Exploring Semantic Information in English Tense Markers

Soisithorn Isarankura
soisithorn.isa@dpu.ac.th
Dhurakij Pundit University, Thailand

Abstract

The English tense-marking system is usually introduced very early, and it has occupied a prominent role in ESL/EFL classes. Yet, even advanced learners of English still have substantial difficulty acquiring the system. Usage of English tenses has been one of the many challenging areas for both teachers and learners. Researchers and educators assert that difficulty in the English tense usage stems from the complex interplay of multiple form-function mappings encoded in the system. Tense-related errors tend to result from learners' lack of a clear understanding of the referential relationships that exist between the two types of semantic information expressed by their grammatical markers; namely, *time reference* and *aspectual property* in association with their grammatical markers. This paper, therefore, seeks to review linguistic theories in order to describe these two types of semantic information conveyed in tense markers. It is hoped that this paper will offer pedagogical implications for teachers to develop a more informed method and design more appropriate materials for teaching English tenses to ESL/EFL learners.

Keywords: Tense, time, time reference, grammatical aspect, lexical aspect

Review of Theories

1. Tense and Time

Tense and *time* are sometimes used interchangeably and many ESL/EFL textbooks do not make a clear distinction between these two terms. As such, one may find some published materials use the terms 'present tense', 'past tense' and 'future tense' to indicate the time of an event as occurring in the *present*, the *past*, and the *future*, respectively. In fact, *time* should be kept strictly apart from *tense*.

Tense refers to the grammatical forms that a verb undergoes in expressing temporal properties of an event or situation that the verb describes. *Time*, on the other hand, is a universal concept referring to the actual physical time in the real world "as measured by clocks, calendars, or other such devices (DeCarrico, 1986, p. 667)." The units of time are extra-linguistic, and they exist independently of the grammar of any particular language (Quirk, Greenbaum and Leech, 1992). Generally, each language community makes a distinction between three time locations as *past, present*, and *future*, but the means to convey time is different. Some languages associate *time* with *tense*. English, for example, demonstrates an explicit relation between time and tense by means of inflectional morphology and the use of auxiliaries. Many other languages express time through other linguistic means such as using adverbs and various time expressions. Thai, for instance, does not have verb inflections to signal the time concepts. In Thai, time is expressed through time phrases, time markers, and certain types of verbs, while the verb always remains in its base form. Time phrases in Thai

can indicate a point of time, e.g. 'yesterday' /mɨâwaanníí/, 'tomorrow' /phrûŋníí/, or a range of time, e.g. 'since yesterday' /tâŋtææ̀ mɨâwaanníí/, 'three days' /sǎam wan/. In general, sentences in Thai may be said with neither a time phrase nor a time marker and are capable of being understood in the context where time indicators are recoverable in the discourse (Chaiyaratana, 1961). This means that there is no obligation for time distinction to be carried solely by *tense*.

2. Time Reference

Although English associates *time* with *tense*, it can be said that the time conveyed by tense is not an *absolute time* as determined by a clock or a calendar. Rather, tense conveys a *conceptual time* or a *relative time*, relative to the speech time or the time the utterance is spoken. The *time reference* of the event that is referred to by the speaker—either the present or the past—is one piece of semantic information expressed by grammatical tense markers in English.

Table 1 below demonstrates the three grammatical tenses: the present tense, the past tense, and the future tense. Each tense is marked by a specific tense marker. In denoting tense or time reference of an event as happening in the past or at present, an English verb is morphologically inflected; however, reference to the future time can be made in many other ways such as by using the modal auxiliaries *will, shall*, or the semi-auxiliary *be going to*.

