
Title	Acquisition of telicity in English by Mandarin Chinese speakers
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Acquisition of Telicity in English by Mandarin Chinese Speakers

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Aim of Study

- To investigate L1 Chinese/L2 English learners' sensitivity to the effect of the direct object noun phrase on the **telicity interpretation** of English sentences.
 - Research on effect of direct object on telicity still rather limited in SLA (but see e.g. Slabakova 2000; Gabriele 2010)
- To further our understanding of **learnability issue**
 - Superset - subset relationship between L1 and L2 and outcome of acquisition
 - Mixed findings
 - Chinese (two interpretations; superset), English (one interpretation; subset)

Telicity

- “The property of an event’s having a distinct, definite and inherent endpoint in time” (Tenny, 1994: p.4)
- Mary walked to the park.
 - **telic** with intrinsic endpoint
- Mary walked in the park.
 - **atelic** no intrinsic endpoint

Direct object and telicity

- Properties of the direct object affect telicity
 - Mary ate **an apple**. (inherent endpoint; telic)
 - Mary ate **apples**. (no inherent endpoint; atelic)
 - Mary ate **ice cream**. (no inherent endpoint; atelic)
- Contributing factor: whether the entity in question has defined extent or quantity (boundedness)
 - **Unspecified quantity** --> [-bounded] --> atelic
 - **Specified quantity** --> [+bounded] --> telic

Cross-linguistic differences in telicity marking

- Unlike in English, telicity not sensitive to object nouns in some languages (e.g. Slavic)
- Same noun phrase may have different boundedness values in different languages
 - Demonstrative/definite singular NP in English --> [+bounded]
 - Demonstrative singular NP in Chinese --> [+/- bounded]
- Implications for second language acquisition
 - L2 learners might transfer L1 telicity calculation strategy to L2

Telicity in second language acquisition: Slabakova (2000)

- When interpreting an event as telic/atelic, do learners transfer telicity marking from L1 to L2?
- L1 Spanish, L1 Bulgarian learning L2 English
- **Spanish**
 - similar to English in the way direct object affects telicity
 - *Prediction*: Behavior similar to L1 English speakers: sensitive to boundedness of direct object
- **Bulgarian**
 - direct object does not affect telicity; presence or absence of perfective affixes does
 - *Prediction*: treat all sentences as atelic, as perfective affixes absent in English

Slabakova (2000) design & results

- Two-clause sentence:
 - A. *Habitual* context + *Telic* situation
e.g.: **Antonia worked in a bakery and made a cake.**
 - B. *Habitual* context + *Atelic* situation
e.g.: **Antonia worked in a bakery and made cakes.**
- Task: judge how well clauses combine with each other
- Rationale:
 - Habitual context more compatible w/ atelic situation (B) than w/ telic situations (A).
- Results:
 - **L1 English and L1 Spanish** speakers gave higher ratings to (B) than (A)
 - Exhibited sensitivity to indef noun vs. bare plural distinction
 - **L1 Bulgarian** speakers did not distinguish (A) from (B).

Other work on telicity: Japanese

- Japanese bare count nouns --> both telic and atelic readings
- [Gabriele \(2010\)](#): L1 English speakers had difficulty correctly acquiring L2 Japanese telicity
 - Tended to assign telic reading to bare nouns in Japanese
- [Kaku \(2009\)](#): Intermediate and Advanced L1 Japanese/L2 English learners were progressing towards target-like representation of English telicity
 - Beginning learners had difficulties, incorrectly allowing atelic reading for definite singular nouns (e.g. “Lisa erased the star”)

Interpreting telicity in L2 English

- **Spanish:**
 - direct object affects telicity computation in the same way as English
 - => interpreting telicity in English is easy
- **Bulgarian:**
 - direct object does not affect telicity computation
 - => interpreting telicity in English is hard
- **Japanese**
 - direct object lacks morphological distinctions that matter in English
 - => learning to interpret telicity in English is possible for more advanced learners
- **Focus of this talk: Chinese**
 - direct object affects telicity computation but not in the same way as English
 - L1 Chinese speakers use direct object in telicity computation but boundedness not marked in same way as English
 - => implications for learning L2 English?

Telicity computation in English

- **Completion**: inherent endpoint reached
 - John wrote the letter. => letter completed, inherent endpoint (finishing of letter) reached)
- **Incompletion**: inherent endpoint not reached; event is terminated/stopped before completion

English Examples:

Definites, numerals: Not compatible w/ incompletion

a. *Definite/Demonstrative NP*

* John wrote **the/this/that** letter **but didn't finish writing it.**

b. *Numeral NP*

* John wrote **three** letters **but didn't finish writing them.**

Telicity computation in Chinese

Demonstrative NPs: allow
incompletion reading

a. *Demonstrative NP*

John xie le zhei/na feng xin, keshi mei xie-wan.
John write ASP this/that Classifier letter but not write-finish
John wrote this/that letter, but didn't finish writing it.

