

The Use of English Preposition with in Essays Written by Chinese Efl Learners

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ABSTRACT. This corpus-based study compares L1-English and L1-Chinese students' use of preposition with in essays, and explores the acquisition of preposition. Data consist of two corpora of student-produced essays: 38 essays written by L1-English students and 54 essays written by L1-Chinese students. In light of Co-selection theory and the diagnostics of McKercher (2001), we identify the frequency, collocation, colligation and semantic proportion of L1-Chinese students. The study reveals that there is no significant difference in the overall frequency used by EFL learners and that by native English speakers. For EFL learners, the frequently used semantic items are comparatively limited to absolute with and accompaniment with. Some other semantic items like manner with and cause with are respectively of the lowest proportion. When it refers to with-collocation, phrases like communicate with and compare with are very popular. It indicates that L2 students rely heavily on idiomatic collocation of with but neglect any other usages in their writing. Therefore, prepositions should neither be taught in isolation nor as fixed phrase. Teachers need to focus on providing students with enough input rather than just the basic sense of prepositions.

KEYWORDS: Preposition with, Contrastive analysis, Corpus-based analysis, Second language writing

1. Introduction

Prepositions play an important role in written and spoken English. Limited in number, they possess great power in meanings, such as space, time, relationship, purpose, reason, and tools. According to a survey, there is one preposition out of eight words in a text. And statistics from Brown Corpus show that there are 15 prepositions in the top 100 commonly used English words. However, with the multiple meanings and the high-frequency in using, it is difficult for EFL learners to have a good master of them. Therefore, based on self-built corpus, this research analyzes the features of preposition *with* in Chinese EFL learners' essays from the perspective of comparative analysis, so as to have a better reveal on the overall characteristics of second language acquisition.

2. Literature Review

Scholars at home and abroad have conducted multi-dimensional research on prepositions, mainly focusing on the following three aspects: First, from the perspective of *error analysis* and *language transfer*, the impact of mother tongue on acquisition is explored. It conclude that acquisition is a process of deconstructing the concept of native language and reconstructing the concept of target language ^[1-3]. Secondly, combined with *prototype theory*, *conceptual metaphor*, *image schema* and *principled-polysemy model*, the meaning network as well as the connection between each meaning has been investigated ^[4-5]. Cognitive linguists are trying to find out the inner connection of multiple meanings since traditional linguistics only center on the basic meaning, lacking a systematic theoretical explanation of polysemy. Third, based on corpus, through comparative analysis, researchers study prepositions in terms of frequency, collocations, meanings and misuses to examine the acquisition of second language ^[6-9].

However, most current researches on English prepositions mainly focus on semantics and acquisition of spatial prepositions. A few non-spatial prepositions are studied. Non-spatial preposition *with*, whose intricate semantics pose a great challenge for L2 learners, has been examined mainly from syntactic and semantic perspective. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the use of preposition *with* by Chinese EFL learners from the perspective of comparative analysis. And this study, through comparison with native English speakers, explores the use of *with* in essays written by EFL learners so as to improve their writing.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Question

This study will address the following questions: (1) Are there any differences in frequency of preposition *with* in essays of native students and Chinese EFL learners? (2) What's the difference in collocation and colligation of prepositions *with*? (3) What's differences in meanings distribution of prepositions *with*.

3.2 Data Collection

A part of essays with the same topic “*The Future of English*” are selected from Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers. The corpus consist 93 essays including 55 essays from Chinese students with total 15,686 words and 38 essays from native English students with total 17,277 words. With similarities in topic, writing style of the two corpora, they are reliable in comparability. *With* as an idiom, semi-idiom and sayings such as *with regard to*, *with reference to*, *with respect to*, *to begin with*, *with a view to*, *with a will*, *ect* are deleted in the research.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Frequency of Preposition *with*

In order to examine the frequency of preposition *with* in the two corpuses, AntConc, a free online software, is used. The Concordance function is to retrieve the target items and the unwanted are checked and deleted one by one, through which 183 items are got including 92 item in EFL learner corpus and 91 items in native English speaker corpus. By rechecking one by one, 174 valid items meet the requirements. In EFL learner corpus, preposition *with* appears 86 times among 15,686 tokens. It accounts for 0.55%. In native English speaker corpus, it appears 88 times among 17,277 tokens and accounts for 0.51%. It can be seen that they are very close to each other in frequency and EFL learners have not overused preposition *with*.

