Chinese Learners' Acquisition of English Verbs: A Corpus-driven Approach

LINXIAO WANG
HIE-MYUNG JO
Northern Arizona University, USA

ABSTRACT

Limited research has investigated advanced language learners' acquisition of English verbs. The current study examines and compares the acquisition pattern of English verbs among Chinese second language (L2) learners at both intermediate and advanced levels to answer the following questions: (1) Do L2 learners acquire regular verbs and irregular verbs in different manners? And if so, why? and (2) How does the acquisition of irregular verbs differ by different proficiency levels of Chinese L2 learners? This study established a sub-corpus of the Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC) journal writings by retrieving both intermediate and advanced learners' journal writing in the corpus. It was found that advanced L2 learners committed fewer verb-related errors. However, the acquisition of subject-verb agreement remained problematic even for advanced learners. A closer examination on students' writings indicated that cognition-related factors such as exposure frequency and allocation of attention, instead of linguistic knowledge, seem exert more influence on advanced learners' output and performance. Generally, the subject-verb disagreement of advanced learners appeared in sentences with complex linguistic structures such as embedded clauses. The attempt to accurately express meaning using more complex linguistic structures requires more attention from learners, which might compromise grammatical accuracy including subject-verb agreement.

Keywords: English verbs, advanced L2 learners, attention allocation

When it comes to the acquisition of English verbs, the learners' objective is to "identify the correct verb forms and map them onto their appropriate meanings and functions" (Housen 2002: 78). In general, research indicated that learners had different performances in terms of