

The Acquisition of “N + that” Appositive Clauses of Chinese EFL Learners: A Corpus-Based Study

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Received: August 30, 2022

Accepted: October 7, 2022

Online Published: October 17, 2022

doi:10.5539/ells.v12n4p23

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v12n4p23>

Abstract

The present research used a corpus-based method to investigate Chinese EFL learners' acquisition of “N + that” appositive clauses by comparing data from the TECCL corpus of Chinese English learners and the NESSIE corpus of native English speakers. Quantitatively, the number of Ns (nouns) distributed in “N + that” appositive clauses in the TECCL has no significant difference from that in the NESSIE; but results of Chi-square tests revealed that the Ns that are frequently used by Chinese learners in these clauses are significantly different from those used by English native speakers, which may result from the grammatical drills in English teaching and learning in Chinese schools. Qualitatively, Errors occurring in the “N + that” appositive clauses in Chinese EFL learners' compositions could be classified into two types: Errors in Vocabulary and Errors in Sentence Structure; and the errors could be explained by the Markedness Differential Hypothesis (Eckman, 1977, 1989) and the Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972). This study may bring implications to the teaching and learning/acquisition of English appositive clauses.

Keywords: “N + that” appositive clauses, EFL (English as a foreign language) acquisition, corpus-based method

1. Introduction

Subordinate clauses are important components of English sentences (Biber, 1994). The acquisition of subordinate clauses has always been a popular issue in the research of second language acquisition. Generally, the subordinate clauses are introduced by some special words, e.g., that, which, who, when, where, etc. “That” is the most frequent introducer of subordinate clauses. Previous research on “that” in subordinate clauses mainly focused on the aspect of syntax or semantics (Chen, 2006; Lei, 2008; Li, 2011; Xie, 2011), for example, Chen (2006) explained the difference between that- relative clauses and which- relative clauses from the view of generative grammar. Lei (2008) analyzed the role of “that complement clauses” from the perspective of syntax and semantics. Li (2011) investigated the origin of “that” in subordinate clauses. Xie (2011) explored the complementizer “that” in the framework of optimality theory. However, studies on the acquisition of subordinate clauses including “that” are mostly involved in the complement clauses or relative clauses (Lei, 2008; Meng, 2019; Zhong, 2008) and rarely discussed the “N + that” appositive clauses. The structure of “N + that” is a common type of appositive clause and the use of “N + that” appositive clauses of EFL learners could reveal their acquisition conditions of appositive clauses. The use of English by EFL learners could be revealed by the learners' corpus, such as compositions written by them. Previous studies have found much evidence concerning the acquisition condition of English subordinate clauses of EFL learners with the help of learners' corpus (Lin, 2004; Meng, 2019; Zhong, 2008). The present study aims to investigate the acquisition of “N + that” appositive clauses of Chinese EFL learners based on the TECCL (Ten-thousand English Compositions of Chinese Learners) corpus and the NESSIE (Native English Speakers' Similarly or Identically-prompted Essays) corpus.

2. Research Question

To probe the acquisition of “N + that” appositive clauses of Chinese EFL learners, the following questions should be answered.

- 1) What nouns do Chinese EFL learners use in the “N + that” appositive clauses?
- 2) Is there any difference between Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers when using the “N + that” appositive clauses?

3) Whether and what errors occur when Chinese EFL learners use “N + that” appositive clauses?

3. Research Methodology

A corpus-based method is used in the present study. “N + that” appositive clauses are retrieved from Chinese EFL learners’ corpus (the TECCL) and native English speakers’ corpus (the NESSIE). The TECCL selected texts from the English curriculum tasks like time-limited composition homework, and mid-term and final exam compositions of students. Most students are from universities, and a small number of them are primary or middle school students (Xu, 2016). The TECCL contains 9,846 texts, including 1,817,335 words in total. The NESSIE collected written texts with similar topics as TECCL from native English speakers, including 176,578 words in its version 1 (NESSIEv1). Since the size of the TECCL corpus is ten times of the NESSIE corpus, the present study randomly selected 982 texts from TECCL, containing 177,796 words (which is about 1/10 of the whole corpus), to make an equivalent comparison with the NESSIE corpus. For convenience, this part of the TECCL is termed the “TECCL corpus” in this article.

