Original Paper

Corpus-Based Study of Amplifiers in Academic Writing of Chinese EFL Learners

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Abstract

This research aims to analyse the use of amplifiers in academic writing of Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners with a comparison to that of native speakers. By analysing the frequency and features of amplifiers in Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays and Ten-thousand English Compositions of Chinese Learners, it is noticeable that Chinese EFL learners' limited variety of vocabulary might lead to the high frequency of certain amplifiers. Pedagogically, raising learners' awareness on the inappropriate use of amplifiers in academic writing is a necessity. The instruction on using intensifying adverbs authentically should be emphasized in Chinese EFL classes.

Keywords

Amplifier, intensifying adverb, English teaching, Corpus-based study

1. Introduction

With the increasing availability of digital corpora, researchers started to focus on the language use in written or spoken contexts and make a comparison between the usage of L2 learners and that of native speakers. The aim of such contrastive analysis is to detect the differences and predict the difficulties or errors of L2 learners. (Aijmer & Lewis, 2017). With this kind of approach, the usage of a word is often analysed in relation to semantics, pragmatics or discourse in the research of second language teaching. This essay intends to analyse the use of amplifiers in academic writing of Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners compared with that of native speakers. With this aim, two corpora are selected for analysis which are The Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS) and Ten-thousand English Compositions of Chinese Learners (TECCL). The major focus of the analysis is the frequency and features of amplifiers used by Chinese EFL learners and native speakers. The research purpose is considered to come up with implications for future EFL teaching, particularly the

teaching of intensifying adverbs—amplifiers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Amplifiers in English

An adverb can be used to modify adjectives and verbs by expressing the manner, degree, place and time (Kerl, 1861). Among various classifications of adverbs, adverbs of degree are used to show 'how much, to what extent, or in what degree' (Kerl, 1861, p. 31). Linguists define intensifier as: 'an adverbial that scales another element upwards or downwards in degrees of intensity', which is categorised as the subcategory of subjuncts (Aarts, 2014). In the more recent paper, scholars restrict the term "intensifier" as only scaling upwards in the degree of intensity in a strict sense (Méndez-Naya, 2003). As an umbrella term of "ntensifier", amplifiers are defined as the adverbials such as *fully, completely, absolutely, very*, that tend to "express degrees of increasing intensification upwards from an assumed norm" (Quirk & Crystal, 1985, p. 589). According to their semantic meanings and position on the intensifying scale, amplifiers are often classified into boosters and maximisers (Quirk & Crystal, 1985). Boosters convey the meanings of being upper end of scale (e.g., highly; really); while maximisers mark the extreme upper end of the scale (e.g., extremely; entirely) (Anita & Zrinka, 2014; Kennedy, 2003). In contrast, words such as *kind of, partly and somewhat* which 'scaling the sense of an adjective downward from an assumed norm' are named 'downers'; with an effect of hedging and softening (Kennedy, 2003, p. 469; Anita & Zrinka, 2014).

In respect to the grammatical functions, amplifiers can be used to modify not only adjectives and adverbs, but also clause constituent (Méndez-Naya, 2003). The examples are listed as follows.

(1) He runs *very* fast. (adverbial modifier)

(2) This movie is *extremely* boring. (adjective modifier)

(3) She *fully* understands what they say. (clause constituent modifier)

The first and second example show that some amplifiers rarely modify verbs, but adjectives and adverbs. These adverbs modify the degree of other words; thus, they are also named as "degree markers" (Gelderen, 2002, p. 41).

Apart from the form and semantic meanings, linguists also pay much attention to the pragmatic meanings of amplifiers. In a sense of pragmatics, amplifiers play a critical role in conversations. Amplifiers could result in 'impressing, praising, persuading as well as insulting'; and thus, influence the hearers' reception of the speech (Cocea, 2015, p. 153). McCready and Schwager (2009) give examples of amplifiers used in a spoken context:

Brenda is *fully* going to fly kick me!

(McCready & Schwager, 2009, cited in Sawada, 2017)

The amplifier 'fully' indicates an expressive usage (McCready & Schwager, 2009). It shows that the speakers is confident in the proposition he or she makes. Many scholars has further analysed the pragmatic use of amplifiers. For example, Beltrama (2014) found that when amplifiers in English like

fully modified a proposition, they conveyed meanings of a sentimental level, which was similar to Japanese word *chotto*.