b. *Numeral NP*

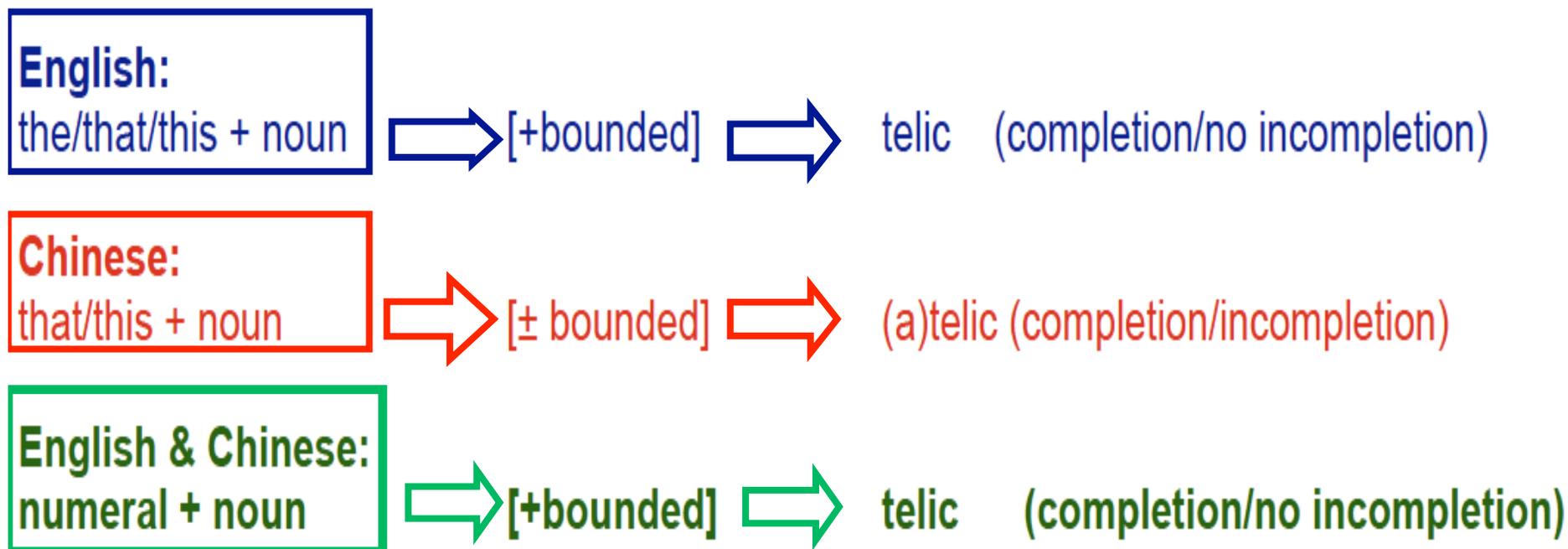
* John xie le san feng xin, keshi mei xie-wan.
John write ASP three Classifier letter but not write-finish
John wrote three letters, but didn't finish writing them.

Numeral NPs: no incompletion
reading

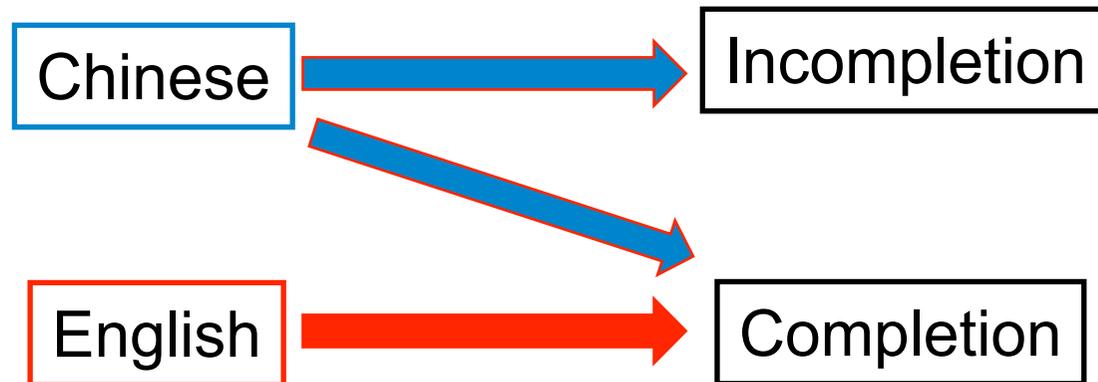
Chinese has no specific definite article 'the'. It does have demonstratives which are considered similar to the English definite article (e.g., Chen 2004).

Boundedness features for Chinese and English NPs

- Differences between Chinese and English attributed to differences in boundedness features for noun phrases (Soh & Kuo, 2005)

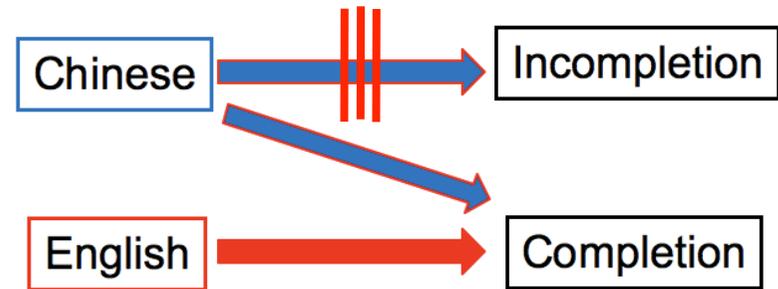


Un-learning L1



- Chinese and English: Superset - subset relationship in terms of the number of telicity interpretations allowed for certain sentences
 - Negative evidence to un-learn L1
- Are learning situations that require negative evidence difficult?
 - Yes: White, 1991, Inagaki, 2001, Gabriele, 2009
 - No: Yuan 2001, Trapman & Kager 2009

Research questions



- **Q1** Are L1 Chinese/L2 English learners able to preempt the L1-based incompleteness interpretation?
 - For some NPs, Chinese allows two interpretations (completion/incompletion) whereas English only allows one (completion)
 - Learnability problem
- **Q2** How is learners' performance correlated with their overall proficiency in English (established through independent means)?

