

The Role of Narrative Structure in the Acquisition of English Tense-Aspect Morphology by Thai Learners

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As regards the acquisition of L2 verbal morphology, one of the universal tendencies as elucidated by the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis (Bardovi-Harlig, 1994, p.43) is that language learners use emerging verbal morphology to distinguish foreground and background in narratives. This present study examines whether Thai EFL learners' use of English tense-aspect morphology is influenced by narrative structure by addressing 2 research questions: (i) Do learners exhibit different rates of use of past in foreground and background? (ii) How do dominant forms of foreground and background change as the learners become more proficient with respect to their L2 tense-aspect system? Data for the analysis came from written narratives produced by 120 Thai EFL learners divided into 5 proficiency levels. Results showed that the foreground exhibited greater rates of use of past than background across proficiency levels. The dominant forms characterizing foreground and background, however, change from nonpast to past as learners become more proficient with respect to their L2 tense-aspect system. Revealing an interplay between distribution of verbal morphology regarding narrative structure, the findings provide empirical support for the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis and shed light on the nature of difficulty learners experience in developing their L2 grammatical competence.

Key Words: Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis, Thai learners of English

1 Introduction

Expression of temporality has long been a topic under investigation. In second language acquisition research, two main approaches to expression of temporality have been employed: meaning-oriented approach and form-oriented approach. (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). The first approach examines the expression of semantic concepts through different types of linguistic devices, whereas the second approach examines the distribution of verbal morphology as an indicator of the underlying semantic system of interlanguage.

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Employing the form-oriented approach, a number of second language studies have investigated the relationship between the distribution of verbal morphology in interlanguage and the structure of the narratives. One of the findings that emerged from the previous studies is the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis. Describing systematic variation in learners' use of temporal morphology, the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis predicts that "learners use emerging verbal morphology to distinguish foreground from background in narratives" (Bardovi-Harlig, 1994, p.43).

For the last two decades, a number of studies have been conducted to examine the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis. The previous studies, however, have largely investigated learners whose L1 is a [+tense] language or a group of learners with mixed [-tense] and [+tense] L1 background. Leaving a homogeneous group of [-tense] L1 speakers as a relatively uninvestigated group of learners, no study to date has been dedicated to investigating, in a thorough fashion, whether Thai EFL learners' acquisition of English tense-aspect morphology conform to the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis. For this reason, the present study, examining the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis, analyzes data from 120 Thai EFL learners.

The remaining portions of this article are organized into 4 sections. In section 2, I provide some basic facts about Thai and English temporality systems, and then a summary of previous studies on narrative structure and its influence on distribution of tense-aspect marking. Then in section 3, I report on the present study. Results of the study are presented in section 4 and discussed further in section 5. Finally in section 6, I state the conclusion of the article by discussing some of the implications of the results and directions for future research.

2 Previous Studies

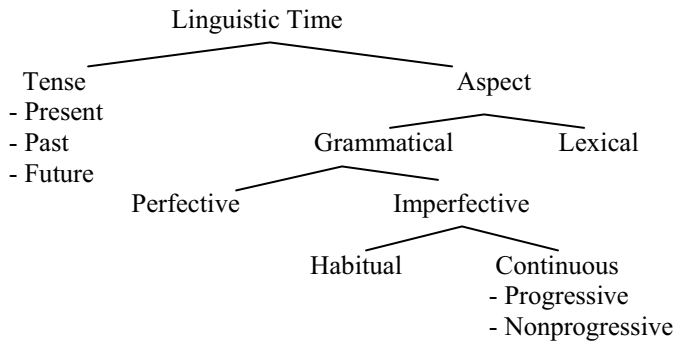
2.1 Expression of temporality in Thai and English

