

Learning Tense and Aspect in L3: A Review of Recent Experimental Studies

Aprendizagem do tempo e aspeto em L3: uma revisão de estudos experimentais recentes

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Abstract

This study reviews recent experimental research on tense-aspect acquisition in a third language (L3). Drawing on 11 studies published between 2017 and early 2026, it identifies recurrent methodological patterns, converging findings, unresolved questions, and persistent limitations in this line of research. The review shows that recent studies tend to favor controlled tasks, particularly Semantic Interpretation Tasks, and rely predominantly on quantitative methods, especially group comparisons and regression-based analyses. Overall, the findings point to the relevance of structural proximity, L2 and L3 proficiency, and L2 status, while also providing recurring support for the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis and the Default Past Tense Hypothesis. At the same time, two issues remain unresolved: the interaction between language distance and L2 status when the L1 is structurally closer to the L3, and the effect of source languages that encode tense but only partially align with the target tense-aspect system. The available literature also remains limited in several respects: it focuses heavily on the perfective-imperfective contrast in Romance L3s, primarily examines learners with tensed European language backgrounds in formal instructional settings, and relies overwhelmingly on offline tasks. Future research should therefore expand the range of language combinations and learning contexts under investigation and adopt a wider methodological range.

Keywords: Third language acquisition, tense and aspect, critical review, experimental studies.

Resumo

Este trabalho apresenta uma revisão dos estudos experimentais recentes sobre a aprendizagem do tempo e aspeto em língua terceira (L3). Com base em 11 estudos publicados entre 2017 e março de 2026, identificam-se tendências metodológicas recorrentes, resultados convergentes, questões ainda em aberto e limitações persistentes nesta linha de investigação. A análise mostra que os estudos mais recentes privilegiam tarefas controladas, como as Tarefas de Interpretação Semântica, e recorrem predominantemente a métodos quantitativos com testes de comparação entre grupos e modelos de regressão. No conjunto, os resultados sugerem um papel relevante da proximidade estrutural, da proficiência em L2 e em L3 e do *L2 status*, ao mesmo tempo que oferecem suporte recorrente à *Lexical Aspect Hypothesis* e à *Default Past Tense Hypothesis*. Permanecem, contudo, duas questões sem resposta conclusiva: a interação entre a distância linguística e o *L2 status* quando a L1 é estruturalmente mais próxima da L3, e o efeito de línguas de partida que dispõem de tempos verbais, mas apenas parcialmente alinhados com o sistema da língua-alvo. A literatura disponível apresenta ainda limitações: concentra-se sobretudo no contraste perfeito-imperfeito em L3 românicas, em aprendentes com L1 e L2 maioritariamente europeias e com tempos verbais gramaticais, em contextos formais de instrução, e em tarefas predominantemente *offline*. Estes resultados apontam para a necessidade de alargar as combinações linguísticas e os contextos de aprendizagem investigados, bem como de integrar desenhos metodológicos mais diversificados.

Palavras-chave: Aprendizagem de língua terceira, tempo e aspeto, revisão crítica, estudos experimentais.

1. Introduction

The acquisition of a third language (L3)¹ has received increasing attention in multilingualism research. A growing body of empirical work suggests that L3 acquisition differs from traditional second language (L2) acquisition, as L3 learners have access to more than one previously acquired language during the learning process (e.g., Cenoz, 2001; De Angelis, 2007; Rothman, 2011; Slabakova, 2017; Westergaard et al., 2017). However, despite the expanding literature on interactions among multiple languages in L3 acquisition, existing reviews of tense-aspect learning have continued to focus largely on L2 acquisition (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000; Bardovi-Harlig & Comajoan-Colomé, 2020). Reviews specifically addressing tense-aspect acquisition in L3 contexts remain scarce.

To address this gap, the present study reviews experimental research on tense-aspect acquisition in L3 published over the past decade. It aims to map the current state of empirical research in this area and to identify unresolved or contested issues that may inspire further investigation. Particular attention is paid to methodological practices and to patterns of convergence and divergence in the reported findings.

The paper is structured as follows. It first outlines the conceptual background, including factors that may shape crosslinguistic influence (CLI) in L3 acquisition and current hypotheses concerning tense-aspect development in multilingual learners. It then presents the guiding questions that frame the review and describes the procedures used to select the studies included. The following sections examine the selected studies with regard to their methodological characteristics and empirical findings. The final section synthesizes the main trends and limitations in current research, and discusses directions for future work.

