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THE TECHNIQUES OF TEACHING THE *PASSÉ COMPOSÉ* / *IMPARFAIT*
DISTINCTION: A THEORETICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will examine the linguistic and theoretical underpinning of the pedagogical techniques associated with teaching the *passé composé* and *imparfait* in French. These two verb tenses, having no straightforward equivalent in English, are notoriously difficult for teachers and learners alike, by virtue of their high formal and functional complexity. These challenges are compounded by the notoriously convoluted and outdated pedagogy of this grammar point; in particular, the rules and explanations found in most textbooks can mislead and confuse students. The solution to this problem, and the goal of this thesis, lies in a thorough understanding of the linguistic nature of the French tense-aspect system and how it relates to English, so that teachers might derive a clear and unequivocal approach from this knowledge. This thesis will also approach the question of the best sorts of activities for introducing, practicing, and mastering the *passé composé* and *imparfait*—ones that go beyond cookie-cutter grammatical drills focused on output, but that rather employ input-focused techniques such as a stress on narrative discourse, the archetypal context for these two tenses. Ultimately, this thesis will provide alternative approaches to teaching this grammar point that are based in current second-language acquisition research and that can be applied to grammatical pedagogy in general.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	iii
LIST OF FIGURES	iii
Introduction.....	1
Tense and Aspect	2
Tense, Aspect, and Narrative Discourse	7
The French Tense-Aspect System: Difficulties for Learners.....	9
Formal Difficulties	10
Functional Difficulties	12
Pedagogical Problems.....	14
Aspectual Input in the Classroom	20
Towards a Cohesive Pedagogy: Incorporating Narrative Discourse	23
Teaching Morphology.....	25
Dealing With Inadequate Textbook Materials	30
Managing Lexical Aspect	32
Conclusion	36
BIBLIOGRAPHY	39

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: The four Vendlerian lexical aspectual categories (adapted from Andersen 1991)..	4
Table 2: A typical textbook description of Romance-language tense and aspect (cited in Whitley 1986).....	17

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Flow chart constructed by Negueruela & Lantolf (2006) after Bull (1965), and adapted for French rather than Spanish.....	31
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Introduction

French teachers everywhere, it seems, have struggled to express the differences between the *passé composé* and *imparfait* to their students. This distinction, fundamental to the language, has formed a crucial part of all French curricula for centuries, and yet despite the various educational theories that have come and gone, many French teachers' experiences mirror the situation in Kaplan's (1993) memoirs:

You learn to draw a time line. You go up to the blackboard, and it's dramatic, and you say, "This is the imperfect: the imperfect is for description; it's for events that haven't finished." The time it takes to say this is just about the time it takes to drag your chalk line, slowly, all the way across the board. You pick up your chalk and you explain, chalk in hand, that the imperfect is used to describe feelings, states of being; it's used to describe background, landscape, and ongoing thoughts. All sorts of things with no definite beginning and end. Then you pause, take hold of your chalk piece like a weapon, and you stab the blackboard line at one point, then at another. This is the *passé composé*, this staccato: a point on the imperfect line of experience, a discrete action in the past with a beginning and an end that you can name (142).

All teachers—and indeed all learners—seem to recognize this technique from countless intermediate-level French lessons. It seems that teaching the *passé composé* and *imparfait* has become what Kaplan (1993) calls a "standard rite of pedagogy" which typically tends to follow one of only a few traditionally agreed-upon instructional formats (Blyth 1997). Yet, very few teachers stop to consider the rationale behind these lessons—and if they truly represent the most effective way of teaching the *passé composé* and *imparfait*. Given the vast amount of change in both pedagogical and language acquisition theory over the years, why has the instruction of the *passé composé* vs. *imparfait* distinction largely remained stagnant? This thesis will examine the shortcomings of traditional explanations of this topic, and will propose improvements based on

current research in tense-aspect acquisition and perspectives on grammatical instruction to form a cohesive approach to teaching the *passé composé* and *imparfait*.

Tense and Aspect

In order to approach this topic, it is vital to understand the distinction between the terms tense and aspect. Tense serves to temporally situate an event in relation to the point of speech, a function realized in many languages as the past, present, and future (Salaberry and Shirai 2002).

Aspect, on the other hand, can be defined as the “different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of the same situation” (Comrie 1976:3). In other words, tense entails the differences in temporal perspective from *outside* a situation, whereas aspect expresses the differences in temporal perspective from *within* a situation. The example given by Comrie (1976) illustrates consistency in tense with a shift in aspect:

(1) John read that book yesterday; while he was reading it, the postman came.

All three verbs in the above sentence (“read,” “was reading,” and “came”) are in the past tense; the speaker describes the events as taking place prior to another, outside event, in this case the moment of speech. However, the two different uses of the verb “to read” illustrate a difference in aspect. In the first, the action of reading the book is marked as a complete event, but in the second, reading the book is presented as a situation, a context in which a different event (the arrival of the postman) took place (Comrie 1976).

Current research about aspect has revealed that two types of aspect exist in languages: grammatical aspect and lexical aspect. Grammatical aspect describes the way morphological forms, such as endings, convey the aspectual nuances of a language (Salaberry & Shirai 2002). In many languages, including all Romance languages, a crucial dichotomy dominates the tense-aspectual system: perfective vs. imperfective (Giorgi & Pianesi 1997, Salaberry & Ayoun 2005).

The terms for these aspects come from the Latin word *perfectum*, the past participle of the verb *perficere*, meaning “to finish, to bring to completion” (Katz & Blyth 2007). Thus, in the most literal sense of the word, the perfective aspect denotes a complete action, one with a clear temporal beginning and ending point, whereas the imperfective aspect describes an incomplete action whose beginning and ending are not specified. For French in particular, these two aspects are generally encoded with two common verb forms: the *passé composé* and *imparfait*. The *passé composé* (literally, “composed past”; it is composed of both an auxiliary verb and a past participle) is commonly used for the perfective; less common options include the *passé simple*, used in formal written contexts, and *plus-que-parfait*, used to refer to events occurring prior to another past event (Katz & Blyth 2007). The *imparfait*, on the other hand, corresponds to the imperfective, and unlike the *passé composé*, it is formed with inflectional suffixes rather than auxiliary verbs (Ayoun 2005).

Lexical aspect, on the other hand, is determined not by grammar, but by semantics: it refers to the inherent aspectual properties encoded in all verbs’ and verb phrases’ lexical meaning, and is completely independent of morphology (Salaberry & Ayoun 2005). Most contemporary studies of lexical aspect have relied on Andersen’s (1991, 2002) framework as a basis, which, in turn, drew from Vendler (1967) and Mourelatos (1981) to devise four basic aspectual distinctions found in the lexicons of all languages. These are states, activities, accomplishments, and achievements (Vendler 1967; Andersen 1991 prefers other terminology). States consist of a constant action which seems to go on in perpetuity, with no discernable beginning or ending. Activities are dynamic—that is, the actions require an input of energy to continue—but they also have no defined completion point. Accomplishments, like activities, describe a process that occupies a certain amount of time, but they also have a natural, built-in endpoint to that process. Finally, achievements are events whose temporal beginning and ending points coincide; that is, they occur instantaneously (Vendler 1967, Andersen 2002). Though

some researchers have argued for a binary lexical aspect classification (e.g. stative/dynamic or punctual/durative; Robison 1990), a four-way division describes the nuances of lexical aspect more precisely (Bardovi-Harlig & Bergström 1996). Table 1 gives examples of each of the four Vendlerian classes, and also illustrates an important feature of lexical aspect: often, inherent aspectual information is contained not in a verb, but in a verb phrase or an entire predicate. For instance, “eat,” an activity, can be changed to an accomplishment (“eat up”) merely by adding a single particle (Andersen 1991).

