

A Corpus-based Study of Present Tense Distribution in Chinese Students' English Writings

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ABSTRACT: In this paper the use of present tenses in Chinese students' writings in CLEC is compared with that of their counterparts in BAWE. First the overall distribution of all present tenses in the two corpora is described respectively; then the distribution feature of each tense is summarized; at last the causes for the distribution features in Chinese students' writings are analyzed. The major findings are: in Chinese students' writings, simple present tense and present progressive tense are overused, while present perfect tense and present perfect progressive tense are underused. Some pedagogical implications based on the research findings are discussed at the end of the paper.

KEYWORD: English writing; Present tense; Distribution; Corpus

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 *Definition of Tense and Aspect*

Temporality has long been viewed as an essential concept in English that poses many acquisition difficulties for both ESL and EFL learners. This area has not only aroused extensive linguistic analysis, but also attracted a number of empirical studies and generated many theoretical explanations, either focusing on one particular tense or the influence of particular aspects on students' use of tense. In this paper a contrastive analysis of Chinese students' use of present tenses and that of the native speakers' will be provided based on corpus.

Though tense has been used for more than two thousand years, its definition remains a controversy. Among all of the definitions, Comrie's version is widely acknowledged in the field of SLA tense study, which defines tense as "the grammatical expression of location in time" (Comrie, 1985).

Aspect is a grammatical category that deals with how the event described by a verb is viewed, such as whether it is progressive, habitual, repeated, momentary, and so forth (Richards, 1992). Aspect is not concerned with relating the time of the situation to other time-point, but rather with the internal temporal constituency of one situation.

1.2 *Differences between Chinese and English Tense Systems*

Current cognitive studies show that there are two

different cognition styles of time. The first one is: the position of the observer is somewhere fixed beside time, taking time as an independently flowing entity. The second is: the observer's position is not fixed and the observer travels with the time mentioned in his imagination. English mainly belongs to the first type, while the notion of time in Chinese is mainly the latter type. To be specific, firstly, English uses grammatical means to mark both tense and aspect, whereas Chinese does not employ any grammatical means, but uses lexical and contextual means to express temporal location. Chinese does not change verb forms to indicate tense as English ordinarily does. The second difference lies in how the reference time is established in expressing temporal relations. English has a fixed deictic center, the speech time, in establishing reference time in expressing events, whereas the reference time in Chinese is established in relation to of another event, that is, the reference time provided is defined by context or figured out from the context.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 *Tenses Investigated in This Research*

There have been lots of arguments and debates as for the number of the English tenses. The bi-tense system (present tense and past tense) is advocated by Palmer, Quirk and Zhang Zhenbang. In the multi-tense group, there are the "three-tense system" by Dionysius Thrax (1967), the "six-tense system" by

George O. Curme (1931), and the “eight-tense system” by Geoffrey N. Leech (1987). Most Chinese students are exposed to English tense system in senior high school, and the most of the high school English textbooks as well as grammar books adopt the sixteen-tense system proposed by Bo Bing and Zhang Daozhen with which Chinese students are more familiar. So, the bi-tense view is adopted in this thesis. Since the most frequently used tenses both for native speakers and inter-language learners are present tenses, in this study only the learners’ use of present tenses is analyzed, including simple present tense, present progressive tense, present perfect tense and present perfect progressive tense.

2.2 Corpora Investigated in This Research

The learner corpus used in this study is St3 of CLEC which contains essays written by Chinese university students of CET-4 level(169, 386 tokens), while the contrastive corpus is the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus(2004-2007), resulting from the research project An Investigation of Genres of Assessed Writing in British Higher Education, which consists of academic writings of both undergraduates and postgraduates from the universities of Warwick, Reading and Oxford Brookes. Considering the features of the topics in CET-4 writings, only the sub-corpus of undergraduates’ written production on Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences (368, 303 tokens) is taken as the reference corpus.