Since all activity takes place in time, expression of temporality is one of the topics widely studied. According to Bardovi-Harlig (2000), two concepts crucial to the study of expression of temporality are tense and aspect. Tense "places an event on a time line, relevant to the time of speech (past, present, future)" (Reichenbach, 1947, as cited in Gabriele 2005, p.14). Aspect represents the "different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation" (Comrie, 1976, p.3). Aspect is usually divided into two distinct categories: grammatical aspect and lexical aspect. Lexical aspect refers to the inherent semantic property of the predicate, whereas grammatical aspect is concerned with the internal temporal constituency of a situation. Grammatical aspect is usually divided into two types: perfective aspect and imperfective aspect. The difference between perfective and imperfective aspect are explained in terms of the speaker's perspective (Smith, 1991, 1997

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as cited in Ayoun and Salaberry, 2008): The perfective aspect focuses on the beginning and end of a situation, whereas the imperfective aspect focuses on the situation without definite temporal boundaries. Classification of tense and aspect can be illustrated by Figure 1.¹

Figure 1. Classification of tense and aspect



Although tense and grammatical aspect are invariably interpreted with respect to a verb phrase in a sentence, languages may vary in ways in which tense and grammatical aspect are expressed. The following discussion, focusing on tense and grammatical aspect, encompasses information on how English and Thai differ in their realization of tense and grammatical aspect.

In English, tense and grammatical aspect are inseparably encoded in verbal inflectional morphology. To illustrate, consider sentences in (1).

- (1) a. Mark read the entire book.
b. She drank wine.
c. They played / used to play tennis when they were children
(Ayoun and Salaberry, 2008, p.560)

The verbs “read”, “drank”, and “played/used to play” denote past tense and simultaneously perfective aspect or imperfective aspect. In (1a), as the reading of a book is viewed as an event in its entirety, including both initial and final endpoints, (1a) expresses the perfective aspect. In (1b) and (1c), however, the events of drinking wine and playing tennis are viewed as a nonprogressive event and a habitual event, respectively. Viewing events as nonprogressive and habitual is a concept of the imperfective aspect; (1b) and

¹ I put aside a detailed discussion of lexical aspect as it is not directly relevant to the present study.

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(1c), therefore, express the imperfective aspect. English, therefore, expresses tense and aspect via verbal inflectional morphology, and hence is a [+tense] language.

Unlike English, Thai is an isolating language with no verbal inflectional morphology. While temporal locations of events are indicated by context clues and lexical expressions², Thai has a number of aspect markers such as *khoey*, *khamlang*, *yu* and *laew*³ to express different ways of viewing the events. To illustrate, *khoey* is considered to be a marker for “existential perfect” or “experiential perfect” (Boonyapatipark, 1983 as cited in Visonyangoon, 2000) as it indicates that a situation occurs or a state holds at least once and that the experience of such a situation or state prevails up to the present time. *Khamlang*, on the other hand, conveys the idea that an event is on-going, and hence is a progressive marker. Unlike *khamlang*, *yu* is considered to be an imperfective marker (Meepoe, 1996 as cited in Visonyangoon, 2000) as it conveys habitual and nonprogressive meanings or the concept of “state” (Chiravate, 2002, 2008). *Laew*, on the other hand, standing for the property of abutment (Chiravate 2002, 2004), is regarded as a marker for the shift or transition of a situation. When describing the termination of a situation, *laew* leaves implicit the subsequent situation. When describing the beginning of a situation, *laew* leaves implicit the previous situation. Thai, therefore, does not morphologically express tense and aspect, and is considered to be a [-tense] language.

Since English and Thai differ in their realization of tense and aspect, the question then arises as to how Thai EFL learners develop an English tense-aspect system. Specifically, can findings from previous studies in which L1 and L2 do not differ in the way that Thai and English do, account for Thai learners’ development of an English tense-aspect system? One of the findings, as captured by Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis, is that learners’ use of tense-aspect morphology is influenced by narrative structure. It is interesting, therefore, to examine whether Thai EFL learners’ use of English tense-aspect morphology is influenced by narrative structure. In the following section, as background material for the present study, I will provide a review of previous studies on narrative structure and its influence on distribution of tense-aspect marking.