Table 1: The four Vendlerian lexical aspectual categories (adapted from Andersen 1991)

States	Activities	Accomplishments	Achievements
<i>love</i>	<i>run</i>	<i>paint a picture</i>	<i>recognize (someone)</i>
<i>have</i>	<i>walk</i>	<i>make a chair</i>	<i>realize (something)</i>
<i>desire</i>	<i>swim</i>	<i>write a novel</i>	<i>lose (something)</i>
<i>possess</i>	<i>push</i>	<i>build a house</i>	<i>find (something)</i>
<i>want</i>	<i>breathe</i>	<i>grow up</i>	<i>win the race</i>

Andersen (1991) used this classification to propose the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis (LAH), an influential theory regarding the sequence of acquisition of second-language (L2) tense and aspect. This hypothesis proposes that L2 learners are “cognitively predisposed” to a specific sequence of acquisition, which applies from the very earliest moments of language learning (Andersen 2002:81). Andersen makes three assertions, of which two are relevant to the Romance languages:

1. Learners first use past marking (e.g., English) or perfective marking (Chinese, Spanish, etc.) on achievement and accomplishment verbs, eventually extending its use to activity and then to stative verbs.
2. In languages that encode the perfective-imperfective distinction, a morphologically encoded imperfective past (as in the Romance languages) appears later than perfective past, and imperfective past marking begins with stative and activity verbs, then extends to accomplishment or achievement verbs. (Andersen 2002:79)

The sequences outlined above illustrate a transition from prototypical uses to non-prototypical uses. That is, an achievement verb’s inherent endpoint pairs well with the perfective,

which accentuates the completion of an action, and a stative verb, which emphasizes a constant, ongoing action, naturally favors the imperfective. These matchups between grammatical aspect and lexical aspect are known as prototypical uses, and are predictably common in native speaker data. Conversely, an achievement verb in the imperfective or a stative verb in the perfective, while not unheard of, occurs much less frequently and is thus a non-prototypical use (Andersen 1993, 1994). Examinations of native-speaker data reveal that prototypical uses dominate, though non-prototypical uses still occasionally appear.

Scholars have examined the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis in great detail since it was first proposed in 1991, with a number of quantitative studies on the subject, including several which corroborate the LAH with a variety of languages (e.g. Robison 1995; Shirai 1995; Rohde 1996; Bayley 1994; Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds 1995; Giacalone Ramat 1995, 1997; Bardovi-Harlig 2000; Housen 2002; Rocca 2002, Sugaya and Shirai 2007). Bardovi-Harlig & Bergström (1996), for example, analyzed the tense-aspect acquisition of both L2 French and L2 English learners. In their French data, they divided learners into four proficiency levels, and found that the most basic group of learners felt most at ease using the *passé composé* with achievements (63.4% of achievement tokens). The next proficiency level began to show increased use of activities in the *passé composé* (72.2%), and the level above that comfortably used this tense with activities (70.7%). Meanwhile, the *imparfait* was almost exclusively used with states in groups one through three; it was not until group four that it began to spread to activities and accomplishments. Notably, in many cases the present tense was used instead of either past tense. This may be due to the conventions of the task: the data were gathered from film retells, which often call for the historical present even among native speakers (Liskin-Gasparro 2000). More generally, however, the present tense is often used as a stand-in for the *imparfait* when it is not fully acquired, as Andersen (1991) predicted (see also Kaplan 1987). To summarize, even though the scope of the study was not broad enough to show the complete sequence (i.e. the most

advanced learners had just begun to use the *imparfait* in non-stative contexts), Bardovi-Harlig & Bergström's (1996) data show support for the preliminary and intermediate stages of the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis.

Of course, a number of studies claim to have disproven one or more of the assertions of the LAH as well. Andersen's (1991, 2002) first claim—that the perfective spreads from achievements to states—is the most attested one (Bardovi-Harlig 2000), but a consistent complaint is that early learners do not exhibit a preference for some lexical classes above others, contrary to Andersen's hypothesis. Hasbún (1995), for example, analyzed tense-aspect marking at four different levels of instruction. She found that the very first past tense marking occurred not with achievements, but with states: a result contrary to the LAH, which claims that learners begin with achievements in the perfective. Moreover, the students in her second-year group used the perfective in roughly equal proportions across achievements, accomplishments, activities, and states, and thus it was impossible to place them in any of the stages posited by Andersen. This was similar to results found by Salaberry (1999) and Schell (2000).

Shirai (2004), who has worked closely with Andersen regarding the LAH (e.g. Andersen & Shirai 1994) responded to this particular concern, admitting that “the prediction that beginning learners are more restricted by inherent aspectual value than more advanced learners may need to be revised” (Shirai 2004:16). Still, he writes off the contradictory research by arguing that beginning learners, unsure about which tense to use, make their choice either based on forms learned by rote, or outright arbitrarily. He goes on to state that the nature of the tasks in many of these studies (e.g. oral narratives or film retells) put too much pressure on the learner, who in panic must resort to memorized forms. According to Shirai, more traditional written tests do indeed show the full trajectory projected by the LAH. Ayoun & Salaberry (2005), in turn, respond to Shirai by pointing to studies where learners made more mistakes in constructed grammar activities than free narratives (e.g. Salaberry & López Ortega 1998). Despite conflicting

research, however, the influential Lexical Aspect Hypothesis has significantly impacted the field of tense-aspect linguistics during the last two decades, and is now an overarching, if not fully agreed upon, model of L2 acquisition.

Tense, Aspect, and Narrative Discourse

No discussion of tense and aspect can underestimate the importance of narrative structure, the crux of which lies in the fact that the act of storytelling is entirely based on the perspective of the speaker or writer (Blyth 2005). To illustrate this, Cox (1994) discusses aspect using the parable of a man, blind from an early age, whose sight was restored. Recounting Sacks's (1993) experiences, Cox states that the man, upon seeing for the first time, saw only "a chaos of light and shadow" from which he could discern no cohesive figure (Sacks 1993:61). It was only after the researcher spoke to him that the man perceived this arrangement of colors as a human face. This story vividly illustrates that the blind cannot distinguish shapes and forms because they have no way to perceive a scene holistically. Cox (1994) analyzes this scene by pointing out that while blind people must only rely on temporal cues in order to mentally construct a sequence of events, sighted people have the advantage of discerning an entire scene all at once. In other words, sighted human beings are able to subconsciously organize events based on their saliency: more prominent events are placed in the "foreground," while less important events are sorted into the "background" (Reinhart 1984, Andersen 1993). Along these lines, Blyth (1997), citing Reinhart (1984), argues that the human eye distinguishes figures by contrasting them with what lies behind. In other words, "we are able to recognize a figure or perceive a form because the background enables it to stand out" (Blyth 1997:59). This *pas de deux* between figure and ground can be illustrated by a black dot on a white computer screen. As the white background is gradually darkened, the black speck becomes more and more difficult to

notice, before vanishing altogether into the completely black field behind it (Blyth 1997). An object is thus only perceptible insofar as its background allows it to be.

According to Reinhart (1984), there is a direct link between the way humans perceive events and the way they recount these events later on. That is, the most salient events are placed in the foreground, in terms of both discourse and morphology. Crucially, these events must be arranged along a chronological continuum; indeed, Labov (1972) defines a minimal narrative as “a sequence of two clauses which are temporally ordered” (360). This sequencing makes it easy for listeners or readers to connect the dots from event to event, forming a cohesive, followable plotline. Additionally, an event’s perceived relevance can be explained in part by the lexical items describing it: the most salient nouns tend to be human, animate, concrete, and count nouns, and high-saliency verbs are often perfective, transitive, actional, and foreground (Wallace 1982).

On the other hand, background events, which usually apply to the narrative as a whole, are independent of chronology and can generally be moved to different parts of a story without affecting the plot. This foreground-background distinction, it is important to note, is not a black-and-white dichotomy, but a spectrum with various gradual degrees that are not well defined (Fleischman 1990). Reinhart (1984) argues that the need to produce such a linguistic distinction arose from the principles of gestalt theory discussed above: early humans needed a way to classify the two (or in some cases more) planes of events that they were perceiving.

Thus, in all Romance languages, a binary tense-aspect system was born, with the perfective and imperfective describing the foreground and background of a narrative respectively. The *passé composé* and *imparfait*, after all, are sometimes known as the narrative past tenses (Katz & Blyth 2007), since it is practically impossible to tell a story of any sophistication without full mastery of these two tenses. In analyses of four different types of written texts elicited from native speakers, Bronckart and Bourdin (1993) found that the various past tenses (i.e. *passé composé*, *imparfait*, and *passé simple*) were most prevalent in narratives, more so than other

genres such as news stories and personal letters. Bronckart & Bourdin also found that the verbs within the different components of a story usually appear under different morphological forms. For example, the initial orientation section of a story—where the author divulges general information about the setting of the story—tends to have mostly verbs in the *imparfait*, because in many cases the events described there tend to apply to the whole narrative and thus have no defined beginning or ending point. Similarly, as the plot begins to move forward, the *passé composé* is featured more prominently to signal the arrival of a new event, but the *imparfait* is still occasionally used to add additional background information (see also Katz & Blyth 2007). In summary, because these two verb forms are so inherently rich in narrative functionality, the context of a cohesive story gives them countless opportunities to shine in the purpose for which they were first conceived.