2.2 Empirical Studies on Amplifiers

Linguists show a great interest in the use of amplifiers in modern as well as old languages. Researchers like Méndez-Naya (2003) study the process of grammaticalization with the case of an intensifying adverb *swīþe* of Old English period from a diachronic perspective. Moreover, Calle-Martín (2014) also conducted a review on the history of the word "wundor", an intensifier in Old English. Synchronically, many studies have been conducted to analyse the use of amplifiers in English compared with other languages like Japanese, German, Croatian and Romanian (Sawada, 2017; Anita & Zrinka, 2014; Cocea, 2015). In most studies of amplifiers used in modern English, a major theme is the comparison of the features of amplifier usage among native speakers and language learners. In this section, empirical studies on amplifiers used by native speakers and learners will be reviewed respectively.

2.1 Native use of Amplifiers

The usage of amplifiers in informal spoken contexts has been frequently studied based on corpora of conversations in TV series or in real lives. Willstedt (2014) examined the frequency of amplifiers used in Swedish English and American soap opera, proving that amplifiers are use more frequently. The most frequently used amplifiers are *wholly, altogether and thoroughly*; while in American soap opera, words like *perfectly and exclusively* show a higher frequency (Willstedt, 2014). Additionally, Willstedt (2014) also claimed that the word choice of amplifiers showed a gender distinction. Likewise, different styles of using amplifiers are also presented in the study of Yaguchi et al. (2010), showing that women tend to use "really" frequently in the predicative position compared with males. Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) argued that the frequency of particular intensifiers like *very, really, so* are likely to change during different time period based on the corpus of American TV series Friends. They also mentioned that adverbs can be delexicalized to be used as amplifiers which means the original meanings are gradually lost (Tagliamonte & Roberts, 2005). This claim is in accordance with the study of Anita and Zrinka (2014) that words like *awfully terribly, and pretty* lost semantic meanings when serve as amplifiers.

The preferred usage of amplifiers varies according to different English-speaking countries in the world. In a research conducted by Calude (2017), it is said that the quantifier *heaps* has an extension to an intensifying use in New Zealand English; furthermore, it shows that *heaps* is commonly used in spoken context and favoured by young people.

Kennedy (2003) carried out a corpus-based study on the British use of amplifiers. The study examines how amplifiers collocate with other words based on British Native Corpus. The result shows that the frequency of common amplifiers results from the learning of particular collocations. Therefore, Kennedy (2003) also provides implications for English language teaching that collocations should have be more explicitly instructed.

2.2 Learner Use of Amplifiers

Some researchers would like to focus on the comparative analysis of learner corpus of different L1 backgrounds because it is likely to reflect the difference teaching focus and influences by learners' L1. Hong and Cao (2014) carried out an analysis of interactional metadiscourse in young learners' writing based on the corpus of Chinese, Polish and Spanish EFL learners. Hong and Cao (2014) identified that Spanish learners tend to use fewer boosters compared to two other groups. Furthermore, they found that the intergroup homogeneity lay in the use of boosters of the three L1 backgrounds, i.e., a narrow range of amplifiers (e.g., very, really, so) (Hong & Cao, 2014). This is consistent with the results of Sánchez-Tornel (2014) in which adverb use and language proficiency in young learners' writing is analysed. Sánchez-Tornel (2014) argued that learners' lexical repertoire of adverbs of degree will be enlarged because of getting exposed to more complex features of L2.

Studies also show a tendency of learners overusing amplifiers in formal writing. For example, Lee and Na (2017) argued that Korean EFL learners were likely to overuse boosters compared with native speakers and misuse amplifiers in semantic cases. On the contrary, Soyoung (2006) claimed that Korean EFL learners underuse amplifiers in writing than the native speakers since they were not able to produce more sophisticated amplifiers because of their limited amplifier vocabulary. Moreover, Soyoung (2006) analysed the reasons for misusing colloquial amplifiers that learners could not distinguish different language register. Consistent with Soyoung (2006), Recski (2004) argued that the reason for overusing amplifiers might be also connected to the colloquial style and exaggerated tone are misused in formal academic writing. Influenced by L1 transfer, learners appear to use amplifiers directly translated from L1. For example, a research of conducted by Yaoyu and Lei (2011) showed that Chinese EFL learners use *totally* much more frequently than native speakers which might result from transfer from L1. Moreover, they believed that another reason of overusing amplifiers was because learners tended to "upgrade and focus the meaning of the adjectives for conscious effect" (Yaoyu & Lei, 2011). As a result, Chinese EFL learners frequently collocate *very* with adjectives such *poor, clear, strong,* etc. (Yaoyu & Lei, 2011). In relate to academic writing style, the research of Lorenz (1999) on adjective intensification in learner argumentative writing showed that learners' overuse of intensification might lead to readers' frustration and might be marked as "non-native style" (Lorenz, 1999).

