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A Study on the Interlanguage Development of the English Present Simple Tense in Chinese Primary Students' Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

This study is situated within the context of China's ongoing reforms in basic education, initiated in the 21st century. Within this framework, understanding students' learning behaviours and challenges becomes crucial for improving teaching quality and outcomes. The present simple tense is one of the most commonly used English tenses and aspects. It is also a major difficulty in teaching elementary English grammar. Several factors might contribute to errors made by primary school students in the acquisition of the present simple tense, including the influence of Chinese morphology, the fossilisation of interlanguage, and the development of cognitive ability. Currently, there is a relative lack of studies on errors in the acquisition of the English present simple tense by Chinese primary school students. The current paper aims to investigate the nature and patterns of errors related to the English present simple tense and discuss the principal linguistic and cognitive factors contributing to these specific errors. Through categorising and analysing various errors encountered in the real context of a fundamental English classroom setting in China, the present study probes to inform language learning and teaching practices, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of language instruction for primary students. This study sheds light on optimising elementary English grammar teaching, including enhancing the frequency effect, reducing negative transfer, and strengthening positive psychological hints.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition; Present Simple Tense; Error Analysis; English Teaching in Primary Schools

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1. Introduction

Tense is a fundamental aspect of English grammar, especially in the field of second language acquisition. The process of tense learning is complex, influenced by various internal and external factors. Its proper acquisition forms the foundation for subsequent grammatical learning, further impacting both comprehension and communication. In the linguistic literature, numerous classic studies have explored this issue from various perspectives, including the Default Past Tense Hypothesis^[1], the Aspect Hypothesis^[2], and the Discourse Hypothesis^[3,4]. Generally, tense serves as an indicator of time, reflecting speakers' perspectives on actions or events. Specifically, the present simple tense is utilised to describe general truths, habitual actions or situations that occur regularly^[5]. As one of the most frequently used tenses, it is the first tense introduced to learners of English as a second language. Research from multidisciplinary domains has revealed the present simple tense to be a focus with linguistic, cognitive, and pedagogical complexity. Cross-linguistic studies have underscored universal processing challenges and presented typological differences. For instance, from the angle of cognitive and semantic complexity, studies have demonstrated that cognitive construal can be shaped by verb tenses. The present simple tense anchors comprehension in ongoing contexts, whereas the simple past elicits abstract thinking^[6]. It poses obstacles for learners in learning the present simple tense, since they have to navigate the dual role between the expression of universal truths and the description of habitual actions. Moreover, studies suggest that the semantic complexity of the present simple tense has been overlooked, especially its marking of temporal imminence and factual necessity^[7]. The oversimplification can lead directly to learners' overgeneralization patterns, such as misusing it for ongoing actions. From the angle of typological conflicts, some Spanish studies have documented that reduced exposure would trigger confusion between the present simple tense and the present progressive^[8]. Another study observed similar present simple tense/progressive contrasts in Spanish narratives and indicated that first language proficiency could predict the accuracy in the present simple tense in a second language^[9]. Furthermore, from the angle of neurological sensitivity, studies examining people with aphasia showed that agrammatic aphasics retain time reference abilities despite tense morphology loss. The findings emphasise the grammatical vulnerability of the present simple tense^[10].

In the context of China, English is crucial in educational curricula. It is vital to understand how elementary students acquire tense forms for pedagogical practice. For elementary English learners with Chinese as their first language, the initial exposure to the concept of "tense" begins with the present simple tense, which can be challenging. In contrast to English, the Chinese language primarily conveys the concept of time through contextual lexical items rather than morphological alterations to verbs^[11]. A large body of literature has suggested that the grammatical structure of the first language influences the acquisition of a second language. It is a well-documented phenomenon in language acquisition research. Prior empirical studies have also shown that native Chinese students frequently make errors in tense usage, with the differences in the tense marking systems between these two languages being cited as the primary reason^[12,13]. Moreover, for English teachers in Chinese primary schools, present simple tense also poses obstacles in teaching grammar. Hence, the acquisition and teaching of the English present simple tense presents a significant challenge. It frequently leads to a variety of errors in the process of language development. It is meaningful to understand various types of errors through a paradigm of error analysis, as it provides valuable insights into the underlying mechanisms involved in second language acquisition. Nevertheless, studies specifically focusing on elementary students in the Chinese context remain limited. The primary objective of the current paper is to investigate the nature and patterns of errors related to the present simple tense and discuss the principal linguistic and cognitive factors contributing to these specific errors. Through categorising and analysing various errors encountered in the real context of a fundamental English classroom setting in China, the present study aims to inform language learning and teaching practices, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of language instruction for primary students.