The French Tense-Aspect System: Difficulties for Learners

Understanding the distinction between the *passé composé* and *imparfait* poses quite a few obstacles for English-speaking learners of French, not least because of the differences of the aspectual systems in these two languages. English speakers learning French are already at a disadvantage: their Germanic first language (L1) and their Romance L2 are quite incompatible when it comes to tense and aspect (Giorgi & Pianesi 1997). Izquierdo and Collins (2008), examining the acquisition of L2 French by L1 English and L1 Spanish students, reported more success among the L1 Spanish learners in learning the *passé composé* and *imparfait*. They attributed the Spanish speakers' relative success to the similar aspectual systems in the Romance languages. Moreover, when asked in interviews why they chose the *passé composé* or *imparfait* in a given instance, students the Spanish-language group explicitly cited their native language in their reasoning, making parallels between the similar constructions in L1 Spanish. In addition,

even English-speaking learners already familiar with a Romance L2 can transfer the tense aspect system more easily; in one particularly striking example, Comajoan (2005) reported that an L1-English student who was fluent in Spanish and familiar with French, Romanian, and Italian learned the tense-aspect system of Catalan with relative ease (see also Salaberry 2005, Izquierdo 2007).

Unfortunately, however, most French teachers in English-speaking countries must deal with the fact that most of their students' L1 handles tense and aspect differently from their new L2. A number of studies have shown that a learner's first language can hinder tense-aspect acquisition in the second language in a variety of learning situations (Collins 2002, Slabakova 1999, Hasbún 1995, Salaberry 1997, Sorace 1993, etc.). A number of studies have been conducted with regard to L1 English's influence on learners studying L2 French, among them Izquierdo and Collins's (2008) aforementioned research. In contrast to the Spanish speakers in the study, who reported using Spanish's similarities to French to their advantage, the English speakers expressed frustration and discouragement that their native language did not share a common tense-aspect system with French. When describing their reasoning behind the answers they chose, the English-speaking students cited their native language significantly less than the Spanish-speaking group. Dissimilarities between L1 and L2, then, can pose a significant obstacle to the language learning process (see also Schell 2000).

Formal Difficulties

The morphological complexity of the *passé composé* and *imparfait* is consistently a nuisance for English-speaking students. Indeed, Ayoun and Salaberry (2005) have argued that the "morphologically poor" English language contrasts with the "number, complexity, and redundancy" of Romance morphological endings, causing acquisition problems for English

speaking learners (254). The sheer amount of endings for the *imparfait*, for example, can overwhelm learners who are unaccustomed to such rich inflectional marking systems (Terrell 1986, Ayoun 2005). The forms of the *passé composé* are difficult to fully master as well. Though Macrory and Stone (2000) remark that English-speaking learners could make connections between the *passé composé* and English compound tenses such as the past perfect and present perfect, Kaplan (1987) observes that compound tenses are much more complex in French than in English: learners must choose between two auxiliary verbs based on semantic factors, manage many irregular past participles, and abide by gender-number agreement in certain situations (see also Katz & Blyth 2007). Thus, before even addressing the uses of the *passé composé* and *imparfait*, students must first overcome the not-insubstantial obstacle of familiarity with the morphological formation of these two tenses.

Another difficulty that Anglophone learners often face when trying to master the French tense-aspectual system is a simple matter of phonology: in many cases, the pronunciation of the *passé composé* and *imparfait* is so similar that non-native speakers have problems distinguishing the two. For many verbs, including regular -er verbs, the inflectional ending on the verb is /ɛ/ for the past participle of the *passé composé* and /ɛ/ for the *imparfait*, two phonologically similar sounds (Ayoun 2005). Furthermore, in the first person singular when the auxiliary verb is *avoir*, the phonological difficulties double: in this frequent situation, the subject *je* and auxiliary verb *ai* are phonologically and orthographically combined into *j'ai*, which differs from the standalone subject *je* by only a single phoneme. Thus, Anglophone learners have trouble distinguishing pairs like *j'ai dansé* (/ʒɛdɑ̃sɛ/) and *je dansais* (/ʒɛdɑ̃sɛ/) due to phonological similarities in both the verb ending and subject (Harley 1986, Lyster 2007). Compounding the confusion is the fact that the imperfect ending is quite commonly changed from /ɛ/ to /e/ in informal contexts, making the two endings phonologically identical (Katz & Blyth 2007). Since learners typically

seek grammatical clues at the ends of words (Slobin 1985, VanPatten 1996), this subtle phonological difference can cause significant problems for learners.

Functional Difficulties

The complexities in form, however, pale in comparison to the highly intricate functions of the *passé composé* and *imparfait*. Like all Romance languages, the primary distinction in French is between the perfective and imperfective, and crucially, either one can be applied to any of the lexical classes of verbs (states, activities, achievements, and accomplishments). The perfective's form in English (the simple past) shares this feature, giving it a relatively clear French analog in the *passé composé*. Though these two tenses hardly match up perfectly, their shared perfectivity does resonate with English-speaking learners, which goes some way in explaining why studies show that students feel more comfortable with this tense (Kaplan 1987, Schell 2000, Ayoun 2001, Ayoun 2004; see also Andersen 1991, 2002). The research that perhaps best illustrates this phenomenon is Izquierdo & Collins's (2008) study of Anglophone and Hispanophone learners of French. Being a Romance language, Spanish shares a tense-aspect system with French, so the Spanish-speaking learners used the *passé composé* just as much as the *imparfait*, with practically identical percentages in terms of overall usage (47.7% *passé composé*, 47.7% *imparfait*) and correct usage (72.8% vs. 73.5%). On the other hand, the English speakers used the *passé composé* significantly more often than the *imparfait* both overall (57.4% vs. 40.3%) and in appropriate contexts (73.5% vs. 56.5%). These data show that English-speaking learners seem to identify more with the *passé composé*, likely because of its similarity to the English simple past.

The *imparfait* is not fortunate enough to have an English equivalent. The reason for this is that while the French language opposes the perfective and imperfective, the English tense-

aspect system opposes the perfective and progressive, a fundamental difference (Ayoun 2005). Thus, when translating the *imparfait* into English, it becomes clear that there is no clear correspondence between the two, partly because the *imparfait* encompasses not one, but three different aspects: imperfective, iterative, and durative (Ayoun 2005, after Kaplan 1987). The imperfective, as previously discussed, conveys an action with no defined beginning or ending point, as in “*Je lisais le journal*” (“I was reading the newspaper”). Iterative aspect describes a habitual action: “*Le lundi matin, je jouais au tennis*” (“On Monday mornings, I would play tennis”). Finally, the durative aspect, which indicates a continuing action or an action in progress, is most commonly used with stative verbs: “*Elle adorait danser seule*” (“She loved to dance alone”) (examples from Ayoun 2005:85).

The acquisition problem for English speakers should be apparent from the above sentences and their translations. While the French verbs are all in the *imparfait*, the English verbs are encoded in three completely different ways: the imperfective using the past progressive, the iterative using the modal “would,” and the durative using the simple past. The problem with the durative in particular is that it often appears with stative verbs, which rarely take the progressive in English (Smith 1997). For example, a phrase like “it was existing”—a stative in the past progressive—seems unnatural to English speakers, whereas an equivalent French expression in the *imparfait* (*il existait*) does not have such constraints. Having three semantic values in one morphological form creates a chaotically confusing situation for students as they form hypotheses about the French aspectual system (Katz & Blyth 2007). Too often, students yearn for a perfect correspondence between L1 and L2 grammatical constructions—and where such a matchup does not exist, they imagine one. This phenomenon, known as the One-to-One Principle, was described by Andersen (1984), who claims it to be a universal trait of L2 learners’ interlingual technique (Collins 2002). Though this strategy can sometimes prove effective, too often it leads to erroneous overgeneralizations (Katz & Blyth 2007). Tense and aspect are particularly

problematic in this regard due to the significant disconnect between, specifically, the French *imparfait* and English past progressive. Striving for a complete correspondence, students will tend to equate all uses of the *imparfait* with all uses of the past progressive—an incorrect and misguided conclusion, because the *imparfait* encompasses not just the imperfective aspect, but also the iterative and durative aspects (Ayoun 2005, after Krashen 1987). In short, learners mistakenly make invalid connections between the past progressive and *imparfait*, and in fact do so quite frequently.

Pedagogical Problems

Perhaps the most significant obstacle to English-speaking students' tense-aspect acquisition of lies in the pedagogy associated with the *passé composé* and *imparfait*. Textbooks' usual explanations for these forms engender confusion for teachers and students alike (Katz & Blyth 2007, Blyth 1997, Dansereau 1986, Bryant 1980), a frustration echoed by teachers of Spanish (Negueruela & Lantolf 2006, Liskin-Gasparro 2000, Bolinger 1991) and of Italian (Melucci 2007, Vizmuller-Zocco 1990). Bull (1965) attempted to tackle the problem head-on, but despite his efforts, his conceptual approach to explaining the Spanish tense-aspect system had minimal impact on the field at large. Although Bull et al. (1972) did publish a textbook of their own, its explicit instructional technique soon fell out of vogue due to the rise of Krashen's (1981, 1985) Input Hypothesis, which eschews all but the simplest grammatical explanations (Negueruela & Lantolf 2006).