Table 1: *Tense and Tense Marker in English*

TENSE	TENSE MARKER	
	Singular	*Plural*
Present	-*s* (except for 'I')	Ø ('zero' marker)
Past	-*ed* (except for irregular verbs)	
Future	*will, shall, be going to*	

Huddleston (2006) states that the speaker's choice of tense is determined by the relationships between three notions of time: *event time* (Te), *reference time* (Tr), and *speech time* (Ts). The relationship between these three times can be classified as "anteriority, simultaneity and posteriority—or simply put—past, present, and future" (p. 103). For instance, the present tense associates the event time with the reference time that is more or less simultaneous to the speech time (Te = Tr = Ts); the past tense associates the event time with the reference time that is anterior to the speech time (Te = Tr < Ts); and the future tense associates the event time with the reference time that is posterior to the speech time (Te = Tr > Ts). Huddleston, therefore, refers to tense as "relational" in that "it locates one time by its relation to another (p. 102)." Richards (1995) maintains that tense is *deictic*, for it is simultaneous with the moment of utterance but points either toward time now or time then.

According to Gabrielatos (2003), usage of tense is largely subjective and context-sensitive. The choice of tense depends heavily on the time-point the user wants to focus on in a particular context. Thus, in order for learners to acquire the English tense system fully, they need to have a clear understanding of the complex relationships of the three time notions—i.e. event time, reference time, and speech time, as well as how context impacts on determining tenses.

3. Aspect

Aspect is another type of semantic information conveyed in tense markers. Aspect is an additional temporal property that is independent of its relation to any reference time. There are two types of aspect: *grammatical aspect* and *lexical aspect*.

3.1 Grammatical Aspect

The *grammatical aspect* gives the details about how the speaker views the situation described in terms of *internal temporal properties*, and is expressed through grammatical markers. The grammatical aspect is sometimes called the 'viewpoint aspect' (Smith, 1983). That is, an event may be viewed as a completed whole, in progress, repeated intermittently, habitual, durative, or continuative to a more recent time (Jacobs, 1995). Grammatical aspect complements time reference in determining grammatical tense markers. There are four grammatical aspects in English: *simple, perfect, progressive*, and *perfect progressive* (Svalberg and Chuchu, 1998), and each aspect is marked by a specific marker, as shown below.

Table 2: *Aspect and Aspect Marker in English*

ASPECT	ASPECT MARKER
Simple	Ø
Perfect	*Have + -en*
Progressive	*Be + -ing*
Perfect Progressive	*Have been + -ing*

(a) Simple Aspect

The simple aspect is also called the 'indefinite aspect'. It depicts an event as a whole, as incomplete (indefinite), as seen unfolding from beginning to end, or as unchanging (Richards, 1995). Finite verbs in the simple aspect allow the speaker to express habitual actions, as in Sentence (1) below, or states as in (2) and (3). The present simple is marked by verbs in the base form, e.g. '*I live in Milan*', or with the inflection –*s*, as in '*The little girl reads a book every morning*'. The past simple is marked by the inflection –*ed* (the so-called "2nd form" verbs), as in Sentence (4), or the 2nd form of an irregular verb, as in (5). The future is added by *will*, as in (6).

(1) The little girl **reads** a book every morning.
(2) I **live** in Milan.
(3) Two and two **makes** four.
(4) He **painted** me a picture.
(5) I **read** "War and Peace" yesterday.
(6) I **will go** to the bookstore with my best friend.

(b) Perfect Aspect

The perfect aspect is marked by the auxiliary verb *have*, followed by the past participle form (the so-called –*en* form) of a lexical verb. The auxiliary verb *have* can be converted to *has*, *had*, or added by the future marker *will* as in the following

examples:

Table 3: *Perfect Aspect in English*

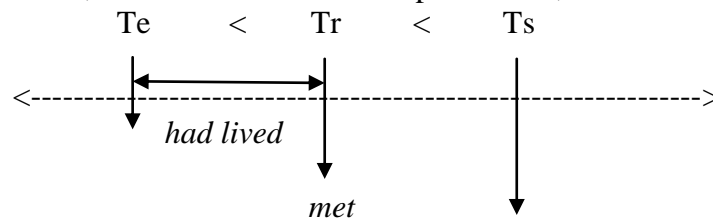| *Present Perfect*	*Past Perfect*	*Future Perfect*
I *have eaten* the food. You *have eaten* the food. We *have eaten* the food. Mary *has eaten* the food.	The train *had left* (before I arrived) Jane *had eaten* the food. The goalkeeper *had injured* his leg and couldn't play.	The plane *will have landed* by then.

