

Past and Present Tense and Temporal Interpretation in English Narrative
Texts by Third Year Law Students of Southwest University of Political
Science and Law at Chongqing City Province, China

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics

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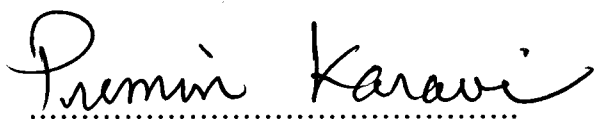
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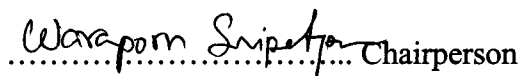
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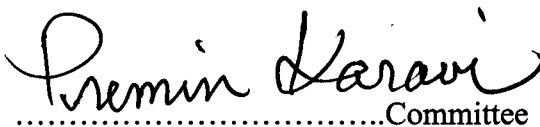


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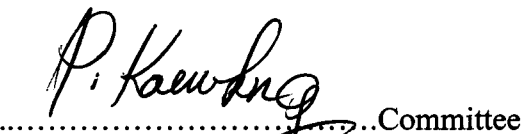
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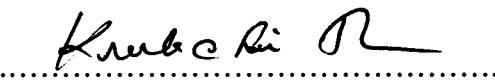
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ABSTRACT

This study investigated tense and temporal interpretation in English narrative texts of students from Southwest University of Political Science and Law (SWUPL) in China. It aimed at four purposes to know: (1) what verb forms were given in English narrative texts by Chinese university students, (2) what factors contributed to their past and present temporal interpretation in English narrative texts, (3) if there were any differences in their receptive performance and productive performance of temporal interpretations in English narrative texts, and (4) if there were any differences in the temporal interpretation performance between the high and the low English proficiency groups.

The subjects in this study were 170 third-year law students randomly picked up from the SWUPL 1,500 population, who had finished Foundation English IV in the academic year 2006. The 170 subjects were divided into two groups: the high proficiency group and the low proficiency group with 85 subjects in each of them.

Four instruments were used to collect data: a cloze test, a recall questionnaire concerning the cloze test, a writing test and a recall questionnaire concerning the writing test.

The data analysis consisted of (1) qualitative analysis of verb forms, targeted at the ungrammatical forms given by the subjects in the cloze test and the writing test;

(2) qualitative analysis of the factors involved in temporal interpretation; (3) *t*-tests to compare the scores of the cloze test and the writing test and the correlation of the cloze test scores and the writing test scores within each group; and (4) *t*-tests to compare the scores between the high and the low proficiency groups.

The findings of the study are as follows:

1. Nine types of ungrammatical verb forms were found involving the tense formation. They were the misuse or misforms of the *modals and past verbs*, the *passive voice structures*, the *progressive tense structures*, the *perfect tense structures* and the *pure present participle structures*. Errors in *past irregular verbs*, in *subject-verb agreement*, *word classes* and *spelling* were also observed. Among them, the incorrect uses of past irregular verbs and of passive voice were conspicuous.

2. Eight factors contributing to temporal interpretation were identified and categorized respectively at syntactic, textual and conceptual levels. They were: *adverbial phrases*, *conjunctions*, *noun phrases*, *verb phrases*, *grammar* (sentence patterns and grammatical meanings of tense), *context*, *text* (discourse structure) and *conceptions*. Among these factors, adverbial phrases, noun phrases, context and verb phrases most facilitated the subjects' temporal interpretation in reading. The decisive factors influencing the students' temporal interpretation in writing were their knowledge of the text structure and general understanding of the event(s). Context and action verbs also played their roles in the subjects' temporal interpretation.

3. Significant differences were found in the subjects' temporal interpretation performance in narrative reading and writing. More correct tenses and temporal interpretations were given by the subjects in the writings than in the readings.

4. The high subject group's temporal interpretation performance in the narrative reading and writing texts was significantly different from that of the low subject group. The subjects' temporal interpretation ability was associated with their language proficiency levels. The high proficiency group outperformed the low proficiency group both in correct verb forms and in temporal interpretation.