

Besides . . . on the other hand: Using a corpus approach to explore the influence of teaching materials on Chinese students' use of linking adverbials

Maria Leedham*, Guozhi Cai

The Open University, United Kingdom

Abstract

Studies conducted on first and second language student writing in English have pointed to the latter group's high use of features such as informal language, pronouns, and linking adverbials, yet few studies have been conducted on assessed undergraduate writing produced within an English-speaking environment. This paper reports findings from a corpus study of Chinese and British students' writing in UK universities, confirming that a key area of difference is the Chinese students' higher use of particular linking adverbials (e.g., *besides, on the other hand*). We hypothesize that one reason for this higher usage is the influence of secondary school teaching materials in mainland China prior to UK university study and examine a set of model texts from the English paper in the Chinese university entrance test, selected as these texts comprise much of the teaching material in the final year of secondary education. We argue that Chinese students are "primed" (Hoey, 2005) to favour particular linking adverbials, to disregard issues of informality, and to prefer sentence-initial positioning. It is hoped that the reported findings will challenge English language teachers and textbook writers to consider the requirements of writing within the academy.

© 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Chinese students; Teaching materials; Corpus linguistics; Linking adverbials; Intensive reading lesson; National Matriculation Test

Introduction

Students from China are increasingly choosing to study at undergraduate level in English-speaking countries; in the UK, Chinese people now comprise the "largest single overseas student group" with more than 90,000 Chinese students engaged in learning in the UK (The British Council, 2011). However, relatively few large-scale studies have been carried out on the assessed undergraduate writing of this group within English-speaking contexts; instead, the majority of large-scale studies of both Chinese¹ students' writing and non-native speaker (NNS²) student writing in general have been corpus studies concentrating on data sets of *unassessed*, extremely short, argumentative essays collected mainly from

* Corresponding author at: Centre for Language and Communication, Faculty of Education and Language Studies, Level 2, Stuart Hall, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 01908 655312; fax: +44 01908 654111.

E-mail address: maria.leedham@open.ac.uk (M. Leedham).

¹ While it is recognized that the term 'Chinese students' refers to a range of geographical locations, dialects, and ethnic groups, the majority of students in the study are from the PRC. Moreover, the contextual data in the corpus used in this study (BAWE) details only the student's self-proclaimed L1 (for many Chinese students this is simply 'Chinese'), and does not request information on perceived ethnicity. The group termed 'L1 English' or 'British' students gave English as their L1 and undertook all or most of their secondary education in the UK.

² In this paper the terms 'NS' and 'L1 English' are used synonymously, as are 'NNS' and 'L2 English,' though it is recognized that references to 'native' and 'non-native' speakers are contentious (as discussed by, for example, Leung, Harris, & Rampton, 1997; Römer, 2009).

non-UK universities. While these “learner corpus” studies have yielded useful insights into L2 English students’ writing, it is unclear how far the findings can be extended to longer pieces of assessed writing.

A common assertion of learner corpus studies is that NNSs “overuse,” “under-use,” or “mis-use” certain linguistic features such as informal language (e.g., Gilquin & Paquot, 2007; Wen, Ding, & Wang, 2003), pronouns (e.g., Petch-Tyson, 1998; Ringbom, 1998), and linking adverbials (e.g., Bolton, Nelson, & Hung, 2002; Field & Yip, 1992; Paquot, 2010). Other studies have examined Chinese under- and postgraduate writing in English written in PRC (=Chinese) universities and have reached similar conclusions (Hyland, 2008a; Lee & Chen, 2009). However, little research has been carried out on Chinese students’ writing in English within an English-speaking context, and this paper aims to address this gap. The dataset for the study comprises Chinese and British students’ assessed undergraduate writing from four UK universities (extracted from the British Academic Written English [BAWE] corpus; Nesi, 2011). The focus is further narrowed to the area of linking adverbials, since these were revealed through corpus linguistic analysis to be an area of difference between the two student groups. The findings of the study will add more generally to the current body of knowledge on the use of linking adverbials by L2 writers.

The term “linking adverbials” is used to refer to lexical items which have a broadly textual function in binding units of discourse together of clause length or longer. Since they “explicitly signal the connections between passages of text, linking adverbials are important devices for creating textual cohesion, alongside coordinators and subordinators” (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999, p. 875). Definitions of this linguistic phenomenon vary, however, making it difficult to compare findings across studies (for discussion on terminology, see Liu, 2008, pp. 492–493). In this paper, we follow the listing given by Biber et al. (1999, p. 79) and thus exclude coordinators (e.g., *but*, *and*) from consideration.

A further level of categorization of linking adverbials important in the context of this study is that of formality/informality, though it is difficult to definitively categorize a lexical item as “informal” or “formal” since much depends on the text and context in which the item appears. Furthermore, linguists’ approach to formality/informality is bound up with many currently contested sets of binaries which themselves are often mapped against the key presumed binary of “speech” and “writing” (for discussion see Lillis, 2013). Thus we find that the phenomenon of informal written language is usually referred to in the literature as “speech-like” items or as language with an “oral tone” (e.g., Cobb, 2003; Field & Yip, 1992; Gilquin & Paquot, 2007; Granger, 1998; Hinkel, 2002, 2003; Lee & Chen, 2009; Mayor, 2006; Paquot, 2010) and defined in comparison with a NS “norm” (such as the British National Corpus, academic writing section) or according to researchers’ intuitions. Whilst a contested category, however, it is clear that items marked as “informal” in academic writing by teachers, test markers, or researchers are often viewed as salient and problematic; indeed, Thewissen (2012, p. 9) comments on raters in her study paying “more attention to linguistically-marked textual cohesion [e.g., connectives] than to semantic coherence.” Due to the widespread problematizing of informal lexical items within academic writing, we consider it important to attempt to identify linking adverbials which are likely to be viewed in this way. In the identification and analysis in this study we are guided by Biber et al. (1999), by previous studies of similar language, and by our intuitions as teachers of English for Academic Purposes with extensive experience of teaching Chinese students. For example, while the linking adverbial *what’s more* is not explicitly discussed in Biber et al., the use of contracted forms in academic writing generally are described as “strongly associated with the spoken language” (p. 1129) and thus as highly unusual. Moreover, *what’s more* is referred to in other studies as informal (e.g., Lee & Chen, 2009) and is also, in our experience, relatively uncommon in an academic context.

The theoretical discussion of findings from the study is framed within Hoey’s (2005) lexical priming. Central to the theory is Hoey’s claim that for both first language (L1) and second language (L2) users, each and every word is “primed” (p. 8), meaning that we gradually gain knowledge of a word’s collocations, colligations, semantic associations, textual positioning, and other features pertaining to its use:

As a word is acquired through encounters with it in speech and writing, it becomes cumulatively loaded with the contexts and co-texts in which it is encountered, and our knowledge of it includes the fact that it co-occurs with certain other words in certain kinds of context (Hoey, 2005, p. 8).

In this paper we argue that the way in which English language teaching materials, and model texts in particular, are used exerts a huge influence on Chinese students’ writing and their choices of linking adverbials. “Teaching materials” includes both textbooks used for daily classes and reference books (containing lists of lexical items and/or model texts), with the latter being used mainly in the final year of senior high school as part of their preparation for the English section of the PRC university entrance test (the National Matriculation English Test [NMET]). Model examination texts thus lead or prime (Hoey, 2005) students to favour particular linking adverbials, to disregard the informality of some linking adverbials and to prefer sentence-initial positioning.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/364022>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/364022>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)