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Control of Preterite/Imperfect in Extended Narration

Achieving control of the preterite/imperfect distinction in Spanish presents speakers of English with a number of challenges; in fact, the difficulties are so notorious that most considerations of the concept begin by referring to its problematical character. As language teachers well know, some of the problems stem from the resistance of aspectual distinctions to simple rule formulation. Students who make correct choices between preterite and imperfect in discrete point exercises still may not demonstrate comparable levels of accuracy in extended oral or written narration. Furthermore, the very nature of the distinction, depending as it does on both narrative task and the perspective of the speaker, produces such wide variation in authentic texts that students may draw the not illogical conclusion that the choice of preterite and imperfect is entirely arbitrary. Students acquire the concept late, if at all; developing native-like command of preterite/imperfect remains one of the hardest tasks faced by L2 students.

At present, there are two principal theoretical and pedagogical approaches to the preterite/imperfect distinction: one based on a consideration of aspect, the other on discourse analysis. Although there is an increasing body of research applying the principles of discourse analysis to the preterite/imperfect distinction, most textbook explanations remain aspect-based. Indeed, Frantzen's observations in her frequently-cited 1995 article remain valid, both with regard to textbook "rules of thumb" and to the types of errors students make as they attempt to apply the rules.[1]

In recent years the discourse-based approach--which focuses on the contrast between the preterite's "foregrounding" function in establishing narrative sequence while the imperfect provides setting, background and motivation--has gained numerous adherents. Westfall and Foerster, citing García and van Putte's research on preterite/imperfect usage in native and non-native speakers, state categorically that "the problem to address is how to get students to understand the interaction of the PRET and the IMPF in discourse."[2] López-Ortega concurs that "more attention must be paid to grounding principles of the narratives";[3] Liskin-Gasparro finds that textbook presentations of aspect are at odds with acquisitional sequence.[4]

No matter what the teacher's pedagogical or theoretical preference, discourse or aspect, the fact remains that the student must ultimately demonstrate mastery of preterite/imperfect through extended narration. If L2 students are to approximate the native speaker's ability to make choices based on the development of a narrative, they must have a sense of narrative function; and we cannot assume that they have any such notion. Moreover, it is obvious that narration may be, and frequently is, conducted in present tense rather than past, particularly when the subject of the narrative is a literary work, a film, or an extended anecdote. The ability to narrate and to control preterite/imperfect are in fact separate, though closely related, issues. When students are required to organize a narration, make preterite/imperfect choices and deal with unfamiliar morphology, the number of variables may become overwhelming.

The following exercise, therefore, has been designed to minimize variables in order to allow students to focus on narrative structure as they participate in recreating a story. A fairy tale such as "Caperucita Roja" offers several advantages-- the availability of the story in numerous texts, children's books and online; the familiarity of the story to the majority of students, so that students already know what happens; and a tradition of multiple versions, which invites creative variation at certain points of the exercise--though any extended story with which students are already familiar, such as a film presented in class, would work as well. The exercise as presented here is for use with beginning students, but may be adapted to various levels.

Preparation for the exercise: Students have been introduced to the forms of the preterite and the imperfect, and have been given as homework handouts containing two lists of sentences, all with the verb in the infinitive, plus a graphic representation of the story. The sentences in list A include the key elements in the plot, but are given out of sequence. Students are instructed to conjugate these verbs in the preterite. The sentences in list B have to do with characterization, motive, and background; students are instructed to conjugate these verbs in the imperfect. This preparatory exercise is collected and corrected. On the day the narration is to be performed, the graphic version of the story should be visible to the whole class. The instructor divides students into groups to work with the corrected versions of the sentences, making sure that only one group deals with the sentences in the

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[1] Diana Frantzen, "Preterite/Imperfect Half-Truths: Problems with Spanish Textbook Rules for Usage," *Hispania* 78 (1995), 145-58.
[2] Ruth Westfall and Sharon Foerster, "Beyond Aspect: New Strategies for Teaching the Preterite and the Imperfect," *Hispania* 79 (1996), 551.
[3] Nuria R. López-Ortega, "Tense, Aspect and Narrative Structure in Spanish as a Second Language," *Hispania* 83 (2000), 500.
[4] Judith Liskin-Gasparro, "The Use of Tense-Aspect Morphology in Spnaish Oral Narratives: Exploring the Perceptions of Advanced Learners, " *Hispania* 83 (2002), 842.

imperfect. The instructor then assigns segments of the story to each of the “preterite” groups, whose task is to put the sentences in order within their segment of the story. The “imperfect” group is invited to experiment with the sequence of their sentences to arrive at a “best” presentation. Once the students have agreed on a sequence, they elect a spokesperson to read the final version to the class. The instructor then calls on each of the preterite groups to present a segment of the narration, but does so out of sequence. The entire class then decides which group should go first, which next, until the end of the story. Finally, the preterite groups narrate the story in the proper sequence, one speaker per group.