Participants

- 39 participants were L1 Chinese/L2 English learners
 - 6 Advanced L2 learners
 - 23 Intermediate L2 learners
 - 10 Low L2 learners
 - *Proficiency established by cloze test*
- 19 participants were L1 English speakers

Design

- Two-clause complex sentences
 - **First clause**: simple accomplishment sentence (with Definite or Numeral NP object)
 - **Second clause**: implies interpretation of event expressed in first clause (complete/incomplete)

John read the book/three books **but did not finish reading it/them.
and finished reading it/them.**

- *NP form* (def vs numeral) and *interpretation* (incompletion vs completion) were crossed to create four conditions:

	Incompletion	Completion
Definite + NP	The NP/Incompletion	The NP/Completion
Numeral + NP	Num NP/Incompletion	Num NP/Completion

- **Task**: Judge how natural the combination of clauses is (5 pt scale: 1=Very Unnatural Combination; 5=Perfectly Natural Combination)
- 24 test sentences (6 different verbs), 43 fillers

Examples

Chinese and English differ in **the NP / incompleteness condition**

The NP/Incompletion Interpretation:

John read the book, but did not finish reading it.

→ Natural in Chinese; Unnatural in English

Num NP/Incompletion Interpretation:

John read three books, but did not finish reading them.

→ Unnatural in Chinese; Unnatural in English

The NP/Completion Interpretation:

John read the book and finished reading it.

→ Natural in Chinese; Natural in English

Num NP/Completion Interpretation:

John read three books and finished reading them.

→ Natural in Chinese; Natural in English

Expected performance

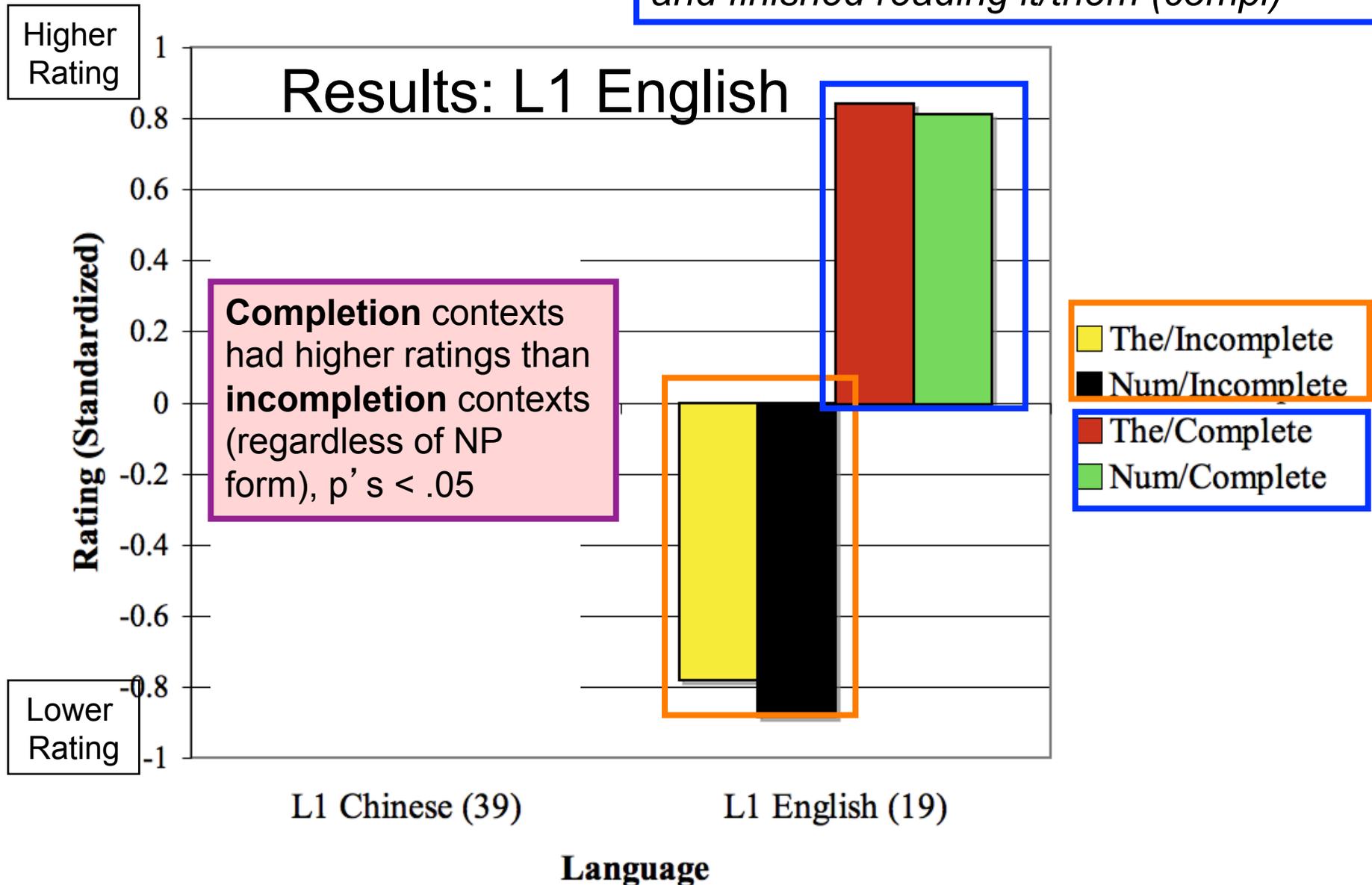
Conditions	L1 Chinese	L1 English
The NP/Incompletion Interpretation	√	×
Num NP/Incompletion Interpretation	×	×
The NP/Completion Interpretation	√	√
Num NP/Completion Interpretation	√	√

Test sentences were in English.