According to Huddleston and Pullum (2002), the perfect aspect expresses the time relation of anteriority. It is used when the speaker refers to the time of an event that may begin before (anterior) and extend up to the reference time, which may or may not be simultaneous with the speech time. With the perfect, the reference time may be specified by the time clause, adverbs, or the context.

The present perfect is used to express the event that begins before and extends up to the reference time, which is simultaneous with the speech time, as illustrated below:

$$Te \quad < \quad Tr = Ts$$

<--->
has lived
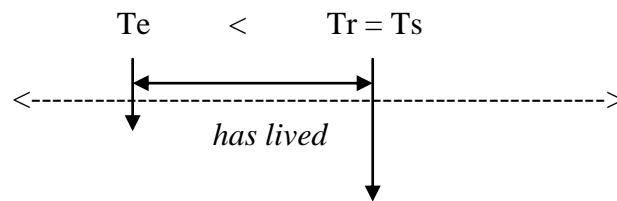
*Present perfect*: John *has lived* in Paris for two years.

The past perfect is used to express the event that begins before and extends up to the reference time, which is anterior to the speech time, as shown:

$$Te \quad < \quad Tr \quad < \quad Ts$$

<--->
had lived

met

Past perfect: John *had lived* in Paris for two years (when I *met* him).

The event expressed by the future perfect is anterior to the reference time in the future, as shown:

$$Ts \quad\quad < \quad\quad Tr$$

<----------------------------|---|--------->
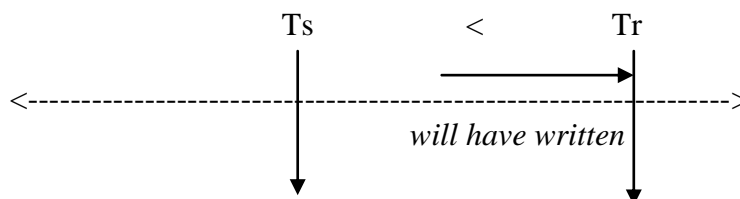
will have written

Future perfect: John **will have written** four chapters (by next week).

From the above examples, the perfect aspect focuses on the relevancy of anteriority to reference time, either in terms of continuative, experiential, or resultative perfect (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). In the case of future perfect, although the beginning of the event time is unspecified, the speaker indicates his interest in the state of affairs at the reference time as a result or an experience of the anterior event/situation. Quirk et al. (1992, p. 91) describes the perfect as indicating "a period of time stretching backwards into some earlier time." Present perfect denotes "current relevance" (p. 91), and past perfect signals "past-in-the-past" (p. 92).

(c) Progressive Aspect

The progressive aspect is shown in the verb phrases by means of the verb *be* followed by a lexical verb in the present participle form, the so-called *–ing* form. Huddleston and Pullum (2002) describe the category of meaning to involve the following features:

(1) The situation is presented as *in progress*
(2) The situation is viewed *imperfectively*
(3) The situation is interpreted as *mid-interval*
(4) The situation is presented as *durative*
(5) The situation is presented as *dynamic*
(6) The situation is presented as having *limited duration*
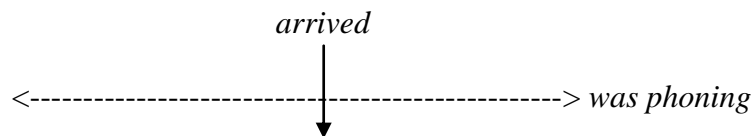
Situation in progress

Consider the following examples:

(a) Paula **was cooking** dinner when I arrived.
(b) They **were discussing** the matter over lunch.
(c) I **am writing** my term paper at the moment.

In (a), the clause *when I arrived* indicates that at that point, the *cooking* was in progress. In (b), the phrase *over lunch* is a period allowed for the ongoing discussion throughout that period. Some situations are not strictly continuous but allow for gaps. An example can be seen in (c). One is unlikely to only *write* the term paper at a single sitting—that is, there may be reading interspersed with periods when one is doing other things (such as taking some rest, or even a nap). But this is of no linguistic significance. The gaps are normally treated as part of the situation. Thus, in (c) it is the situation with gaps included that is presented as ongoing.