2.2 Narrative structure

The definition of a “narrative” has varied through the course of studies on the topic. In linguistic studies, a narrative is considered to be a text in which “the

² Similar to Chinese temporality system described by Yang and Huang (2004), lexical expressions used to indicate tenses are expressions such as *yesterday*, *last year*, *the next day*, etc.

³ I am using the transcription system of The Royal Institute (1982).

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speaker relates a series of real or fictive events in the order in which they took place” (Dahl, 1984, p. 116 as cited in Bardovi-Harlig, 1992, p.144). Basically, a narrative discourse is comprised of two parts: the foreground and the background (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). Foreground background characteristics have been discussed in several studies including Hopper (1979), Reinhart (1984), Dry (1983) and Bardovi-Harlig (2002).

Drawing a distinction between foreground and background, Hopper (1979) conceived of the foreground as relating to events belonging to the skeletal structures of the discourse. The background itself is not involved in the narration of main events, but provides supportive material which elaborates on or evaluates the events in the foreground. Events reported in foreground clauses are understood to be sequential, whereas background events are often out of sequence with respect to the foreground and to other background events. (as cited in Bardovi-Harlig, 2000).

Reinhart (1984), on the other hand, proposed that a set of “temporal criteria” which consists of “narrativity or temporal continuity,” “punctuality,” and “completeness” can be used to characterize the foreground (as cited in Bardovi-Harlig, 2000, p. 280). Each criterion is summarized below.

Narrativity, or Temporal Continuity:

Only narrative units, i.e., textual units whose order matches the order of the events they report, can serve as foreground.

Punctuality:

Units reporting punctual events can serve more easily as foreground than units reporting durative, repetitive, or habitual events.

Completeness:

A report of a completed event can serve more easily as foreground than a report of an ongoing event.

Dry (1983), however, suggested that when drawing a distinction between foreground and background, one needs to consider information value. According to Dry, the information communicated in the foreground clause must be new rather than given. To illustrate, consider (2) and (3).

(2) (a) John gave Mary an apple, (b) and she sat down **to take a bite**. (c) She took the bite deliberately, savoring the taste.

(3) (a) John gave Mary an apple, (b) and she sat down **and took a bite**. (c) She took the bite deliberately, savoring the taste.

(as cited in Bardovi-Harlig 2000, p. 282).

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In (2), clause (c) presented ordered new information whereas in (3), it elaborates on information already presented in (b). Consequently clause (c) in (2) is foreground, whereas in (3), it is not. According to Dry, as foreground clauses provide new information, foreground clauses can be said to move time forward.

Bardovi-Harlig (2000), subsequently, suggested that background information is supporting information which elaborates on the information revealed through the foreground material. A background can occur either before or after the narrated event. Moreover, according to Aksu-Koç and von Steutterheim (1994), when a background refers to a simultaneous event, it can also be located at the same point on the time line (as cited in Bardovi-Harlig 2000).

Background and foreground, therefore, clearly differ in several respects. Essentially, the foreground is the actual story line whereas the background supplies supportive material and does not itself narrate the main events.

2.3 Narrative structure and distribution of verbal morphology

Research into narratives in primary language has demonstrated convincingly that a relationship exists between the use of verbal morphology and the foreground and background of narratives. In their studies, Hopper (1979) and Dahl (1984) closely examined narratives in primary language. Hopper found that language users “mark out a main route through the narrative and divert in some way those parts of the narrative that are not strictly relevant to this route” (Hopper, 1979, p. 239 as cited in Bardovi-Harlig, 2000 p. 278). One way of marking a route concerns the use of tense-aspect. In the foreground clauses, Hopper observed, events happening in a sequence may be marked in the preterite or simple past (Hopper, 1979, as cited in Bardovi-Harlig, 2000). Dahl further observed that in some languages verbs in the foreground clauses may carry no marking and concluded that “it is always possible to use the least marked indicative form in a narrative (i.e., foreground) past context” (Dahl, 1984, p.117 as cited in Bardovi-Harlig, 2000 p. 278). Hopper’s (1979) and Dahl’s (1984) studies, therefore, link verbal morphology to narrative structure.

