# PATTERNS OF PAST TENSE PRODUCTION BY THIRD-YEAR STUDENTS OF SPANISH: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF OPEN-ENDED PERSONAL NARRATIVES

Daniel Castañeda

MODERN AND CLASSICAL LANGUAGE STUDIES DEPARTMENT

KENT STATE UNIVERSITY AT STARK

Jessie Carduner

MODERN AND CLASSICAL LANGUAGE STUDIES DEPARTMENT

KENT STATE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

*In this mixed-methods study, the researchers explored the distribution and accuracy rates for preterite and imperfect in the full discursive context in personal narratives written by native English-speaking learners of Spanish as well as the distribution of aspects, tenses and moods other than the preterite and imperfect. Regarding distribution, results revealed that obligatory contexts for other tenses differed significantly from obligatory context for preterite and imperfect. However, the latter two did not differ significantly from one another. As for accuracy, students seem to have a better command of the preterite at the discourse level, whereas the imperfect appears more problematic in its conceptualization and application. Qualitative analysis yielded additional insights with respect to accuracy in the full discursive context and revealed how other tenses and moods may be required along with the preterite and imperfect to relate a personal narrative.*

KEY WORDS: preterite, imperfect, aspect, past tense, discourse, narrative structure

RESUMEN

*En este estudio de métodos mixtos, se investigó, a nivel discursivo, tanto la distribución y tasas de precisión del pretérito y el imperfecto como la distribución de otros tiempos, aspectos y modos en las narrativas personales escritas por estudiantes de español cuyo idioma materno es el inglés. En cuanto a la distribución, los resultados revelaron que los contextos obligatorios para otros tiempos, aspectos o modos difieren significativamente del contexto obligatorio para el pretérito y el imperfecto. Sin embargo, estas dos últimas categorías no difieren entre sí. Con respecto a la precisión, los estudiantes parecen tener mayor dominio del pretérito a nivel del discurso, mientras que el imperfecto parece más problemático en su conceptualización y aplicación. El análisis cualitativo arroja nuevas perspectivas con respecto a la precisión en el contexto del discurso completo y también que otros tiempos y modos pueden ser necesarios, junto con el pretérito y el imperfecto, en una narrativa personal.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: pretérito, imperfecto, aspecto, tiempo pasado, discurso, estructura narrativa

Dirección de los autores:
Daniel Castañeda
Kent State University at Stark
6000 Frank Avenue,
Canton, OH, 44720
USA
dcastane@kent.edu

Jessie Carduner
Kent State University
PO Box 5190
Kent, OH, 44242
USA
jcardune@kent.edu

## Introduction

Moving students from intermediate to advanced proficiency is a common objective in upper-division university language courses. Per the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2012), writing at the advanced-low level includes the ability to narrate and describe in major time frames with some control of aspect, while writing at the advanced-mid level includes the ability to narrate and describe with detail in all major time frames, including the past tense. The latter challenges second language writers, particularly when verb tenses and/or aspects do not map similarly across languages, as is the case with Spanish and English. In Spanish, the distinction between the preterite and imperfect, two tenses used to describe past states and actions, is marked by inflectional morphology (*e.g.*, *-é*, *-ba*); however, these morphological distinctions do not occur in English, in which both tenses are often realized with the same past marker (*-ed*) (Cuza, 2010). Alternatively, in English, continuous and indefinite past states and actions are often realized with a phrasal construction, such as *be + -ing*, *would* + infinitive, or *used to* + infinitive rather than with inflections.

Errors in past tense marking by English-speaking learners of Spanish (ELSs) may result from overreliance on textbook rules of thumb that "fail to reflect the full meaning or the concept or which are not organized in a way that promotes understanding, control, and internalization" (Negueruela & Lantolf, 2006: 82) can lead to overgeneralization and faulty hypotheses (Katz & Blyth, 2007). Failure to grasp the complexity of narrative structure (Katz & Blyth, 2007) and insufficient practice and assessment at the discourse level may also contribute to learner difficulty.

Practice and assessments often require output at only the word, phrase, or sentence level as occurs in exercises in which students are expected to fill in blank spaces with the correct past tense form based on lexical aspectual cue words, such as *de repente* ('suddenly') for preterite or *todos los días* ('every day') for imperfect. Although students may learn to use lexical cues to supply the correct form in controlled exercises, this ability often fails to transfer to self-generated texts. Helping students use the past tenses accurately requires an understanding of where breakdown occurs when students use the past tenses in authentic messages at the discourse level. In this mixed-methods study, the researchers explored the distribution and accuracy rates for preterite and imper-

fect in the full discursive context in personal narratives written by English learners of Spanish. Qualitative analysis provided additional insights with respect to accuracy in the full discursive context and also into what other tenses and moods may be required along with the preterite and imperfect to relate a personal narrative.

*Acquisition of the preterite and imperfect*

The acquisition of the preterite and imperfect in Romance languages has been framed by various hypotheses, the most influential of which have been the aspect hypothesis (AH) and the discourse hypothesis (DH). The AH predicts that learners follow an eight-stage developmental sequence in acquiring the preterite and imperfect. In the first, learners use present tense for past contexts. In the second, the preterite emerges with verbs expressing achievements (*e.g.*, *arrive*, *leave*, *notice*, and *recognize*), which have no duration but which have a definite goal or end point. Next, the imperfect appears with verbs that describe states (*e.g.*, *seem*, *know*, *need*, *want*, and *be*). In stage four, the preterite spreads to accomplishments (*e.g.*, *build a house*, *paint a painting*), which have an endpoint but also have duration; and the imperfect to activities (*e.g.*, *sleep*, *snow*, *play*, and *rain*). In the last four stages, morphology continues spreading until all aspectual classes (states, activities, accomplishments, and achievements) are inflected for preterite and imperfect (Andersen, 1991).