The researcher used WordSmith6 Tools 6.0 to retrieve the “N + that” structure in the TECCL and NESSIE corpus. Then, the “N + that” appositive clauses were selected and put into a document of Microsoft Word 2019. Next, the nouns of the “N + that” structure were calculated. The data were analyzed by Chi-square with IBM SPSS Statistics 25 (Roever, 2018). Besides, the misuse conditions of “N + that” appositive clauses of Chinese EFL learners were recorded. And the errors were qualitatively analyzed.

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Data and Quantitative Analysis

As is shown in Table 1, the TECCL corpus includes 157 “N + that” appositive clauses with 50 different nouns distributing in these clauses, and the NESSIE corpus have 147 “N + that” appositive clauses with 62 different nouns distributed in the clauses. Chi-square test reveals no significant difference between the frequency of “N + that” appositive clauses in the TECCL and that in the NESSIE ($\chi^2 = 0.2640$, $df = 10$, $p = .607$); and there is no significant difference between the number of Ns (nouns) appearing in the “N + that” appositive clauses in the two corpora ($\chi^2 = 1.3700$, $df = 12$, $p = .242$).

Table 1. The numbers of “N + that” appositive clauses in the two corpora and the related Chi-square test

Corpus	Size	Number of “N + that” AC	Number of N
Part of TECCL	177,796 words	157	50
NESSIE	176,578 words	147	62
Chi-square	/	0.2640	1.3700
Significance (<i>p</i>)	/	.607	.242

Notes. AC refers to appositive clauses; N refers to the noun in the “N + that” appositive clauses.

Table 2. The nouns and their distribution frequency in “N + that” appositive clauses in the TECCL

N	Frequency	N	Frequency	N	Frequency	N	Frequency
doubt	25	trend	3	argument	1	news	1
fact	17	case	2	assertion	1	period	1
view	11	claim	2	balance	1	pity	1
opinion	10	consequence	2	confidence	1	principle	1
idea	9	conviction	2	debt	1	problem	1
conclusion	7	example	2	declaration	1	proof	1
phenomenon	6	point	2	denial	1	reality	1
thing	4	question	2	fancy	1	sensation	1
belief	3	saying	2	fashion	1	sentence	1
dream	3	scene	2	fortune	1	symbol	1
evidence	3	sense	2	knowledge	1	thought	1
reason	3	truth	2	message	1		
tendency	3	way	2	mind	1		

Table 3. The nouns and their distribution frequency in “N + that” appositive clauses in the NESSIE

N	Frequency	N	Frequency	N	Frequency	N	Frequency
fact	32	sense	2	evidence	1	point	1
idea	10	statement	2	excess	1	premise	1
belief	8	understanding	2	fear	1	proposal	1
notion	6	way	2	framework	1	prospect	1
assumption	4	allegation	1	hope	1	reason	1
theory	4	approach	1	impression	1	record	1
doubt	4	assertion	1	indication	1	saying	1
view	4	attitude	1	indicator	1	sign	1
argument	3	comment	1	issue	1	state	1
hypothesis	3	conclusion	1	institution	1	solution	1
case	2	consensus	1	likelihood	1	theorist	1
chance	2	deception	1	likeliness	1	value	1
claim	2	definition	1	member	1		
extent	2	detail	1	misconception	1		
information	2	device	1	patterns	1		
myth	2	effect	1	period	1		

Based on the two corpora (see Tables 2 and 3), the nouns that are more frequently adopted in the “N + that” appositive clauses in the TECCL corpus, i.e., that are more frequently used by Chinese EFL learners in the clauses include: *doubt, fact, view, opinion, idea, conclusion, phenomenon, thing, belief, dream, evidence, reason, tendency, trend*; the nouns that are more frequently adopted in the “N + that” appositive clauses in the NESSIE corpus, i.e., that are more frequently used by native English speakers in the clauses (comparing with the use by the Chinese EFL learners) are: *fact, idea, belief, notion, assumption, theory, doubt, view, argument, hypothesis*. Nouns that are frequently used by both Chinese EFL learners and native speakers are *fact, idea, view, and belief*.