2. Conceptualization of tense-aspect acquisition in L3

2.1. Crosslinguistic influence factors in L3 acquisition

Crosslinguistic influence (CLI), or transfer, is widely regarded as a central concept in research on non-native language acquisition. In L3 acquisition, CLI is generally assumed to be more complex than in L2 learning, since learners already know at least one other non-native language. CLI in L3 learning may be shaped by several factors, the most frequently discussed being typological proximity, linguistic proficiency, and L2 status (Bardel & Falk, 2012; De Angelis, 2007; Diaubalick et al., 2023; Rothman, 2011).

Typological proximity, or language distance, involves similarity at two levels: the general proximity between languages from the same family or subgroup (e.g., Portuguese and Spanish), and the structural proximity between specific features in two languages that do not necessarily belong to the same family or subgroup (e.g., cognates shared by English and Portuguese) (De Angelis, 2007). Previous research has shown that learners often rely on the language perceived as most similar to the target language as a source of CLI, regardless of whether this is the L1 or the L2 (Foote, 2009).

Proficiency in both the source and target languages can also influence CLI. With regard to the target language, CLI is more commonly observed at earlier stages of learning, when learners compensate for gaps in target language knowledge (De Angelis, 2007). By contrast, the role of proficiency in the source language remains under-researched, and the available evidence is limited and mixed. Some studies suggest that CLI is more likely to arise from well-mastered languages (Williams & Hammarberg, 1998), whereas others report influence from less proficient languages (De Angelis & Selinker, 2001).

The L2 status factor, rooted in neuropsychological theory, holds that non-native languages rely primarily on declarative memory because they are typically learned explicitly in formal settings, whereas the L1 relies on procedural memory as a result of naturalistic acquisition. On this view, the shared cognitive basis of non-native languages facilitates CLI between them (Bardel & Falk, 2012; Falk & Bardel, 2011; Paradis, 1994).

¹ In this paper, the term third language (L3) is used to refer to “a non-native language which is currently being used or acquired in a situation where the person already has knowledge of one or more L2s in addition to one or more L1s” (Hammarberg, 2010, p. 97).

2.2. Hypotheses on the acquisition of tense and aspect in non-native languages

Research on tense-aspect acquisition in L3 contexts largely draws on hypotheses originally developed for L2 acquisition. Among the many hypotheses proposed in the literature, three have received the greatest empirical attention, namely the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis (LAH), the Discourse Hypothesis (DH), and the Default Past Tense Hypothesis (DPTH).

The Lexical Aspect Hypothesis (LAH) proposes that the development of tense-aspect morphology follows a systematic sequence constrained by lexical aspect. Drawing on Vendler's (1967) classification, LAH holds that learners initially associate past marking (e.g., the English simple past) or perfective marking (e.g., the Spanish *pretérito perfecto simple*) with expressions denoting telic situations, and only later extend such marking to atelic situations. In languages with a formal perfective-imperfective contrast, imperfective morphology is expected to emerge later and to appear first with atelic predicates before extending to telic ones. Likewise, in languages with progressive morphology, learners are expected to initially restrict progressive marking to activity predicates and only subsequently generalize it to other lexical aspect classes (Andersen, 1991, 2002; Andersen & Shirai, 1996). Building on Prototype Theory (Rosch, 1973), Shirai and Andersen (1995) further distinguish between prototypical combinations (i.e., perfective aspect with telic predicates and imperfective aspect with atelic predicates), and non-prototypical combinations (i.e., perfective aspect with atelic predicates and imperfective aspect with telic predicates). They argue that acquisition proceeds from prototypical to non-prototypical contexts.

The Discourse Hypothesis (DH) proposes that tense selection is conditioned by narrative grounding. Drawing on Hopper's (1979) distinction between foreground and background, DH predicts that learners preferentially use perfective forms in dynamic foreground contexts that advance the narrative, and imperfective forms in background contexts that provide descriptive or explanatory information (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998, 2000). Since foreground contexts are often associated with telic predicates and background contexts frequently involve atelic predicates, DH may generate surface patterns similar to those predicted by LAH (Salaberry, 2008, 2011). The two accounts differ, however, in their explanatory focus: LAH gives primacy to inherent lexical aspect, whereas DH attributes tense selection primarily to discourse structure.