This study emerges within the context of China's ongoing basic education reforms initiated in the 21st century, particularly emphasised by the "Decision on Reform and Development of Basic Education". This specific policy stressed the importance of student-centred learning approaches. Within this framework, understanding students' learning behaviours and challenges becomes crucial for improving teaching quality and outcomes. In the process of foreign language acquisition, the occurrence of errors can illuminate the com-

plexities of language learning. Particularly, errors made by second language learners could serve as timely feedback for the teaching-learning interaction^[14]. The error analysis of English tense helps not only to describe language learning mistakes more systematically, but also to identify the reasons for occurrences from a linguistic research perspective. It can expose potential problems that students encounter while learning a foreign language. The analysis and discussion of the patterns and sources of errors can provide insights into the cognitive mechanisms that underpin language acquisition. Moreover, error analysis can further enhance the effectiveness and quality of teaching from a pedagogical perspective. It is essential in classroom instructions, since it aids teachers in formulating suitable teaching strategies by highlighting and correcting mistakes^[15]. Consequently, it is common that language learners frequently make mistakes in tense, which offers valuable information for language teachers and linguists to overcome obstacles in language acquisition and teaching. Firstly, from a linguistic perspective, as Selinker suggested, learners frequently build a specific linguistic system, namely, interlanguage, during the transition from their first language to the target language^[16]. Selinker's Interlanguage Theory highlights the transitional linguistic system that language learners develop. Interlanguage presents features such as transitory, variable, and fossilised stages at a certain period. Among all the features, a certain number of learning errors are also included. Based on Chomsky's theory of children's inborn device, Corder introduced the concept of a "built-in syllabus", which suggested that errors made during second language learning were not "ill-formed, faulty and incorrect"^[17]. Instead, they are substantially analogous to those unique languages observed in children. It is crucial to differentiate "errors" from general "mistakes". Drawing on Chomsky's differentiation between linguistic competence and linguistic performance, Corder further explained that errors frequently occur due to a lack of linguistic competence or insufficient learning, making it hard for learners to self-correct without external guidance^[17]. Errors merely deviate from the standard target language, but observing and analysing them can help correct them and foster the development of their distinct linguistic systems. However, mistakes are often caused by improper performance, such as carelessness or distractions^[18].

Secondly, from the pedagogical perspective, error anal-

ysis is beneficial for educational development. Learners' errors provide information for syllabus designers and educators, since errors can indicate the obstacles that learners encounter during learning. They stress the shortcomings in teaching and emphasise the key concepts that should be reinforced in the curriculum. Thus, errors serve as efficient indicators of areas where learners need guidance and support. This, in turn, aids teachers in adjusting instructing methods and facilitate the teaching effects^[19].

Foundational theories underscore the complexities of tense learning and show that learners frequently draw on grammatical structures of their first language, which can often lead to errors and misunderstandings. As the classic Krashen's Input Hypothesis proposes, learners acquire language more effectively when being exposed to language just beyond the current level of proficiency^[20]. Recent studies have expanded on these classic theories, bringing new insights into the specific features presented by foreign language learners. Specifically, regarding Chinese learners' performance in English tenses, previous literature has extensively discussed various issues, including the classification of errors, the causes of errors and suggestions to overcome obstacles, etc. For instance, from the perspective of negative transfer, Wang investigated the main difficulties for Chinese students in learning English tenses^[21]. The study suggested that the lack of a pure and immersive English environment was the main reason. The mixture of different languages and cultures interferes with the formation of a standard and grammatical way of English expression. Students' Chinese way of tense expressions would sometimes be activated automatically, even when they were required to use English^[22]. Similarly, Ding tested high school students in China and suggested that the causes for these types of errors were contextual interference, insufficient mastery of target grammar, negative native language transfer and stereotypical way of thinking^[23]. Other studies have shown that English input affects the frequency of learners' use of noun plurals and verb tenses^[24]. Moreover, corpus studies have investigated the representational features of the tense-order errors through inter-group comparisons, and the findings indicated that cross-linguistic influences contributed to these errors. The underlying cause can stem from distinctions in the spatio-temporal aspects between English and Chinese^[25].

