

# The acquisition of *plus-que-parfait* in French by Chinese learners in French L2 and L3

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research is to show the differences of French *plus-que-parfait* acquisition by Chinese learners in French seconde language (L2) and third language (L3) at the initial and intermediate level. Through the comparison of written samples of four groups (native speakers and learners), we found that (1) two groups of French learners sometimes use the *passé composé* to replace the *plus-que-parfait*; (2) FL2 learners use the subordination with perfective value or lexical means to mark the double anteriority, which is influenced by their L1 Chinese; (3) FL3 learners, who have learned English as L2, are very familiar with the double anteriority indicated by the pluperfect. This likely facilitates the acquisition of the *plus-que-parfait*.

Key words: Chinese learners, *plus-que-parfait*, double anteriority, FL2, FL3

## Introduction

The acquisition of French past tense as a foreign language interests many researchers. Many previous studies (Kaplan 1987, Bergström 1995, Kihlstedt 2002, Ayoun 2004) concerning the distinction between *the passé composé* and *imparfait* have been published. The *plus-que-parfait* emerges later among learners (Labeau 2002, Howard 2005, Sun 2006) and receives less attention from researchers. Howard (2005) found that advanced English learners often use the *passé composé* instead of the *plus-que-parfait*, and they often express the double anteriority by lexical or grammatical means. Howard indicates that the use of *plus-que-parfait* is stricter than that of the pluperfect:

1. I had to return home because I forgot / had forgotten my wallet.  
*J'ai dû rentrer à la maison parce que j'avais oublié mon portefeuille.*  
(Howard 2005: 70)

In this example, one could either use the *preterit* or the *pluperfect* in English to mark the double anteriority, while in French, only the *plus-que-parfait* is acceptable.

In Chinese, there is no equivalent grammatical mark as *pluperfect* in English and *plus-que-parfait* in French. Howard (2005) observed the English learners of French at the advanced level, but at the initial and intermediate

level, how do Chinese learners express the double anteriority in French? This will be explained in the following sections.

## Methodology

Written samples of learners who study French as second language (L2) or third language (L3) - English as L2, were compared and the similarities and differences were determined. The written sample is a narrative based on a segment from the silent film "Modern Times". A total of four groups were included in this study. The two control groups consisted of a group of Chinese natives (CN, n = 8) and a group of French natives (FN, n = 8). The two experimental groups consisted of a group of Chinese FL2 learners (two levels, which were classified by learning time: initial, n = 6 and intermediate, n = 6) and FL3 (also two levels) were included in the study.

## Results and Conclusion

Table 2. Use of *plus-que-parfait* of all verbal tenses by Chinese learners and French natives

|   | FL2 initial | FL3 initial | FL2<br>intermediate | FL3<br>intermediate | FN |
|---|-------------|-------------|---------------------|---------------------|----|
| n | 2           | 0           | 3                   | 6                   | 8  |
| % | 1.3%        | 0%          | 1.9%                | 2.8%                | 3% |

In our corpus, we found that the use of *plus-que-parfait* is limited, not only by learners, but also by French natives. In the initial stage, FL3 learners had not learned *plus-que-parfait* when the data was collected, therefore, it is expected that there is no use of *plus-que-parfait* by FL3 in the initial stage. With the development of acquisition, the use of this tense increased in both groups. The methods used by the learners to compensate the value of *plus-que-parfait* were analyzed and are shown in table 2.

In short, the passé composé is an important method to replace the *plus-que-parfait* for learners of French with different L1s and even for learners who study French as L3. Furthermore, FL2 learners, influenced by their L1, combine the lexical and grammatical methods to replace the *plus-que-parfait* value. It should also be noted that FL3 learners more frequently use the *plus-que-parfait* than FL2 learners in the intermediate stage, although the FL3 learners studied this tense later than FL2 learners. Thus, it is possible that the L2 English facilitate the *plus-que-parfait* learning in L3.

Table 3. Methods to compensate the value of *plus-que-parfait* in both groups of Chinese learners and the ways to indicate double anteriority in Chinese

| Initial level<br>(Chinese learners)  | Intermediate level<br>(Chinese learners)  | Native Chinese  |
|--|---|---|
|  | Passé composé used in relative subordinations by two groups of learners :<br>“c’était... qui” ( <i>It is...that/who</i> ) structure | The structure « shi...de »<br>(It is...that/who)                            |
|  |   | Lexical methods :<br>« gānggāng » ou<br>« gāngcái » (just now)              |
| Passé composé used in indirect speech : two groups                                 | Passé composé used in indirect speech: FL3 group  | Indirect speech with perfective value (indirect speech+ suffix <i>-le</i> ) |
|  | Subordination introduced by « avant ... » (before): one FL2 learner   | Subordination + lexical<br>« 前qián... » (avant)<br>(before)                 |
| Passé composé lonely: a FL2 learner  |   | No marks  |
| Causal subordination + passé composé/imparfait/ illegible verbal form : two groups | Causal subordination + plus-que-parfait : FL2 learners  |   |

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