John read the book/three books

but did not finish reading it/them (incompl)

and finished reading it/them (compl)

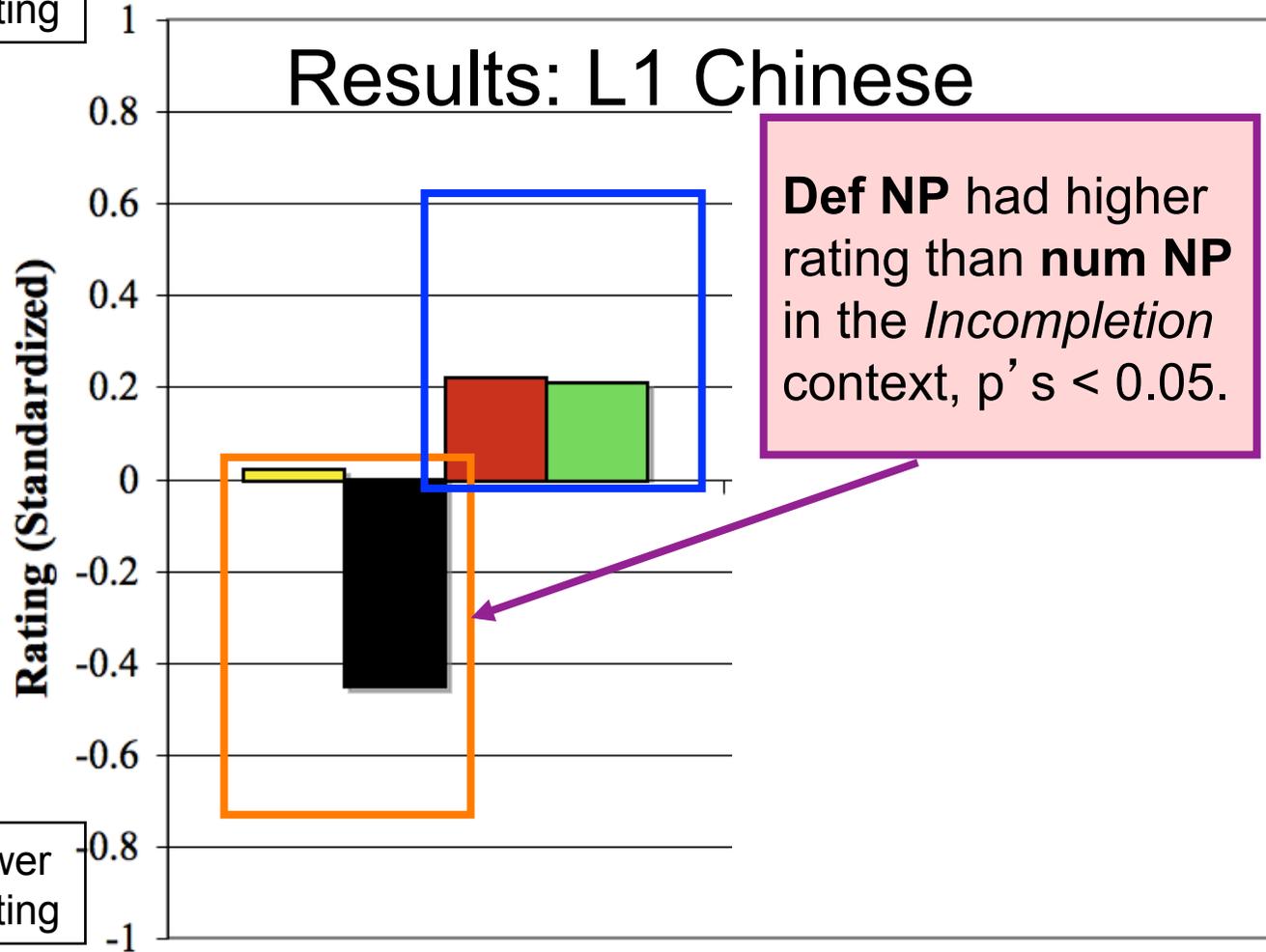


but did not finish reading it/them (incompl)

John read the book/three books

and finished reading it/them (compl)

Higher
Rating



Def NP had higher rating than **num NP** in the *Incompletion* context, p 's < 0.05.