Extending Hopper’s (1979) and Dahl’s (1984) investigations to the field of interlanguage narratives, a number of studies have shown that narrative grounding influences the distribution of tense-aspect morphology. Examining narratives produced by a Japanese learner of English, Kumpf (1984) found that the learner used the base form of the verb to express completed action in the foreground, and morphologically marked background verbs with tense and aspect. Flashner (1989), on the other hand, examined oral narratives produced by three Russian learners of English and found that the learners marked foreground verbs with simple past while using base forms in the background. In another study,

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Bardovi-Harlig (1992) compared how native speakers and learners of English differed in their use of tense-aspect markers with respect to narrative structure. Examining oral and written narratives produced by 16 intermediate learners of English, she found that the majority of the learners distinguished foreground from background by employing simple past tense in the foreground and present tense or base form in the background. Native speakers, in contrast, do not rely primarily on tense-aspect markers to distinguish foreground from background. Changing the target language from English to Dutch, Housen (1994) examined narratives produced by an American learner of Dutch. It was found that the learner marked the foreground predominantly in the present perfect, whereas the background verbs occur predominantly in simple present and nonfinite forms. In spite of different distribution of tense-aspect across grounding, these studies revealed that a relationship exists between narrative grounding and interlanguage verbal morphology.

Stating clearly the relationship between narrative grounding and interlanguage verbal morphology Bardovi-Harlig (1994) proposed the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis which asserts that “language learners use emerging verbal morphology to distinguish foreground and background in narratives” (p.43). Then to account for the apparently contradictory results regarding distributions of tense-aspect across grounding, Bardovi-Harlig (1995) claimed that the contradictory findings resulted from the level of proficiency of the learners. According to her, as learners continually develop their tense-aspect system (from low proficiency learners with no systematic use of tense-aspect to high proficiency learners with native-like use of tense-aspect), at each stage of development (or level of proficiency) they may exhibit differential uses of verbal morphology relative to narrative grounding.

To address in particular how second language proficiency affects use of tense-aspect morphology with respect to narrative structure, Bardovi-Harlig’s (1995) examined 37 written and oral narrative pairs produced in a film retell task by learners of English. In this study, she divided learners into 7 groups according to the frequency of their appropriate use of the past. The results of this study show that tense-aspect morphology in interlanguage is influenced by narrative structure. The foreground shows greater rates of use of simple past than background in both oral and written narratives and across levels. The dominant forms of foreground and background, however, change as the tense-aspect system is acquired. After an early stage of development in which nonpast is the favored in both foreground and background, learners mark foreground events for simple past first and use a variety of forms in the background, progressing toward a more native-like distribution with increasing proficiency. Her study, therefore, clarifies the relationship between second language proficiency and the influence of narrative structure on tense-aspect distribution.

The use of verbal morphology by grounding in relation to proficiency level was also discussed earlier by Veronique (1987). Veronique reported that

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Arabic and Berber-speaking learners of French at low, intermediate and advanced proficiency levels, showed variation in their use of verbal morphology by grounding. Additionally, the study also revealed variation within levels among individuals, and individually across texts.

In conclusion, it appears then that a relationship exists between the use of verbal morphology and the narrative grounding. In primary language as well as interlanguage, the foreground and background elements of narrative structure play a substantial role in tense-aspect marking.

3 The Present Study

Applying Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis concepts, which assert that language “learners use emerging verbal morphology to distinguish foreground and background in narratives,” this study investigates the development of English tense-aspect system of a group of Thai EFL learners. Two research questions addressed in this study are: (i) Do learners exhibit different rates of use of simple past in the foreground and background of their narratives? (ii) How do dominant forms of foreground and background of narratives change as the learners become more proficient with respect to their L2 tense-aspect system?

3.1 Participants

The participants of the study are 120 Thai EFL learners, who were undergraduate students at a university in Thailand. They speak Thai as L1 and have learned English in classroom setting for at least 12 years before being recruited for the present study.

