

On the Error Patterns of Multi-word Verbs Used by Chinese EFL learners

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Abstract: Multi-word verbs are complex and problematic for EFL learners. The present study is corpus-driven and intends to explore the error patterns of multi-word verbs used by Chinese EFL learners. In the process of data collection, a learner corpus (CLEC) was employed to provide raw data in the form of Key Word in Context (KWIC) for each multi-word verb concerned in this study. Several Foxpro programs were compiled to fulfill searching and calculation tasks. Both intralingual and interlingual errors committed by Chinese learners in using multi-word verbs have been identified and analyzed. Finally, it is concluded that the strategies of language transfer, and avoidance are preferred by Chinese learners in the production of multi-word verbs.

Keywords: Multi-word Verb; Error pattern; EFL learners; Corpus.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognized that there are at least 3000 multi-word verbs (hereinafter MWV) in English and native speakers frequently use most of them (Ellis, 1999). However, it is quite challenging for Chinese EFL learners to make use of them correctly and properly. Based on CLEC and self compiled programs, this paper aims to search and classify the errors that Chinese learners tend to make. Some noteworthy MWVs misused by Chinese EFL learners have been found and collected for further analysis (spelling mistakes were not included here), and corresponding strategies that learners tend to adopt have been revealed to some extent.

2. ERROR PATTERNS OF MULTI-WORD VERBS

After automatically extracting the data by the Foxpro program (see Table 2.1 below) and manually correction in the form of KWIC, it is found that error patterns of MWVs produced by Chinese EFL learners could be classified into four erroneous types.

Table 1. Part of Foxpro program.

set defa to e:\corpus
set safe off
clear
clos data
cl=""
crea tabl word (word c(25))
crea tabl clecmove (clc c(150),freq n(5))
clos data
st=filetost('clecdecoding.txt')
st=strtr(st,' ',chr(13))
strtofil(st,'temp.txt')
sele 1
use word
appe from temp.txt sdf
scan for lower(word)='move ' or lower(word)='moves ' or lower(word)='moved ' or lower(word)='moving '
wlength=round(len(upper(alltri(word)))/2,0)
repl word with '*'+upper(alltrim(word))+'*'
skip -5

2.1 Improper choice of particles

Due to the similarity in meaning and form between some particles in MWVs, Chinese EFL learners may be confused confronting them (See the concordance lines extracted from CLEC).

[1] Once you lost it, you'll always think about it, because it makes you GET in trouble.

[2] For a instance, if we drive a car to a place, we should obey the trafic rules, otherwise we may GET in trouble.

Obviously, Chinese students mistook the combination get in (trouble) for the prepositional verb (hereinafter PRV) get into (trouble). As is known, get into trouble is usually used by native speakers as a relatively fixed collocation, and they will not say get in trouble in such situation. Thus, it was the confusion of similar particles of MWVs that led to the improper use.

2.2 Redundant prepositions

Transitive phrasal verbs (hereinafter PVs) may take a direct object and do not need other preposition between the PV and NP. For example, take up as a transitive PV, means, 'to start or do something, especially a job' (Crowther, 1997), and in this PV, the particle up should be directly followed by its object. Nevertheless, in the following sentence collected from CLEC, the preposition in is added redundantly.

[3] Some people consider it is profitable to TAKE up in one job in their lives.

Similar erroneous examples of look up are listed below to illustrate this type of errors committed by Chinese students.

[4] I must LOOK up in dictionary.

[5] For example, during learning English, when you read a new word, you will LOOK up in the dictionary

and know the meaning.

[6] Before every unit, we get a word list containing some new words and the important phrases and expressions appearing in the unit, which we are asked to LOOK up in the dictionary and to be familiar with.

2.3 Improper choice of verbs

Improper use of MWVs due to wrong choice of verbs could be found in CLEC. For example, in the sentence below, the Chinese student misapplied the verb stand, rather than put to express the meaning of ‘to bear or stand something’. As is known, none other but the phrasal prepositional verb (hereinafter PPRV) put up with in English means that.

[7] I can't STAND up with that kind of life.

That case of misuse may be ascribed to one meaning of stand – ‘to bear or put up with’, and consequently the Chinese students mistook it for put up with.

2.4 Improper use of NPs

Notwithstanding that, Chinese students are seemingly familiar with some MWVs like pay for even when they were in middle school, they are actually incapable of using them properly owing to incorrect positions of the NPs (See the examples below).

[8] Someone like change his job because once he have a job, he will think that the job isn't well PAY for him, or he don't do the job very well because his ability is limited, or he like do all kinds of work to improving his ability, so he change his work.

[9] It mainly because that they had good salary which they were PAID for.

[10] They think the background is not good to them or they aren't well PAID for money.

[11] They think their jobs are not fit for them, and they PAID for less money.

[12] Some people like changing their jobs cause many reasons just like, they don't like their current job, the money that they were PAID for is not much better than they would hoping.

On one hand, most Chinese students bear clearly in mind that pay for means sb. spend some money for sth. and thus they feel confident to use it frequently. However, they are not yet really clear about the function of particle for in the sentence. As a result, they put the NPs to incorrect positions as shown above.

Another type of error concerning NPs is illustrated in the following sentences from CLEC:

[13] They always think the job they used to do is not suit for him, or can not express his capacity So they GIVE up it and find a new one.

[14] I often do things slowly than others Example: doing homework, doing housework, even clearing up my school-bad This test paper was done so bad, the important reason was this. try to GIVE up it I must study hard.

Biber (2000) points out that, with transitive PVs the direct object appears between the particle and the verb, which is the normal word order when the object is a pronoun. Whereas, once Chinese EFL

learners forget this conventional rule, improper expressions like examples [13] and [14] would be produced.

Even sometimes no prepositional object, i.e. the NP occurring after the preposition could be found in the sentences containing PRVs. Instead, Chinese learners will choose a verb following the particles and that phenomenon is especially common for PRVs ending with particle *to*. Take *contribute to* as example:

[15] The while country should pay more attention to the project and everyone should CONTRIBUTE to help the children.

[16] Fights broke out less and, so people can CONTRIBUTE to develop their industry and agriculture.

[17] The while country should pay more attention to the project and everyone should contribute to help the children.

[18] Thirdly, the stability of the developing countries may provide the people various comfortable surrounding, which to a certain content CONTRIBUTES to make them live better than ever, and in turn adds their life expectancy.

[19] Secondly, various accomplishment in enviroment-improving research had been achieved, in some degree, CONTRIBUTING to prevent the enviroment from further pollution.

It is obviously that Chinese learners misused the particle *to* as the sign of infinite structure, so they chose a verb to follow *to* and overlook the NP of PRVs.

3. CONCLUSION

On the whole, most of errors committed by Chinese EFL learners are of intralingual errors which might result from faulty or partial learning of the target language. That is, those errors were caused by the influence of one target language item upon another, or due to the complexity of MWVs. For example, Chinese learners might be under the influence of infinite structure of English, and thus overgeneralization occurred, that is, they produced the sentence ‘Fights broke out less and, so people can contribute to develop their industry and agriculture.’

However, some errors are of interlingual, which resulted from language transfer, that is, which were caused by the learner’s native language – Chinese. For example, the incorrect English sentence ‘So they give up it and find a new one’ was produced according to the word order of Chinese (因此他们放弃它, 找到一个新的), instead of the correct English sentence ‘So they give it up and find a new one.’ Furthermore, it is generally agreed that some MWVs, especially idiomatic ones, usually are of rather difficulty for foreign learners like Chinese students, whose native language is free of MWV structures. That might be a sign of interference.

REFERENCES

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