Imperfectivity

> (d) When I arrived, Paula ***phoned*** Nicky.
> (e) When I arrived, Paula ***was phoning*** Nicky.

In (d), the *phoning* is viewed as a whole; the non-progressive is interpreted 'perfectively', and the clause *when I arrived* indicates the time of the phoning as a whole. Semantically, the act of arriving and Paula's phoning are said to be simultaneous, but pragmatically we interpret it as the sequence of actions with the phoning immediately following the speaker's arrival. In (e), the progressive gives an imperfective interpretation. The time clause *when I arrived* specifies the time when the phoning was in progress, with the implication that it had started before the speaker's arrival and continued after it. The diagram below illustrates the relationship between the two actions.

arrived

<-----------------------------|---------------------> *was phoning*

The progressive use of a situation is sometimes presented as a frame or background for a perfective (viewed as whole) situation:

> (f) I saw a terrible car accident as I ***was walking*** along the street.
> (g) Michael ***was mowing*** the lawn when the police arrived.

Mid-Interval

The progressive aspect is normally interpreted as a mid-interval of the whole event—that is, it specifies a point or period that excludes the beginning and an end, as in:

> (h) Michael ***is mowing*** the lawn.
> (i) Annie ***was writing*** a novel.

In (h), the mowing started in the past and will continue for at least some time into the future; whereas in (i), the writing started before the time specified in the context and presumably continued afterwards, which therefore excludes the punctual terminal phrase. The progressive used in this case implicates *incompleteness* and is of great significance with accomplishment verbs as will be discussed in Section 3.2.

Duration

For a situation to be in progress, it must have duration. In other words, there can be no progress within a punctual situation. Compare the sentences below:

(j) The train ***arrived***.
(k) The train ***was arriving***.

The sentence in (j) can be interpreted punctually as an achievement, whereas in (k) the train had not yet arrived, and thus, the effect of the progressive is precisely to change a punctual situation into a durative one, providing a basis for realizing future achievements.

Dynamicity

Expressions that indicate purely static situations do not combine properly with progressive aspect.

(l) When I left, Jackie ***had*** her head buried in a book but David ***was watching*** TV.

The *have* clause in (l) has non-progressive aspect because having one's head buried in a book is a state whereas *watching TV* is an activity, and thus can be progressive, though the time clause *when I left* is shared by both. There are, however, several ways in which the progressive can combine with a stative expression to give a dynamic interpretation:

(m) Peter ***is being*** smart, as opposed to Peter ***is*** smart.
(n) Linda ***is driving*** to school this week, as opposed to Linda ***drives*** to school every day.

In (m), the non-progressive *Peter is smart* is stative in that we interpret *smart* as being a quality. By contrast, the progressive *Peter is being smart* is dynamic because we interpret it as describing Peter's present behavior—"Peter is behaving in a smart manner". In (n), *Linda drives to school every day* again suggests a serial state interpretation indicating her regular mode of travel to school whereas the progressive version comes from the feature of temporary state (perhaps she normally goes to school in someone else's car, but this week something happens, so she is driving to school).

Limited Duration

The progressive is often used to denote the situation that is of limited duration or temporary. In *Peter is being smart*, the focus is on current behavior and therefore is likely to be interpreted as indicating a shorter duration than *Peter is smart*, which generally suggests a permanent personal quality (state of affairs vs. dynamicity resulting in limited duration). By comparison, *The train arrived* and *The train was arriving* suggest the interaction between punctual and extended duration.

(d) Perfect Progressive Aspect

The perfect progressive is marked by the form of *have been*, followed by a lexical verb in the present participle form, the so-called *–ing* form. The perfect progressive combines the functions of perfect and progressive aspects and can be more or less what can be predicted from the functions of the individual aspects. While the perfect expresses *anteriority*, the progressive indicates the period up to the reference time that has *limited duration*. Following the basic use of the perfect, the perfect progressive can suggest the results of an event/situation at the reference time, but with the emphasis on the temporary duration of such a situation, as implicated in the progressive.

