A Corpus Study of English Verbs in Chinese EFL Learners' Academic Writing Abstracts

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Abstract : The correct use of verbs is an important element of high-quality research articles, and thus for Chinese EFL learners, it is significant to master characteristics of verbs and to precisely use verbs. However, some researches have shown that there are differences in using verbs between learners and native speakers and learners have difficulty in using English verbs. This corpus-based quantitative research can enhance learners' knowledge of English verbs and promote the quality of research article abstracts even of the whole academic writing. The aim of this study is to find the differences between learners' and native speakers' use of verbs and to study the factors that contribute to those differences. To this end, the research question is as follows: What are the differences between most frequently used verbs by learners and those by native speakers? The research question is answered through a study that uses corpus-based data-driven approach to analyze the verbs used by learners in their abstract writings in terms of collocation, colligation and semantic prosody. The results show that: (1) EFL learners obviously overused 'be, can, find, make' and underused 'investigate, examine, may'. As to modal verbs, learners obviously overused 'can' while underused 'may'. (2) Learners obviously overused 'we find + object clauses' while underused 'nouns (results, findings, data) + suggest/indicate/reveal + object clauses' when expressing research results. (3) Learners tended to transfer the collocation, colligation and semantic prosody of shǐ and zuò to make. (4) Learners obviously overused 'BE+V-ed' and used BE as the main verb. They also obviously overused the basic forms of BE such as be, is, are, while obviously underused its inflections (was, were). These results manifested learners' lack of accuracy and idiomatic property in verb usage. Due to the influence of the concept transfer of Chinese, the verbs in learners' abstracts showed obvious transfer of mother language. In addition, learners have not fully mastered the use of verbs, avoiding using complex colligations to prevent errors. Based on these findings, the present study has implications for English teaching, seeking to have implications for English academic abstract writing in China. Further research could be undertaken to study the use of verbs in the whole dissertation to find out whether the characteristic of the verbs in abstracts can apply in the whole dissertation or not.

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