The/Incomplete

Num/Incomplete

The/Complete

Num/Complete

Lower
Rating

L1 Chinese (39)

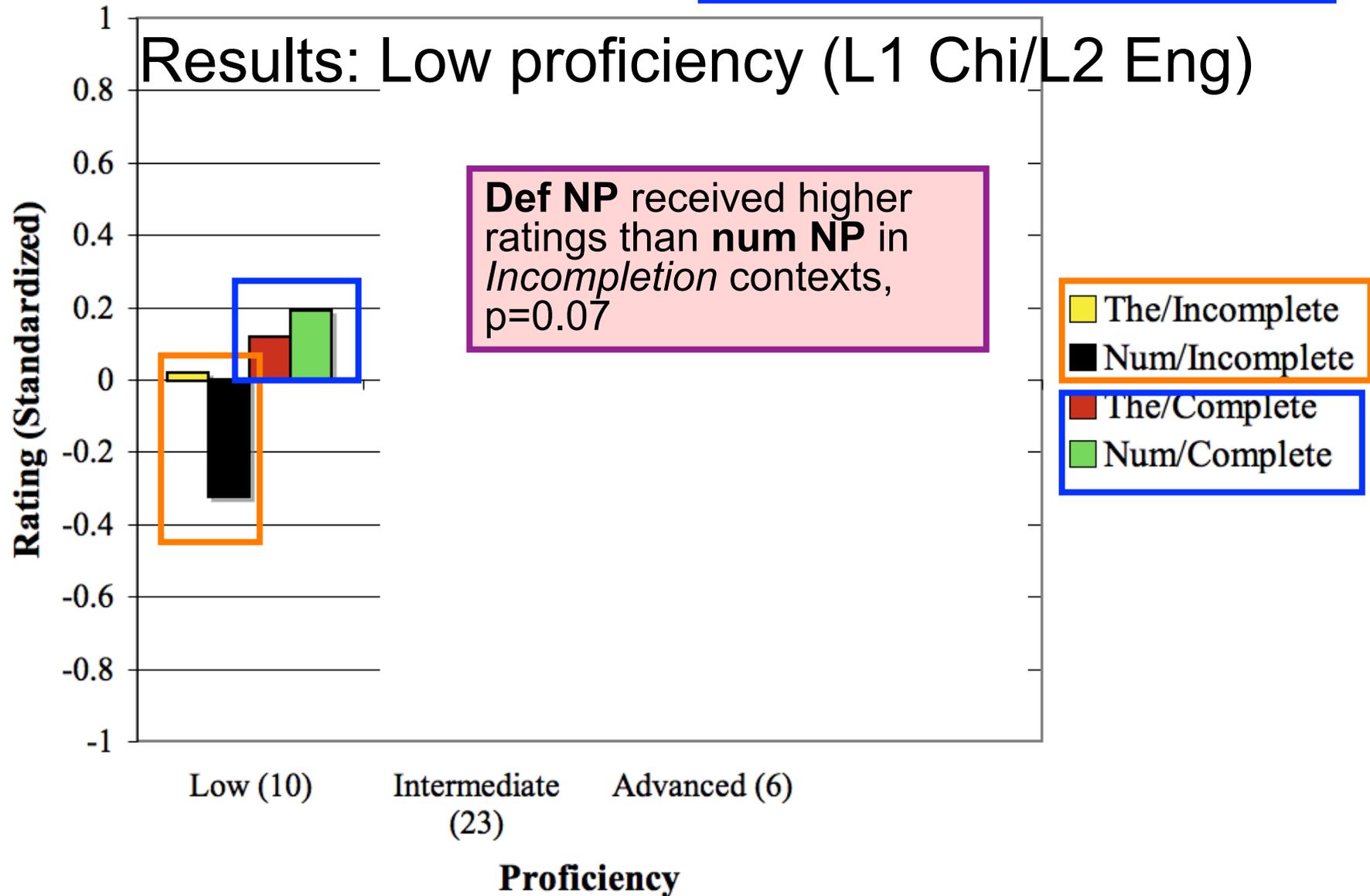
L1 English (19)

Language

but did not finish reading it/them.

John read the book/three books

and finished reading it/them.