Although there have been plenty of studies on English

tenses in the field of second language acquisition, there is still a lack of research addressing the acquisition of the present simple tense among this specific group of higher-grade primary students in the Chinese context. Firstly, students at primary schools are at a developmental stage of growth, especially cognitively. It is a crucial period for them to learn a second language and improve their language proficiency^[26]. Particularly, they are around the age of the classic “Critical Period”, which indicates a biological age of acquisition on learning^[26,27]. The nature of second language knowledge is known to be associated with cognitive aptitudes^[28]. Cognitive abilities are not only crucial for understanding but also for producing a second language^[29]. However, younger students are limited in their advanced cognitive abilities, particularly in their working memory capacities, sensitivity and awareness. This may potentially influence their language performance, especially in difficult linguistic tasks such as associating morphological elements in full sentences. Previous literature suggested that early bilinguals (age 3–6) outperformed late bilinguals (age 16–30)^[30], but more empirical evidence is needed for this group of primary students. Within the context of fundamental education at this level, the present simple tense is the basis of this curriculum^[31]. Thus, it possesses research importance to investigate the learning patterns and characteristics of errors during this specific period of elementary learning. Secondly, students at this stage are beginners in foreign language learning in a classroom setting. They might be deeply implicitly influenced by their mother tongue. First language transfer may interfere with their input and output of the second language. Furthermore, primary students in China are not entirely immersed in a foreign language environment. The frequency of their English courses are also comparatively low.

In the current study, there are mainly two research questions: firstly, we are interested in the types of errors that frequently occur in Chinese primary students’ learning of the English present simple tense. Secondly, what are the causes underlying these typical errors? Through the investigation of these two research questions, this study seeks to shed light on effective learning and teaching strategies in primary students’ second language acquisition. Additionally, understanding these dynamics can inform effective strategies and curriculum design. We will explore efficient teaching methods and strategies related to this domain. The proposed pedagogical

approaches can significantly enhance the acquisition of the present simple tense among primary students, thus fostering more effective communication skills.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Materials

Our research materials were built into a linguistic corpus, consisting of two parts: responses from students and teachers, respectively. The student-related part was the result of three sets of English Quality Examination Papers in a primary school from China. The exam paper was mainly designed to test students’ level of proficiency. We probed into these questions in the examinations, directly testing the present simple tense. We assessed whether students had correctly understood the inflexion rules of verbs in the present simple tense and recognised the markers, as well as the use of auxiliary verbs. Then, the teacher-related part was their response in a questionnaire related to their views on students’ linguistic errors.

2.2. Methods

2.2.1. Participants

The study employed a dual-participant structure to ensure comprehensive data collection. The current study tested both students and teachers to ensure comprehensive data collection. On the one hand, a total of 614 primary students from Nangan District, Changchun, participated. All student participants had completed formal instruction covering fundamental present simple tense concepts according to standard elementary curriculum requirements. After manual screening, 608 valid test papers remained (201 fourth graders, 204 fifth graders, and 203 sixth graders). Four papers were excluded due to incompleteness, and two additional papers were also removed due to the general low accuracy under 10%. In total, there were 19 questions assessing the accuracy of the present simple tense.

On the other hand, ten English teachers from the same institution were selected based on their direct instructional experience with the student cohort. These educators provided supplemental qualitative data through structured questionnaires regarding their pedagogical observations and error correction strategies.

2.2.2. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection followed a multi-stage protocol beginning with the systematic collection of three examination sets (the Fourth, Fifth and Graduate Grade). Each assessment underwent manual verification to ensure response validity before being included in the linguistic corpus. Afterwards, teachers provided their opinions through questionnaires. They were required to provide their daily observations and interpretations of students' errors of the present simple tense.