The Default Past Tense Hypothesis (DPTH) emerged from empirical findings that did not align with the predictions of either LAH or DH. In studies of Romance L2 acquisition, Salaberry (1999, 2002) observed that beginning learners frequently overused the preterit across aspectual classes, irrespective of telicity or discourse grounding. To account for this pattern, DPTH proposes that learners initially adopt a past tense form as a morphological default, applying it uniformly across all aspectual classes. This deviation is attributed not to a lack of understanding of tense-aspect distinctions in the target language but to difficulties in mapping these distinctions to linguistic forms, particularly when the mapping diverges from their L1 (Salaberry, 2008).

3. The present review

3.1. Research objectives

This review aims to describe the current state of empirical research on L3 tense-aspect acquisition and to identify issues that remain underexplored. To this end, it synthesizes recent empirical studies by comparing their research focus, sociolinguistic scope, methodological approaches, and main findings.

The review is guided by the following questions:

- I. What aspects of L3 tense-aspect acquisition have recent studies focused on?
- II. What sociolinguistic contexts have been examined across the studies?
- III. What task designs and analytical approaches have been adopted?

IV. What converging and diverging findings are reported, and how do they relate to existing theoretical accounts of L3 acquisition?

V. What issues remain underexplored, and what future research directions do they suggest?

3.2. Study selection methodology

3.2.1. Inclusion criteria

In this review, the studies were selected according to the following predefined inclusion criteria:

- a. The study was published as a peer-reviewed journal article.
- b. The study was written in English.
- c. The publication year fell between 2017 and 2026, corresponding to the most recent decade of research.
- d. The study focused on the acquisition of tense and aspect in an L3 by adult learners.
- e. The study reported original empirical data.

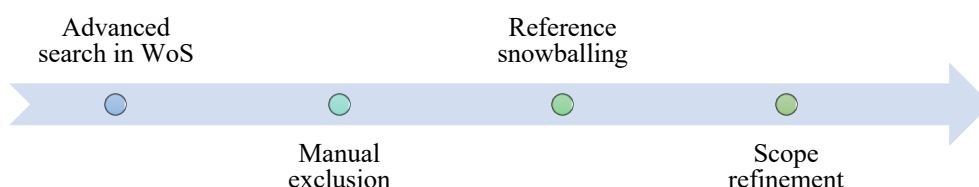
These criteria were defined to ensure both the quality and the focus of the review. Restricting the corpus to peer-reviewed journal articles provides a basic quality filter, while limiting the review to studies published in English ensures accessibility and comparability across sources. The temporal restriction was intended to capture recent developments in the field and to reflect the current state of research on L3 tense-aspect acquisition. The final two criteria delimit the scope of the review by focusing specifically on empirical studies of adult L3 learners, thereby excluding studies on child acquisition as well as theoretical or review-based contributions.

3.2.2. Study selection procedure

The selection follows a sequential procedure, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Study Selection Procedure



Advanced search in Web of Science (WoS). The initial search was conducted in the Web of Science (available at <https://www.webofscience.com/>) in order to maintain a transparent and replicable screening procedure. The search was restricted by publication year (2017-2026), language (English), document type (article), and WoS categories (Linguistics and Language & Linguistics). To identify studies potentially meeting Criterion 4, two groups of keywords were used: *tense OR aspect OR morphology* and *L3 OR Ln OR multilingualism*. The first keyword set was searched in the title field, while the second set was searched in the topic field in order to capture studies explicitly addressing tense-aspect acquisition within L3 contexts.

The literature search was last conducted on March 8, 2026. This search returned 14 studies.

Figure 2 illustrates the search settings used in Web of Science.

Figure 2

Search Settings Used in Web of Science

The screenshot displays the 'FIELD SEARCH' tab in the Web of Science search interface. The search query is built using the following criteria:

- Title:** Example: water consum*
tense OR aspect OR morphology
- And** (operator)
- Topic:** Example: oil spill* mediti
L3 OR Ln OR multilinguism
- And** (operator)
- Year Published:** Example: 2001 or 1997-1995
2017-2026
- And** (operator)
- Document Type:** Article
- And** (operator)
- Language:** English
- And** (operator)
- Web of Science Categories:** Linguistics OR Language & Linguistics

Buttons at the bottom include '+ Add row', '+ Add date range', 'Clear', and 'Search'.

