

An Error Analysis of Collocation Patterns of Delexical Verbs in Chinese EFL Earners' Writing

Chen Liang and Junhong Dong

Abstract—English writing skill has always been the weak point of Chinese EFL learners, how to improve English writing skill is the focus of the education circle. In addition, the appropriate use of verb can polish the writing paper. Furthermore, the frequently-adopted delexical verbs play an important role in the English sentence structure. The collocation patterns of delexical verbs deserve us put more attention. Through the analysis of the CLEC corpora, this paper found the main features of the incorrect use of the delexical verbs and investigated the reason as well as provide some pedagogical implications.

Index Terms—Delexical verbs; corpora; collocation.

I. INTRODUCTION

In China's English class, the composition teaching has always been the focus and the difficult point. Targeted composition teaching is one of the effective ways to improve the writing level. A large number of studies have shown that the appropriate use of words, especially delexical words, has an obvious effect on the writing level. As the multiple senses and the meaningless usage of delexical words are easy to be confused with, the fixed collocation of delexical words has become a common mistake for students. There already have a lot of studies on collocation errors of delexical verbs. With the help of students' writing corpus, Qi Li (2011), under the guidance of transfer theory and the theory of error analysis, analyse the students' collocation errors of delexical words and explores that situation in different English levels and finally put forward some pedagogical implication for the problems exposed by students [1]. Xing Hongbing (2013) defines collocation from the perspective of mental lexicon and lexical knowledge, and analyzes the types and characteristics of collocation. This paper holds that collocation knowledge is the key to second language learners' learning of target vocabulary [2]. In the study of second language vocabulary acquisition, more attention should be paid to the extraction of collocation knowledge based on the target language corpus, and it's necessary to establish a lexical collocation knowledge system for second language teaching. This paper focuses on the construction and development of collocation knowledge in L2 learners' mental lexicon based on interlanguage corpus, and makes a comparative analysis of collocation knowledge with target language corpus from the perspectives of error rate and matching degree. Based on Chinese Learner English Corpus

and English Composition Corpus of Native Canadian College Students, Deng Yaochen& Xiao Defa(2005), adopts the method of comparative analysis, investigates the collocation patterns and variation patterns of six delexical verbs in Chinese college students' interlanguage. The results show that Chinese college students tend to overuse the collocation of delexical verbs, with less types, less typical collocations and more colloquial collocations. Little awareness of collocation and less knowledge about vocabulary can both serve as the reason for that situation[3]. In Gong Xuelian's study (2008), corpus-based interlanguage contrastive method is used to explore the collocation features of four grammaticalized verbs in Chinese English Majors' compositions. By comparing the verb-noun collocations of the four grammaticalized verbs in the Chinese English Majors' Written Language Corpus and the Brown Corpus, this study focuses on the characteristics of Chinese English Majors in using the collocation of delexical verbs from the aspects of quantity, appropriateness and accuracy of usage. This study shows that Chinese EFL learners are weak in collocation of delexical words. The results show that the universal verb effect, native language transfer, repetition and avoidance are the main causes of the collocation errors of the delexical verbs. Through the discussion and analysis of the results, this study draws some implications for English teaching. For example, teachers should pay attention to enhance students' awareness of collocation and teach collocation according to their mother tongue. At the same time, it is necessary to increase collocation input by using corpus [4].

Under the guidance of the former research, this paper mainly investigates the following three questions. Firstly, the main features of the incorrect use of delexical verbs in Chinese EFL learners' writing is investigated. Then, this paper study that with the advancement of English performance, dose the incorrect use of delexical verbs has been improved? Lastly, the reasons for the incorrect use of delexical verbs is researched.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Language Transfer

It has always been assumed that, in a second language learning situation, learners rely extensively on their native language. Lado in his *Linguistics Across Culture* once said that individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture--both productively and receptively. Stubs, M (2001) put forward that transfer is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and

Manuscript received September 19, 2021; revised December 27, 2021. This work was financially supported by Northwestern Polytechnical University.