Getting to the root of this conundrum involves examining the nature of grammar rules written expressly for pedagogical use. Hammerly (1982) terms this sort of rule a “linguistic rule” and lists six guidelines for them, arguing that a linguistic rule ought to be:

1. as concrete as possible, that is, based on actual sentences and the relationships between them;
2. as simple as possible;
3. as nontechnical as possible (if calling verbs “polka dotted elephants” helps learners to learn them, do so);
4. cumulative, to be learned one at a time and integrated with those rules learned up to that point;
5. as close as possible to popular grammar and traditional grammar without distorting the facts and with refinements on traditional grammar drawn from various linguistic schools as needed; and
6. limited to what can be learned at any one time, that is, in the form of a rule-of-thumb, leaving exceptions and fine points until later (Hammerly 1982:402).

A number of researchers have created their own guidelines for pedagogical rules as well, some of which overlap with Hammerly’s points (Westney 1994, Swan 1994). However, other researchers have disputed some of his arguments. For example, Katz & Blyth (2007) take issue with Hammerly’s insistence on nontechnical terminology—his infamous “polka dotted elephants.” Of course, if rules are too technical, the arcane terms will merely add to students’ confusion. On the other hand, resorting to polka dotted elephants may be a worse sin; Katz & Blyth are concerned that putting a rule in layman’s terms may not be sufficiently thorough for students to accurately and consistently apply. A moderate amount of metalinguistic vocabulary, they argue, will help students conceptualize the grammatical structure being taught.

Hammerly’s last criterion, which encourages a rule-of-thumb format, has proven to be even more contentious. Drawing from Webster’s Dictionary, Hammerly defines a rule of thumb as “a general principle regarded as roughly correct and helpful but not intended to be scientifically accurate” (402). He adds that an acceptable rule of thumb will apply to at least 80% of cases, with the other 20% accounted for by additional rules or miscellaneous exceptions to be taught later. In Hammerly’s view, the rule of thumb is a stepping stone, a primary stage to assist in the eventual construction of full-fledged linguistic rules.

Bull & Lamadrid (1971) propose a contrasting viewpoint. In an article provocatively titled “Our grammar rules are hurting us,” the authors emphatically state that “a perfect rule

guides the student to a perfect imitation of the native **in all cases** [original emphasis]” (450). They decry the use of “all except” rules—e.g. “All adjectives agree in number and gender with their nouns, except the ones that do not” (452)—and proceed into a litany of shoddy textbook rules immediately followed by examples that directly contradict them. Along with other scholars (e.g. Whitley 1986, Dansereau 1987, Westney 1994, Blyth 2003, Negueruela & Lantolf 2006), they argue that rules must be unequivocal in order to be effective. Garrett (1986), for instance, suggests that if a non-universal rule is to be presented, the exceptions to that rule should be presented along with it. She once asked a group of teachers for their thoughts on this strategy, and they unanimously rejected it, sometimes even taking offense at the very idea of presenting such a confusing notion to students. Garrett argues that these teachers missed the point: explaining exceptions from the beginning would not propagate confusion, but eliminate it, giving students a “sense of the ‘real’ processing which motivates the form’s use” (142). What is more, the fact that students can state a rule is no guarantee that they can apply it in context (Macrory & Stone 2000), and even if students are fully aware that a rule is full of holes, they will often use it anyway, as they have never been presented with a proper rule on the subject (Izquierdo & Collins 2008). To summarize, if improperly learned grammatical concepts can cause irreversible damage to the language acquisition process—as Hammerly (1982) himself contends—why risk a student becoming accustomed to a grammatical error that fell through the cracks of a leaky rule?

Indeed, these “leaky rules”, as Blyth (1997) termed them, have been a consistent problem in language pedagogy, especially in textbooks. Often, these rules take the form of a two-column chart such as the one in Table 2 from a Spanish textbook cited in Whitley (1986). Though this particular textbook (Dasilva & Lovett 1965) dates from the 1960s, it should be apparent that very little has changed up to the present day (Negueruela & Lantolf 2006, see also Abrate 1983).

Table 2: A typical textbook description of Romance-language tense and aspect (cited in Whitley 1986)

Imperfect (imperfective)	Preterit (perfective)
Tells what was happening	Records, reports, and narrates
Recalls what used to happen	With certain verbs causes a change of meaning
Describes a physical, mental emotion	
Tells time in the past	
Describes the background and sets the stage upon which another action occurred	

To begin with, the format of a dual list is questionable, because it does not reflect native speakers' conceptualization of tense and aspect, which is better described as an abstract process rather than a concrete inventory of situations (Abrate 1983, Kaplan 1987, Negueruela & Lantolf 2006). The content of the chart is riddled with problems as well: in addition to suggesting that the imperfective occurs more often than the perfective, many of the guidelines seem "as capricious as the classification of tomatoes as vegetables rather than fruits" (Whitley 1986:109). Furthermore, the categories listed under both tenses are too vague for students to effectively apply them to specific contexts:

If students wish to convey their *I slept all day*, should they opt for "what was happening," "describes physical state," "describes background," or "records, reports"? All these seem applicable and conflicting; thus, students are baffled when their teacher recommends *Dormí todo el día* [perfective: "*J'ai dormi toute la journée*"] over *Dormía todo el día* [imperfective: "*Je dormais toute la journée.*"] (Whitley 1986:109).

Dansereau (1987) made this point even more forcefully, asserting that students' difficulties with French tense and aspect are due to "vague, incomplete, contradictory, and generally poor explanations found in most beginning textbooks" (33). In examining twelve textbooks' stated rules regarding the *passé composé* and *imparfait*, she found a number of rules to be faulty and misleading at best and outright wrong at worst. She provides several sentences that challenge standard explanations:

1. Le roi a régné pendant soixante ans.
2. À huit heures, j'étais dans mon bureau.
3. Il est souvent venu me voir.
4. Cet été-là, il ne mangeait que deux fois par jour. (Dansereau 1987).

For sentence (1), a student would likely think that because his textbook prescribes the *imparfait* for “continuing actions,” he should use the *imparfait*, because the king’s reign certainly “continued” for quite a long time. Sentence (2) states the precise time of the event—a condition often attributed to the *passé composé* in textbooks—but counterintuitively uses the *imparfait*. If a student reads in a textbook that the *imparfait* is for events repeated an unspecified number of times, and the *passé composé* is for a specified number of times, this student may become confused that sentence (3), where the amount of visits is unspecified, is in the *passé composé*, and that sentence (4), which clearly states the precise number of times he ate, is in the *imparfait*. Yet, all these sentences are fully grammatical and reflective of native speech. Because the presented rules are not thorough enough to apply to all cases, they lead students to incorrect conclusions, thus defeating the purpose of the rule in the first place.

Dansereau (1987) also decries the overreliance of L1 translations of the tenses: because the *imparfait* in particular can apply to the English past progressive, simple past, and a few more expressions, she asserts that “it is simply bad practice to get students dependent on English translations” (36). Translation, indeed, is already unmanageable enough with a verb like *danser* that has a straightforward English equivalent; verbs like *pouvoir* (to be able) and *falloir* (to be necessary) complicate matters immensely. Bryant (1980) chooses to focus his analysis on these two verbs because neither of them can be expressed concisely in English, and students must resort to periphrastic expressions to translate them, especially when navigating the murky waters of tense and aspect. Despite these inherent difficulties, however, some textbooks have chosen to use English translations even when describing *pouvoir* and *falloir*. Bryant cites one textbook (Noblitt 1978) that gives the aspectual minimal pair of “*Elle a pu réparer la voiture elle-même*” and “*Elle*

pouvait réparer la voiture elle-même.” The textbook’s translation for the *passé composé* sentence is “She was able to repair/succeeded in repairing the car herself”, whereas the sentence in the *imparfait* is translated as “She could repair/was capable of repairing the car herself.” The problem with English translations here is that there is practically no semantic difference between “was able to,” “was capable of,” and “could.” Surrounded by these semantically bland phrases, “succeeded in,” the only expression that gives any indication of the difference between the two sentences, gets lost in the shuffle, ultimately resulting in a thoroughly perplexed student. In summary, then, textbooks that attempt to draw comparisons between English and French by translations are misguided not only due to the vastly different tense-aspect systems of the two languages, but also because certain verbs not present in the English lexicon are impossible to translate systematically and unequivocally.