Manual exclusion. In the second step, the titles and abstracts of the 14 studies were examined. At this stage, four studies were excluded because they did not meet the scope of the review. More specifically, Branets and Verschik (2021), Saturno (2022) and Koptleuova et al. (2022) were excluded because they did not address tense-aspect acquisition, whereas Zaretsky and Russak (2024) was excluded because it did not focus on adult learners². This step reduced the dataset to 10 studies.

Reference snowballing. To ensure broader coverage, the reference lists of the 10 selected studies were manually reviewed. This procedure led to the identification of three additional studies that met the predefined criteria, resulting in a corpus of 13 papers. The reference lists of these newly included studies were also checked, but no further relevant publications were found.

Scope refinement. In the final step, the full texts of the 13 studies were examined in relation to the specific scope of the review. At this stage, Lu et al. (2019) and Sun and Rodríguez (2023) were excluded. Although both studies referred to the target language as an L3, they did not systematically incorporate learners' L2 knowledge or learning experience into the discussion. More specifically, neither study included L2 linguistic features in task design, nor did either include L2-related factors in the analysis. As a result, the target language was effectively analyzed within a traditional L2 acquisition framework, with attention restricted to the influence of the learners' L1. These studies therefore fell outside the scope of the present review and were excluded from the later comparative analysis. This step reduced the final dataset to 11 studies. This limited number shows that this subarea remains relatively underexplored and is still emerging within the broader field of L3 acquisition research.

The final set of 11 studies is presented in Section 4.2.1 together with their sociolinguistic context.

² Studies involving high school learners (e.g., Eibensteiner, 2019) were not excluded due to their comparable characteristics with adult learners in terms of age, cerebral development, and language acquisition experience.

4. Discussion

This section discusses the overall trends emerging from the selected studies in terms of research focus, methodological characteristics, and empirical findings. The analysis of the methodology is organized around the main stages of an experimental study, from the sociolinguistic context of the study to proficiency measurement and control, and finally to task design and data analysis. The empirical findings are then compared in order to identify converging patterns, points of divergence, and possible explanations for the variation observed.

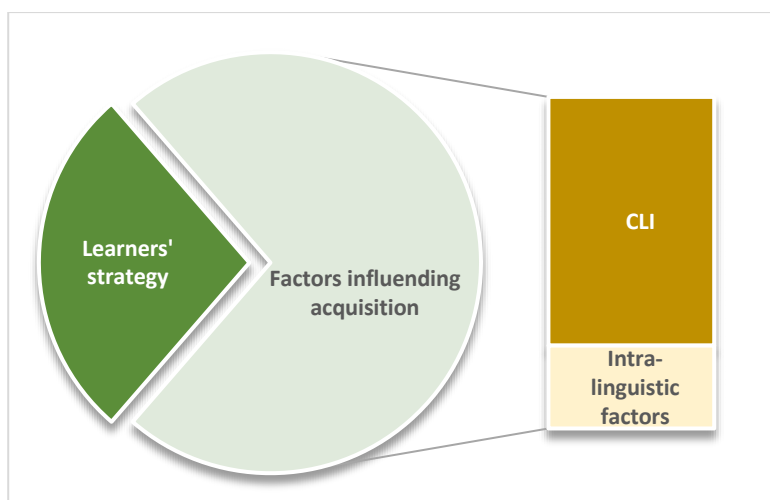
4.1. Research focus of the selected studies

The selected studies differ in their primary research focus. Three studies examine the strategies learners use when selecting tense forms, such as intuition-based choices and explicit grammatical rules, whereas eight focus on linguistic factors influencing learners' acquisition of tense-aspect morphology. Within the latter group, two studies address intra-linguistic factors, such as lexical aspect and discourse grounding, and six examine CLI-related factors, such as typological proximity, L2 status, and L2 and L3 proficiency. CLI-related factors therefore constitute the most frequently investigated topic in the dataset. As these differences do not map neatly onto distinct methodological or empirical patterns, the following discussion is not organized by research focus.

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of research focuses across the selected studies.

Figure 3

Distribution of Research Focuses Across the Selected Studies



4.2. Methodological characteristics of the selected studies

4.2.1. Sociolinguistic context

Regarding the sociolinguistic context, the selected studies share a specific instructional and linguistic scope: all were conducted in formal learning contexts and examine the acquisition of perfective and imperfective past-tense morphology in a Romance L3 (e.g., Spanish *pretérito perfecto simple* versus *pretérito*

imperfecto)³. Against this background, Table 1 presents the learners' L1, L2, and L3 combinations across the studies.

