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Learning Prepositions: A Corpus-based Study in Taiwan EFL Contexts

Abstract

Language transfer (cf. Gass and Selinker 1983; Kellerman and Perdue 1992) is an issue widely discussed in second language acquisition. Preposition is one of the areas in which cases of language transfer can be found. The examples in (1) show some of the incorrect uses of *to* by Taiwanese undergraduate learners of English.

(1) (a) **I really <u>appreciate</u> **to** my father.*
   (b) **...they can call to schools, and <u>let</u> schools **to** check whether their children are safe or not.*
   (c) **…and if they have accidents, the school will <u>announce</u> their parents.*

In these examples, learners either add *to* when unnecessary (both (1a) and (1b)) or omit *to* when needed (1c).[1] Discussion of syntax-semantics errors in Mandarin can also be found in Shan and Yuan (2007), and Juffs (1996a, b, 1998).

When Taiwanese learn Czech, they encounter similar problems. For instance, they will produce errors like those in (2a) and (3a-c) in which the particles before the direct objects are often misused.

(2) (a) **Čekám kamarádku.*

   (b) *Čekám **na** kamarádku.*

   "I am waiting for a friend."

(3) (a) **Těším víkend.*

   (b) **Těším se víkend.*

   (c) **Těším na víkend.*

   (d) *Těším **se na** víkend.*

"I am looking forward to the weekend"

(Jana Śimon, personal communication)

(4) (a) **И потом мы обсужд али о фильме.

   I potom my obsujdali **o** filme.

   "And then we discussed <u>about</u> the movie."

(b) И потом мы обсуждали фильм.

   I potom my obsujdali film.

   "And then we discussed <u>about</u> the movie."

(Elizaveta Luzeva, personal communication)

Taiwanese learners of Russian may also be confused with the use of particles after the verb. They may produce (4a) instead of (4b). Since this phenomenon can be observed cross-linguistically, the topic is worth researching when learner corpora of more languages become available. This paper will first focus on the English preposition *to*.

In order to observe how Taiwanese EFL learners use the preposition *to* in English, 40 essays were collected from undergraduate (sophomore) learners of English in National Chengchi University, Taiwan. The purpose is to observe the collocational patterns of *to* and the possible errors occurring due to language transfer. A corpus was built based on this purpose. Both Wordsmith (Scott 1999) and AntConc (Anthony 2005) tools were used for the analyses discussed herein. These 40 essays amount to 28,252 tokens with 3,982 word types. For the

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[1] Such phenomenon is due to their Mandarin-based interpretation of the verbs preceding the preposition (undelined). In (1a), the Mandarin equivalent meaning of *appreciate* (*gan3ji1*) takes a preposition (*dui4*) and this results in the addition of *to*. In (1b), the learner adds *to* because *let* is itself a preposition in Mandarin (*rang4*) and learners include *to* as one of its English equivalents. As for (1c), the learner is confused between the verbs *announce* and *inform* as both can be translated with an equivalent form in Mandarin (*tung1zhi1*).

preposition *to*, 914 instances were found. Among these instances, the most frequently appearing collocates on the immediate left (L1) and right (R1) are given in Table 1. For each word, their total occurrences in the corpus are given (e.g., 32 for *buy*). From these total instances, the frequency with which this word appears at L1 or R1 position is also given (e.g., 22 from 32 instances, i.e., 68.75%, of *buy* appear after *to*). Only a small number (shaded in Table 1) has percentages lower than 50, indicating that most of the combinations in Table 1 are frequently used by the learners.

Table 1: Collocates on the First Left (L1) and First Right (R1) of the Keyword *to*

WORD	TOTAL	L1	%	WORD	TOTAL	R1	%
have	111	43	38.74	*buy*	32	22	68.75
want	46	39	84.78	*make*	26	18	69.23
need	34	16	47.06	*face*	40	17	42.50
going	18	13	72.22	*get*	35	17	48.57
due	14	13	92.86	*have*	111	15	13.51
addition	17	11	64.71	*take*	21	11	52.38
used	16	11	68.75	*see*	16	11	68.75
according	11	11	100.00	*help*	16	10	62.50
start	12	8	66.67	*find*	16	9	56.25
choose	16	7	43.75	*pay*	13	9	69.23

Most of the combinations in Table 1 are used correctly by our learners. Learners' errors only occur with words appearing in lower frequency (not in Table 1). Examples in the corpus are such as *become to* (as in *We become to leave home and make our own social life*) and *enter to* (as in *to enter to college*). It is possible that learners sometimes try to avoid using structures they are unsure about and that this is reflected through the examination of specific linguistic forms in corpora.

This study, though carried out as a pilot study, will be expanded when larger amount of corpora data are collected. Cross-linguistic comparisons are also possible when corpora data for other languages become available. This study is advantaged in its use of corpora data for error analyses. Through using a small sample of data, we show that frequency in corpora can be used to infer cognitive mechanisms of certain errors which EFL learners tend to commit. Comparisons to native corpora are also possible in the future through using native and non-native corpora.

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