Rather than general English proficiency, overall rates of appropriate use of past morphology in the participants’ narratives were used as a criterion when placing the participants into groups. The rationale, according to Bardovi-Harlig (1995), was that grouping learners according to their appropriate use of tense eliminates less relevant variables (i.e., other linguistic and academic skills) and facilitates the comparison of learners on the single relevant variable of development to tense.

Based on Bardovi-Harlig’s (1995) approach, each narrative was first coded for use of a past form in past-time contexts, which included simple past, past progressive, and pluperfect. Rates of past use were calculated for verb types rather than tokens. As a result, the participants were divided into 5 groups according to the percentage of appropriate use of past morphology.

Table 1. Distribution of Participants

Group	1	2	3	4	5
Percentage of appropriate use of past	1-20	21-40	41-60	61-80	81-100
N	14	25	38	27	16

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3.2 Instrument

This study employed a personal narrative as an elicitation task. Participants were asked to narrate some memorable personal experience (e.g., recounting a trip or a New Year celebration) in an attempt to elicit their best writing – in class and within 50-60 minutes. The reason for using a personal narrative, as discussed in Ayoun and Salaberry (2008), is that a personal anecdote is more inspiring than an imposed one.

3.3 Analysis

Each narrative was coded first for grounding. Based on Hopper (1979) and Dry (1983), clauses that relate events belonging to the skeletal structures of the discourse and move time forward were considered to be foreground clauses; clauses that do not themselves narrate main events, but provide supportive material elaborating on or evaluating the events in the foreground, are considered to be background clauses. Grounding analysis was performed by the researcher and a second experience coder. Interrater reliability was 97.28%. Disagreements were resolved by discussion.

Next, based on Bardovi-Harlig (1995), all verbs were coded for verbal morphology and placed in 4 main categories: “past,” “nonpast,” “no verb,” and “other.” The category of **past** was subdivided into past simple, past progressive and pluperfect; whereas the category of **nonpast** was subdivided into base, present simple, present progressive, \emptyset -progressive (\emptyset -*eating*, \emptyset -*singing*) and present perfect. Incorrect forms such as *swams* and *is drove* were coded as **other**, and propositions that require verbs but lack them, such as *he angry*, were coded as **no verb**. For the integrity of the text, rates of verbal morphology were calculated for verb tokens rather than types.

4 Results

The narratives produced by the participants varied in length. The number of words ranged from 148-526; the number of sentences ranged from 13-47. The number of verbs across grounding are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of Verbs by Grounding

	Group									
	1		2		3		4		5	
	(N = 14)		(N = 25)		(N = 38)		(N = 27)		(N = 16)	
	Fore	Back	Fore	Back	Fore	Back	Fore	Back	Fore	Back
Number of Verbs	126	98	275	225	494	342	459	324	288	208

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The percentage of use of tense-aspect morphology with respect to grounding by learner group is demonstrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of Tense-Aspect Morphology in Narratives

	Group									
	1		2		3		4		5	
	(N = 14)		(N = 25)		(N = 38)		(N = 27)		(N = 16)	
	Fore	Bac k	Fore	Bac k	Fore	Bac k	Fore	Bac k	Fore	Bac k
Past	25.6	10.7	46.3	25.5	63.0	48.4	78.4	63.1	90.1	81.1
	8	5	8	1	3	5	4	4	2	1
Past Sim	25.6	10.7	46.3	21.9	61.3	46.2	75.1	58.7	87.2	75.7
Past Pro	8	5	8	7	2	3	2	8	2	4
Pluperfect	0	0	0	3.54	1.74	2.22	3.32	3.42	2.75	3.62
	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.94	0.15	1.75
Nonpast	57.3	61.9	39.8	56.3	29.1	42.4	19.2	33.2	9.28	16.6
	2	4	2	4	6	1	3	6	4	4
Base	41.9	31.1	30.7	30.7	20.5	23.1	14.5	17.8	7.47	8.66
Pres Sim	7	1	6	4	1	2	5	9		
Pres Pro	13.1	21.6	8.71	20.6	6.20	16.4	3.91	13.1	1.06	6.92
Ø Pro	2	5		3		8		9		
Pres Per	1.71	6.84	0.23	3.08	1.83	1.77	0.42	1.64	0.75	1.06
No Verb	0.52	2.34	0.12	1.21	0.62	0.98	0.35	0.54	0	0
	0	0	0	0.68	0	0.06	0	0	0	0
Other	6.83	14.2	4.62	9.94	3.84	4.46	0	1.71	0	1.05
	5	6	9.18	8.21	3.94	4.68	2.33	1.89	0.60	1.20
	10.1	13.0								
	7	6								