The authors are with Northwestern Polytechnical University, China (e-mail: 1036325465@qq.com, 1762718221@qq.com).

any other language that has been previously acquired (and perhaps imperfectly acquired) [5]. Jarvis, Pavlenko(2008) believed that language transfer is the influence of a person's knowledge of one language on that person's knowledge or use of another language. [6] Transfer may occur at all levels. First, the phonology which refers to the foreign accent. Second, the syntax which may indicate the word for word translation. For example, the sentence "I like very much Edinburgh" could be a transfer of French word order into English. Third, the lexis, for instance, a Spanish speaker may use "embarrassed" to mean "pregnant", and the word "embarazada" is the Spanish word. Fourth, the pragmatic, that is, the inappropriate over-formality or under-formality. Last, morphology seems to be less affected than other areas. Discussions of transfer often begin with the work of American linguists in the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1950s, language transfer was often deemed the most important factor to consider in theories of SLA. Based on behaviorist position, second language was seen as the development of a new set of habits. The role of the native language, then, took on great significance, because it was the major cause for lack of success in learning the L2. During the 1960s to the late 1970s, some researchers virtually denied the existence of language transfer in their enthusiasm for universalist explanations. Since the late 1970s, research on the role of the native language has taken on a different view, advocating a nonbehaviorist position. Those linguists were more likely to view transfer as a creative process. During the mid-to late 1970s, the emphasis was on the determination of how and when learners use their language and on explanations for the phenomenon. In recent years, however, a more balanced perspective has emerged in which the role of transfer is acknowledged and in which transfer is seen to interact with a host of other factors in ways not fully understood. In the course of learning English, students easily understand English in Chinese way which may result to the Chinglish.

B. Error Analysis

Longman dictionary of applied linguistics define the Error analysis as the study and analysis of the errors made by second and foreign language learners. Corder argued that error analysis is a type of bilingual comparison, a comparison between learner's interlanguage and the target language. It has several objectives [7]. Firstly, it tries to find out how well the learner knows the second language. Then, it aims to find out how the learner learns the second language. In addition, it obtains information on common difficulties in second language learning, as an aid in teaching or in the preparation of teaching materials. Lastly, it provides data from which inferences about the nature of the second language learning process can be made.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

CLEC corpora collects more than a million words from the composition of junior students, CET-4, CET-6, junior English majors and senior English majors. Furthermore, it has already established an annotation for all the writing errors and classified them in order which aims to provide effective information for English teaching. For example, in the sentence "will make [cc3,-3] a good health for you.", [cc]

means the improper collocation.[cc1] means collocation of two nouns. [cc2] means collocation of nouns and verbs. [cc3] means collocation of verbs and nouns. Adopting the CLEC corpora, this paper uses the software Antconc to compare the incorrect use of delexical verbs from the sub-corpora ST2, ST3 and ST5, ST6. This paper mainly investigates six verbs: make, do, get, have, take and give.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

From the Table I, it can be found that in sub-corpora ST2, ST3, ST5, ST6, the total number of improper collocation patterns reached 2067. And, the number of improper collocation patterns of the delexical verbs "make, do, get, have, take, give" is 87. In sub-corpora ST2, ST3, the misuse of those collocation patterns of the six delexical verbs arrive at 71, while in sub-corpora ST4, ST5, the number is 16.

TABLE I: THE OVERALL RESULTS OF THE IMPROPER COLLOCATION PATTERNS IN DELEXICAL WORDS

verb	The number of improper collocation patterns	
	In sub-corpora ST2,ST3	In sub-corpora ST5, ST6
make	12	1
do	19	12
get	6	0
have	21	0
take	8	2
give	5	1

TABLE II: THE RESULTS IN SUB-CORPORA ST2, ST3

verb	The number of improper collocation patterns	Total number
make	12	71
do	19	
get	6	
have	21	
take	8	
give	5	

From the Table II, it's clear that students often make mistakes on the delexical verb "have", then "do", and the third one is "make". The total number of improper collocation patterns in sub-corpora ST2 and ST3 is 71.

The following four examples are the mistakes made by students.

(1) In order to develop our economy, we must have [cc3,-4] reform and open policy.

In example (1), students want to express that the implementation of the reform and open policy can develop our economy. However, the students translate it into English from the Chinese "有" to express the meaning "implement". It can be regarded as Chinglish and as a result of negative transfer.

(2) make [cc3,-3] a good health for you.

In this sentence, the students want to express the meaning "something will bring you a good health or something is healthy for you". But, the word "make" was used as the meaning "使" in Chinese which was not authentic in English. This is also a sign of negative transfer. In addition, this collocation is not formal in some situation. So, this is also an example as colloquialism.

(3) Do [cc3, -2] a doctor [vp5,2-] as my father has been

doing [sn8,s-] .

In sentence (3), the author wants to express the meaning “be a doctor like my father” . However, the word “do” was adopted as the meaning “做” in Chinese which was a typical example for negative transfer.

(4) how to do [cc3,0-2] the text.

In example (4), the student wants to express the meaning “do the exercise” or “finish the text” which is equal to “做题” in Chinese. This phrase also can be seen in many conversations between Chinese. So, this is a typical example of Chinglish and colloquialism.