Alongside the aforementioned list of conditions for *passé composé* and *imparfait* typically lies a series of adverbs commonly associated with each tense. Phrases like *souvent* (often) and *d’habitude* (usually) are frequently listed as going hand in hand with the *imparfait*, whereas words like *soudain* (suddenly) and *puis* (then; afterward) are supposedly linked to the *passé composé*. Di Vito (1995) examined native speaker corpus data to gauge whether this supposed connection between verb and adverbial is legitimate. She found that *souvent* was only used with a verb in the *imparfait* 57% percent of the time for spoken data, and 60% for written data—hardly enough to propose a valid correlation, let alone a hard-and-fast rule. Meanwhile, *puis* was only used with the *passé composé* or *passé simple* about three-quarters of the time (72% spoken, 75% written), leaving one quarter of all tokens in other tenses including the *imparfait*. Learners have been shown to rely on hints from adverbials rather than morphological information to gather aspectual information (Ayoun & Salaberry 2008, Marsden 2006, Macrory & Stone 2000, Noyau et al. 1995), and this tendency is only exacerbated by textbooks’ suggestions to attend to them when making aspectual choices or interpretations. If students take the advice of

their textbooks and look to the accompanying adverbs for tense-aspect clues, then they will often be misled, as corpus data from native speakers show.

Aspectual Input in the Classroom

Teacher input has likewise proven to be a problem in tense-aspect pedagogy. Input—that is, any written or spoken examples of the L2 available to the learner—has long been shown to be a crucial component of language learning, and was elemental to Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, which trumpeted the importance of comprehensible input sitting just above the learner's current level. Through subconscious analysis of the input, learners assemble a set of structures known to be grammatically valid in the L2, and because the learner's knowledge base is constantly in flux, teachers must keep pace with their input to ensure that grammatical acquisition does not stagnate.

Unfortunately, however, in many cases teacher input tends to be biased, insufficiently varied, and generally unsatisfactory. Studies have highlighted the poor quality of teacher input with a number of grammatical structures (see Anderson's 2007 study of adjective placement in L2 French). Tense and aspect, however, seem to be particularly problematic in this regard, in part due to a staggering lack of narrative discourse in day-to-day classroom interactions (Liskin-Gasparro 2000, Blyth 2005). The fact that teachers rarely use past tense in the first place exemplifies this phenomenon. Harley et al. (1987) found that immersion teachers in Canada overwhelmingly favored the present tense (75%) at the expense of the past tenses (15%); Izquierdo's (2007) data produced nearly identical figures (74% and 14%). Thus, even before taking into account any aspectual differences, all the past tense forms are severely underrepresented in teacher-talk data, putting students at a significant disadvantage from the outset (see also Swain 1991, Ayoun 2004).

Looking now at the *passé composé* and *imparfait*, research consistently shows once again that there are extreme biases in teacher input, both in terms of the distribution of the tenses themselves and each tense's use among different lexical items. Kaplan (1987) performed an analysis of classroom discourse data which showed that 84% of all past tense tokens used by the teacher were the *passé composé*. Kaplan attributes this substantial discrepancy, in part, to the fact that this tense “might simply be easier to elicit in isolated context than the *imparfait*” (56). That is, in day-to-day classroom contexts, teachers feel that they can lead more fruitful discussions with a question like “What did you do this weekend?” than with “How did you used to spend your summers as a kid?” which does not hold up as well to repeated use. Indeed, Kaplan's findings showed that the learners mastered the *passé composé* much more quickly than the *imparfait*, likely due to this distributional bias, and her research also begins to explain why students consistently overuse this tense (Katz & Blyth 2007).

Looking now at distribution biases within the Vendlerian lexical classes, native speakers' natural tendency to use prototypical uses more frequently (statives with the *imparfait* and punctual verbs with the *passé composé*) can mislead students into thinking that lexical aspect is a foolproof predictor of grammatical aspect (Andersen & Shirai 1994, Shirai & Kurono 1998). In other words, students striving to apply a black-and-white dichotomy to the French tense-aspect system distort natural trends in the input to form erroneous assumptions (Blyth 2005). For an example of this, one must look no further than students' verb arsenals, which are often quite poor when making vocabulary choices in narrative discourse. This is particularly true of the *imparfait*, which is dominated by *être* (to be) and *avoir* (to have) in student data; these two verbs sometimes account for over four-fifths of stative verbs used in the *imparfait* (Bardovi-Harlig and Bergström 1996). Kihlstedt (2002) observed this phenomenon in her data, and wondered whether the learners had merely internalized forms like *j'étais* (“I was”) and *il y avait* (“there was/were”) without having a true sense of their aspectual meaning. Meanwhile, non-stative verbs are

underrepresented and difficult for learners, and even other stative verbs such as *pouvoir* and *falloir* are challenging due partly to their rarity in the input (Bryant 1980).

Of course, the *imparfait* forms of *être* and *avoir* are commonplace in native speech—these two verbs are, after all, the two most frequent in the French language (Müller 1974). In fact, their frequency can be described by Zipf’s Law, which states that the most common tokens in a corpus constitute the vast majority of all tokens (Zipf 1935). Wulff et al. (2009) found a Zipfian distribution when examining tokens of four English verb tenses, and discovered that the most distinctive verbs for the progressive were generally states or activities (e.g. *sit, play, walk*) whereas the past and perfect favored highly punctual verbs such as achievements (e.g. *die, crash, explode*). Applying these findings to the French tense-aspect system, a select few achievement verbs would represent the majority of *passé composé* tokens, and the *imparfait* would mostly be found in a handful of states and activities.

Prototypical as *être* and *avoir* in the *imparfait* may be among native speakers, learners’ clear favoritism towards an elite group of verbs far outweighs any inherent tendencies in the language. For example, Kihlstedt (2002) analyzed the variety of verbs used in the *imparfait* by L1 and L2 French speakers, finding that the native French speakers used twice as many unique verbs as the learners of French, whose paltry verbal choices amounted to only a few different tokens. It is hard to blame a student, after all, for assuming that *être* and *avoir* are the be-all and end-all of the *imparfait*; indeed, the input points to precisely that. However, learners who overuse these two verbs do not demonstrate full acquisition of the *imparfait*. “The real grammaticalization of imperfect,” Bardovi-Harlig (2005) notes, “begins when it is used in new lexical combinations and for new functions” (405). Thus, though learners rightly observe aspectual tendencies in the L2, they consistently exaggerate them, resulting in a stunted tense-aspect system based around a handful of recurring verbs.

Towards a Cohesive Pedagogy: Incorporating Narrative Discourse

As demonstrated above, teaching the complex uses of the *passé composé* and *imparfait* can prove an “almost Herculean” task (Bryant 1980:514). In some cases, applying the above research to the classroom may involve a complete pedagogical bouleversement. Teachers could begin by acknowledging the fact that the choice of aspect is not objective, but subjective; it wholly depends on the perspective and personal choice of the speaker (Blyth 1997, 2005; Cox 1994; Comrie 1976). Students must learn that the difference between the *passé composé* and *imparfait* is not a matter of a single right or wrong answer. Rather, the two tenses can be exploited according to the will of the speaker as a storytelling technique to highlight the most significant events. L2 learners, however, pay very little attention to the arc of the story at large when making aspectual choices, choosing instead to rely on superficial clues from individual verbs and their immediate surroundings. Any pedagogical approach, Blyth (2005) argues, must take narrative perspective into account, and for this reason activities that are limited to an isolated, single sentence poorly represent the complexities of tense and aspect. By giving a student a situation that he has not experienced and forcing him to choose between perfective and imperfective, the activity gives the student a very challenging task: to step into the narrator’s shoes and imagine how he must have perceived the event.

For this reason, many researchers have advocated using short, simple films when first introducing the concept of aspect; if a learner witnesses an event, he or she is able to personally separate foreground from background and make informed aspectual choices. A clip from Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (“Alone and Hungry”) has practically become the industry standard for tense-aspect lessons, having been used in almost a dozen studies (for a list, see Bardovi-Harlig 2000:200). Bardovi-Harlig (2000) also recommends classic cartoons such as *The Pink Panther*, *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*, and Pixar’s *Tin Toy*; Blyth (1997) used thirty-second commercials

that told a story. Anything with a coherent plotline will do, but researchers seem to agree that a film without any dialogue is best. That is, a film whose plot can be determined through gestures and theatricality alone eliminates the need for students to pay attention to dialogue, and also will not taint students' responses by giving them ideas for L2 structures or vocabulary to use. Teachers can also use modern technology to their advantage; even in the relatively early days of the personal computer Chun & Plass (1997) recognized the potential for visual input that computers could provide.