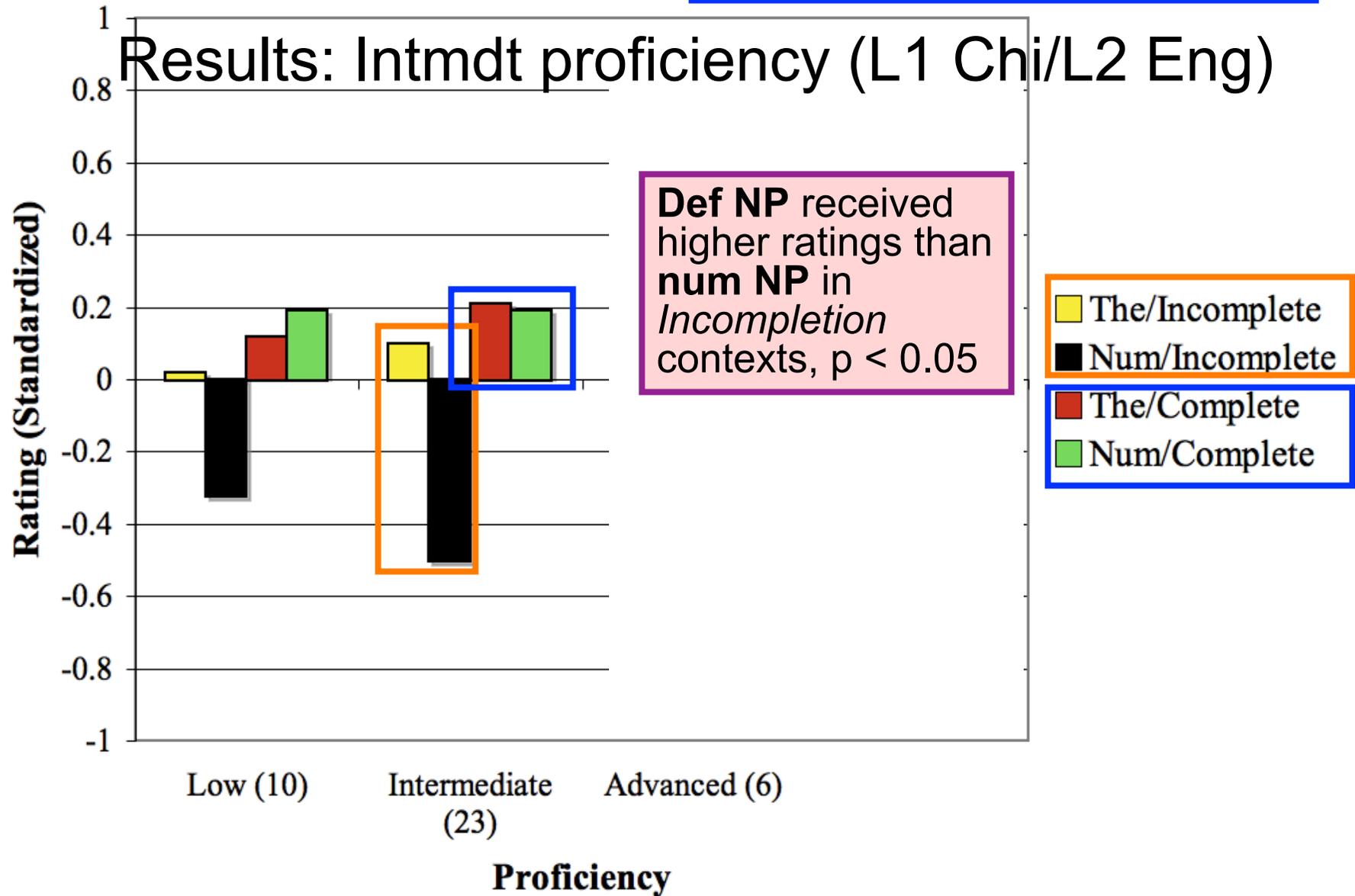


but did not finish reading it/them.

John read the book/three books

and finished reading it/them.

Results: Intmdt proficiency (L1 Chi/L2 Eng)