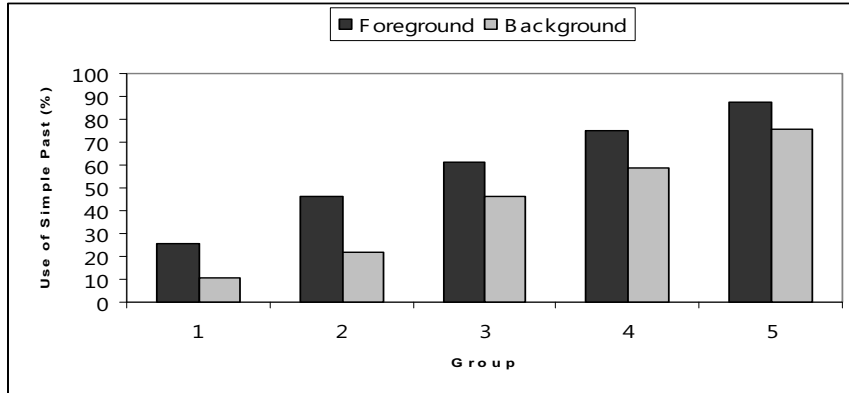
Past Sim = Past Simple, Past Pro = Past Progressive, Pres Sim = Present Simple, Pres Pro = Present Progressive, Ø Pro = Ø Progressive, Pres Per = Present Perfect

4.1 Research question 1: Do learners exhibit different rates of simple past use in foreground and background of their narratives?

An examination of tense-aspect morphology use in the foreground and background revealed that for all groups the use of simple past is greater in the foreground than background. This is demonstrated in Figure 2.

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Figure 2. The distribution of simple past by grounding



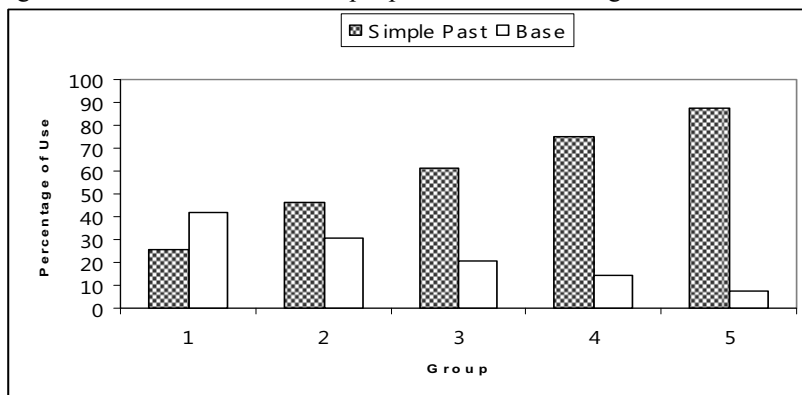
There are, however, varying proportions of marking of the foreground over the background. Group 1 and 2 show an increase of over 100% in the use of simple past in the foreground compared to the background (from 10.75% in the background to 25.68% in the foreground and from 21.97 % in the background to 46.48% in the foreground). The disparity, however, is less remarkable in the higher groups. Groups 3, 4 and 5 show an increase of less than 100% in the use of simple past in the foreground compared to the background.

4.2 Research question 2: How do dominant forms in the foreground and background of narratives change as the learners become more proficient with respect to their L2 tense-aspect system?