*Foreground and background within the DH framework*

The AH has been supported by empirical evidence (*e.g.*, Andersen, 1991; Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Bergström, 1995; Comajoan, 2006; Salaberry, 1998); however, it fails to offer a theoretical accounting of how aspect choices are made at more advanced levels when learners should no longer rely solely on lexical qualities of the verb to select aspect. An alternative model to the AH is the DH which proposes that learners use emerging verbal morphology to distinguish foreground from background in a narrative. The foreground refers to the core or main events of the discourse whereas the background provides information that elaborates on or evaluates the events in the foreground. This hypothesis predicts that the simple past emerges first, and predominantly, in the foreground. The simple past becomes

the dominant tense in the background later than in the foreground, but never reaches the same high level of use because other past-tense forms (*e.g.*, past progressive and perfect) appear and are used appropriately in the background (Bardovi-Harlig, 1994, 1995; see also Hopper, 1979). This claim places aspectual phenomena at a level of analysis above the phrase and the sentence level. In fact, Salaberry (2010), whose early work was oriented from the AH, likewise concluded that grounding (*i.e.*, distinguishing between foreground and background) creates a contextual space that influences the selection of grammatical markers of past tense.

Research from the foreground and background perspective is emerging. For example, in a study of English-speaking learners of Catalan who had no knowledge of Catalan but had extensive knowledge of other languages, Comajoan (2005) used discourse analysis theory to examine the acquisition of past tense morphology and found that the preterite emerged before the imperfect and occurred in the foreground, whereas the imperfect emerged in the background. Güell (1998) found that the use of preterite in the foreground and imperfect in the background increased with level of proficiency while the use of imperfect in the foreground and preterite in the background decreased.

In addition to the preterite and imperfect, other tenses may be used in a narrative. Various tenses, such as the pluperfect, future, and future-perfect, tend to occur in the background, whereas the foreground is usually more constrained with respect to verbal morphology (Hopper, 1979). Using a grounding analysis (foreground vs. background) of narrative structure, Bardovi-Harlig (1995) examined written and oral narratives pairs produced in a film retell task by adult ESL learners. The foreground yielded higher rates of simple past than the background while in the background a greater morphological diversity included simple past, base, simple present, past progressive, and pluperfect.

*Labov and Waletzky's framework of discourse analysis*

In addition to the aforementioned background and foreground framework, a more comprehensive framework for the analysis of narrative discourse comes from Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972). According to this model, narratives, the genre examined in the current study, are typically divided into six parts, each with a specific function. The first segment, the abstract, which is

optional (Eggins & Slade, 1997), provides a summary of the narrative and indicates the point of the story. Next, the orientation informs the audience with respect to person, place, time, and behavioral situation, followed by the complication (plot), comprising a series of events that form the main body of the narrative. The evaluation reveals the narrator's attitude towards the narrative, followed by a resolution. Finally, the coda (also optional per Eggins and Slade, 1997) is a functional device for returning the verbal perspective to the present moment.

*Connection between Labov and Waletzky and the DH frameworks of discourse analysis*

Typical pedagogical approaches tend to frame the preterite and imperfect in terms of foreground (preterite dominates) and background (imperfect dominates). If we connect this approach to Labov and Waletzky's (1967) framework, foreground (and therefore preterite) might be expected to occur most frequently in complication and resolution. Background (imperfect) would be used mostly in orientation and evaluation. As for coda and abstract, since these are summaries (abstract is a preview and coda wrapping up), these may contain both foregrounding (preterite) and backgrounding (imperfect). Since the function of the coda is to bring the verbal perspective to the present moment, present tense might be predicted as well.

Two studies of native speaker narratives by Silva-Corvalán (1983, 1984) support this mapping. She found that the distribution of the preterite and imperfect varied according to narrative segment. Although both tenses co-occurred in each segment, the preterite appeared with greater frequency in the abstract, the complicating action, the resolution, and the coda, whereas the imperfect was used more frequently in the orientation and evaluation.

The study

The aforementioned research confirms the importance of discursive contextual factors in the emergence of the preterite and imperfect. This study examines the distribution and accuracy of the preterite and imperfect alongside of other tenses, moods, and aspects in full discursive context in 700- to 1000- word original essays written by English-speaking learners of Spanish.

It was guided by the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. What was the relative distribution of obligatory contexts for preterite (PRET) or imperfect (IMP) versus other (OTH) tenses, aspects, and moods?

RQ2. To what extent did students use the PRET and IMP correctly with respect to one another in obligatory contexts?

RQ3. In what segments of the narrative do PRET/IMP and OTH tend to predominate? Were there any patterns of tense, aspect, and mood usage other than PRET/IMP and were there any noticeable patterns of difficulty?

METHODOLOGY

*Participants and corpus*

This mixed-methods study was conducted using document analysis of electronically archived, original compositions written by native ELSs enrolled in a fifth-semester Spanish Grammar and Composition (SGC) course at a medium-sized, public U.S. university. Students who completed the intermediate courses preceding SGC had been exposed to all the major tenses and moods in Spanish. Further, it was assumed that those who placed directly into SGC also had prior exposure to the complete verbal system. Direct placement into SGC is done by various means: the university's placement test; transfer credits for Intermediate Spanish II or higher; or via credits awarded through one of two national (U.S.-based) standardized credit and placement exams, The College-Level Placement Exam (<http://clep.collegeboard.org/>) or the Advanced Placement Exam (<https://ap-student.collegeboard.org/home>).