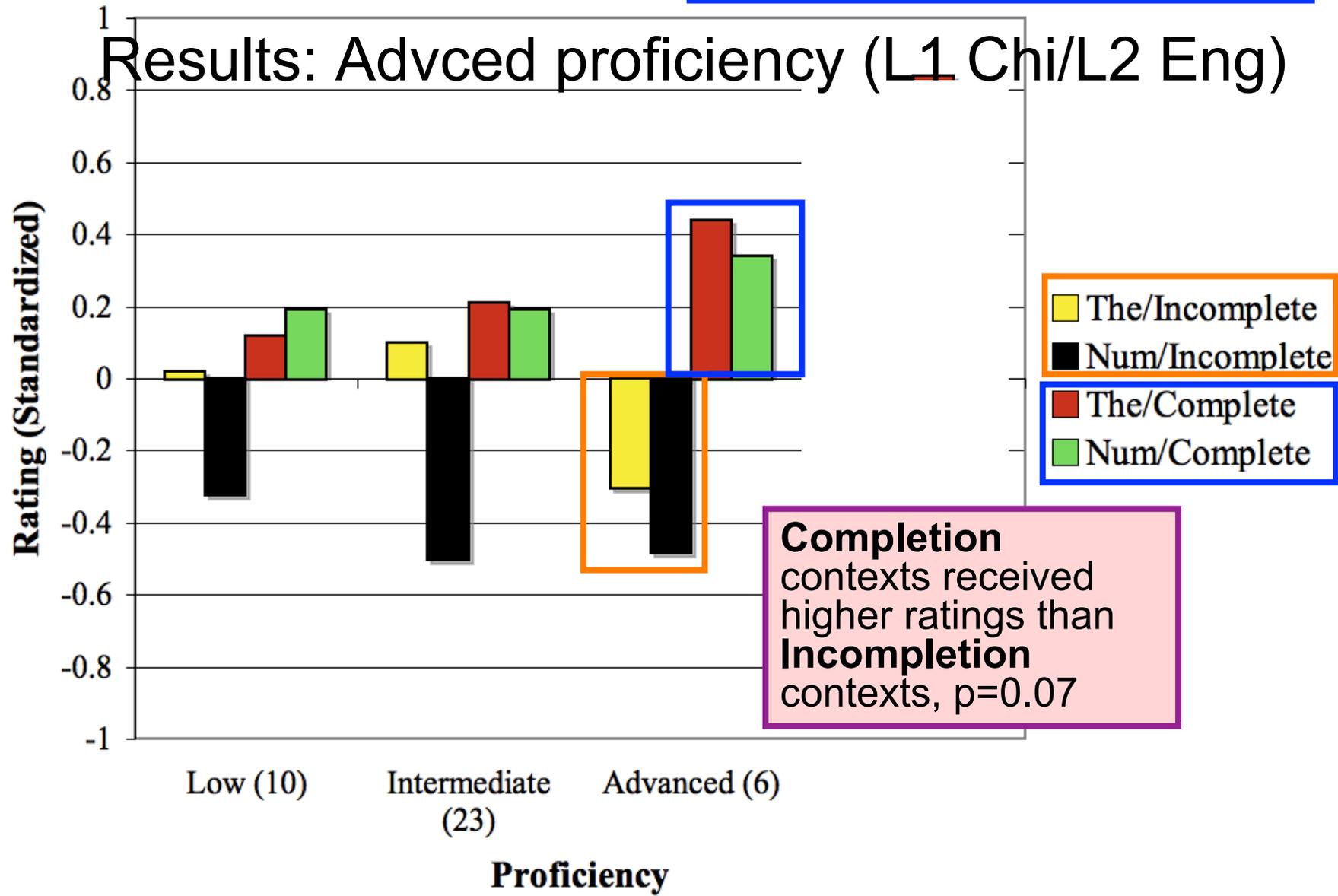


but did not finish reading it/them.

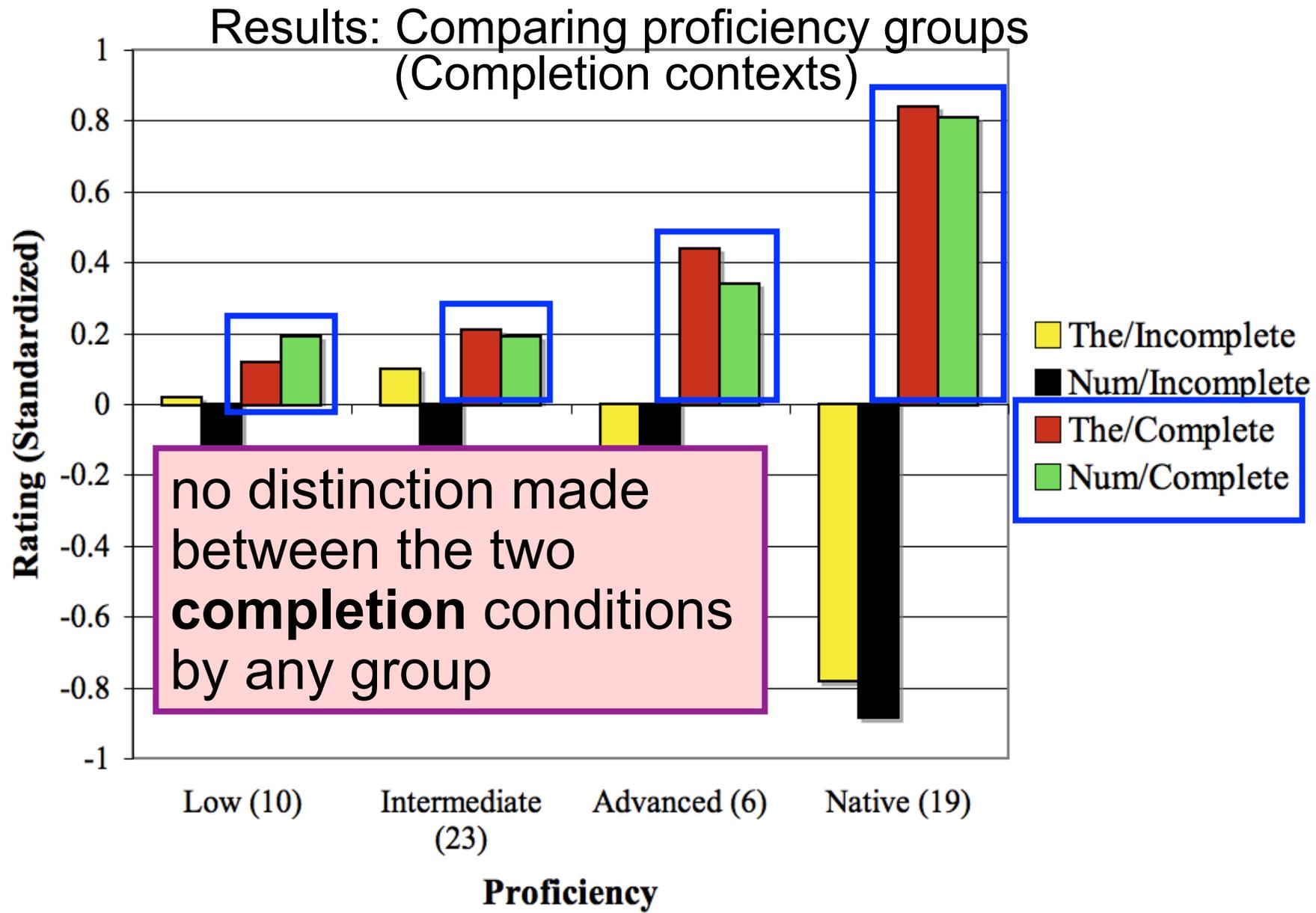
John read the book/three books

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Results: Advcded proficiency (L1 Chi/L2 Eng)