4.2.1 Foreground

A comparison of verbal morphology used in the foreground revealed that learners mainly used two forms: the simple past and the base. However, the rate at which the two forms are used varied as the tense-aspect system is acquired. In the first group, the use of base exceeded the use of simple past (41.97% base to 25.68% simple past). In the second group, however, the use of simple past pulled ahead of the base 46.38% to 30.76% respectively. In groups 3, 4 and 5, simple past remained the favored form, with an increase in use of more than 100% compared to the use of base. This is demonstrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. The distribution of simple past and base in foreground



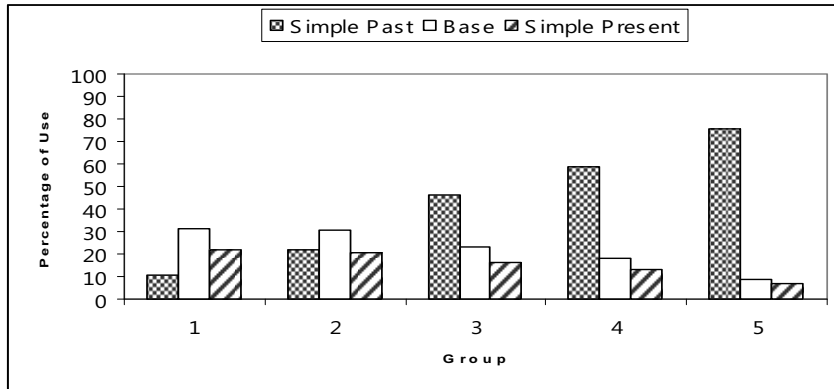
It therefore may be concluded that at an early stage base is the dominant form characterizing foreground. After the early stages however, learners exhibit a decided preference for the simple past in foreground. Thus, the simple past can be said to characterize the foreground.

4.2.2 Background

In the background, learners primarily employ three forms: the simple past, base and simple present. The proportion of the past and nonpast (base and simple present), again varies as the tense-aspect system is acquired. In the first two groups, the nonpast is the favored form. Group 1 recorded 52.76% nonpast usage (31.11% base and 21.65% simple present) and 10.75% simple past. Group 2's nonpast usage was almost the same at 51.37% (30.74 base and 20.63 simple present). Its simple past usage was higher at 21.97%. This begins to change in group 3 with 46.23% use of simple past forms, compared to the nonpast with 39.6% use (23.12% base and 16.48% simple present). In the last two groups, the gap between the use of simple past and nonpast continued to widen. Results for group 4 were 31.08% nonpast (17.89 % base and 13.19% simple present), and 58.78% simple past. Usage for Group 5 was 15.58% nonpast (8.66% base and 6.92% simple present), and 75.74% simple past. This is demonstrated in Figure 4.

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Figure 4. The distribution of simple past, base and simple present in background



Therefore, it can be concluded that the nonpast (base and simple present) characterizes the background in the early stages of development. In subsequent stages, however, the simple past characterizes the background.

5 Discussion

5.1 Use of simple past morphology in foreground and background

With respect to use of simple past morphology in foreground and background, the result of the present study is congruent with the findings in Bardovi-Harlig's (1992, 1995) studies, in which the simple past emerges first in the foreground. As previously discussed, in Bardovi-Harlig (1992)'s study, the examination of oral and written narratives showed that the majority of the learners tended to use simple past in the foreground rather than the background. Similarly, in Bardovi-Harlig's (1995) study, the use of simple past in the foreground is greater than in the background in both written and oral contexts. In the present study, since learners also showed a greater use of past in the foreground than in the background, the result of the present study, therefore, corroborates the findings in Bardovi-Harlig's (1992, 1995) studies.

Demonstrating that the proportions of marking of the foreground over the background vary across proficiency level, the result of this study conforms to the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis which predicts that "learners use emerging verbal morphology to distinguish foreground and background in narratives." In this study, since learners' use of simple past is greater in foreground than background, learners' use of simple past is presumably sensitive to the foreground-background distinction. Compared to learners in the higher groups, learners in the lower groups is more sensitive to

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background-foreground distinction. This suggests that the association of tense-aspect morphology with narrative grounding is, as predicted, more common among learners at an early state than learners at an advanced state of L2 tense-aspect development.