Prior to the study, the researchers obtained Institutional Review Board approval. All essays were from an identical assignment given to five intact sections of SGC between fall 2009 and spring 2011, in which students were tasked with describing an episode in their past that resulted in learning a *moral lesson*. Four essays written by students whose first language was not English were eliminated in order to ensure a homogeneous first-language background, leaving 47 essays for analysis. The essay, a typical assignment for SGC, had been used for many years prior to the study to teach rhetorical techniques for composing and editing (pre- and post-feedback) personal narratives. Criteria and expectations for the

assignment included a length of 700-900 words, use of a *refrán* ('proverb') in the title and to sum up the *lesson learned*, use of hyperbole (exaggeration), foreshadowing, and direct or indirect speech. Additionally, students were expected to pay attention to common *problem areas* as outlined in a grading rubric, such as using connector words and transitions, including an (engaging) introduction and conclusion, considering readers' needs, varying vocabulary, replacing semantically weak words with ones with higher semantic value, and making use of diminutives, augmentatives, and adverbs to communicate affect.

Seven to 10 days before the first draft was due, students examined a model essay to discuss the use of rhetorical strategies and targeted grammatical and lexical features. Following that, students received instructions for their own essay and were given time to brainstorm and gather feedback on their topics from classmates. Students submitted their essays electronically via the university's course management eLearning system. Essays were graded and returned with a rubric. Students made corrections and resubmitted. The essays in this study were all first drafts from the above-described assignment.

*Coding and analysis procedures*

Initially, the researchers (one native speaker of Spanish and one nonnative) were interested primarily in the distribution and accuracy rates for just the preterite and imperfect. They began with a pilot analysis of five essays to assess the effectiveness of their coding scheme. In this first trial, each researcher separately marked for accuracy in their estimation all instantiations of PRET and IMP (indicative) verbs contained in the essays using a color-coded two-by-two matrix. Accurate uses of PRET and IMP were marked with dark and light green respectively, and instantiations of PRET where IMP was expected and vice versa were marked in red and pink respectively. Minor spelling errors, such as a missing accent mark on *-ía* in the imperfect or inappropriate application of stem-changing rules (*e.g.*, *piensé*) and person-number agreement errors were ignored unless these errors resulted in aspectual, modal or temporal ambiguity. After coding the pilot essays, the researchers compared results.

Despite consensus concerning PRET/IMP usage in the first pilot, the researchers discovered that the two-by-two matrix was inadequate. They determined that for an analysis at the discourse level, as opposed to the lexical or sentential

level, all verbal tokens should be considered because narratives about the past are not limited to actions and emotions in the past but also make reference to the future, the hypothetical, and past anterior. The original 2 x 2 matrix was revised as follows to include 10 categories of verbal tokens:

TABLE 1. Coding of verb tokens

| CODE | DESCRIPTOR(S) | EXAMPLES FROM THE CORPUS | ENGLISH GLOSS[a] |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | PRET used; PRET expected. | 1. _Recibí tres excesos de velocidades en solamente seis meses._ | I received three speeding tickets in only six months. |
| 2 | IMP used; PRET expected. | 2. _Mi abuela me perdonó y mi tío_ *[b]_empezaba a esconder sus fósforo_s. | My grandmother forgave me and my uncle was beginning to hide his matches. |
| 3 | Neither PRET nor IMP; PRET expected. | 3. _Todo *pasado sumamente rápido._ | Everything happened extremely quickly. |
| 4 | IMP used; IMP expected. | 4. _Cuando era joven, mi familia era unida. Íbamos a parques juntos._ | When I was young my family was very close. We used to go to parks together. |
| 5 | PRET used; IMP expected. | 5. _Yo *supe que *tuve goma en mi coche pero olvidé adonde._ | I found out that I got/obtained gum in my car but I forgot where. |
| 6 | Neither PRET nor IMP used where IMP was expected. | 6. _Mi vida había *destruida y no *se como *voy a quedar valiente durante el día._ | My life had *destroyed and I don't know how I am going to stay brave during the day. |
| 7 | PRET or IMP used; other tense or mood expected. | 7. _Con el dinero, *compraba una casa y *vivía en salario de McDonald's_ | With the money I was buying a house and I was living on the salary of McDonalds. (The writer, recalling speculations about the future, used imperfect where conditional was expected.) |
| 8 | Form other than PRET or IMP used as expected. | 8. _Contaré mi anécdota, mis amigos, y ojalá que aprendan esas lecciones de me._ | I will tell my anecdote, my friends, I hope you learn those lessons from me. |
| 9 | Form other than PRET or IMP expected but the correct form was not used. | 9. _El próximo fin de semana Jodi quería que nosotros *escaparse por la ventana._ | The next weekend Jodi wanted us to escape through the window. |
| 10 | Writer's intent indeterminable or restructuring needed. | 10. _Mis padres eran gente *tratando de controlarme y *me sostiene de nuevo de la vida._ | My parents were people trying and he/she supports me again of life. |

[a] Glosses are rendered as literally as possible; however, due to structural differences sometimes it was necessary to rephrase the original slightly.
[b] * Signifies incorrect tense, mood, or aspect as determined by context.