2.3 The Conduct of a Questionnaire

At the end of this research, a questionnaire was designed to tentatively probe into the students’ psychological or cognitive basis for tense use, which is supposed to provide further explanation for the potential causes leading to tense distribution features in Chinese students’ compositions. A total number of 202 students were randomly chosen to conduct the questionnaire from a university in Liaoning province. Altogether 197 valid answer sheets were collected. In the questionnaire, there are altogether 15 questions given ranging from the students’ attitude towards (question 1 to question 3) and knowledge about (question 4 to question 6) English tense, the possibility (question 7 to question 10) of their first language transfer, the strategy they employ in their writing (question 11 to question 13) to the writing instruction that is given in a writing class (question 14 to question 15).

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Distribution of Tenses in BAWE

In this research, regular expressions are first written to extract each type of tense via Antconc3.2. The distribution of each tense type in BAWE is listed in the following table:

Table 1. Distribution of present tenses in BAWE

Tense Type	Frequency
Simple present	10757
Present progressive	258
Present perfect	1353
Present perfect progressive	32

It can be found out from Table 1 that the frequency of simple present tense which is 10757 significantly exceeds all other tenses. Among all the compound tenses, present perfect tense is most frequently resorted to, followed by present progressive tense. While present perfect progressive tense is least used.

3.2 Distribution of Tenses in CLEC

The distribution of each tense type in CLEC is listed in the following table:

Table 2. Distribution of present tenses in CLEC

Tense Type	Frequency
Simple present	11632
Present progressive	522
Present perfect	613
Present perfect progressive	20

It can be seen from Table 2 that in CLEC the frequency of simple present tense also ranks as the top one. And this is the same with the situation in BAWE. And simple present tense is used almost 19 times as much as present perfect time, which ranks as the second most frequently used tense. Then follows present progressive tense. Among all the present tenses in CLEC, present perfect progressive tense is least used, which coincides with what happens in BAWE.

3.3 Comparison of Tense Distribution in BAWE and CLEC

A Log-likelihood test was conducted via the Log-likelihood Ratio Calculator to see if there is a significant difference between the frequency of each tense form in BAWE and in CLEC:

Table 3. Log likelihood ratio test of the distribution of each tense

Tense type	Frequency in BAWE	Frequency in CLEC	Loglikelihood	Asymp. Sig
Simple present	10757	11632	23.73	0.000-
Present Progressive	258	522	112.73	0.000-
Present perfect	1353	613	89.27	0.000+
Present perfect progressive	32	20	0.20	0.654+

3.3.1 Simple Present Tense

As can be seen from the output of the Log-likelihood Ratio Calculator, the values under “Asymp.Sig” of simple present tense is 0.000(<0.05), which indicates that between BAWE and CLEC, significant difference exist in the frequency of simple present tense. And the “-” in the last column of the table signifies that the frequency of the tense form in CLEC over-numbers that of BAWE. So even though simple present tense is favored by both native speakers and Chinese inter-language learners, Chinese students still resort too excessively to it compared with native students.

3.3.2 Present Progressive Tense

The “Sig” value of 0.000(<0.05) together with the “-” mark indicates that the frequency of present progressive tense in CLEC is significantly higher, which implies that among all the present tense forms, Chinese students show a clear preference to it. And previous studies show that it is not the same for native speakers. In 1994, Swale found that the progressive aspect is hardly ever found in written academic genre (Swale, 1994), which is further confirmed by Hunston “Progressive tenses are common in conversational and spoken discourse, however, they appear very rare in academic prose”. (Hunston, 2002). Due to their associations with casual spoken register, the usage of progressive verbs makes an academic writing look somewhat conversational and casual. The causes for the overuse of present progressive tense in Chinese students’ writings might include: first, it is generally taught to Chinese students earlier than other tenses; second, the lack of formal instruction on the differences between written English and spoken English makes room for a strong speech-like tendency in Chinese students’ compositions, which heavily increases the use of progressive tense.