Table 1

Language Combinations in the Selected Studies

Studies	L1	L2	L3
Comajoan-Colomé (2019)	Various European languages	Various European languages	Catalan
Eibensteiner (2019)	German	English	Spanish
Vallerossa (2021)	Swedish	English and Romance language	Italian
Diaubalick et al. (2023)	German	English and Romance language	Spanish
Eibensteiner (2023)	German	English	Spanish
Sun et al. (2023)	Mandarin	English	Spanish
Vallerossa & Bardel (2023)	Various European languages	Various European languages	Italian
Vallerossa et al. (2023)	Swedish	English and Romance language	Italian
Eibensteiner (2024)	German	English and Romance language	Spanish
Toth et al. (2024)	Slovak	English	Spanish/Italian
Vallerossa (2024)	Primarily Swedish	English and Romance language	Italian

The shared focus may be related to the acquisition difficulty of Romance past-tense morphology. Perfective and imperfective values are formally encoded in Romance past-tense forms but not in the same way in many widely spoken L1s and L2s, such as English and Mandarin Chinese, making this domain particularly suitable for examining learning strategies and patterns of CLI.

The narrow scope of the evidence is also reflected in the language combinations represented in Table 1. Most studies involve learners with tensed European L1s and L2s, whereas only one study includes participants whose L1, Mandarin Chinese, lacks grammatical tense marking. The empirical evidence in this area is therefore largely limited to tensed language combinations and to European language-learning contexts. Informal instructional contexts also remain unexplored, presumably because they are less accessible to researchers.

4.2.2. Proficiency measurement

As proficiency in both the L2 and the L3 may shape learners' performance on the main tasks, the studies reviewed generally address it either at the participant-selection stage or in the statistical analysis as a continuous variable. Two main issues arise with regard to proficiency measurement: first, what type of proficiency is assessed; and second, how different types of proficiency are operationalized.

Across the studies, two general types of proficiency can be identified. The first is general language proficiency, which refers to overall linguistic competence. In the reviewed works, this type of proficiency is assessed through four main approaches: self-reported proficiency, course enrolment level, externally validated proficiency tests (e.g., tests provided by institutional language centers), and C-tests adapted from previous research or constructed by the authors following the framework proposed by Klein-Braley (1985, 1997).

Each of these approaches presents particular advantages and limitations. Self-reported proficiency is the most economical option for both participants and researchers, and previous research has suggested that it can

³ The fact that all studies included in the final dataset examine a Romance L3 reflects the empirical coverage of the studies identified, rather than a priori restriction in the search procedure.

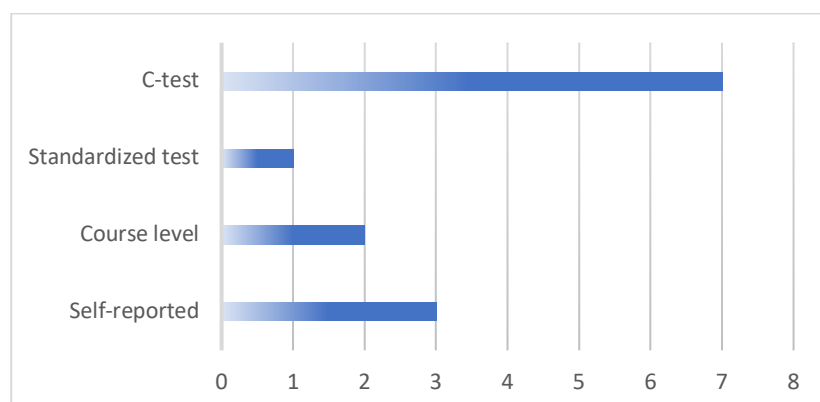
provide useful information about learners' proficiency. However, it remains dependent on learners' self-perception and may diverge from objective proficiency measures (Edele et al., 2015; Ma & Winke, 2019). The course enrolment level is not, strictly speaking, a measurement method but rather an approximation based on the assumption that the institution has previously placed learners using an appropriate proficiency test. Nevertheless, language development varies considerably across individuals, and learners' proficiency may change within a relatively short time after the initial placement, even among students enrolled in the same course level.