3. Results

The research team recorded 1,215 responses to direct present simple tense questions (16.2% error rate) and 2,634 responses to questions in which present simple tense was one of multiple options (0.5% error rate). The error rate was calculated as in Equation (1), using total errors divided by total possible errors.

$$\text{Error Rate} = \frac{\text{Number of Errors}}{\text{Number of Examinees} \times \text{Number of Tense Related Questions}} \quad (1)$$

The research yielded two sets of data: First, the quantitative analysis of 608 test papers revealed systematic patterns of grammatical errors across three grade levels, with particular difficulties observed in verb inflexion and contextual tense recognition. Second, the teacher questionnaire data

provided complementary qualitative insights into both the nature of these errors and the pedagogical strategies employed to address them. Both results contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of difficulties in learning the present simple tense.

3.1. Linguistic Statistics Analysis: Common Categories of Errors

Tables 1 and 2 show that most students tended to forget the inflectional affix “-s/-es” or add inflectional affixes in the wrong situation. For example, “*He *like to eat apples.*” or “*They usually *plays football together.*” These types of errors are much more common than other types of errors.

“*My mother ____ this computer.*” (Example 1)

A. likes B. like C. doesn't likes

On the other hand, questions that indirectly assessed the present simple tense involved combining it with other tenses and aspects as interference items, prompting participants to select the correct option. For example:

“*He always ____ with his dog in the evening.*” (Example 2)

A. will play B. plays C. played D. is playing

Most participants who did not choose option B, in questions similar to Example 2, were unable to notice or too careless to recognise the marker of the present simple tense —“always”. It is also a common error that occurs when primary students use the present simple tense.

Table 1. The Statistics of Present Simple Errors from Collected Data (From the Perspective of the Number of Tense-related Questions).

	Errors of the Present Simple Tense			Errors Caused by Inaccurate Recognition		
	Number of Paper	Errors of Inflectional Affix	Errors of Auxiliary Verb	Present Simple → Past Simple	Past Simple → Present Simple	Present Perfect → Present Simple
Number of Tense-related Questions	1	1	1	1	2	2
	2	1	0	1	2	2
	3	2	1	1	1	1

Table 2. The Statistics of Present Simple Errors from Collected Data (From the Perspective of the Number of Errors).

	Errors of the Present Simple Tense			Errors Caused by Inaccurate Recognition		
	Number of Paper	Errors of Inflectional Affix	Errors of Auxiliary Verb	Present Simple → Past Simple	Past Simple → Present Simple	Present Perfect → Present Simple
Number of Errors	1	56	36	1	3	0
	2	48	0	0	3	2
	3	54	3	0	5	0

3.2. Questionnaire Analysis: Teachers' Awareness of Errors

The questionnaire answers from teachers basically coincide with the statistics from the result of the linguistic statistics analysis (Appendix). **Table 3** revealed that all teachers agreed that students were inclined to make mistakes in inflectional affixes and auxiliary verbs. Three teachers thought that the confused use of the present simple tense and the present perfect aspect was also a common error. All teachers taught the 6th grade. In conclusion, according to the teachers' opinion, most of their students tended to produce errors in inflectional affixes and auxiliary verbs, as well as misusing the present perfect aspect and the present simple tense.

Table 4 revealed that 90% of teachers thought that forgetting to notice the change of verbs was the most frequent error, the misuse of auxiliary verbs was the second frequent error, and the confused use of the present perfect aspect and the present simple tense was the third frequent error. Most teachers thought that students made errors more frequently in

communication and writing, while errors occurring in daily practices were relatively less frequent.

All the teachers mentioned that they usually used the strategy of repeated training and repeated emphasis to deal with the errors. One teacher also mentioned creating communicative situations to increase the frequency of using the present simple tense. Timely error correction and reinforcement were also mentioned.

It is also noticeable that one teacher added some issues about the other tenses misused as the simple present tense, mentioned in the first two questions. She said that in most cases, students forget to change the verbs according to the marks of other tenses. For example, "yesterday", which was the marker of the past simple tense, was often misused in the present simple tense.

In conclusion, the most frequent types of errors are mis-addition, omission, and mis-generation. Errors of the present simple tense, according to teachers, happen most frequently in the use of the inflectional affixes and the use of auxiliary verbs.

Table 3. The teachers' answer to Question 1 (Appendix A).