The only caveat to using narrative technique is that many learners as well as native speakers find it more natural to recount a film's plot in the present tense due to narrative convention (Liskin-Gasparro 2000). Nevertheless, at least in Blyth's (1997) view, this is a small price to pay when considering the benefits of video input: it helps learners to "establish their own pragmatic mappings between the visual concepts of figure and ground, the discourse concepts of foreground and background, and the grammatical concepts of perfectivity and imperfectivity" (62). Because the use of video enables the students to personally bear witness to an event, they will not need to mentally reconstruct the scene in order to gather complex aspectual information.

Another simple way to give learners perspective on a story is to include personal narratives among the activities. After all, what better way is there to fully appreciate a story than to experience it oneself? Oller (1993) argues that narration based in a learner's own experiences will ultimately be more fruitful from a pedagogical perspective, because the learner has personally experienced the foreground and background and can thus make more informed aspectual choices. Personal narratives have a slight advantage over film summaries as well; for one, Liskin-Gasparro (2000) found that the learners in her study viewed the film retells as merely a "straightforward report of the facts rather than a multi-faceted story" (835). That is, learners felt compelled to recount simply the events of the films, whereas personal narratives included more background information and thus a greater variety of verb forms (see also Bardovi-Harlig

1999). Bardovi-Harlig (2000, 2005) also suggests personalized narratives as a teaching tool: students take the role of a main character in a story or film and recount the events in the first person based on that character's perspective. The story could be based on a film or reading students have seen in class, or on a story that students are likely to be familiar with—Terry (1986) recommends “Cinderella,” “Jack and the Beanstalk,” or even *Star Wars*. One advantage to this technique is that the teacher has control over narrative content and can solicit certain vocabulary or verb forms. More importantly, however, it enables the learner to make more use of background as well as foreground morphology, just as they did for true personal narratives. Finally, teachers ought to make a concerted effort to increase narrative input in the classroom, whether it be from readings, from other students, or directly from the teacher. Even a casual anecdote (“The funniest thing happened to me last night...”) will give students quality input, perhaps even encouraging them to tell stories of their own, a phenomenon known as story rounds (Katz & Blyth 2007). These story rounds, as sociolinguists call them, are a natural feature of conversation: a story by one person will often trigger a related story from another. If a teacher harnesses the power of story rounds in class, it could help students to master narrative convention and by association the verb tenses associated with it.

Teaching Morphology

Having firmly established a foundation in narrative context, a teacher must consider how to teach the nuts and bolts of grammar: morphology. Traditionally, grammatical instruction has followed the “three P’s”—present a grammar point explicitly, practice it with drills, and produce it in a communicative (or pseudo-communicative) scenario (Carter & McCarthy 1995). Thus, at least in terms of sequence, form supersedes function, which Lee & Vanpatten (1995) view as a fairly outrageous instance of “putting the cart before the horse” (95). Barraging students with

endings and auxiliary verbs and forcing them to master morphology before they have any association with the usage of these forms does no good; teachers should first ensure that students have at least a rudimentary conceptualization of how the *passé composé* and *imparfait* are used in context. Teachers should therefore plan activities that manipulate input before output, so that when students eventually do produce grammatical forms, form and meaning will be fully integrated as one (VanPatten & Cadierno 1993, Lee & VanPatten 1995, Blyth 2005).

Manipulation of input is one of the tenets of the Input Processing model, proposed by VanPatten (1996). He argues that students will benefit most from input if teachers take specific measures to make certain grammatical aspects more salient. This enhancement is necessary because in many cases, students infer grammatical information using lexical rather than morphological clues—a notion known as the Lexical Preference Principle (VanPatten 2004). This concept is very much in line with the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis, but differs in its focus on a full sentence and not single verbs or verb phrases. For instance, in a sentence such as “*Hier, Jean a joué au tennis*” (“Yesterday, John played tennis”), from the first two words the reader knows that the sentence takes place in the past (*hier*) and that the subject is in the third person singular (*Jean*)—having gathered all this from lexical information alone. On the other hand, the word *a*, which morphologically marks the third person singular of a past tense, has become completely redundant in light of the lexical information preceding it, and is not likely to be perceived by learners (VanPatten 2004, Marsden 2006).

Teachers have the responsibility, then, to enhance the input so that students pay attention to the morphology rather than relying on neighboring lexical cues. One of the simplest ways to ensure that students attend to grammatical form in the input is by typographical means. Boldface, italics, and underlining have had their place in grammar instruction for years, especially in the age of widely available word processing programs, although some researchers (Jourdenais 1998, Doughty 2003) have argued that typographical enhancement alone is not sufficiently salient to

learners. Nevertheless, Izquierdo (2007) found that his two-color categorization of aspect (blue for *passé composé*, green for *imparfait*) was not only successful from a quantitative standpoint, but also a hit with students, who remarked that the consistency of the color-coded system helped them to distinguish between the two tenses (see also Leeman et al. 1995). It seems, then, that choosing one typographical categorization and standing by it consistently is the secret to truly salient typographical enhancement.

Furthermore, some activities could help students attend to grammatical input by their very nature, and not necessarily by typographical flair. Marsden (2006) proposed an activity about subject-verb agreement that involved choosing the correct subject for a given predicate. One question read “*Le chat / les parents promène le chien*” (“The cat / the parents walks the dog”). This exercise aims to wean students from their overreliance on the lexicon by forcing them to choose a sentence that is grammatically correct at the expense of semantic sense. Marsden’s study found that processed-instruction activities like this one were more effective than exercises where a sentence was simply presented to the students with no effort made to make the grammar point more salient. Another activity in her study focused on verb tense, presenting students with sentences in the present and *passé composé* and asking them to select whether the event took place this weekend or takes place on a regular basis. The catch was that there were no other temporal markers in the sentences other than the morphology of the verb. So, students would be obliged to notice that “*Il a fait la vaisselle*” (“He did the dishes”) takes place in the past by the form of the verb only, instead of by adverbials or other discourse markers.

This latter exercise is best suited to the teaching of the French tense-aspect distinction in that it removes other temporal factors and forces students to simply focus on morphology. An Input Processing activity directly targets students’ misconceptions about the link between adverbials and tense, which is too often assumed to be associative or even causal. By requiring the student to focus on the verb forms only, the exercise teaches the students that it is the forms

themselves, and not their context, that convey aspectual information. Marsden's activity forced students to choose between "normally" (present) and "last weekend" (past); why not divide the two sentences between foreground (*passé composé*) and background (*imparfait*)?

Granted, in the absence of a coherent narrative, these terms are meaningless. For this reason, Katz & Blyth (2007) argue that the use of visuals, and in particular videos, in these exercises is "extremely important" even for organized grammar exercises (133). Exemplifying this philosophy, Blyth (2005) proposes an activity based around a car commercial and a series of twenty-one sentences describing its plot. The object is for students put the sentences in the chronological order of the plot, but the trick is that some sentences are in the *passé composé* (e.g. "*Elle est montée dans la voiture*": "She got in the car") and others are in the *imparfait* (e.g. "*Un couple rentrait d'une soirée élégante*": "A couple was coming back from an elegant soirée"). The *passé composé* sentences, of course, have a defined narrative sequence, but the *imparfait* sentences describe background events and thus cannot be placed on a single point on a time line. Blyth's activity is meant as an introduction to the relationship between aspect and narrative discourse; as students discuss their answers, they find that their *passé composé* sentences are all in the same positions, but their sentences in the *imparfait* may be positioned arbitrarily along the time line. To further highlight this aspectual difference, Blyth has the students draw single points along a time line to represent the *passé composé* and long, extended arrows for the *imparfait* showing these actions' endpoints (or lack thereof). Because the students have seen the video for themselves, they know precisely what happened, but they are forced to attend to the grammatical information encoded in the verbal forms in order to gather meaning from the sentences and put them in order.

In fact, this activity makes use of another teaching technique championed by Blyth (1997, 2005), among others—the use of symbols and other visual mnemonics to teach tense and aspect. In another activity proposed by Blyth (1997), students are given a newspaper story to read and

must place an arrow (\rightarrow) above all verbs that advance the plotline, and a circle (\circ) above those that do not. With this activity, students come to realize that some of the background events marked by the circle can apply to the whole narrative, and some to only parts, and that the sentences with these verbs can be displaced to anywhere in the story without affecting the overall plot. The arrowed verbs, on the other hand, form a linear plot, and thus it is impossible to rearrange them without disturbing the entire sequence of events. Katz & Blyth (2007) even propose an activity like this in the L1, to ensure that students are thinking in aspectual terms before diving into the L2 system.