Jacobs (1995) makes a distinction between perfect and perfect progressive aspects in that the latter has applied the completion sense of the individual perfect aspect to the duration sense of the progressive. Thus, instead of being completed, the action/event is rather interrupted at the time the sentence refers to (pp. 209-210).

Consider the sentence below.

(o) Mary ***had been cooking*** dinner when Eric *arrived*.

Compare the sentence (o) above with sentence (p) in the past perfect and sentence (q) in the past progressive below:

(p) Mary ***had cooked*** dinner.
(q) Mary ***was cooking*** dinner.

Sentence (p) with the perfect aspect suggests a finished state of the action, whereas sentence (q) in the progressive indicates the activity being in progress, but not completed, at the reference time. Thus, with combination of both aspects, we can tell that at the time Eric arrived in sentence (o), the duration of the cooking could be over, but we cannot tell from the sentence whether the cooking had been completed. Mary might go back later to finish cooking the dinner. The speaker's attention is not on the resultative state of the activity, but rather on the durative state at the time the sentence refers to.

In summary, the English tense-aspect system thus puts the relations of three time locations—present, past and future—together with the four aspect of simple, perfect, progressive, and perfect progressive. With tense and aspect combinations, English accommodates 12 tense-aspect grammatical forms, as shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4: *Twelve tense-aspect forms in English*

	Simple **0**	**Perfect** *have + V-en*	**Progressive** *be + V-ing*	**Perfect Progressive** *have + -en be + V-ing*
Present	Present simple *plays*	Present perfect *has/have played*	Present progressive *is/am/are playing*	Present perfect progressive *has/have been playing*
Past	Past simple *played*	Past perfect *had played*	Past progressive *was/were playing*	Past perfect progressive *had been playing*
Future	Future simple *will play*	Future perfect *will have played*	Future progressive *will be playing*	Future perfect progressive *will have been playing*

Note: Adapted from Larsen-Freeman, D., Kuehn, T., & Haccuis, M, 2002, p. 3.

Disagreements over the English tense-aspect system pertain to the question of how many 'tenses' there are. Comrie (1976) identifies three tenses in English: *past, present*, and *future*, whereas Jacobs & Rosenbaum (1970), Lester (1976) and Quirk et al. (1992) hold the view that English has two tenses: *past* and *present*. In the assertion that English contains only the present and past tenses, it views these two tenses as expressing the factual account of an event or a situation. The present, on the one hand, expresses proximity, while the past, on the other, expresses remoteness. Futurity is characterized as the non-factual account of a situation. It is regarded as predictive and thus is not a tense, but merely a future time marker. The future time markers are shown by means of other structures such as simple present, present progressive, or modals in the present-past time dichotomy.

3.2 Lexical Aspect

Lexical aspect is also known as 'semantic' aspect (Comrie, 1976). It indicates the semantic properties inherent in the meaning of the predicate or a particular conception of a situation regardless of any grammatical marking or reference to time (Robison, 1995; Salaberry, 1999). Vendler (1967) classifies lexical aspect into four classes:

1. *States (STA)* denote stative situations that have no dynamics, and continue without additional effort or energy being applied (e.g., *love, hate, want, seem, know, be*).
2. *Activities (ACT)* denote events or actions that have duration, but without a specific endpoint (e.g., *run, walk, play, sing, sleep, talk, rain*).
3. *Achievements (ACH)* denote situations that take place instantaneously, and can be perceived as being reduced to a single point without duration (e.g., *reach, arrive, leave, recognize, notice*)
4. *Accomplishments (ACC)* are similar to activities in that they denote events or actions that have inherent duration, and, like achievements, they have an inherent endpoint (e.g., *make, build, paint*).

Among the above four classifications, there are three basic semantic distinctions: *dynamic* vs. *state*, *telic* vs. *atelic*, and *punctual* vs. *durative*, which can be illustrated by three binary features: [± dynamic], [± telic], and [± punctual], respectively. Dynamic predicates describe actions or events that occur; state verbs denote conditions, properties, or relations that exist. A telic predicate suggests a situation that is presumed to have an inherent endpoint if the goal is reached; an atelic predicate relates an event that has no well-defined endpoint. Punctual predicates denote events that occur in an instant, with no duration; durative predicates indicate situations perceived as lasting for some duration of time. These three aspectual semantic contrasts effect the four classifications of lexical aspect, as shown below.