Options	Number of People
forgetting to notice the third-person singular form	10
the misuse of auxiliary verb	10
Students should have used the present simple, but chose the past simple.	0
Students should have used the past simple, but chose the present simple	0
It should have indicated actions in the future, but students chose the wrong present simple.	0
Students should have used the present perfect aspect, but chose the present simple tense.	3

Table 4. The teachers' answer to Question 2 (Appendix A).

Options	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th
forgetting to notice the third-person singular form	9	1	0	0	0	0
the misuse of auxiliary verb	1	9	0	0	0	0
Students should have used the present simple, but chose past simple.	0	0	0	0	0	10
Students should have used the past simple, but chose the present simple	0	0	1	5	4	0
It should have indicated actions in the future, but students chose the wrong present simple.	0	0	0	5	5	0
Students should have used the present perfect aspect, but chose the present simple tense.	0	0	9	0	0	1

4. Discussion

In response to our research questions, the present findings systematically identify, categorise and analyse different types of errors related to the present simple tense during the English learning process of primary students. According to the standard provided by Lu, various errors are di-

vided into five categories, including omission, mis-addition, mis-substitution, mis-ordering and overgeneration. In detail, omission errors occur when certain elements are omitted from a sentence or vocabulary, whereas mis-addition errors, which are more prevalent, refer to the inclusion of unnecessary components. Mis-substitution errors occur when two or more words are used incorrectly, which may possess similar

or even contradicting meanings. Mis-ordering errors appear when one or more elements are positioned incorrectly within a sentence. Overgeneralisation means that learners set and apply their own grammatical rules, resulting in incorrect outcomes. In the present study, errors related to the present simple tense from 608 examination papers of elementary students were collected and sorted. Generally, the results showed that when using the present simple tense, primary students tended to produce errors more frequently in changing the form of verbs and using auxiliary verbs. They often failed to notice the marks of the present simple tense or the changes in verbs in writing. They also occasionally misused the present perfect aspect as the present simple tense. The most frequent types of errors are mis-addition, omission, and mis-generation. In the survey of teachers, almost all teachers reported that they could track of students' learning status and errors. Based on the results of the investigation, the causes of errors were analysed. The causes include differences between Chinese grammar and English grammar, fossilisation of language, as well as characteristics of students' recognition.

Secondly, in line with prior research, our findings have provided empirical evidence of fossilization during learning. As suggested by Lü, the system of interlanguage operates independently of both the native language and the target language, existing as a dynamic yet unstable cognitive bridge that often becomes fossilised at certain developmental stages^[32]. Language transfer and overgeneralisation are the main reasons for primary students' fossilisation in making tense-related errors. On the one hand, negative transfer is one of the principal causes of interlanguage fossilisation. Typically, learners inappropriately apply L1 structures to L2 contexts, especially when the grammar systems differ substantially between languages. In our study, the differences between Chinese and English morphology are the main reason. Morphologically, Chinese verbs do not inflect as they do in English. The relationships between linguistic components are not expressed through form or morphology, but by lexical, grammatical relations or discourse strategies, which allow semantics to reflect various concepts. However, English uses the tense instead. Syntactically, English follows relatively strict rules, such as explicit grammatical morphology marking, dominant derivational affixes, etc. In the case of tense and aspect categories, the distinction focuses on the

grammatical morphology markers. In short, there is little or no inflectional morpheme to mark morphology in Chinese. Even if such a component exists, its use is not obligatory. Furthermore, the absence of this element does not compromise the accuracy of the sentence. The Chinese "inflectional morpheme," has - 们, - 的, - 着, - 了, - 过, are similar to the English -s/-es, -'s/-s', the progressive aspect, perfective aspect and past tense of verbs. However, in some cases, the use of these "inflectional morphemes" will cause inaccuracy. For example:

他有很多本书。 (1)

他有很多本*书们。 (2)

He has many books. (3)

The expression (2) is incorrect. The examples above show that the tense markers of the present simple in Chinese grammatical morphology are absent. Thus, English has both tense and aspect markers, whereas Chinese only has aspect markers^[33], which may cause tense and aspect errors for Chinese learners^[34]. An error observed in our data, such as "She often help us with English," provides another representative example of negative transfer. Since Chinese tense markers for the present simple in grammatical morphology are absent, little attention is paid to verbs. The habit of the native language transfers to English when they used the present simple tense.