Table 1 Frequency of Preposition *with*

| corpus | C1 | C2 |
|------------|-------|-------|
| Tokens | 15686 | 17277 |
| frequency | 86 | 88 |
| percentage | 0.55% | 0.51% |

The EFL learners' corpora and Native English speakers' corpus are called C1 and C2 shortly and Absolute Frequency is shorted as AbF in the following paper.

4.2 Comparison and Analysis of Collocation and Colligation of Preposition *with*

To examine typical collocations in essays, the left-one verb of WITH is regarded as research object. Clusters/N-Grams function is used and various verbs are retrieved. There are 10 types of collocations in EFL learner corpus and 19 types in native English speaker corpus. Native speakers tend to use various verbs like *use*, *face*, *move*, *explain*, *end*, *cope*, *disagree*, *deal*, *reconcile*. Compared with native English speakers, we can see that EFL learners seldom use the non-phrase collocation but verbs like *communicate*, *compare*, *connect* and *combine* are of highest frequency. Overemphasizing the importance of these fixed collocations leads students having a strong memory of them. Therefore students overuse them and ignore the significance to collocate *with* with other verbs. EFL learners' competence in collocation is lower than the required level. Therefore they should focus on the choice of collocations and learn to use expressions and collocations which are employed frequently by native speakers.

Interestingly, “*agree with*” accounts for 17.6% in native speaker corpora and 1.1% in EFL learner corpora, which is in line with the former research that Chinese students use less *stance marker* in their writing. To some extent, to be more authoritative, EFL students avoid expressing personal emotions or making subjective judgments in texts. In contrast, under the influence of individualism, it is reasonable for Western students to fully express their thoughts and emotions.

Colligation of *with* is divided into 13 categories and the Absolute Frequency (every 1000 words) is calculated. In terms of the left side of *with*, by comparing with native speakers, the verbs that EFL learners use is not so diverse as native speakers and also the Noun phrases are less used. EFL learners tend to use a few verbs intensively. For example,

among the 50 verb phrases, *communicate*, *compare*, and *compete* appear 24 times and account for 48%. This shows that EFL learners rely heavily on formulaic expressions, resulting from the insufficient depth of vocabulary. Due to negative transfer, EFL learners often ignore the construction that prepositions can be used as post attributives to modify nouns in spoken and written English, leading to some naturalness expression. There is no vocabulary on the left side of *with* is of higher percentage than that of native speakers. It seems that EFL students have a good grasp of *with* as an independent adverbial. Through further analysis of the original frequency (30), it is found that “*With the development...*” appears 17 times, accounting for 56.6%.

In terms of right side of *with*, by comparing with native speakers, Noun phrases EFL learners use are much higher than native speakers. “*With+Det+N*” and “*With+Det+Adj*” are much used. It is not difficult to find that these constructions are similar to certain constructions in Chinese. Also the *Clause* behind *with* is rarely used, which leads to an oversimplified expression in their essays. Although the lacking of *V-ing*, Independent Nominative Structure such as “*With English being so much important...*”, is obvious in EFL learners’ essays, they surly like a simpler independent structure “*With+Det+N*”, such as “*With the decline/development of...*” Analyzing the data, we found that EFL students are more inclined to constructions that are similar to Chinese like “*With+Det+N*” and they seldom use constructions that are away from Chinese such as “*V-ing* and *With-Clause*”. In order to avoid mistakes, they tend to use simpler constructions and avoid more complex one.