Table 5: *Semantic Features for Vendler's classification of Lexical Aspect Categories*

Categories	Semantic Features		
State	[–punctual]	[–telic]	[–dynamic]
Activity	[–punctual]	[–telic]	[+dynamic]
Accomplishment	[–punctual]	[+telic]	[+dynamic]
Achievement	[+punctual]	[+telic]	[+dynamic]

Table 5 demonstrates that achievements are punctual whereas all other categories are durative. Achievements and accomplishments are telic (have an inherent endpoint) whereas activities and states do not have a specific endpoint. State verbs are non-dynamic, whereas activities, achievements and accomplishments are dynamic.

As lexical aspect indicates semantic properties residing in the meaning of the predicate rather than in an isolated verb (Robison, 1995, p. 3346), it should be noted that many verbs, with different predicates, may belong to more than one lexical aspect category. Compare *sing* and *sing a song*, for example. The verb *sing* in isolation may be conceived as having no definite duration [–telic], and thus is classified as an activity verb; whereas *sing a song* has a definite endpoint [+telic] as determined by the length of the song, and is therefore an accomplishment verb. Other verbs that belong to more than one classification depending on the predicate's sense are verbs such as *weigh*, *smell*, *grow*. Consider the following examples:

(1) I always **weigh** less in the morning.
(2) He **is weighing** the parcel for me.
(3) The room **smells** of lemons.
(4) She **is smelling** the milk to see if it has gone bad.

The verbs *weigh* and *smell* in (1) and (3) denote stative situations with no dynamics, and thus they are used in the simple aspect. These two verbs, when used with dynamic predicates to denote actions or events that occur, can be used in the progressive aspect as in (2) and (4).

Research on L1 acquisition and adult L2 learning of tense and aspect has reported correlations between lexical aspect and tense-aspect markers. A large body of L1 acquisition research (e.g. Bloom, Lifter, & Hafitz, 1980; Aksu-Koç, 1998, as cited in Haznedar, 2007) has suggested that at the onset of L1 acquisition, children tend to associate the progressive marker (V-*ing*) with atelic activity verbs, and the past

markers (V-*ed*) with punctual verbs (i.e. ACH) and telic verbs (i.e. ACC).

L2 acquisition research also reported correlations between lexical aspect and tense-aspect markers. For example, Robison (1990); Andersen (1991); and Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds (1995) found that the past marker initially emerged with predicates which semantically entail inherent endpoints, that is, first with telic punctual verbs (ACH), then spread gradually to ACC, next to ACT, and finally to STA. The use of the progressive marker moved from semantically dynamic and durative STA to ACT, ACC, and finally to ACH. Shirai and Andersen (1995) found in their study that three L2 children initially used past inflections with ACH verbs, and progressive inflections with ACT verbs. Their results were consistent with Collins' (2002) study of ESL learners' use of tense-aspect markers in past contexts, which supports the aspect hypothesis that early development of tense-aspect morphology is strongly influenced by the inherent aspect of the verbs. In Collins' study, the learners were significantly more successful in using the past tense with telic verbs, struggled most with state verbs. These learners preferred progressive for activities and present for state verbs. It has thus been argued that the acquisition of tense-aspect morphology tends to be guided by the inherent semantic aspect of verbs during the early stages of L2 acquisition.

Research also investigated the relationships between grammatical forms and nonnative speakers' perceptions of meanings with regard to tense and aspect acquisition. Coppetiers (1987) found that highly-educated nonnative speakers with near-native proficiency in French had acquired tense-aspect forms, while their perceptions of meanings were not native-like, suggesting that the nonnative speakers' perceptions of tense-aspect meanings are likely to be strongly affected by tense and aspect meanings in their L1. Speakers of languages that lack morphological tenses may perceive L2 tense and time according to their L1 conceptual paradigms, resulting in their interpretations of tense and aspect meanings in ways different from native speakers of languages with morphological tense-aspect forms. In line with Coppetiers's study, Donnellan (1991) found that perceptions of meanings and functions of time reference in the learners' L1 may affect their ability to establish the referential relationships between L1 and L2 time reference and grammatical markers. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, for speakers of languages, particularly those without morphological tenses, to be able to fully acquire conventionalized uses of the English tense-aspect system.