Externally validated tests provide scores with established validity and standardized scoring procedures. However, researchers often do not have access to the full test materials or to participants' item-level responses, and in some cases the reported scores are obtained only through participants' self-report. Finally, the C-test offers a relatively balanced alternative. Because the test materials are accessible to researchers, it can be administered under controlled conditions, and the resulting scores can be used directly either for participant grouping or as continuous variables in statistical models. Nevertheless, when a C-test is constructed or adapted by the researchers, its reliability must be established through appropriate statistical measures (e.g., internal consistency indices), as it does not benefit from the extensive validation typically associated with large-scale standardized examinations.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of methods for measuring general proficiency across the studies, with the C-test being the most frequently used⁴.

Figure 4

General Proficiency Measurement Methods Used in the Selected Studies



The second type is analytic proficiency, which refers to learners' competence in specific linguistic domains rather than overall language ability (Sánchez, 2020). In the selected studies, analytic proficiency typically concerns learners' command of tense-aspect expressions. In practice, general language proficiency does not necessarily correlate with proficiency in a specific linguistic domain (Ellis, 1994). When examining CLI in L3 acquisition, researchers have to determine which type of proficiency to be assessed considering the research question. For instance, studies may explore the relationship between general L2 proficiency and analytic proficiency regarding tense-aspect expression in the L3, or instead compare analytic proficiency in the relevant structure across both languages. This issue is closely related to theoretical assumptions about the nature of CLI,

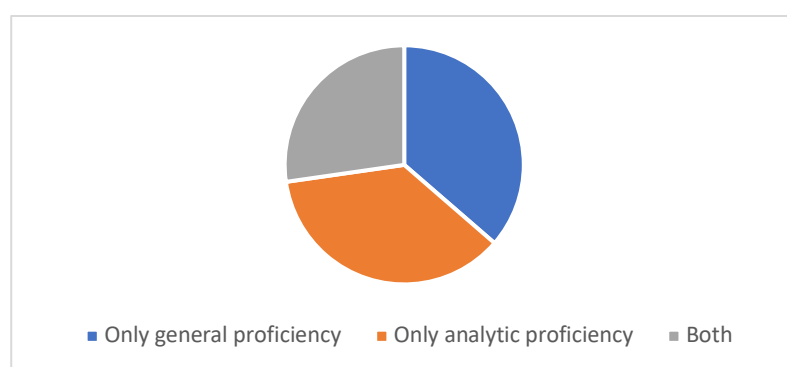
⁴ The total number therefore exceeds the number of selected studies, as some studies employ different methods to assess L2 and L3 proficiency. For example, Diaubalick et al. (2023) use self-reported measures for L2 proficiency and a standardized test from the Oxford University Language Centre for L3.

namely whether transfer operates primarily at the level of the language as a whole or at the level of specific linguistic structures (De Angelis, 2007).

Figure 5 illustrates the types of L2 proficiency measured in the selected studies. It shows that although more than half of the studies take analytic proficiency into account, more than one third consider only general proficiency. In several cases, both general and analytic proficiency are assessed as independent variables through different tasks, most commonly a C-test for general proficiency and a Semantic Interpretation Task for analytic proficiency. The latter method will be described in more detail later.

Figure 5

Types of L2 Proficiency Measured in the Selected Studies



4.2.3. Task design and data analysis

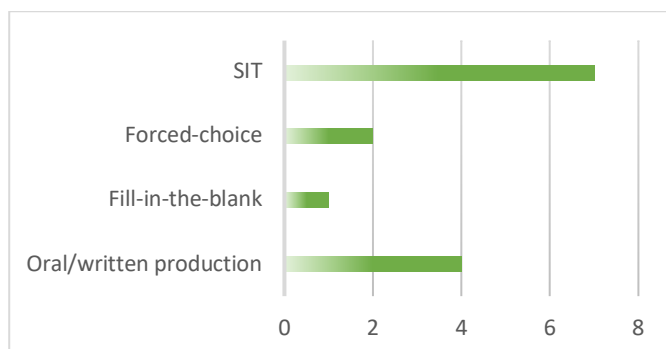
Regarding task design, the selected studies show a general preference for controlled tasks. In particular, Semantic Interpretation Tasks (SIT), in which participants rate the acceptability of different possible interpretations on a Likert scale, are the most frequently used method. These interpretations may be target-like or may reflect potential crosslinguistic influence. Other controlled tasks, such as forced-choice tasks or fill-in-the-blank exercises, appear only occasionally in the dataset.