Once the sequence has been established, the “imperfect” group offers its sentences. Students are then invited to rearrange the sentences in the “imperfect” group, which they discover that they can do without appearing to be illogical. The instructor then invites the “preterite” group to tell the story (questions such as “¿Qué pasó?” can set up the narrative), but halts it at various points to cue the “imperfect” group, which speaks in unison, to provide information about character, setting and motivation (“¿Cómo. . .?” and “¿Por qué. . .? “ questions may be used as cues). Students soon discover that while the preterite sequence cannot be altered without violating logic, the information conveyed by the imperfect can be inserted at various different points in the story. For example, the observation that “Caperucita era muy cariñosa, y todos los animales eran sus amigos” may be used as an introduction; it works just as well as an explanation when she talks to the wolf despite her mother’s admonition (“Cuando salió el lobo, Caperucita no se asustó, porque era muy cariñosa, y todos los animales del bosque eran sus amigos”). Similarly, information about the wolf’s character (“El lobo era malo y astuto”) may be placed at the beginning of the story, or as commentary on his encounter with Caperucita on the way to grandmother’s.

In this exercise, students are not required to make choices between the preterite and the imperfect. In a follow-up exercise, the instructor may present a different story in present tense, guiding the students into selecting the critical points in the action of the narrative, then converting the present to preterite, followed by the insertion of background information, motive, etc. with verbs in the imperfect. More advanced classes may be given an even greater degree of freedom, generating their own utterances rather than working from models. Moreover, advanced students may be challenged to try to make the “imperfect” sentences fit in as many different places as possible by adding transitional phrases and connectors.

Obviously, this type of exercise does not address a number of issues involved in making correct preterite/imperfect choices, and cannot be considered as a method for teaching the entire concept. It is one strategy for allowing students to experience the narrative process within a specific context. Assigning the preterite narrative line to a single voice, with the imperfect group working in unison as a chorus, aids students in developing a sense of the linear character of the preterite and the non-linear, “background” character of the imperfect. Moreover, working to insert the “imperfect” material and seeing its effect on the story reminds students that the imperfect is indeed necessary in creating a complete narration, and not simply an “extra” past tense the function of which is secondary to that of the preterite.

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Appendix: Historia de Caperucita Roja

Pretérito: (orden correcto) 1. Un día la madre de Caperucita le dijo: -- La abuelita está enferma. Llévale esta cesta con comida, pero ten cuidado con el lobo feroz. 2. Caperucita se puso la capa roja, tomó el cestito y entró al bosque. 3. Muy pronto se encontró con el lobo, pero no se asustó. 4. El lobo le preguntó: --¿Adónde vas, Caperucita? 5. Caperucita contestó dulcemente: --Voy a casa de mi abuelita con comida, porque está enferma. 6. --¿Vive lejos tu abuelita? --preguntó el lobo. 7. -- Sí, vive muy dentro del bosque--respondió Caperucita. 8. --

Pues, si vas por este camino, vas a llegar más temprano--dijo el lobo. 9. Caperucita se fue por el camino que le señaló el lobo, y el lobo se fue por otro camino más corto.
10. Cuando el lobo llegó a la casa de la abuelita, llamó a la puerta y dijo: --Abre, abuelita, soy Caperucita y te traigo una cestita con comida. 11. La abuela abrió la puerta, pero al ver al lobo, se asustó, echó a correr y se escondió en el armario. 12. El lobo se puso el camisón y el gorro de dormir de la abuela, y se metió en la cama. 13. Cuando llegó Caperucita, vio la puerta abierta y entró. 14. Vio a la abuela muy metida en la cama, y se acercó. 15. Notó algo raro en el aspecto de su abuela, y le dijo: --¡Abuelita, qué ojos más grandes tienes! 16. --Para verte mejor--dijo el lobo. 17. --¡Abuelita, qué orejas más grandes tienes! --prosiguió Caperucita. 18. --Son para oírte mejor. 19. --¡Abuelita, qué boca tan grande tienes! --exclamó Caperucita. 20. --¡Es para comerte mejor! --gritó el lobo, y se lanzó sobre ella. 21. Pero un leñador oyó los gritos de Caperucita, entró con su hacha, y espantó al lobo. 22. El lobo se fue corriendo, y la abuela salió del armario. 23. Caperucita, la abuela y el leñador quedaron felices y contentos.

Imperfecto: 1. Caperucita Roja vivía cerca de un bosque con su madre. 2. El bosque era grande y hermoso, y allí vivían muchos animales. 3. Caperucita era una niña dulce y simpática. 4. Se llamaba Caperucita Roja porque siempre llevaba una capa roja, un regalo de su abuela. 4. Todos los animales del bosque eran sus amigos, y Caperucita Roja los quería mucho. 5. La abuela de Caperucita Roja la quería más que nadie, y Caperucita la quería mucho también porque era muy buena y generosa. 6. El lobo era malo y astuto. 7. Al lobo le apetecía mucho el cuerpo tierno de Caperucita, y la vigilaba para encontrar el mejor momento para comerla. 8. Caperucita no sabía que el lobo era malo. 9. El leñador era valiente y fuerte.