Results from the author's research study (Isarankura, 2011) investigating conceptualizations of time and aspect among Thai speakers of English showed that conceptualizations of aspectual property were more challenging than time reference. In terms of time, tenses relating to more than one time point (i.e. past with present relevance or before another past event) were more challenging to conceptualize than tenses associating with one time point (i.e. past, present, or future). For Thai learners, the present simple and the present progressive denoting the present time were the most accessible time reference, followed by the past simple depicting the past time. Time reference of the past perfect progressive seemed to have been perceived as the most difficult to acquire for Thai learners. With regard to aspect, aspectual properties of the past perfect progressive appeared to be the most difficult to conceptualize for Thai speakers of English. The past progressive was also found to be problematic. The results showed a slight deterioration in the developmental pattern of this tense form. Among the three English-proficiency groups, conceptualizations of the learners with high English proficiency were most distant from the native speaker norms, while the

low group most closely approximated those of the native speakers. This suggests a high degree of complexity existing in the past progressive aspect. Tawilapakul's (2007) study on Thai learners' production of English tenses also reported similar results. The findings revealed frequent errors in the learners' use of the past perfect and the perfect progressive. Such errors were hypothesized to stem from the learners' difficulty in conceptualizing time and aspect of the target language as a result of the different means that the L1 Thai and the L2 English use to convey temporal properties of an event.

Conclusion

It can be seen from the above theoretical review that the relationships between forms and meanings with regard to tense, time and aspect are not simple or obvious. Usage of tense requires a clear understanding of the form-function mapping of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic notions encoded in the system. Tense is syntactic, while the inherent meaning of verb is semantic, and the interpretations of time and aspectual references in discourse context are pragmatic (Ajé, 2010). All these elements are closely intertwined in a complex way. Thus, it is not surprising that L2 learners find it challenging to acquire the complex interplay of the tense-aspect meanings and their morphological forms simultaneously. Nonnative learners of English, particularly those whose L1 lacks inflectional tense-aspect markers, tend to have difficulty conceptualizing time and aspectual properties in ways native English speakers do. This could be due to the fact that grammaticalization of time reference and aspectual properties of the English tense-aspect system may not be readily available for semantic and pragmatic interpretations by these nonnative learners.

Pedagogical Implications

Based on the theoretical review presented, the following pedagogical implications can be offered.

Firstly, in the English tense-aspect system, a number of factors are in play: (1) time reference and its marker, (2) grammatical aspect, (3) verb meaning or lexical aspect, and (4) context. The tense meanings will become specific when time and grammatical aspect that mark verbs interact with context and lexical aspect. Many ESL grammar textbooks usually introduce the English tense-aspect system by presenting rules, explaining forms in association with time reference and tense meanings. As English tense and aspects have a variety of functions, one may assume that all these functions are beyond the terminology and explanations that published materials could possibly provide. The implication is that learners should look at the different functions in a variety of contexts rather than memorizing the more general rule that each tense-aspect grammatical form refers to. To have a clear understanding of the system, learners must first be aware of the meanings of time reference and aspectual property in relation to their linguistic forms. Then they should be encouraged to associate those functions and forms within the context of language use. Generally, learners often know what the correct form is, but it is the association of functions and forms in context that continues to present difficulties. Thus, there is a need for exposure to time and aspect marking in a variety of contexts and for ample opportunities to make choices regarding which forms best convey intended meanings.

Secondly, as lexical aspect is an important factor which motivates choices about the most appropriate tense-aspect form, it should be useful to associate lexico-semantic classifications of verbs and time-aspect references with which the verb forms are more suitable in the teaching of the English tense-aspect system.