Oral and written production tasks are also employed in order to capture learners' behavior in more naturalistic contexts. In some cases, controlled comprehension tasks are combined with more naturalistic production tasks as complementary sources of evidence (e.g., Eibenstein, 2023; Vallerossa, 2021). In production tasks, non-verbal multimodal stimuli, such as videos or cartoons, are commonly used to elicit narrative responses (e.g., Sun et al., 2023; Toth et al., 2024).

Figure 6 summarizes the main experimental tasks used to elicit learners' tense-aspect use.

Figure 6

Main Experimental Tasks Used in the Selected Studies



Regarding the analytical methods, only the three studies focusing on learners' strategies rely primarily on qualitative approaches and descriptive frequency statistics, whereas the remaining eight studies employ various forms of statistical modelling, mainly group comparison tests (e.g., t-tests and ANOVA) and predictive models such as regression analyses. This distribution reveals a clear tendency toward data-driven quantitative approaches, which is also related to the preference for more controlled tasks noted above.

4.3. Converging and diverging findings across the selected studies

4.3.1. Main convergences

Across the reviewed studies, several consistent patterns emerge, particularly with regard to CLI factors and the predictions of major acquisition hypotheses.

A first robust convergence concerns typological proximity. As shown in Section 4.2.1, many studies examine learners with a Romance L2 acquiring another Romance language as an L3, and the facilitating effect of this typological similarity is consistently attested (Diaubalick et al., 2023; Vallerossa, 2024; Vallerossa et al., 2023). A similar facilitative effect is also reported in several studies involving English as the L2, where it is analyzed as structurally closer to the Romance L3 than the learners' L1 (Eibenstein, 2019, 2023).

Higher L2 proficiency is likewise often associated with better L3 performance (Diaubalick et al., 2023; Vallerossa et al., 2023). In many cases, this pattern is interpreted as further support for the role of typological proximity, since greater mastery of an L2 analyzed as structurally similar to the L3 may increase the likelihood of positive transfer to the L3. Several studies also report that learners' tense-selection strategies change as proficiency in both the L2 and the L3 increases (Vallerossa, 2024; Vallerossa & Bardel, 2023).

A further convergence concerns the influence of L2 status (Diaubalick et al., 2023; Eibenstein, 2019, 2023). In many studies, learners appear to rely heavily on their L2 as the primary source of CLI. However, the independent effect of this factor is difficult to isolate. In most of the linguistic configurations examined, the L2 is not only cognitively prominent as a previously acquired non-native language, but also typologically closer to the L3. As a result, the role of L2 status is typically discussed in interaction with typological proximity and proficiency rather than as a fully independent factor.

Converging evidence is also found with respect to major acquisition hypotheses. Across the reviewed studies, learners generally perform better in prototypical contexts than in non-prototypical ones (i.e., contexts defined by pairings between lexical aspect and grammatical aspect marking; see the discussion of the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis in Section 2.2). Non-prototypical contexts are more often associated with target-divergent performance and less stable development, whereas prototypical form-meaning combinations tend to be acquired

earlier and more successfully (Diaubalick et al., 2023; Vallerossa et al., 2023). This pattern is commonly interpreted as support for the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis (LAH). Evidence consistent with the Default Past Tense Hypothesis (DPTH) is also reported in several studies (Eibenstein, 2019, 2023), where learner deviations are attributed to difficulties in mapping aspectual meanings onto the appropriate morphological forms in the target language.

4.3.2. Main divergences

Interaction between language distance and L2 status. One divergence concerns learners' selection of the source language for transfer. For example, Eibenstein (2019) reports a positive influence of L2 English in both prototypical and non-prototypical contexts. In contrast, Vallerossa et al. (2023) find that learners rely on their L2 English primarily in prototypical contexts, but shift to their Swedish L1 when dealing with non-prototypical contexts.

This divergence may reflect an interaction between structural similarity and the L2 status factor. Although participants in the two studies share the same L2, their overall linguistic profiles differ. In Eibenstein (2019), learners have German as L1 and English as L2. Neither language exhibits a formal perfective-imperfective contrast that fully corresponds to the system in L3 Spanish, but English is analyzed as possessing greater structural similarity. In this configuration, both typological proximity and L2 status may converge in favor of transfer from L2 English.