The researchers conducted a second pilot with another five essays, again independently using the revised coding scheme. Compound tenses were counted as a single token (*e.g*., *había ido* was counted once as pluperfect). Satisfied with the revised coding scheme, the authors recoded the original five essays along with the remaining essays synchronously using Blackboard IM chat and Google Docs to ensure reliability as follows. First, the researchers read each essay independently to orient themselves to the narrative context. Next, working synchronously, they took turns reading aloud and coding each verb according to the classification scheme outlined in Table 1.

For each verb in the student essays, the researchers predicted the expected inflection based on the surrounding discourse. Tokens bearing the inflection expected by both researchers were marked as obligatory and correct (Codes 1, 4 & 8 from Table 1). For instance, in example 1 from Table 1, *Recibí tres excesos de velocidades en solamente seis meses*, the verb *recibí* was considered obligatorily preterite and correctly produced by the student. Tokens not bearing the inflection expected by both researchers (spelling and agreement errors excepted) were marked as obligatory contexts, but incorrect (Codes 2, 3, 5, 7 & 9) as in example 2 from Table 1: *Mi abuela me perdonó y mi tío empezaba a esconder sus fósforos*. The researchers expected *empezaba* to be in the preterite, but the student used the imperfect. In cases where the researchers disagreed on expected morphology or when the writers' communicative intent was unclear, the researchers discussed their rationales, rereading the surrounding text until consensus was reached. If the latter proved impossible, the token was placed in the indeterminable category (Code 10). Clauses that could not be corrected easily by a single morphological change and which required a complete restructuring were also placed into this category. Once coding was completed, total counts for each category for each essay were recorded on a spreadsheet for numerical analysis.

Qualitative analysis was completed recursively. While coding the essays, the researchers used Google Docs commenting tools to record questions and observations that surfaced. Then once all the tokens for all essays were entered into the spreadsheet, the researchers reviewed their notes for further exploration and also compiled descriptive statistics (totals, means, and proportions) to determine whether additional patterns surfaced. Essays were read multiple times to check for coding accuracy before final descriptive and inferential statistics were calculated. Once all the tokens of verbs were entered into the spreadsheet, the authors

read the essays a final time to identify the various narrative segments as proposed in Labov and Waletzky's (1967) framework in order to look for patterns of verb usage within each narrative segment. Note that we did not distinguish between internal and external evaluations and we counted both dedicated evaluative segments (of which there were few) and evaluative comments occurring within other segments in a single category called *evaluations*.

Results

*RQ1. What was the relative distribution of obligatory contexts for preterite (PRET) or imperfect (IMP) versus other (OTH) tenses, aspects, and moods?*

Since essay length varied with some students failing to heed length requirements and because the number of assessable verbal tokens in each essay varied (min = 75, max = 215, M = 136.9 with no meaningful mode), obligatory contexts for PRET, IMP, and OTH were calculated proportionally to total assessable verbal tokens per essay; and verbs whose tense, mood, or aspect were marked as indeterminable were excluded. By using proportions for each variable, each category could be compared equivalently regardless of essay length. For example, the mean relative frequency of obligatory contexts for preterite across essays was calculated thusly:

$$\frac{\text{Sum of obligatory preterite tokens contained in [Essay 1 + Essay 2 + ... + Essay 47]}}{\text{Sum of all assessable verbal tokens contained [Essay 1 + Essay 2 + ... + Essay 47]}}$$

To investigate which tenses predominated in written personal narrative, a repeated measures ANOVA was run as described below. Data analysis was done using the proportions for each variable as mentioned above. It should be noted that infinitive forms were excluded because they may inflate the tokens in the *other* category and may favor the latter as the predominant category and because infinitive forms are often more nominal than verbal, serving as complements in periphrastic constructions.

TABLE 2. Tests of within-subjects effects

Measure: MEASURE_1

| | SOURCE | TYPE III SUM OF SQUARES | DF | MEAN SQUARE | F | SIG. | PARTIAL ETA SQUARED | NONCENT. PARAMETER | OBSERVED POWER[a] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Context | Sphericity Assumed | .081 | 2 | .040 | 3.491 | .035 | .071 | 6.982 | .639 |
| | Greenhouse-Geisser | .081 | 1.935 | .042 | 3.491 | .036 | .071 | 6.756 | .629 |
| | Huynh-Feldt | .081 | 2.000 | .040 | 3.491 | .035 | .071 | 6.982 | .639 |
| | Lower-bound | .081 | 1.000 | .081 | 3.491 | .068 | .071 | 3.491 | .448 |
| Error (Context) | Sphericity Assumed | 1.066 | 92 | .012 | | | | | |
| | Greenhouse-Geisser | 1.066 | 89.012 | .012 | | | | | |
| | Huynh-Feldt | 1.066 | 92.000 | .012 | | | | | |
| | Lower-bound | 1.066 | 46.000 | .023 | | | | | |

[a] Computed using alpha = .05

A repeated measures ANOVA with sphericity assumed determined that the obligatory contexts for preterite, imperfect, and other tenses (minus infinitives) differed significantly (F (2,92) = 3.49, $p < .035$) $\eta^2$ = .071. Post hoc tests (Tukey LSD, $p < .05$) revealed that obligatory contexts for other tenses (M = .24, SD = .083) differed significantly from obligatory context for preterite ($p = .017$) (M = .29, SD = .099) and imperfect ($p = .028$) (M = .29, SD = .087). The latter two did not differ significantly from one another ($p = .77$). With the latter analysis, findings indicate that in a past personal written narrative, the preterite and imperfect predominate over other tenses, aspects, and moods (see scatterplot in Figure 1) and that this type of narrative, on average, prompts the use of almost an equal number of preterite and imperfect tokens.