Finally, for teachers to teach their students to use these grammatical forms correctly, the teachers themselves need to fully understand the different shades of meanings expressed by different grammatical forms of verb tenses, and then find a way to make these associations of forms and meanings understandable to their students.

References

Ajé, S.A. *Reconceptualising tenses in English: Implications for teaching and learning*. Retrieved from http://www.unilorin.edu.ng/unilorin/publications/aje/ reconceptualizing.htm on August 2, 2010.

Andersen, R. (1991). Developmental sequences: The emergence of aspect marking in second language acquisition. In Huebner, T. and Ferguson, C.A. (eds.), *Crosscurrents in second language acquisition and linguistic theories*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 305-324.

Bardovi-Harlig, K. and Reynolds, D.W. (1995). The role of lexical aspect in the acquisition of tense and aspect. *TESOL Quarterly*, *29*(1), 107-131.

Bloom, L., Lifter, K., & Hafitz, J. (1980). Semantics of verbs and the development of verb inflection in child language. *Language*, *56*, 386-412.

Chaiyaratana, C. (1961). *A comparative study of English and Thai syntax*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University.

Collins, L. (2002). The role of L1 influence and lexical aspect in the acquisition of temporal morphology, *Language Learning*, *52*(1), 43-94.

Comrie, B. (1976). *Aspect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Coppetiers, R. (1987). Competence differences between native and non-native speakers. *Language*, *63*, 544-573.

DeCarrico, J. (1986). Tense, aspect and time in the English modality. *TESOL Quarterly*, *20*(4), 665-682.

Donnellan, K. (1991). *Reference and definite descriptions*. In S. Davis (Ed.), Pragmatics (pp. 52-64). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gabrielatos, C. (2003). *Teaching the expression of time: A concise framework*. A paper presented at the 37th IATEFL International Annual Conference, Brighton, UK, 22-26 April, 2003.

Haznedar, B. (2007). The acquisition of tense aspect in child second language English. *Second Language Research*, *23*(4), 383-417.

Huddleston, R. (2006). *The English perfect as a secondary past tense*. In B. Aarts and C. F. Meyer (Eds.), The verb in contemporary English: Theory and description (pp. 102-122). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Huddleston, R., & Pullum, G. (2002). *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Suffork: Cambridge University Press.

Isarankura, S. (2011). Conceptualizations of temporal and aspectual references of English tenses. In *Proceedings of the JACET 50th Commemorative International Convention*, Fukuoka, Japan, 315-320.

Jacobs, R. (1995). *English syntax: A grammar for English language professionals*. New York, Oxford University Press.

Jacobs, R., & Rosenbaum, P. (1970). *English transformation grammar*. London: Ginn and Co.

Larsen-Freeman, D., Kuehn, T., & Haccius, M. (2002). Helping students make appropriate English verb tense-aspect choices. *TESOL Journal*, *11*(4), 3-9.

Lester, M. (1976). *Introductory transformational grammar of English*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1992). *A Grammar of contemporary English*. London: Longman Group Limited.

Richards, J. C. (1995). *The context of language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Robison, R. E. (1990). The primacy of aspect: Aspectual marking in English interlanguage. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 12*, 315-330.

Robison, R. E. (1995). The aspect hypothesis revisited: a cross-sectional study of tense and aspect marking in interlanguage. *Applied Linguistics*, *16*(3), 345-370.

Salaberry, M.R. (1999). The development of past tense verbal morphology in classroom L2 Spanish. *Applied Linguistics*, *20*(2), 151-178.

Shirai, Y. & Andersen, R. (1995). The acquisition of tense-aspect morphology: A prototype account. *Language, 71*(4), 743-762.

Smith, C. S. (1983). A theory of aspectual choice. *Language*, *59*, 479-501.

Svalberg, A.M.-L. & Chuchu, H.F.b.h.a. (1998). Are English and Malay worlds apart? *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *8*(1), 27-60.

Tawilapakul, U. (2007). The use of English tenses by Thai university students: Relativity, transfer and cognitive implications. In *Proceedings of the New Directions in Cognitive Linguistics Conference*, Cardiff, UK.

Vendler, Z. (1967). *Linguistics in philosophy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.