By contrast, in Vallerossa et al. (2023), learners have Swedish as L1. Although Swedish does not belong to the same language family as Italian, it nevertheless displays aspectual distinctions that are structurally comparable to the perfective-imperfective contrast. In this case, the factors of structural similarity and L2 status may point to different potential source languages.

One possible explanation of learners' behavior in Vallerossa et al. (2023) is that the influence of L2 status is more prominent in prototypical contexts, leading learners to rely primarily on their L2. In more demanding non-prototypical contexts, however, the influence of structural similarity may become more salient and override the L2 status factor, resulting in transfer from the L1. The evidence from this study also supports the view that transfer operates at the level of specific linguistic structures rather than entire language systems.

Role of a partially misaligned language. The second divergence concerns the role of English as an L2 in the selected studies. In most studies involving L2 English, such as Eibenstein (2019, 2023), Vallerossa et al. (2023) and Toth et al. (2024), L2 English is reported to exert a positive influence on tense-aspect acquisition in a Romance L3. By contrast, Sun et al. (2023) argue that learners are more likely to transfer patterns from previously acquired languages that diverge from the target language, resulting in negative transfer from English.

This divergence may reflect the complex role of an L2 that is only partially aligned with the target language. In such cases, English may simultaneously provide conditions for both positive and negative transfer, and the resulting patterns may depend on learners' broader linguistic profiles. For instance, in studies such as Vallerossa et al. (2023) and Toth et al. (2024), learners possess L1 or additional L2 languages with rich morphology and formal perfective-imperfective distinctions. When English diverges from the L3 in relevant mappings, learners may instead rely on these structurally closer languages as sources for transfer.

By contrast, Sun et al. (2023) examine learners whose L1 lacks grammatical tense marking and whose only other previously acquired language is English. In the absence of a more structurally comparable source language, English becomes the most accessible system for transfer, making negative transfer effects more visible.

The potentially complex role of a partially misaligned L2 is also consistent with the findings of Eibenstein (2024), who reports cases of hybrid negative transfer from a typologically distant L2 even in the presence of a typologically closer one. These findings suggest that crosslinguistic influence may be shaped not only by overall typological proximity but also by the degree of structural alignment between specific linguistic features.

5. Final considerations

This review provides an updated overview of current research on tense-aspect acquisition in an L3. Based on the studies reviewed, several methodological trends emerge. The reviewed dataset is characterized by controlled, data-driven research designs. The C-test is the proficiency measure most frequently used prior to the main tasks. Controlled tasks, especially comprehension-based ones such as Semantic Interpretation Tasks, are generally preferred, sometimes in combination with more naturalistic production tasks elicited through multimodal stimuli. Quantitative approaches have also become increasingly prominent, with group-comparison tests and regression analyses frequently used.

With regard to empirical findings, several robust convergences are identified in the selected studies. A structurally similar L2 is consistently found to facilitate L3 acquisition, and higher proficiency in such an L2 is generally associated with better performance in the L3. The L2 status factor is likewise supported, although it is rarely examined in isolation and is more often discussed in interaction with typological proximity and proficiency. Converging evidence also supports major acquisitional hypotheses such as the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis and the Default Past Tense Hypothesis: learners tend to perform better in prototypical than in non-prototypical contexts, and target-divergent performance is often linked to mismatches in form-meaning mapping across languages.

At the same time, the review reveals unresolved questions. In particular, it remains unclear how L2 status interacts with typological proximity in cases where the L1 is structurally closer to the L3 than the L2. A further open question concerns the complex influence of a source language that is tensed but only partially aligned with the L3, whose influence may not be straightforwardly facilitative or interfering. These issues call for further investigation.

Several broader limitations characterize the available studies. First, the existing literature remains linguistically narrow, focusing mainly on perfective-imperfective contrast in Romance L3s and often on learners whose L1 and L2 are themselves tensed languages. Second, the sociolinguistic and learning contexts represented are limited, as most studies examine learners from European backgrounds in formal instructional settings. Finally, the methodological range remains restricted, with the existing studies relying almost exclusively on offline tasks. Future research should therefore broaden the range of language combinations and tense-aspect contrasts under investigation, diversify the learning contexts examined, and incorporate complementary online methods that can better capture how learners draw on multiple prior languages during processing.

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