FIGURE 1. Estimated marginal means of MEASURE_1
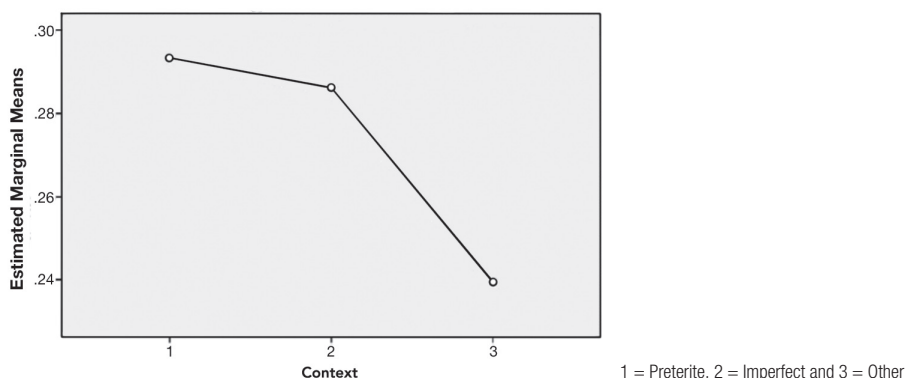


1 = Preterite, 2 = Imperfect and 3 = Other

*RQ2. To what extent did students use the PRET and IMP correctly with respect to one another in obligatory contexts?*

Accuracy rates of PRET and IMP were calculated proportionally to the number of obligatory PRE or IMP tokens. For example, proportions of accuracy rates for the preterite across essays were calculated as follows:

Sum of correct preterite tokens contained in [Essay 1 + Essay 2 + ... + Essay 47]
Sum of obligatory preterite tokens contained in [Essay 1 + Essay 2 + ... + Essay 47]

TABLE 3. Paired samples statistics

|  |  | MEAN | N | STD. DEVIATION | STD. ERROR MEAN |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pair 1 | Proportions_accuracy_rates_for_preterite | .8780 | 47 | .13646 | .01990 |
|  | Proportions_accuracy_rates_for_imperfect | .6552 | 47 | .21727 | .03169 |

TABLE 4. Paired samples test

|  | PAIRED DIFFERENCES | | | | | T | DF | SIG. (2-TAILED) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | | | |
|  |  |  |  | Lower | Upper | | | |
| Pair 1 Proportions_accuracy_rates_for_preterite- Proportions_accuracy_rates_for_imperfect | .22281 | .28242 | .04119 | .13989 | .30573 | 5.409 | 46 | .000 |

A paired samples *t*-test was conducted to determine accuracy rates for the preterite and imperfect. Results indicate a significant difference $t(46) = 5.41$, $p < .0001$ in students' accuracy between the preterite (M = .88, SD = .14) and the imperfect (M = .66, SD = .22). The mean difference between the use of preterite and imperfect was .22 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from .14 to .31. The eta square statistic (.39) indicated a large effect size. In summary, these results indicate that students seem to have a better command of the preterite at the discourse level, whereas the imperfect appears more problematic in its conceptualization and application.

*RQ3. In what segments of the narrative do PRET/IMP and OTH tend to predomi-nate? Were there any patterns of tense, aspect, and mood usage other than PRET/IMP and were there any noticeable patterns of difficulty?*

Qualitative analysis, using descriptive statistics, was conducted to observe which tenses prevailed in each section using Labov's (1972) narrative framework (abstract, orientation, plot, evaluation, resolution, and coda). To determine which tense or mood tended to dominate by narrative segment, the number of correct PRET, IMP, and OTH tokens for each segment were counted and divided by the number of participants (*n*) who included that specific narrative segment. As shown in Table 5, which contains examples from the corpus, the preterite dominated by a wide margin in the complicating action and resolution sections; the imperfect dominated by a wide margin in the orientation; and, at around 40% each, there was an almost even distribution between PRET and IMP for evaluations. However, in the abstract (only present in 10 essays) and in the coda, other tenses, mainly the present indicative, dominated.

Although either the PRET, IMP or present indicative dominated in the various narrative segments, a combination of mood, tenses and aspects were required throughout the essays. In addition to PRET, IMP and present indicative, nine other verb forms (excluding infinitives) were needed: future, conditional, conditional perfect, present perfect, pluperfect, present and imperfect subjunctive, pluperfect subjunctive, and imperatives. In a few instances, passive voice was also needed. While a complete analysis of verbal usage other than PRET or IMP with accuracy rates is beyond the scope of this paper, some patterns merit discussion as they have implications for the teaching and assessment of narration in the past tense although in most cases the number of obligatory contexts were too small for inferential statistical testing.

First, as noted, the present indicative, not PRET or IMP, dominated in the abstract and coda. The present was also used, albeit somewhat less frequently, in middle segments of the essays to make asides, to give explanations and to provide evaluations within the plot. In fact, every essay contained at least one obligatory context for the present tense. One student even interrupted his plot with a paragraph-length description of the symptoms and treatment of diabetes written entirely in the present tense. Another used the present tense throughout his essay to make self-deprecating remarks as in example 5a in Table 6. Students frequently made tense errors when switching back and forth between past and present time (see example 5b in Table 6).