Table 4. The Chi-square test of high-frequency nouns in “N + that” appositive clauses in the two corpora

N	Frequency in TECCL	Frequency in NESSIE	Chi-square	Significance (<i>p</i>)
doubt	25	4	15.0643	.000***
fact	17	32	4.6962	.030*
view	11	4	3.2189	.073
opinion	10	0	9.9318	.002**
idea	9	10	0.0597	.807
conclusion	7	1	4.459	.035*
phenomenon	6	0	5.959	.015*
thing	4	0	3.9726	.046*
notion	0	6	6.0415	.014*
assumption	0	4	4.0276	.045*
theory	0	4	4.0276	.045*

Notes. .000*** < 0.001; .002** < 0.003; .030* < 0.031.

The Chi-square test (see Table 4) shows that the distribution frequencies of some nouns in the “N + that” appositive clauses form the TECCL and those from the NESSIE are significantly different ($p < .05$). Compared with native English speakers, Chinese EFL learners prefer to use the nouns *doubt* ($x^2 = 15.0643$, $df = 21$, $p = .000***$), *opinion* ($x^2 = 9.9318$, $df = 10$, $p = .002**$), *conclusion* ($x^2 = 4.459$, $df = 6$, $p = .035*$), *phenomenon* ($x^2 = 5.959$, $df = 6$, $p = .015*$) and *thing* ($x^2 = 3.9726$, $df = 4$, $p = .046*$) in the “N + that” appositive clauses. And compared with Chinese EFL learners, native English speakers have the preference to using the nouns *fact* ($x^2 = 4.6962$, $df = 15$, $p = .030*$), *notion* ($x^2 = 6.0415$, $df = 6$, $p = .014*$), *assumption* ($x^2 = 4.0276$, $df = 4$, $p = .045*$) and *theory* ($x^2 = 4.0276$, $df = 4$, $p = .045*$). And the two nouns of *view* ($x^2 = 3.2189$, $df = 7$, $p = .073$) and *idea* ($x^2 = 0.0597$, $df = 1$, $p = .0807$) are frequently used by both Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers.

4.2 Errors and Qualitative Analysis

Based on the TECCL corpus, Errors occurring in the “N + that” appositive clauses in Chinese EFL learners’ compositions could be classified into two types: Type I. Errors in Vocabulary and Type II. Errors in Sentence Structure.

Type I . Errors in Vocabulary:

(1) *Comments from movie critics show different opinions that the great income in box office is articulate not to premium quality of the movie itself, but to commercial speculation.*

(2) *First, the lack of sleep contributes to the phenomenas that some college students can't help deserting, and can't force their attention on test-book, ...*

In example (1), the subordinate clause refers to the content of the antecedent noun “opinions”; however, the appositive clause stands for one opinion, which is inconsistent with the antecedent noun “opinions”. Besides, the student may have confounded the appositive clauses with the relative clauses, and the passive form of the verb “articulate” is incorrect. In example (2), the antecedent is used as the incorrect form “phenomenas”, and its correct plural form should be “phenomena”.

Type II . Errors in Sentence Structure:

(3) *..., his dad is explaining to his son the principle that the importance of small things before undertaking something big.*

(4) *Another issue to note: some financial aid offices require proof that you are attending the courses and that you are getting the aid more.*

(5) *It was my first sense that the house was deserted.*

In example (3), the subordinate clause is not a clause, instead, it is a noun phrase. In example (4), “so” of “so that” is omitted in the subordinate clause. And in example (5), the cleft sentence structure is mixed up with the appositive clause structure.

5. Discussion

The Chi-square test (Table 1) reveals no significant difference between the number of “N + that” appositive clauses in the TECCL corpus and that in the NESSIE corpus; and there is no significant difference between the number of Ns (nouns) appearing in this kind of clauses in the two corpora. The similar frequency of using “N + that” appositive clauses in Chinese learners’ corpus (TECCL) and that in the native speakers’ corpus (NESSIE) may reflect that Chinese EFL learners know when to use “N + that” appositive clauses in discourses.