3.3.3 Present Perfect

As can be seen from Table 3, the “Sig” value of present perfect tense, 0.000(<0.05), along with the “+” mark clearly indicate that compared with BAWE, the frequency of present perfect tense in

CLEC is significantly underused. As is known to all, perfect aspect does not concern the ways representing the internal temporal structure of a situation; rather it concerns the present relevance of a past situation (Comrie, 1976). According to previous studies (Fan Changrong & Linhai, 2002) and the writer’s own experience as an English learner and instructor, the present perfect tense is rather difficult for Chinese learners. Because Chinese has a distinct way to express the aspectual meanings compared to English. Chinese uses adverbials to indicate the perfect. However, no inflection of the main verb is requisite when expressing perfective aspect. So Chinese students may consciously or subconsciously try to avoid the use of perfect tense.

3.3.4 Present Perfect Progressive Tense

As to the frequency of present perfect progressive tense, the data in Table 3 do not indicate any significant differences between BAWE and CLEC. At first, this tense is scarcely used in English writing. Even for native speakers in BAWE, it is only used for 32 times. Compared with the high frequency of simple present tense 10757, it may just be negligible. Besides, present perfect progressive tense not only indicates the tense, it also simultaneously involves two kinds of concepts of aspect, namely perfect aspect and progressive aspect. Therefore it is both grammatically and semantically challenging for Chinese learners.

3.4 Causes for Tense Distribution in CLEC

3.4.1 Complexity

Firstly, the distribution feature is a reflection of the complexity of a particular tense. Simple present tense rank as the most frequent one because it is grammatically and semantically easier, and more familiar to Chinese learners. Other tenses are less used, because they are more “marked”, requiring a more complicated process to be learned and applied, such as present perfect progressive tense.

Secondly, the underuse of certain tenses might be attributed to the students’ strategic avoidance to them. Kleinmann(1977) interpreted avoidance as a strategy that non-native learners might resort to when they perceive that it is too difficult to produce. According to the questionnaire almost 58% of the students admitted that they usually do not use the tenses that they are not very familiar with because of the fear for mistakes. And this might consequently increase the chance of resorting to a simpler and more familiar tense form.

3.4.2 Misuse

Another cause for the disproportional distribution of tenses is simply the students’ incorrect choice of

tenses, in other words, the misuse of tenses. And the case is especially true when their recounts of experiences and story-telling are mixed with general truths in the essays, substantial confusion in the use of tenses emerges (Michaelis, 1994). While one of the deep-lying factors for the misuse of tenses might be attributed to L1 transfer. For about 63% of the students admitted that when composing they tended to conceive in Chinese then translated their thoughts into English.

3.4.3 Writing Instruction

The last factor is the deficiency in writing instruction. The prevalent employment of simple present tense may also reflect that students tend to write within one time reference in English. The students are always being reminded to make sure that all tenses are consistent. And the doctrinarism in applying this creed inevitably leads to the oversimplification of tense use in writing. This research highlights the necessity of more focused instruction in regularities of tenses and aspects in formal academic writing. However the fact is that the important features of tense use in academic texts are barely mentioned in most writing instructional texts. The questionnaire shows that only a small fraction of the students reported receiving regular writing instruction. The reason for this important omission in writing instruction may lie in the traditional separation between the teaching of writing and the teaching of grammar, and the subsequent integration and connection is thus implicitly relegated to language learners themselves, without instructional guidance or teaching.

4 CONCLUSION

The study shows that significant differences exist between Chinese students' use of present tenses and that of the native speakers resulting from the discrepancy between the two temporality systems. Because Chinese and English belong to different language families and have different language

structures, which are expected to pose difficulties to Chinese learners of English. Besides, factors like learner avoidance, L1 transfer and inadequacy of writing instruction may also be contributing factors.

Specific instruction on English writing, especially the semantic differences between Chinese and English tense systems should be available to all students both in class and off class. Teachers need to provide contextualized examples, so that the students can put what they know about rules into practice and can better interpret different tense-aspect forms.

Change the conventional way of evaluating student's writings. Encourage students to try challenging structures in their writing. And students' endeavors to diversify tense forms in their written production should be highly evaluated and correctly directed.

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