From the above examples, it's evident that students in lower grade often translate what they have thought in Chinese into English which lead to the phenomenon of negative transfer. Also, in light of the poor knowledge of collocation patterns, they often use the informal collocations which is not suggested in writing text.

TABLE III: THE RESULT IN SUB-CORPORA ST4, ST6

verb	The number of improper collocation patterns	Total number
make	1	16
do	12	
get	0	
have	0	
take	2	
give	1	

From the Table III, it's pleasure to see senior students make far less mistakes in collocation patterns in which the total number of the wrong usage reach at 16. Among all the incorrect usage, students make more mistakes on the verb “do” which accounted for 75%. In addition, student behave well in the collocation patterns of the verb “get” and “have” in which they make no mistake.

The following four examples are the mistakes made by students.

(5) make [cc3,15] finical [fm1,-] budgets and monetary policy

In example (5), the student make mistake on the phrase “make financial budgets” which is an informal expression. The formal one should be “plan the budgets” or “build the budgets”.

(6) to do [cc3, -2] any crime

In sentence (6), the student wants to express the meaning “做犯罪的事情”. However, the word “do” was choosed as the verb which was a Chinese expression. In COCA corpora, the top five verbs collocate with the noun “crime” are “commit” , “charge” , “convict” , “solve” and “investigate”.

(7) criminals do [cc3, -2] great threat [np6,3-2] to others.

In sentence (7), the wrong collocation is “do great threat”. It's evident that the student has little knowledge on the sense of the verb “do”. In fact, the top five verbs collocate with the noun “threat” are “pose”, “represent”, “present”, “perceive” and “respond” in COCA corpora.

(8) Usually, we give [cc3, -2] great sympathy to those criminals

In example (8), the phrase “give great sympathy to” is a typical Chinese way to express the meaning “同情罪犯”. The student uses the word “give” by literal translation which is

totally improper. Actually, the top five verbs collocate with the noun “sympathy” are “feel”, “express”, “offer”, “gain” and “extend” in COCA copora.

Compared with the number of the wrong usage of junior students, the number of senior students reach at 16 which is far less than juniors whose number is 71. So, it's evident the collocation knowledge of seniors is more ample. However, express things in Chinese way is also the big problem should be solved.

B. Discussion

1) The main feature of the errors made in collocation patterns of delexical verbs

From the above results, it can be concluded that Chinglish is the main feature of the improper collocation patterns of delexical verbs. That is, students always translate what they want to express in Chinese directly. In addition, students often use the informal collocations in formal writing which is not suggested and can be regarded as colloquialism.

2) The trend of errors made in collocation patterns of delexical verbs by students in different levels

With the advancement of English performance, the incorrect use of delexical verbs has been improved. 71 is the total number of the improper collocation patterns of delexical verbs for juniors, while seniors only make 16 mistakes.

3) The reason for the errors made in collocation patterns of delexical verbs

Language transfer serves as the main reason for students make such mistakes. It can't be denied that the influence of mother tongue is great and can't be ignored. So do in collocation patterns in delexical verbs. Student accustomed to writing in Chinese thinking patterns, so the words they adopted are not easy be understood by natives. In addition, the little understanding of the various senses of delexical verbs is another reason for that phenomenon. The feature of polysemy in delexical words is not deeply understood by students. They only know the main sense or the notional senses of the verb. However, understanding various senses of prepositions and the subtle differences between prepositions is critical for mastering prepositional collocation.

V. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

A. Raising Students' Awareness of Collocation

In order to improve the learners' collocational competence, first of all, learners' awareness of collocations should be raised. Bahns,J (1993) proposes that what teachers must do is make students aware of collocation as a vital key to language leaning[8]. On the simplest level, teachers could encourage students to think bigger than the word-always to look for the two-or three-word expression. Noticing is an important stage in learning. Asking students to underline all verb+noun collocations in a text will be a typical exercise. It is also important to get across to students at that these relations are arbitrary— there is no reason why it should be gain knowledge rather than learn knowledge, and it is completely by convention [9]. By focusing students' attention on miscollocations, awareness can be strengthened that learning more vocabulary is not just learning new words; it is often

leaning familiar words in new combinations.

B. Increasing the Collocation Input

Input is a critical factor for learning second language [10]. If learners do not have enough input of collocations, it will be difficult for them to formulate the correct hypothesis and produce native-like sentences. So, teachers should change traditional teaching method which focuses on grammar. In detail, they can increase students' collocational competence by using collocations as input unit in English teaching. Also, they should try to use the English corpora in class which can show students the authentic usage of collocations. In addition, in syllabus and text books, the collocational aspect of word knowledge should be emphasized.