However, although both Chinese English learners and native English speakers would use various nouns in the “N + that” appositive clause, the nouns they use are quite different. Based on the data in Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4, Chinese English learners more frequently use Ns (nouns) like *doubt, fact, view, opinion, idea, conclusion, phenomenon, thing, belief, dream, evidence, reason, tendency, trend*, but English native speakers are prone to use nouns like the *fact, idea, belief, notion, assumption, theory, doubt, view, argument, hypothesis* in “N + that” appositive clauses. The nouns *fact, idea, view, and belief* co-occur in this kind of clause from both the TECCL and the NESSIE. The difference in using the nouns may be explained by the frequent occurrence of nouns like *doubt, fact, view, idea, conclusion, phenomenon, belief*, etc. in grammatical tasks in English classes and exams and English language proficiency texts (such as the College English Test Band Four in China). Thus, Chinese EFL learners use those nouns more frequently in “N + that” appositive clauses in their compositions. But the nouns *notion, assumption, and theory*, which are academic vocabulary, do not so frequently occur in language proficiency texts, so Chinese students rarely use them in compositions. And the noun *thing* is frequently used by Chinese EFL learners but rarely by native speakers, which may find the reason for the frequent use of the corresponding expression of “thing” in Chinese, i.e., the thinking habit of the mother tongue may influence the expression of a second language.

And errors are occurring in Chinese learners’ texts, including two types: Type I . Errors in Vocabulary and Type II . Errors in Sentence Structure. For the type I errors, since the plural form of Chinese is realized by the modifier in front of nouns but not the inflection of nouns, Chinese students would easily misuse the plural form of abstract nouns in English. For the type II errors, Chinese EFL learners may confuse “N + that” appositive clauses with other sentence structures containing “that” such as nominal phrases appositive, adverbial clauses, and cleft sentences. The errors suggest that the differences in morph-syntactic rules and language structures between second language and first language may bring a difficulty to EFL learners. Since Chinese and English are from totally different language systems (Xu, 2010), Chinese EFL learners would have difficulties in English learning and acquisition. According to the Markedness Differential Hypothesis (Eckman, 1977, 1989), language users tend to ignore the differences between first language and second language. The plural forms of Chinese nouns are different from English nouns, so when Chinese EFL learners encounter plural English nouns they may neglect the inflectional symbol of nouns. The errors in example (1) are caused by the misuse of the vocabulary.

In example (2), the incorrect use of an irregular plural form of nouns could be explained by the overgeneralization of Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972). In most cases, the plural form of nouns is achieved by the inflectional suffixes “-s/-es” (Biber, 1994; Zhang, 2009). However, when students use the irregular plural form of nouns, they would overgeneralize the rule of adding “-s/-es” to the singular form. Type II Errors in Sentence Structure may result from the incomplete acquisition of the “N + that” appositive clause structure, thus the learners produce the interlanguage of this structure. Due to the lack of context of communication in daily life, students could not internalize the grammatical rules of “N + that” appositive clauses, instead they would use them in the wrong way like example (3), and easily be confused about similar structures like the “so that” clause in example (4) and the cleft sentence in example (5).

The present research is likely to give some implications to the learning and teaching of “N + that” appositive clauses. Errors occurring in this kind of subordinate clause reveal students’ interlanguage when using it. Teachers should pay attention to the difference between Chinese and English and help students distinguish the “N + that” appositive clauses with other structures containing “that”, and then students may use the clauses correctly. Besides, the teaching materials should not only be restricted to discourses for grammatical training. Teachers could make use of native English corpus to get authentic materials of certain grammatical structures.

6. Conclusions

The present study has investigated Chinese EFL learners’ acquisition of “N + that” appositive clauses by using the TECCL and NESSIE corpus. Compared with data from the NESSIE corpus of native English speakers, data from the TECCL corpus of Chinese EFL learners suggest that Chinese EFL learners use antecedent nouns of “N + that” appositive clauses differently from native speakers. And the difference in antecedent nouns may result from the practical drills of grammatical teaching and learning and learners’ thinking habits of the first language. The errors occurring in “N + that” appositive clauses could be explained by Markedness Differential Hypothesis and Interlanguage Theory. The finding of this research may bring implications to the teaching of “N + that” appositive clauses. English teachers could pay attention to the difference between English and Chinese, and they could choose authentic learning materials for students from native English corpus.

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