Westfall & Foerster (1996) take this system of arrows a step further with a set of five symbols. A pair of brackets ([]) represents a statement summarizing a general series of events. A downward arrow striking a bar (approximated here by \downarrow), naturally, represents a completed situation. Adding two more heads to the shaft of this arrow (approximated by \Downarrow) indicates an event that took place a specific number of times and was completed each time. All of the above symbols are meant to represent different uses of the perfective. For the imperfective, there are two symbols: a solid line (—) to indicate an ongoing situation, and a horizontal line with three arrowheads (approximated by \rightarrow) to describe a habitual action. Westfall & Foerster's goal is to raise students' consciousness of what these verb forms mean by marking the symbols in a narrative text as shown below (adapted for French rather than Spanish):

Hier j'ai passé (\downarrow) la matinée dans le café où nous déjeunions (\rightarrow) le dimanche. Quand j'y suis arrivé (\downarrow) j'ai vu (\downarrow) Sergio. Pendant que nous déjeunions (—) il m'a dit (\downarrow) que tu voulais (—) me voir... (79).

[Yesterday I spent (\downarrow) the morning in the café where we would eat lunch (\rightarrow) on Sundays. When I arrived (\downarrow) I saw (\downarrow) Sergio. While we were having lunch (—) he told me (\downarrow) that you wanted (—) to see me...]

The notion of using symbols to solidify tense and aspect is also echoed by other cues such as characteristic hand motions. When a teacher routinely performs the same gesture in reference to a particular grammatical point, the students learn to associate morphology with some

factor beyond the words on the page. If this gesture relates to the function or meaning of the grammatical form, the students' link between form and meaning is cemented even further (Blyth 2005). For instance, using a swift clap of the hands to indicate a punctual event encoded in the *passé composé* is actually quite logical; several students in Izquierdo and Collins's (2008) study frequently used abrupt hand gestures to indicate the completeness of the event when describing why they chose the *passé composé*. Again, these gestures are most effective when they are used consistently to illustrate the same grammatical concept so students begin to make associations in their minds between form and meaning.

Dealing With Inadequate Textbook Materials

The shortcomings of typical French textbooks have already been discussed at length, so it should go without saying that teachers should not always take textbooks for gospel (Blyth 1997). Rather, they should closely scrutinize the textbook descriptions of tense and aspect and ensure that they do not choose anything misleading or ambiguous to be the standard-bearer of their approach. In all too many cases this process involves rethinking the ubiquitous two-column usage chart so prevalent in modern textbooks. As an alternative to this, a number of conceptualizations have been presented. The terminology differs, but they have one aspect in common: they all divide tense and aspect in a binary system. That is, many researchers propose a model that opposes two and only two concepts, be it foreground vs. background (Blyth 1997, et al.), "what happened" vs. "what the conditions were" (Dansereau 1987), or, more figuratively, backbone vs. flesh (Westfall & Foerster 1996). The advantage of a dichotomy is that it eliminates the need for the infamous lists of concrete situations: "Having a single, clear contrast in mind reduces the task to reasonable proportions and is probably closer to the native speaker's subconscious strategy than lists of rules or verb categories" (Cox 1994:208; see also Kaplan

1987). Hence, rather than confusing students with a jumbled list of various situations, teachers would do better to explain the basic aspectual difference from day one and then stand by that definition (Dansereau 1987).

If some kind of visual aid must be used, Negueruela & Lantolf (2006) propose a flow chart model (Figure 1), arguing that this format lends itself well to sophisticated grammatical issues such as tense-aspect distinctions; one student in their study very aptly called it a “grammar-figuring-out-guide” (97). Based around the idea of didactic models in the educational philosophy of Gal’perin (e.g. 1989), an ideal flow chart should be both as informative as possible and generalizable to a broad range of situations. Negueruela & Lantolf base their terminology on Bull et al. (1972), who categorize lexical aspect as cyclic and non-cyclic verbs—cyclic verbs need to be finished in order to have taken place, whereas non-cyclic verbs do not. Crucially, Negueruela

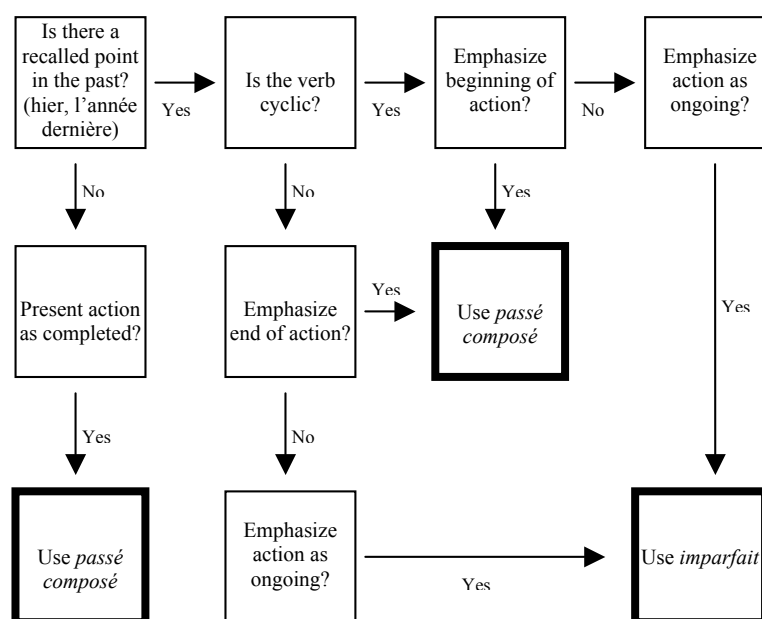


Figure 1: Flow chart constructed by Negueruela & Lantolf (2006) after Bull (1965), and adapted for French rather than Spanish.

& Lantolf warn that their flow chart should not be used as a tool to simply deduce the correct answer, but to create a new frame of mind which parallels native speaker logic. In their study, student response to the flow charts was overwhelmingly positive, with some even saying that the flow charts were easier to remember than a dual list of situation. The true advantage of this presentation of grammatical rules is that it forces the student to reflect on why the *passé composé* or *imparfait* is used, rather than choose from a list of fragmented situations; this holistic model of grammar pedagogy is not only clear and unequivocal but also approaches the native-speaker mindset.

Managing Lexical Aspect

Lastly, teachers must better appreciate the role that lexical aspect plays in learners' conceptualizations of tense and aspect. As Andersen's (1991) Lexical Aspect Hypothesis outlines, students will first acquire the perfective with achievements, which will gradually spread to states and other atelic verbs; the imperfective follows the opposite pattern and arises later. However, the spreading from states to achievements or vice versa tends to stagnate, with the two tenses never quite reaching the opposite end of the spectrum. In other words, even advanced learners still have trouble correctly using states in the perfective and achievements in the imperfective (Coppetiers 1987). Above all, what is most crucial for teachers to stress to learners is that regardless of lexical class, *any* verb can be encoded in the *passé composé*, and *any* verb can be encoded in the *imparfait* (Dansereau 1987). This is contrary to the English verbal system (Ayoun 2005), a fact which is rarely mentioned in textbooks or other instructional materials (Dansereau 1987, Abrate 1983). Many researchers have proposed going into detail to students about lexical aspect, but most agree that abstruse linguistic terms are of little help to students. Abrate (1983) suggests a division between momentary and non-momentary verbs. Momentary

verbs are actions which occur at a finite moment in time, whereas non-momentary verbs have a hazier temporal definition. In Abrate’s model, momentary verbs are in the *passé composé* by default—unless the speaker wishes to emphasize the action’s continuity or repetition, in which case the verb is in the *imparfait*. Similarly, a non-momentary verb (i.e. a stative, in many cases) naturally prefers the *imparfait* unless its completion or momentariness is being emphasized. Abrate explains all this to students who have some conceptualization of the French tense-aspect system already, saying that once students grasp the distinction between momentary and non-momentary verbs, their aspectual knowledge begins to approach native-speaker levels.

Another approach to explaining lexical aspect to students lies once again with mnemonic symbols. Salaberry & Ayoun (2005) propose a different symbol for each of the four Vendlerian classes (7):

_____	(states)
.....	(activities)
..... ×	(accomplishments)
..... ×	(achievements)

According to Blyth (2005), using these symbols helps students to grasp key lexical distinctions without resorting to “opaque metalanguage” (225). Teachers could use this system to explain that some verbs inherently focus on the end of an action while others focus on the ongoing process, making sure to note that the *passé composé* and *imparfait* can both apply to any of the above verb classes.