C. Teaching Collocations with Reference to the Chinese Language

Although the present study has shown that L1 interference is an important factor attributable to collocation errors, however, the study by Granger (1998) has indicated that the LI plays an important role in the successful acquisition and accurate use of collocations in the L2 [11]. Therefore, it is advisable for teachers to introduce to the students the typical English expressions for the frequent Chinese ones. Meanwhile, it is also important for Chinese learners to realize the difference between LI collocations and L2 collocations. The Chinese collocations do not necessarily have their corresponding ones in English. In this way, errors in the collocation production could be greatly reduced.

VI. CONCLUSION

The sub In English writing teaching, collocation is the key which should attract both students' and teachers' attention. In this study, the author find that Chinglish and colloquialism are the main features of the errors. And, with the development of English level, students behave better in the collocation patterns of delexical verbs. Furthermore, language transfer and lack of collocation knowledge are the two main reasons for the errors. In order to solve that problem, students' awareness of collocation should be raised. Collocation input also should be increased. Teaching collocations with reference to the Chinese language is also important. However, the text capacity in this study is limited, so the future research should expand the sample.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Chen Liang conducted the research, analyzed the data and wrote the paper in draft; Junhong Dong supported the research, gave many suggestions and helped revise the draft.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Chen Liang would like to thank her supervisor, Prof. Junhong Dong, for her constant encouragement and guidance. Prof. Junhong Dong has walked the author through all the stages of the writing of this paper. The author would like to express her deep gratitude and lofty respect to Professor Dong.

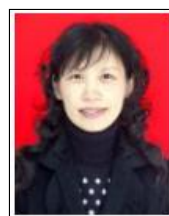
REFERENCES

- [1] L. Qi, "Study on collocation transfer of vocabulary in CLEC," *Journal of Chuzhou University*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 36-42, 2011.
- [2] H. B. Xing, "Collocation knowledge and second language vocabulary acquisition," *Application of Language and Character*, vol. 4, 117-126, 2013.
- [3] Y. C. Deng and D. F. Xiao, "A study on collocation types of English hypothetic verbs for Chinese college students," *Foreign Languages and Foreign Language Teaching*, vol. 7, pp. 7-10, 2005.
- [4] X. L. Gong, "A corpus-based study on the collocation of English hypothetic verbs by Chinese students," Shandong University, 2008.
- [5] M. Stubbs, *Words and Phrases: Corpus Studies of Lexical Semantics*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.
- [6] P. Bayona, "S. Jarvis and A. Pavlenko, *Crosslinguistic Influence in Language and Cognition*, New York/London: Routledge. pp. xviii + 287, 2008," *Canadian Journal of Linguistics*, vol. 54, no. 1, pp. 169-172, 2009.
- [7] C. Y. Wang, "A corpus-based approach to synonyms differentiation for Chinese Learners," *Foreign Language and Foreign Language Teaching*, vol. 6, pp. 27-31, 2009.
- [8] J. Bahns, and M. Eidaw, "Should we teach EFL students collocations?" in *System*, vol. 21, no. 1, Pergamon Press, 1993.
- [9] J. Bahns, "Lexical collocations: A contrastive view," *ELT Journal*, vol. 47, no. 1, Oxford University Press, 1993.
- [10] P. Zhang and H. X. Wang, "An overview of Chinese second language vocabulary acquisition," *Journal of PLA Foreign Languages Institute*, vol. 4, pp. 44-106, 2006.
- [11] S. Granger, "Prefabricated patterns in advanced EFL writing: Collocations and formulae," in *Phraseology, Theory, Analysis, and Applications*, A. P. Cowie, Eds. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 145-60, 1998.

Copyright © 2022 by the authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)).



Chen Liang is 23 years old. She got her BA in English in Chang'an University in 2019. She is currently undertaking her master's degree in Northwestern Polytechnical University. Her research interests include psycholinguistics and cognitive linguistics. She has published two papers in international journals.



Junhong Dong was born in Xi'an, China. She obtained the BA in English language and literature in Wuhan University, Wuhan, China in 1988 and she got the MA in foreign linguistics and applied linguistics in Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an, China in 2001. From 2006 to 2007, Junhong Dong was supported to study in Britain as a visiting scholar. Her research direction is cognitive linguistics.

She is a professor in School of Foreign Studies in Northwestern Polytechnical University. She has published more than 30 academic papers as first author.