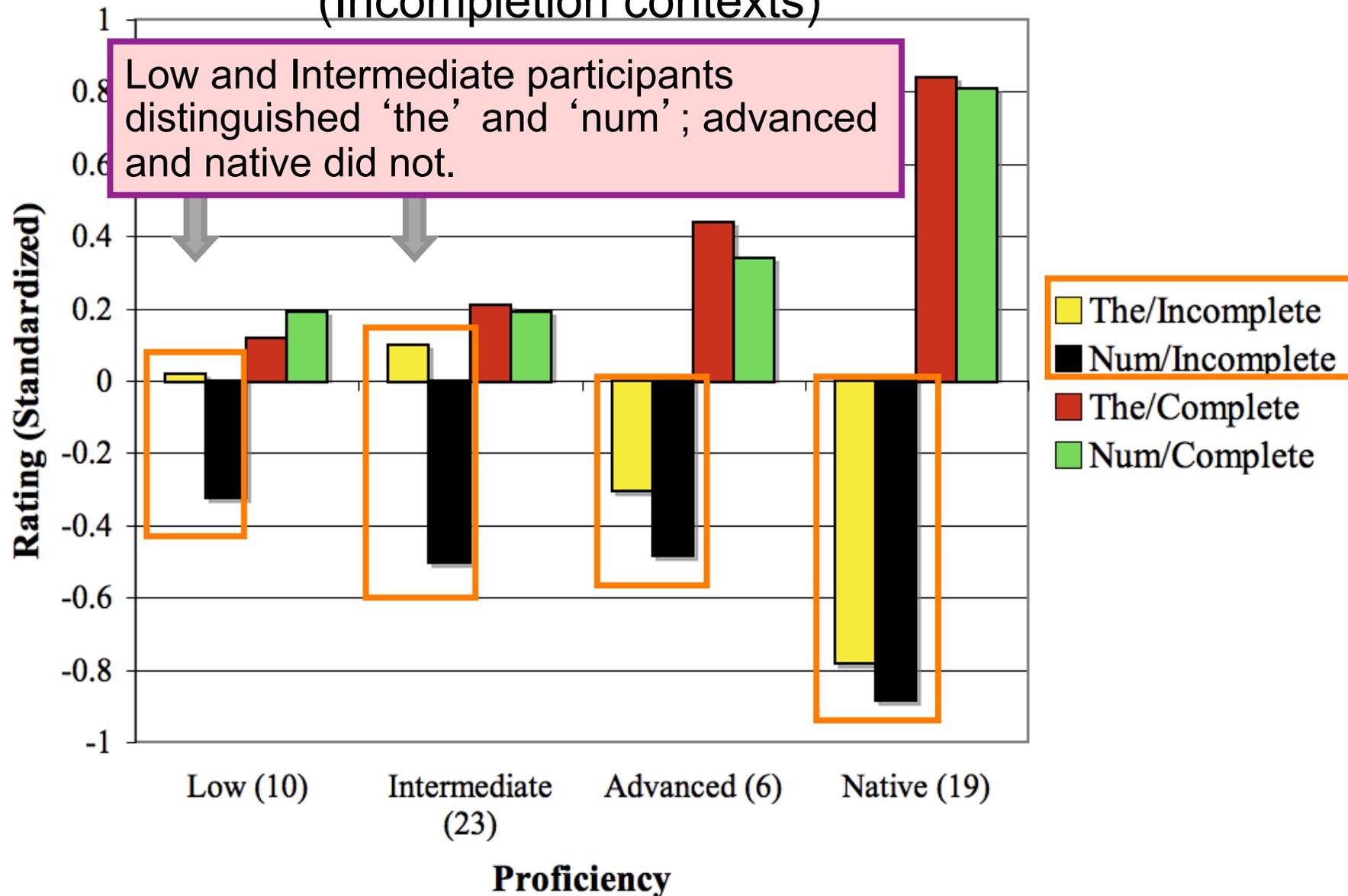


John read the book/three books and finished reading it/them.



John read the book/three books but did not finish reading it/them.

Results: Comparing proficiency groups (Incompletion contexts)



Summary

- L1 English and L1 Chinese participants performed largely as predicted
 - Completion conditions:
 - No difference between definite NP, numeral NP for L1 or L2 speakers
 - Incompletion conditions:
 - L1 English: def NP and num NP conditions pattern alike
 - L1 Chinese: def NP judged better than num NP condition
- > Suggestive of transfer of telicity (how boundedness feature affects telicity calculation in L1)

Effects of proficiency

- **Low and Intermediate:**
 - Ratings for Incompletion vs Completion contexts depend on NP type (def/numeral) , as in L1 Chinese
- **Advanced:**
 - Resemble L1 English speakers: low ratings for incompletion contexts regardless of form

Discussion: Role of L1

- Results point to L1 influence in acquisition of telicity in L2 English for L1 Chinese speakers
 - Overall pattern suggests L1 influence
 - Learners could have transferred boundedness feature from L1 to L2
- Could be indicative of difficulty in integrating information from both verb and object in computing telicity (e.g., van Hoot, 2007).

Discussion: Challenges of pre-emption

- Provides evidence in support of the position that a **learning situation requiring negative evidence is challenging**.
 - Chinese speakers need to **preempt** the L1-based incompleteness interpretation from their inter-language system.
 - Preemption needs negative evidence which is argued to be either non-existent or not effective (e.g., Marcus, 1993; White, 1991;)
 - Supports position that un-learning L1 is challenging (e.g., White, 1991; Gabriele, 2009; Inagaki, 2001).
 - Meanwhile, there are studies whose results suggest that un-learning L1 poses no problems (e.g., Yuan, 2001; Trapman & Kager 2009; Slabakova 2006)

Conclusions

- Acquiring L2 telicity is challenging when differences exist in nominal system between L1 and L2 (leading to different *boundedness* values)
- Learning task may be further complicated when negative evidence is needed to preempt an L1-based property

Thank you for listening!

Selected References

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