As far as instruction is concerned, the learning arc should largely follow the pattern dictated by the LAH, in keeping with the notion of “developmental readiness” (Pienemann 1989, Blyth 2005). Developmental readiness—the idea that effective instruction must be based on students’ current linguistic capabilities—fits in well with the theoretical framework of constructionism, proposed by Herschensohn (2000) and elaborated by Schell (2000). When applied to tense and aspect, Schell emphasizes the main syntactic differences between English

and Spanish. Although English stative verbs are by nature imperfective, they cannot be formed using typical imperfective morphology (i.e. the past progressive); instead, they require the simple past, which is more typically associated with the perfective. Students in the first stage of constructionism are likely to incorrectly choose the L2 perfective for stative verbs due to this negative L1 influence (Schell 2000). When learners enter the second phase, they begin to take risks with their L2's syntax, even if that means occasionally making mistakes. Schell (2000) cited this second, transitional phase as the reason why the intermediate students in her study had so much initial difficulty linking lexical and grammatical aspect. Although the learners were beginning to become aware of this connection, they did not effectively manage it when making linguistic choices, using faulty logic or choosing arbitrarily. Eventually, however, the students received enough L2 input to fully to develop a link to grammatical aspect. One by one, the learners discarded each of the features of their L1's tense-aspect system and replaced them with the proper ones, with some of the learners rising to the third phase of constructionism, essentially achieving syntactic proficiency in their L2 (Schell 2000).

Any pedagogy of French tense and aspect should keep pace with these three stages, with a different instructional approach especially tailored for each level (Ayoun 2001, 2004). Initially, the goal should be to construct a rudimentary conceptualization of the *passé composé-imparfait* distinction, beginning with the simplest, most prototypical uses (i.e. states in the *imparfait* and achievements in the *passé composé*) and only the easiest morphology (for example, limiting learners only to the auxiliary verb *avoir*; see Rocca 2005). Part of the educational goal of this stage is to shatter students' notions of a default past tense and to wean them of their all-too-common dependence on the *passé composé* (see Salaberry 2000). Narratives presented during this stage ought to be as basic as possible, with a linear plot consisting of achievements and accomplishments and background information that applies to the entire story, from beginning to end (Blyth 2005).

During the second stage, teachers can lead students into more adventurous territory, choosing texts that are not only more complex from a narrative point of view, but that are also peppered with non-prototypical uses of the *passé composé* and *imparfait*. This constitutes a deliberate effort to “actively counteract the effects of the distributional biases found in most narrative input” (Blyth 2005:221). *Être* as an auxiliary verb should also begin to appear at this time. Gradually, the teacher should increase the lexical variety in the input, both in terms of tokens and types, through the second stage and into the third and final stage. For example, texts will begin to include statives in the *passé composé* (non-prototypical uses), as well as a wider variety of stative verbs in the *imparfait* (uncommon prototypical uses). When teachers take active steps to diversify their input, they broaden students’ linguistic horizons, thus solving a number of consistent problems in tense-aspect acquisition: overreliance on the *passé composé*, struggles with *passé composé* statives and *imparfait* accomplishments, stative lexicons limited to *être* and *avoir* in the *imparfait*, and many more (Blyth 2005). Numerous studies involving lexical aspect make a point of advocating greater variety in teacher input to avoid a skewed aspectual distribution (Izquierdo 2007, 2009; Ayoun 2004; Schell 2000; Bardovi-Harlig & Bergström 1996). Teachers can effectuate this by giving “rich contextualized examples drawn from authentic texts and natural discourse” that highlight as many non-prototypical uses as possible (Ayoun 2004:49). Along these lines, Hernández (2008) proposes inundating the input with abundant examples of target forms to facilitate their acquisition; this so-called “input flood” was most effective when paired with explicit instruction techniques. Another possible technique was suggested by Izquierdo (2007), who points out that computers could be used to great effect here: imagine a program where teachers can manually adjust the classes of verbs to which students are exposed, depending on their developmental readiness. In this way teachers can exaggerate input to highlight non-prototypical uses of the *passé composé* and *imparfait* as needed, literally manipulating the proportions of verbs in each lexical class. No matter how the teacher chooses to

implement it, he or she must analyze and effectively manage the input provided to the students in terms of the lexical information it conveys.

Conclusion

In the above pages, I have endeavored to paint a picture of the current research regarding tense and aspect in Romance-language pedagogy with particular attention to French. Much of this research has been framed by Andersen's (1991) Lexical Aspect Hypothesis, which posits that tense-aspect acquisition universally occurs along a distinct progression. In languages such as French that separate the perfective (*passé composé*) from the imperfective (*imparfait*), Andersen argued that the perfective consistently appears first, beginning with verbs whose lexical meaning complements the perfective's emphasis on the ending of an action, and later spreading to verbs such as states, which are not natural matches for the perfective. The imperfective appears after the perfective begins this process, and follows the opposite pattern, emerging first with states and not reaching achievements and accomplishments until the last stage of the sequence. The Lexical Aspect Hypothesis has had a considerable impact on the field at large, and many researchers suggest taking the sequence into consideration while lesson planning. French teachers should keep pace with learners, at first providing simple input featuring achievements in the *passé composé*, states in the *imparfait*, and very few non-prototypical uses. As students master the most basic uses, teachers should systematically introduce more aspectually bold input, providing texts with non-prototypical uses of both aspects. Finding input of this nature can prove difficult for teachers, since these uses are less common even among native speakers. Nevertheless, the increased input will help learners by giving them plentiful examples of non-prototypical uses, to give them a full conceptualization of the L2 tense-aspect system.

Another way for teachers to engender acquisition of the *passé composé* and *imparfait* is to ensure that students have an effective command of the conventions of narrative structure. In particular, teachers should emphasize the difference between the notions of foreground and background when presenting and discussing classroom stories. Because the French aspectual system lines up so closely with these concepts, teachers should highlight the connections between the grammatical forms and the role they play in the narrative, the *imparfait* being used for background events and the *passé composé* being used for foreground events. It is also of utmost importance to couple the narratives presented in class with video, which allows learners to witness events for themselves and thus make judgments about the distinctions between foreground and background. Activities that feature the narrative past tenses are infinitely more difficult when students are forced to reconstruct the situation in their imagination, so visual input serves as a means of scaffolding students to the proper way of thinking, leading them to apply the *passé composé* and *imparfait* to the storytelling notions of foreground and background.

Perhaps most significantly, however, the preponderance of misleading and erroneous textbook explanations creates tremendous problems for learners. This issue in particular is not only widespread, but also troublingly persistent across time. Negueruela & Lantolf (2006) remark that little has changed in the textbook world since Whitley's (1986) research, which in turn draws from a textbook published in the 1960s. In a 1971 survey, Bull & Lamadrid found that grammatical rules in Spanish textbooks had scarcely changed since before World War II. Going even further into history, Robert (1928) was lamenting the "rather unfortunate" terminology found in explanations of tense and aspect in French grammars of his day (34). Even an 1854 edition of Bescherelle's classic French grammar guide, speaking of aspectual distinctions, remarked that "*les grammariens...ont quelquefois mis si peu de clarté et de précision dans ce qu'ils ont écrit sur le sujet*" (xiv) [grammarians...have sometimes put so little clarity and

precision in what they have written on the subject]. French teachers, thus, have a conundrum on their hands, a conundrum which after 150 years is no closer to being solved.

As argued in this thesis, if any change is to occur in this area, it must come from a close examination of not only instructional materials, but also practices passed down from generation to generation. Kinginger (1995) criticizes the so-called “craft model” of teacher education, in which debutant teachers are encouraged to blindly follow their mentors’ practices without ever calling into question whether the reasoning behind them is legitimate. Blyth (1997) believes that this effect has been particularly apparent in the domain of tense-aspect teaching—which is why the autobiographical scene recounted by Kaplan (1993) at the beginning of this thesis rings true for so many. Teachers have explained the *passé composé* and *imparfait* in this way for years, and yet very few of them have ever stopped to consider the reasons why this particular grammar point is so often explained in this way. This lack of engagement with both instructional material and pedagogical technique among new teachers has posed and will continue to pose an obstacle to lasting change in grammar teaching.

Bull & Lamadrid (1971) once pointed out to the head of a major publishing house that even though many textbooks consistently contained inadequate grammatical rules, authors continued to include them in textbooks. “Yes, we know that,” the editor replied, “but the teachers do not. We can’t sell books with rules that upset the teachers” (454). That is precisely the point: in order to perpetuate a true shift in perspective of grammar teaching, teachers must in some cases consider an overhaul of their entire philosophy, which is certainly a very upsetting prospect. Nevertheless, this is a necessary change, one that teachers must begin to undertake as soon as possible. The countless legions of confused students will thank them.

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