TABLE 5. Proportions of PRET and IMP by narrative segment

| SEGMENT | EXAMPLES FROM THE CORPUS | ENGLISH EQUIVALENT | PRET | IMP | OTH |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Abstract n = 10 | 1. *Cada chica hace errores grandes en su vida. Todas realizan los lecciones importantes que *existan en cada situación mal. Tengo una historia en cuál yo aprendí una lección tanta importante.* | Every girl makes big mistakes in her life. All of them realize the important lessons that exist in every bad situation. I have a story in which I learned a very important lesson. | 0.0 | 0.0 | 100 |
| Orientation n = 47 | 2. *Cuando tenía dieciséis años jugaba el fútbol norteamericano más bien que todos los chicos en la escuela. Todos los noches de viernes corría, agarraba y hacía todo que necesitaba ganar los partidos.* | When I was sixteen I used to play American football better than any other boy at school. Every Friday night I would / used to run, catch and make every effort to win the games. | 21.3 | 61.7 | 17.0 |
| Complicating action (plot) n = 46 | 3. *La próxima mañana, me levante^a y fui a iglesia. Después, comí con mis padres y termine^a mi tarea. Nada raro ocurró^a. Nadie me llamó o me mandó un mensaje de texto.* | The next morning, I got up and went to church. Later, I ate with my parents and finished doing my homework. Nothing rare happened. Nobody called me or sent to me a text message. | 95.7 | 4.3 | 0.0 |
| Evaluation n = 42 | 4. *Tenía tanto miedo que no quería tratar conversar. Estaba tan frustrada y irritada conmigo misma. Sabía que solo con tiempo y práctica me mejoraría.* | I was so afraid I did not try to talk. I was so frustrated and irritated with myself. I knew that with time and practice I would improve. | 40.4 | 42.8 | 16.6 |
| Resolution n = 47 | 5. *Pasé el resto de ese verano trabajando casi todos los días. Nuestro seguro se aumentó a causa de mí y yo tuve que pagar los costes del tribunal.* | I spent the rest of the summer working almost every day. Our insurance premium went up because I was at fault and had to pay for the tribunal expenses. | 83.0 | 10.6 | 6.4 |
| Coda n = 45 | 6. *La lección de ésta experiencia es cuándo la vida te empuja debajo, puedes caerte y dejarlo ganar, o puedes subir otra vez y combatirlo y rehusar estar derrotado.* | The lesson of this experience is when life pushes you down, you can fall and let it win or you can get up again and beat it and refuse to be defeated. | 4.4 | 0.0 | 95.5 |

[a] The authors believe this verb has an omitted accent mark and that the student intended to produce the preterite.

Table 6. Percentage of essays with at least one obligatory context for OTH

| Tense / Mood | Essays | Examples from the corpus | English equivalent |
|---|---|---|---|
| Conditional | 83% | 1a. *Yo sabía lo que sería su respuesta.* (Plot) | I knew what her answer would be. |
| | | 1b. *Claro, les aseguré que devolvería todo el dinero.* (Plot) | Of course, I assured them that I would return all of the money. |
| | | 1c. *No sabía que iba a experimentar un día que nunca olvidaría.* (Abstract) | I didn't know that I was going to experience a day that I would never forget. |
| Future | 38% | 2a. *—Te daré medicina.—* (Plot) | I will give you medicine. |
| | | 2b. *Me pensé: "Conduciré cada día y noche. Iré al centro comercial con mis amigas y visitaré mi novio. ¡Aleluya!"* (Plot) | I thought to myself: "I will drive everyday. I will go to the mall with my friends and I will visit my boyfriend. Halleluya!" |
| | | 2c. *Voy a tener hijos y diré ellos ésta historia. Van a necesitamos aprender por ellos mismos pero será ahí los ayudar.* (Coda) | I am going to have children and I will tell them this story. They are going to need for themselves but I will be there to help them. |
| | | 2d. *Jamás haré de nuevo (solo los cigarillos y la cerveza son suficientes).* (Coda) | I will never do again (only cigarettes and beer are sufficient). |
| Imperative | 30% | 3. *—Espéren hasta que oigan lo que voy a decir!— Todos nosotros esperamos mientras ella guardaba silencio. —¡Dinos!— No podíamos soportar el suspense.* | "Wait until you hear what I am going to say!" We all waited while she remained silent. "Tell us!" We couldn't take the suspense. |
| Pluperfect | 85% | 4a. *Nosotros estabamos aburridos porqué nosotros ya * hemos * nadito en la piscina de mi familia y no había nada hacer.* (Orientation) | We were bored because we have swum in the family pool and there was nothing to do. |
| | | 4b. *Nunca me había *cruzaba una calle sin mis padres antes.* (Plot) | I had never was crossing a street without my parents before. |
| Present indicative | 100% | 5a. *Aquí es el parte que necesitas recordar que yo era un grande perdedor con no cuida por nadie pero yo.* (Plot) | Here is the part where you need to remember that I was a big loser with no care about anyone but myself. |
| | | 5b. *Un día, decidí que me *quiero pizza de queso, en adición a mi otra comida. ¡No *debo comer pizza de queso porque pero a veces yo *tiento a la suerte y la *comía porque es muy delicisa!* (Plot) | One day I decided I want cheese pizza in addition to my other food. I shouldn't eat cheese pizza because but sometimes I tempt fate and I used to/ would eat it because it is delicious! |
| Subjunctive (imperfect or pluperfect) | 96% | 6a. *No quise mi familia *amar otra chica!* (Plot) | I didn't want my family to love another girl! |
| | | 6b. *Me sentí por quince minutos antes de ella *llegó.* (Plot) | I sat down for 15 minutes before she arrived. |
| | | 6c. *Ayer, los doctores les dijeron a sus padres que sí *viviría, probablemente sería un vegetale.* (Plot) | Yesterday, the doctors said to my parents that if he were to live probably he would be a vegetable. |
| | | 6d. *Aprendí mucho que nunca habría aprendido si no *cambió las compañías.* (Coda) | I learned a lot that I would not have learned if [I] he didn't change [boy scout] companies. |