3. Research Questions and Methods

3.1 Research Purpose and Research Questions

Based on previous studies, learners' overuse and misuse of amplifiers are commonly reported in learner corpus-based studies, whereas more studies need to be done for examining the features of amplifiers used by learners and native speakers as well as the effective teaching methods. Therefore, to fill these gaps, this research aims to examine the frequency and features of amplifiers used by Chinese EFL learners and native speakers in academic writing. Moreover, it will reflect on Chinese EFL teaching and

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provide implications for amplifier instructions. The research questions are as follows:

(1) What is the overall frequency of the amplifiers used by Chinese EFL learners and native speakers in academic writing?

(2) What amplifier-adjective or amplifier-verb collocations are frequently used by Chinese EFL students compared to NS speakers in academic writing?

3.2 Methods

This study adopts corpus-based data collection. Two corpora will be analysed, namely, the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS) and the Ten-thousand English Compositions of Chinese Learners (TECCL). Both quantitative and qualitative analysis will be applied to this study.

3.2.1 Corpus Data

The TECCL corpus contains approximately 10,000 writing samples of Chinese EFL learners, totalling 1,817,335 words (Xue, 2015). The writing samples are collected from online scoring and testing system. The corpus provides a large amount of learners' writing of a wide range of topics, approximately over 1,000 different topics. The majority of the writers are undergraduates, with the rest ranging from elementary school to postgraduate students. Thus, longitudinal research on amplifier development might be feasible (Li & Liu, 2017). Additionally, the TECCL corpus include texts written in class and in testing context finished in a limited time as well as texts written after class.

The LOCNESS corpus contains 149,574 words of argumentative essays written by American university students and 18,826 words of literary-mixed essays written by American university students. The rest essays include some timed essays which are completed in a test such as A-level test. The word number is 324,304 in total. Similar to the TECCL corpus, the LOCNESS corpus has a collection of various topics. The sample of the two corpora are presented in Appendix.

3.2.2 Data Analysis Procedure

The tool for analysis is a software for corpus linguistic research named AntConc (3.5.8). It involves the function of getting concordance, collocates and word list. Yaoyu and Lei (2011) chose to analyse 24 amplifiers which were said to be most frequently-used in British Native Corpus. However, due to the difference of native speakers' and learners' vocabulary, some words might be unfamiliar to the learners, so they may underuse these words and the results may get influenced. In this research, a total of 25 amplifiers were selected for analysis according to their occurrence in the word list sort by high frequency to low frequency. The 25 amplifiers are classified into boosters and maximisers according to the taxonomy of Quirk and Crystal (1985).

Boosters: *really, deeply, clearly, seriously, greatly, hardly, highly strongly, definitely, surely, ndoubtedly, badly, exceedingly, particularly, severely, largely, intensely,*

Maximisers: *extremely, completely, totally, absolutely, fully, perfectly, entirely, thoroughly*

In the following procedure, the tokens of these words are counted by AntConc. Concordance was checked to remove any irrelevant usage from the total tokens. For example, *strongly* occurred in the text 'my heart beats *strongly*' which is not related to the intensifying function. Moreover, some

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misspellings which may result from typos or spelling errors were also counted for the word tokens. This is because that word meanings are the major focus of this study instead of word forms. Next, the same procedure was applied in the LOCNESS corpus to compare the word tokens. The comparison of word frequency in the two corpora is conducted by log likelihood test through which the overuse and underuse of certain words can be identified (Rayson, 2008).

In the final process, a qualitative textual analysis was used to examine the features of the amplifier usage in the two corpora. The analysis process focused on the words modified by the 25 amplifiers, identifying the parts of speech they belonged to. Error analysis was also adopted to examine the misuse of the amplifiers in learner corpus (Hendrickson, 1981).