On the other hand, overgeneralisation is another key factor, occurring when learners misapply L2 rules beyond their valid contexts, as exemplified by morphological errors. It is a common intralingual error in second language acquisition. Learners frequently tend to overapply specific rules in a second language, utilising them in contexts where their application is inappropriate. Students frequently misuse a certain rule and apply the rule to other incorrect contexts, thus expanding the scope in the wrong way. Take an example from our data:

"Please write the third-person singular form of 'be' _____"

One student wrote "**bes*" in the blank, exemplifying a common error associated with overgeneralisation. The student may have assumed that the third-person singular form is created by adding "-s" or "-es" to the end of words, leading to the error. In the situation described in Example (1), the student incorrectly transferred the use of the inflectional affix

that indicates the plural form of a noun to the verb. Consequently, the student did not alter “like” to “likes,” reasoning that “mother” refers to a singular entity rather than multiple individuals, thereby negating the need to change the verb form. This instance also exemplifies overgeneralization.

Another possible cause stems from the transfer of training, where instructional methods or materials inadvertently promote incorrect language patterns. Furthermore, learners’ communication strategies may also contribute to fossilisation. If they lack adequate L2 knowledge, learners may develop compensatory techniques that ultimately hinder proper acquisition, such as persistently substituting simpler constructions for more complex target forms. In addition, certain learning strategies adopted to facilitate initial progress may later obstruct further development.

Thirdly, based on our current findings, we propose three teaching strategies to minimise the chances of errors or mistakes: (1) Enhancing the frequency effect. The frequency effect is a crucial factor in second language acquisition. The “usage-based acquisition theory” posits that the language rules learners develop at all levels are constructed through their subconscious analysis of the characteristics of language input distribution, thereby generating a frequency effect^[35]. In this context, the object of second language acquisition pertains to constructs, and the frequency effect is directly correlated with the frequency of these constructs. As noted by Cai et al., “the frequency of use of a particular construct has a direct impact on the representation and activation of linguistic knowledge”^[36]. Increasing the frequency of present simple constructions can significantly enhance students’ representations of this tense. This increase will also have a direct positive effect on activating both the form and semantics of the present simple tense, thereby fostering a deeper subconscious understanding and improving overall accuracy. Moreover, incorporating additional contexts, such as role-play activities and situational dialogues, is effective for teachers in identifying the errors made by students. Teachers can intervene promptly to highlight these errors or pose questions that encourage students to recognise them independently. Such targeted interventions can reinforce the forms and rules of the present simple tense, thereby further reducing the occurrence of errors. (2) Emphasising the control of negative transfer is essential. Efforts to mitigate overgeneralization, transfer of training, learning strategies,

and communication strategies can help reduce instances of negative transfer. Teachers can proactively clarify that the rules governing verb changes in the present simple tense differ from those applicable to singular and plural forms of nouns, and that the fundamental rules of verb alteration are not universally applicable to every verb. Additionally, teachers should encourage students to use the present simple tense in appropriate contexts as frequently as possible, fostering an environment where they feel comfortable producing errors without fear. (3) Enhancing students’ Motivation and Self-Efficacy. From a psychological perspective, enhancing both integrative and instrumental motivation, along with fostering learners’ self-efficacy, can significantly improve the accuracy of the present simple tense. Integrative motivation refers to an individual’s strong interest in the language itself and a desire to integrate into the culture associated with that language. Conversely, instrumental motivation pertains to the desire to achieve specific goals through the use of a second language. Teachers can leverage this by creating engaging content, such as videos and images that showcase English culture. It can help to enhance students’ integrative motivation to appreciate English and their instrumental motivation to speak accurately. Self-efficacy, defined as an individual’s subjective assessment of their capability to achieve specific tasks, plays a critical role in enhancing learning outcomes. Educators should communicate to students that the present simple tense is one of the more challenging aspects of elementary language learning, making it common to encounter errors. Furthermore, it is essential to convey that errors are an inevitable part of language acquisition for all learners, and making mistakes does not reflect an inability to use the present simple correctly. Additionally, providing adequate praise can serve as an effective strategy to bolster students’ self-efficacy. In addition, other strategies may also be employed, including the incorporation of more focused grammar training, the utilisation of contextually rich instruction materials specifying the present simple tense, and the implementation of more interactive classroom activities, which are designed specifically to reinforce the tense knowledge through practical application.