Activities and events presented in narratives are not necessarily relayed in the same chronological sequence in which they occurred. The pluperfect situates one action or situation as occurring before another. Eighty-five percent of the essays contained at least one token in which the pluperfect (indicative mood) was needed. On average between four and five tokens of pluperfect were expected per essay (M = 5; Mdn and Mo = 4). Yet, only 17.5% of the participants were able to produce this tense consistently where needed. Another 25% showed only partial control, while the remaining 57.5% showed virtually no control over this tense. Most of these latter failed to produce even one correct token where needed, either substituting another tense such as the present perfect (example 4a in Table 6) or the preterite or exhibiting morphological difficulties with the auxiliary verb *haber* or the past participle (example 4b in Table 6).

As proficiency advances, learners begin to connect clauses, inevitably producing contexts requiring moods other than the indicative. Ninety-six percent of the essays contained at least one obligatory context for the imperfect subjunctive or pluperfect subjunctive with only about 25% accuracy overall across students. Obligatory contexts for the imperfect subjunctive most often appeared in the plot or in evaluative comments within the plot in subordinated noun clauses in which the narrator described emotional reactions to a situation or event (example 6a in Table 6) and in clauses beginning with temporal adverbs that typically trigger the subjunctive when referring to anticipated events (example 6b in Table 6).

So-called '*si* clauses' also created contexts in which either the imperfect or pluperfect subjunctive was expected in the hypothetical portion of the sentence. *Si* clauses (19 total obligatory contexts in the corpus) were typically found in the plot and in the coda when participants speculated about potential alternative decisions and actions (examples 6c and 6d in Table 6).

Obligatory contexts for the conditional and conditional perfect, in turn, co-occured with the imperfect subjunctive and pluperfect subjunctive in *si* clauses to render potential alternative outcomes or results as in *que nunca habría aprendido...* (example 6d in Table 6). These moods were also needed to relay anticipated events, actions or situations in the past (example 1a in Table 6) including in reported indirect speech (example 1b in Table 6) and for foreshadowing (example 1c in Table 6). Nearly 83% of the students created at least one obligatory context for the conditional mood. In total, 106 conditional verbs and 13 conditional perfect verbs were expected. However, only roughly a third of the students used conditional verbs

with consistent accuracy; another third showed only partial control; and the final third showed little to no control of the conditional in their narratives.

The final two verb paradigms with enough obligatory contexts to be of note were the non-periphrastic future and the imperative. Across essays, there were 38 realized or expected tokens for the future tense, nearly half of them need to relay direct discourse (example 2a in Table 6) or interior monologues (example 2b in Table 6) within the plot, and 25% of them occurring in the coda or conclusion to make a promise or to describe how the future would be different from the past (examples 2c and 2d in Table 6). Most future verbs were rendered accurately; only three of 18 students who created contexts for future verbs experienced any difficulty with this tense.

As for imperatives, slightly less than a third of the participants (14 students) used these, every instance in direct discourse within the plot (example 3 in Table 6) for a total of 25 tokens across essays. Generally, imperatives were rendered accurately, although a few students confused familiar (*tú*) and formal (*usted*) forms.

To sum up the use of OTH by narrative segment: the present indicative appeared and exceeded preterite and imperfect in the abstract and coda and was also present in dialogues and evaluative comments within the plot. The pluperfect, which presented considerable difficulties for students, was needed quite often in the orientation and plot to juxtapose two actions or states in the past. The imperfect subjunctive and pluperfect subjunctive, which also had low accuracy rates, were needed in the plot, particularly within evaluative comments occurring in this segment. The conditional which frequently co-occurred with past subjunctive forms in *si* clauses also was common in the plot, and also in the abstract and coda, used to hypothesize about alternative actions and outcomes; the future was needed in the coda and in direct discourse within the plot; and the imperative was needed in reported speech within the plot as well.

DISCUSSION

Results indicate that obligatory contexts for PRET and IMP were nearly equal and were far greater than the number of obligatory contexts for other tenses and moods (RQ1). However, learners produced PRET with greater accuracy than IMP (RQ2). On average, students were more than four and a half times as likely to use PRET (M = 9.4 for Error type 5, Table 1) where IMP was expected than the other

way around (M = 2 for Error type 2, Table 1). Thus, it seems that for the learners in our study, PRET may be still the default past marker as hypothesized by Salaberry (1999).

As for correctly supplied IMP verbs, the majority (M = 70% per essay) were from the infinitives: *ser*, *estar*, *tener*, *haber* and *querer*, in other words, verbs that typically describe states, existence and traits rather than verbs that relate activities, accomplishments or achievements. Students used the imperfect infrequently to describe habitual or repeated actions in the past (*leía*, often glossed as 'would read' or 'used to read') with the mean number of tokens of only 3.19 per essay. Further, this use of the imperfect was completely absent from 28% of the essays.