Table 2 Distribution of Left-Colligation of Preposition with

| | VP | NP | None | Idiom |
|--------------------|-----|-----|------|-------|
| C2 | 66 | 15 | 10 | 0 |
| Absolute Frequency | 725 | 165 | 110 | 0 |
| C1 | 50 | 7 | 30 | 5 |
| Absolute Frequency | 543 | 76 | 326 | 54 |

Table 3 Distribution of Right-Colligation of Preposition with

| | NP | | | | N+Wh- | Pre | V-ing | None | Misuse |
|-----|-----|-------|-------|-----------|-------|-----|-------|------|--------|
| | N | Adj+N | Det+N | Det+Adj+N | | | | | |
| C2 | 22 | 4 | 22 | 4 | 10 | 12 | 16 | 0 | 1 |
| AbF | 242 | 44 | 242 | 44 | 110 | 132 | 176 | 0 | 11 |
| C1 | 16 | 8 | 32 | 13 | 1 | 16 | 4 | 2 | 0 |
| AbF | 174 | 87 | 348 | 141 | 11 | 174 | 43 | 22 | 0 |

4.3 Comparison and Analysis of Different Senses of Preposition with

Based on McKercher’s diagnostic tests of preposition with, the senses of with are categorized into 9 types as absolute with, opposition with, accompaniment with, proximity with, instrument with, reference with, locatum with, causal with and attribute with, which are shortly called S1-S9 in the paper. From the data, there are obvious differences in the use of each sense in the two corpora. Native speakers employ every sense listed while EFL learners have not fully use them. EFL learners do not use Sense 8, and Sense 5, Sense 7, Sense 9 are seldom used. However Sense 1 and sense 3 are of higher occurrences. The frequently used senses absolute with, accompaniment with are the basic senses acquired at the very beginning. Students are quite familiar with them and they occur immediately in learner’s written and spoken English. In absolute with, the expression “*With the development...*” occurs 17 times among the total 35 and accounts 48.6%. It shows that EFL tend to repeatedly and intensively use them. Instrument with, locatum with, causal with and attribute with are much lower than other senses in EFL learner corpora, which does not indicate they do not know these senses. The fact is EFL learners tend to replace them with other constructions in expressing the same meaning. Instrument with are often replaced by construction use+object/ instrument to express “using something”. Have+Noun is more popular than postpositive attributive attribute with. Because/ Because of is used for reasons while causal with is ignored. EFL learners do not prefer using prepositions which is away from Chinese but they do like notional verbs and Nouns due to first language transfer.

Table 4 Semantic Distribution Of Preposition with

| Sense | S1 | S2 | S3 | S4 | S5 | S6 | S7 | S8 | S9 | Idiom/Misuse |
|-------|-----|----|-----|----|----|-----|----|----|----|--------------|
| C2 | 15 | 2 | 15 | 6 | 3 | 31 | 4 | 4 | 8 | 3 |
| AbF | 165 | 22 | 165 | 66 | 33 | 341 | 44 | 44 | 88 | 33 |
| C1 | 35 | 3 | 28 | 9 | 2 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 6 |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----|-----|----|-----|----|----|----|----|---|----|----|
| AbF | 380 | 33 | 304 | 98 | 22 | 76 | 11 | 0 | 11 | 65 |
|-----|-----|----|-----|----|----|----|----|---|----|----|

5. Conclusion

There are significant differences between EFL learners and native English speakers in using preposition *with*. Compared with native English speakers, EFL learners intensively use some fixed collocations and basic meanings in their essays. Therefore foreign language teaching should pay enough attention to prepositions and manage to prevent students from learning prepositions only by memorization of collocations and phrases. Improving the quality of preposition phrases used by students is a very important way to avoid vagueness and inadequacy in meaning and usage. Teachers should explain various semantics of prepositions further so as to prevent students from understanding semantics only at surface level. Also the syllabus should pay attention to the diversity of prepositional phrases. In teaching process, overemphasizing certain prepositional phrases should be avoided.

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