4. Results

In the counting process of the overall frequency of amplifiers, the total frequency of the 25 selected amplifiers is counted in the two corpora. The frequency of amplifiers occur in the LOCNESS corpus is 399, with a total word number of 204325 (Table 1). The frequency in the TECCL corpus is 3732, with a total number of 1817743. Due to the different size of the two corpora, a normalised frequency is calculated (the number of tokens per thousand words). The frequency of amplifiers used in the LOCNESS is 1.953 per thousand words; 2.053 in the TECCL. Therefore, it is obvious that a higher frequency of amplifiers can be identified in the academic writing of Chinese EFL learners than that of native speakers.

Table 1. Amplifiers in the Two Corpora

	LOCNESS corpus	TECCL corpus
Amplifiers	399	3732
Total word tokens	204325	1817743
Frequency per 1,000 words	1.95277132	2.053095515

The results are in accordance to Huang (2007) and Yaoyu and Lei (2011). They all found that Chinese EFL learners tended to frequently use amplifiers in their writings. To further support this finding, a log likelihood was calculated.

Table 2. Log Likelihood Calculator Results

Item	O1	%1	O2	%2	LL	%DIFF	Bayes	ELL	RRisk	LogRatio	OddsRatio
Word	399	1.95	3732	0.21 +	1050.53	851.02	1036.11	0.00015	9.51	3.25	9.68

According to (Rayson, 2008), O1 was observed frequency in the LOCNESS Corpus and O2 was observed frequency in the TECCL Corpus. In Table 2, the "+" indicates the overuse in TECCL Corpus

relative to LOCNESS Corpus. Moreover, no underuse was found in the two corpora.

Although the results show a higher frequency and overuse of amplifiers in Chinese EFL learners' writing, no significant difference is found in the frequency in the two corpora (1.953 versus. 2.053). However, in the previous studies, many scholars found that the learners' frequency of amplifiers was massively higher than native speakers (Recski, 2004; Lorenz, 1999). The inconsistence may result from the English proficiency of the learners. Many studies have restricted the proficiency of the learners to a certain level whereas the learner corpus in this study is consisted of learners of random levels. In this sense, the data can be more representative. The frequency of boosters and maximisers will be analysed respectively in the following sections.

4.1 Boosters

From Table 3, it can be clearly identified that the frequency of boosters in the TECLL are higher than LOCNESS. The most frequent boosters found in the TECLL are *really, deeply, clearly, seriously, greatly*. Booster like *really, clearly, particularly, greatly, highly* are mostly used in LOCNESS. Comparing the two groups of words, *deeply* and *seriously* tend to be more frequently used by the learners. For an in-depth analysis, a textual analysis will be applied to the usage of *seriously*.

Table 3. Boosters in TECLL and LOCNESS

	LOCNESS			TECLL		
	count	tokens	per 1000	count	tokens	per 1000
really	107	204325	0.523676	1237	1817743	0.680514
extremely	16	204325	0.078307	370	1817743	0.203549
deeply	2	204325	0.009788	257	1817743	0.141384
clearly	35	204325	0.171296	209	1817743	0.114978
seriously	14	204325	0.068518	190	1817743	0.104525
greatly	27	204325	0.132142	156	1817743	0.085821
TOTAL	294	204325	1.438884131	2768	1817743	1.52276752

The most common collocations of seriously shown in Chinese EFL writing is *seriously affect* in order to show the seriousness of a negative situation and the large possibility of suffering from the consequences. The subjects of *seriously affect* are *water pollution, stress, playing smartphone,* etc. As for native speakers' usage, *seriously* is only collocated once with *affect*, with the subjects being *membership of the single market*. Thus, Chinese EFL learners tend to use *seriously affect* to modify a wide range of things regardless of the necessity than native speakers. As a result, the amplifier *seriously* is overused.