The simple continuous imperfect, *e.g.*, *leía* ('was reading'), was used only slightly more frequently than the habitual imperfect; M = 3.34 with 25.5% of the essays not containing a single token of this usage. The periphrastic imperfect, *e.g.*, *estaba leyendo* ('was reading'), was even more rare; M = .83 and this form only appeared in 32% of the essays. It appears that learners may be overgeneralizing or still relying to some extent on lexical features of verbs to make aspectual choices when writing about the past in narrative-length discourse, reserving imperfect mainly for stative verbs, and the preterite for verbs that convey achievements and accomplishments. This would place this group of students somewhere in stage 4 in the AH hypothesis (Andersen, 1991) model. Alternatively, it could be the assignment topic may not have elicited ample contexts in which the imperfect would be used to relay habitual or continuous actions and activities in the past. Whatever the explanation, participants clearly did not use the imperfect to its full potential in relating their narratives.

As for integration of other tenses and moods, while obligatory contexts for the PRET and IMP clearly dominated in the essays examined for this study, particularly in the orientation and evaluation (IMP), and the complicating actions and resolution (PRET), obligatory contexts for other tenses and moods were common. In fact, as mentioned above, the present indicative tended to dominate in two of the narrative segments: abstract and coda. Even in segments in which PRET, IMP or present dominated, this was never to the exclusion of other tenses and moods. In any given segment, a variety of tenses and moods were called for and participants in this study often struggled to supply them accurately, suggesting a need for more integrative pedagogical approaches to narration in the past, ones that consider the full verbal system in the essay-length discourse contexts.

Conclusion and pedagogical implications

The third-year students in our study overused the preterite tense (RQ2) and did not use the imperfect to its fullest potential when relating their personal narratives. They seem to have formed a faulty hypothesis, based on lexical features of verbs, that IMP is used with stative verbs (*e.g.*, *ser*, *estar*, *tener*, *haber*) and PRET is used with verbs that express actions (*e.g.*, *decidir*, *volver*, *trabajar*). This would suggest that these students are somewhere in Stage 4 of the AH and only in the early stages in the DH in which they can successfully use PRET for foreground but have a limited ability to use IMP for the background. Ongoing and habitual actions in the imperfect generally were absent from this corpus. Therefore, we need to help students at this level advance to next stages of acquisition by expanding the imperfect repertoire.

Textbook authors and instructors should dedicate more pedagogical time and space to the imperfect, because it seems conceptually more difficult to acquire than the preterite, even though the latter is morphologically more complex. Instruction should include receptive and productive practice that helps students understand how the imperfect is used with other verbs in addition to stative verbs. Students need to understand that PRET and IMP can equally be used with either type –stative and non-stative verbs– and that it is context and the sender's (writer's or speaker's) communicative intent that determines which aspect should be selected. Therefore, practice must be designed in such a way that students cannot rely solely on lexical features of verbs to make aspectual choices. Exercises and elicitation tasks should foster the use of a variety of verbs (achievements, states, accomplishments and activities) in both tenses but students must be forced to use discursive context, rather than merely lexical qualities to process the meaning of these verbs in the past tense both receptively and productively.

Moreover, textbook explanations and exercises that present PRET/IMP as a dichotomy may lead students to the false impression that need only decide between these two tenses when narrating in the past. To progress to the advanced levels, students will need to be able to use the full tense/aspect/mood system in Spanish when narrating in the past. Thus, presentation and practice must encourage students at the advanced threshold to make use of the full verbal system. One way to do this is to have students analyze the verbs in model narratives to see how different tenses are used in each narrative segment. Students can then be given

guided productive practice moving from more 'closed' activities to self-generated discourse, provided that the activities focus students' attention on the full discursive context and provided that these activities require students to move beyond the dichotomous choice of PRET versus IMP. Instructors may also ask students to analyze their own verbs to compare their intended message with different readers' (peer's, the instructor's or an outsider reader's) interpretation.

The current study contributes to the existing body of past tense-aspect research from the perspective of the discourse hypothesis (DH); that is, in our analysis we considered contextual factors (*i.e.*, discourse and narrative structure) beyond the sentence level. Our study is unique in that we used a written corpus of student-generated, fairly open-ended, 700- to 1000-word personal narratives with total of 6 436 tokens of verbs (infinitives excluded) submitted by English-speaking learners of Spanish in a third year college course. A corpus generated from open-ended student narratives, such as the one in this study, allows for assessment of how students use verbs to generate their own meanings in an authentic communicative task. It shows where students have the highest levels of accuracy (in our study it was with the preterite, present indicative, future, and conditional) and where students have the greatest difficulties.

Our corpus revealed that students have an incomplete conceptual grasp of the imperfect; that they cannot produce subordinate clauses in the past effectively when these clauses require the subjunctive; and that they had difficulty using the pluperfect to temporally juxtapose activities and states with one another in the past. Thus, our study revealed new insights about students' strengths and weaknesses when narrating in the past and identified specific areas that need pedagogical intervention.

However, we must be cautious since we looked only at a small sample ($n = 47$) of students at a particular point in their academic program. Further, our study focused only on one genre and topic –a personal narrative about a lesson learned. Suggestions for further research to address these limitations would be to replicate this study with different participants, other types of narratives in the past, or indeed with other types of discourse that might require extensive use of the past tense.

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