5.2 Characteristics of the foreground and background

As regards characteristics of the foreground and background, the result of the present study revealed that the dominant form of foreground and background changed as learners became more proficient with respect to their L2 tense-aspect systems. Before learners show a strong preference for the simple past in the foreground, base is the favored form. In the background, however, base form and simple present are the favored forms before learners switch to using the simple past in the majority of cases. This result is in agreement with the findings in Bardovi-Harlig' (1995) study in two respects. First, like Bardovi-Harlig's (1995) study, the essential competition between forms in the foreground is between the simple past and the base forms; whereas the competing forms in the background are the simple past, base and simple present. Second, like Bardovi-Harlig's (1995) study, the dominant form of foreground and background changed as learners became more proficient with respect to their L2 tense-aspect systems.

Another result worth being discussed is that the dominant use of simple past emerges later in background than in the foreground. In this study, it is discovered that the use simple past in the background exceeds the use of nonpast (base and simple present) in group 3. In the foreground, however, the use simple past in exceeds the use of nonpast in group 2. This result is also consistent with the findings from Bardovi-Harlig's (1995) study in which the simple past becomes the dominant tense in the background later than in the foreground. Moreover, similar to Bardovi-Harlig's (1995) study, the dominant use of simple past in the background never reaches the same high level of use of simple past in the foreground because other past tense forms which are hardly found in the foreground occur more frequently in the background.

An interesting point lies in the use of base compared to the use of other nonpast forms. In both foreground and background, learners show greater rates of use of base than other nonpast forms. This may be attributable to their native language, Thai, which does not have verbal inflectional morphology. The learners were probably not familiar with the use of verbal inflection, thus avoiding any verbal inflection.

6 Conclusions

Having investigated the use of simple past morphology in foreground and background, this study found that the foreground exhibited greater rates of

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use of simple past than background across proficiency levels. Moreover, after an examination of foreground and background expression, this study found that the dominant forms of foreground and background change from nonpast to past as learners become more proficient with respect to their L2 tense-aspect system. The dominant use of simple past, however, emerges later in background than in the foreground.

Revealing an interplay between second language proficiency and the influence of narrative structure on tense-aspect distribution, this study shows that Thai learners' acquisition of English tense-aspect morphology conforms to a universal tendency known as the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis in that the learners associate use of tense-aspect morphology with foreground-background distinction. The association, however, decreases as learners become more proficiency with respect to their L2 tense-aspect system. The findings of this study, therefore, provide empirical support to the Interlanguage Discourse Hypothesis and contribute to the body of research on tense-aspect in SLA.

In practical terms, this study offers support for explicit instruction of tense-aspect morphology. This study suggests that the use of past morphology in foreground should be introduced and practiced prior to use of past morphology in background because it is easier to master. However, as learners must eventually use past in both foreground and background to achieve desired proficiency of tense use in narratives, this study suggests that activities enhancing learner's use of past in the background should supplement the instruction of tense-aspect morphology, particularly when learners are at the early and intermediate stages of L2 tense-aspect development.

The scope of the present study suggests several possibilities for future research. First, this study examined tense-aspect marking in written narratives. Whether the distribution of tense-aspect morphology in oral narratives will follow the same pattern remains undetermined. Future research incorporating oral narratives is, therefore, recommended. Second, investigation of the development of the L2 tense-aspect system was a cross-sectional exercise, in which different groups of learners represent different developmental stages. Future researchers may find it beneficial to apply a longitudinal approach in order to document a continuum of development of the L2 tense-aspect system over an extended period of time. Finally, this study focused on the role of narrative structure on tense-aspect morphology. Other factors, such as lexical aspect, however, may also play a role. Challenging research tasks for the future involves the comparison of their effect on the acquisition of tense-aspect morphology.

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