Besides our findings and empirical evidence, there are still limitations. For instance, other errors which remain outside the scope of analysis might contain certain hidden information for language development, since error analysis

is inherently limited^[37]. Moreover, there might be potential biases due to the self-reported nature of teachers' questionnaires. Furthermore, the generalizability of the study is limited, as this research is a single case study from one school. Future studies could collect more samples across schools or age groups to seek more generalised findings regarding elementary English education in China.

5. Conclusions

This study aims to investigate the types of errors that frequently occur in Chinese primary students' acquisition of the English present simple tense and analyse their underlying causes, with the ultimate goal of developing targeted teaching strategies. Through a systematic analysis of examination papers from 608 students and teacher questionnaires, the research successfully identified three predominant error types: mis-addition, omission, and misgeneration. The results reveal that these errors can be traced to specific linguistic and cognitive factors, including the influence of students' first language, cognitive load during language learning and processing, and the developmental limitations in their grammatical understanding at this learning stage. The study provides concrete pedagogical recommendations aimed at addressing these issues in elementary English instruction. The proposed strategies include enhancing the frequency effect, emphasising the control of negative transfer and enhancing students' motivation and self-efficacy. These recommendations contribute to insights into elementary education and provide actionable suggestions for instructional approaches to better support students in overcoming pitfalls in the tense acquisition. The findings confirm that these aims were comprehensively achieved, as evidenced by the detailed error classification, cause analysis, and practical teaching measures developed through this research. In conclusion, the present study sheds light on the specific challenges posed by the acquisition of the English present simple tense among Chinese primary students. By categorising the identified error types and possible causes, the research suggests a more effective learning environment that can help to promote grammatical accuracy and enhance overall language proficiency in young English learners. The findings also provide actionable learning and teaching strategies accordingly.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, J.L. and X.L.; investigation, X.L.; writing—original draft preparation, J.L. and X.L.; writing—review and editing, J.L. and X.L.; visualization, X.L.; supervision, J.L.; project administration, J.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Informed Consent Statement

This study was conducted in strict adherence to ethical guidelines to ensure the protection and respect of all participants involved. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were maintained throughout the research process, with all personal information securely stored and only accessible to the research team.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study is available from the authors upon request. To access the data, interested parties should contact the corresponding author. Please note that while the data are not publicly accessible, they can be provided for research purposes upon reasonable request. Any restrictions or conditions on the use of the data will be communicated by the authors. This ensures that the data are used appropriately and ethically, in line with the study's objectives and confidentiality requirements.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Questionnaire

Based on the statistical results, the questionnaire ques-

tions are designed as follows.

Question 1: What do you think are the frequent errors of students learning the present simple tense? (Multiple choice)

- a. forgetting to notice the change of verbs
- b. the use of auxiliary verb
- c. Students should have used the present simple, but chose the past simple.
- d. Students should have used the past simple, but chose the present simple.
- e. It should have indicated actions in the future, but students chose the wrong present simple.
- f. Students should have used the present perfect aspect, but chose the present simple tense.

Question 2: Please rank the frequency of the following errors according to your own teaching experience. (Sorting questions)

- a. forgetting to notice the change of verbs
- b. the use of auxiliary verb
- c. Students should have used the present simple, but chose the past simple.
- d. Students should have used the past simple, but chose the present simple.
- e. It should have indicated actions in the future, but students chose the wrong present simple.
- f. Students should have used the present perfect aspect, but chose the present simple tense.

Question 3: Please rank the following situations according to the frequency of errors and your teaching experience. (Sorting questions)

- a. Communication (classroom questions, classroom activities, for example, role play, etc.)
- b. Writing
- c. Daily practice (textbook examples, classroom tasks, homework, test papers, etc.)
- d. Others (please add)

Question 4: What teaching strategies do you generally use to cope with or reduce the occurrence of errors? (Short answer question)

Question 5: Are there any other errors students often produce in the present simple tense? (Short answer question)

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