4.2 Maximisers

The maximisers occurred most frequently are *extremely, completely, totally, absolutely, fully.*

Table 4. Most Frequent Maximisers in TECLL and LOCNESS

	LOCNESS			TECLL		
	count	tokens	per 1000 words	count	tokens	per 1000 words
extremely	16	204325	0.078307	370	1817743	0.203549
completely	17	204325	0.083201	151	1817743	0.08307
totally	21	204325	0.102777	124	1817743	0.068216
absolutely	7	204325	0.034259	115	1817743	0.063265
fully	26	204325	0.127248	110	1817743	0.060515
TOTAL	105	204325	0.51388719	964	1817743	0.530327995

The five words listed in Table 4 are the most common maximisers overused by learners. As Greenbaum (1970) suggested that 'maximisers may denote the highest degree or extent'; for example, *fully* can be paraphrased as 'to a full extent' (p.30). In TECLL corpus, *fully* is identified to be used in formulaic language like *fully convinced that* or *fully aware of; whereas* in LOCNESS corpus, *fully* modifies verbs like *comprehend, integrate, develop* and less attitudinal usage is found. The semantic meanings of such collocations tend to be attitudinal and express the speakers' conviction the truth (Greenbaum, 1970). In this sense, learners might misuse this amplifier:

It is *fully* wise for us to use natural resources.

Meanwhile, considering mom must be *fully* tired…

The writers are trying to intensify the adjectives they use because they think these adjectives are weak for expressing a strong feeling. However, the collocation *fully wise* is unlikely to be paraphrased into *wise to a full extent* and so does *fully tired*. Thus, *fully* is misused and unnecessarily used in this context.

In the experiment conducted by Greenbaum (1970), *completely* tends to have a negative implication, denoting failure or disapproval. Similarly, Kennedy (2003) found in British National Corpus that *completely* was connected with abolition. In TECLL corpus, *completely* is used more neutral, collocating with adjectives like *excited, big, competent, perfect,* etc. Thus, Chinese EFL learners are unlikely to use *completely* in a native-like style in their academic writing.

5. Discussion

The results show a significant difference of amplifier usage between Chinese EFL learners and native speakers. In general, the overall frequency of amplifiers used by Chinese EFL learners and native speakers in academic writing is higher than that of native speakers. The overuse and misuse of

amplifiers has been examined further by calculating log likelihood and textual analysis respectively. The findings of this study are consistent with many previous studies on EFL learners' amplifier usage of Yaoyu and Lei (2011) as well as Recski (2004). Basically, it can be concluded that three reasons might lead to the amplifier overuse of Chinese EFL learners in academic writing and implications will be offered accordingly. Firstly, the insufficient vocabulary may result in overusing amplifiers to compensate for the weak expressions. Secondly, the fixed patterns of academic writing devices like *I am fully convinced that*…might also increase the frequency of amplifiers. Thirdly, the faultiness in the knowledge of amplifiers may mislead the learners in misusing or overusing the amplifiers.

These findings provide a wide range of implications for second language teaching pedagogy. Moreover, learners' limited variety of vocabulary lead to the high frequency of certain amplifiers (e.g., *really*) which often occurs in spoken discourse (Recski, 2004; Lorenz, 1999). Therefore, learners' awareness needs to be raised that a formal style should be adopted in writing, especially academic essays. As Kennedy (2003) suggested, both explicit and implicit instructions should be implemented in second language teaching classrooms. The explicit learning of amplifiers contains a formal way of teaching the form, meaning and usage of intensifying adverbs. In Chinese EFL learning context, the forms of intensifying adverbs might have been clearly instructed whereas the functional exponents might not be sufficiently taught. Furthermore, Harmer (2007) argued that the knowledge of collocation is an "important part of knowing a word" (p.75). Thus, it is necessary to raise learners' awareness of the words in collocations and lexical chunks to get a clear understanding of the mostly accepted usage (Harmer, 2007). Nevertheless, the explicit instructions should not lead to memorise fixed collocations and expressions. To increase the variety of academic vocabulary, the implicit learning process is also necessary which involves informal learning and unconscious learning. Related to second language teaching, input-based teaching can be adopted to raise students' awareness of the usage of certain words. Krashen (2012) claimed many people acquired a great deal of academic vocabulary without instructions and real reading might help to enlarge academic vocabulary. Through being exposed to a large amount of natural academic writing, learners might increase the variety of their academic language.

6. Conclusion

This study has analysed the frequency and features of amplifiers used by Chinese EFL learners and native speakers based on the LOCNESS corpus and the TECLL corpus. Chinese EFL learners show a higher frequency of using amplifiers in academic writing than that of native speakers. Despite the fact that the data in a corpus-based study might be limited, this study has offered many new perspectives of examining learner's language use. The findings have provided implications on both explicit and implicit instructions on amplifiers should be implemented in Chinese EFL classrooms. Furthermore, it should be noticed for the second language teachers that students' awareness of discourse register should be raised.

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