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Adverbial Phrase Placements in L1-Chinese ESL Learners' Writing

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ABSTRACT

The authors of this study looked at 49 samples of English writing from 14 Chinese students enrolled in College ESL. Adverbial placements were recorded, categorized, and analyzed. Although some types of adverbials have different positioning in Chinese than in English, the authors found that this was not a primary factor in the students' English writing. Students greatly favored sentence-initial and post-verbal placement of adverbs and made extensive use of modality adverbs. Reasons for their placements and usage are possibly: ease of transfer, explicit instruction, and a perception of prestige.

1.0 Introduction

English adverbial phrase (AdvP) placement is often a challenge for L1-Chinese ESL learners. Given the complexities of defining and identifying adverbs in English, it is not surprising that ESL students sometimes have difficulty understanding how to best use them. Teachers alike may be reluctant or even unaware of how to instruct students in making full use of the versatility and potency of AdvPs in speech and writing. This study explores the connection between L2 English writing style and Chinese AdvP structures. In our comparison of Chinese syntax to English syntax, we found points of syntactic differences and similarities with regard to AdvPs. After reviewing current literature of adverbial movement rules in English and Chinese, we analyzed a total of 793 adverbial tokens from the writing samples of Chinese students in the College ESL program at St. Cloud State University to look for signs of syntactic transfer from L1-Chinese in the students' L2-English writing. Through this quantitative study we explore pedagogical implications for teaching AdvPs to L1-Chinese students. We also offer suggestions to help Chinese students avoid negative transfer and to use their L1 to make accurate connections so that they may become more effective writers and speakers in English.

2.0 Brief Overview of English Adverbs and Adverbials

There are several ways of categorizing English adverbs. Koffi (2010) offers these five major types of adverbs: degree, manner, place, time, and modality/sentential. Time adverbs can be broken down further by features such as duration, frequency, and point of time, which are important distinctions in Chinese syntax. In English, adverbs can take up to five possible positions in sentences. These are sentence-initial, before the first auxiliary, after the first auxiliary, before the main verb, and after the main verb phrase (VP). While there are differing opinions among linguists as to a default position for adverbs, Koffi (2010) posits that the default position in English is immediately after the VP. The one position adverbs can never take is between a transitive verb that requires a direct object and its direct object. Koffi explains that, "for the sake of simplicity, one can avoid having to distinguish between the two types of transitive verbs by always placing adverbs directly after the direct object if there is one" (2010, p. 277). We will see later how this general rule of thumb may play into our study data. One final note: in this study we

adhere to the definition of adverbials presented by Koffi as words or phrases that function as adverbs. So, while adverbs are a specific and formal part of speech, adverbials are a functional category. This study will examine both adverb and adverbial usage of L1-Chinese writers of English.

3.0 Features of Chinese Adverbs and Adverbials and their Functions
    Chinese adverbials are defined as the words or phrases that decorate or limit verbs or adjectives (Liu, 2004, p. 209), which is similar to the definition of English adverbials. However, Chinese is said to have seven types of adverbs which Liu (2004, p. 212) lists as:

1. Punctual time adverbs: describe a specific point of time (now, yesterday, next week)
2. Frequency time adverbs: (always, often, rarely)
3. Range: (all, totally,[1] together)
4. Degree: (especially, thoroughly, fully)
5. Sentential/modality: (unfortunately, hopefully)
6. Manner adverbs or descriptive adverbial phrases: (peacefully, playfully)
7. Negation: (not, never)

Location was not included on Liu's list because it is not in the formal category of Chinese adverbs for morphological reasons. Chinese does not have single words like <here> and <there>. It uses the bound morpheme "zai" to indicate location, thus these phrases are classified as adverbials.

4.0 Placement rules for Chinese adverbials
    In Chinese, adverbials normally precede the main verbs (Chan, 2004; Chinese Grammar, 2014). This can be seen in example (1) below. The prepositional phrase "zai jia" (at home) functions as an adverbial and precedes the main verb "kan" (watch).

(1) 我在家看电视。

    wo   [zai   jia]   kan   dian   shi

    I   at   home watch TV .

    I watch TV at home

 (1a) * 在家我看电视。

    * [zai   jia]   wo _____ _____ kan   dian   shi

    Sentence (1) becomes ungrammatical when the locative AdvP "在家 (at home)" moves to the front of the sentence, as shown in (1a). Punctual time adverbs may be positioned before the main verb as shown in (2) or they can move to the beginning of a sentence, before the subject of the verb, as shown in (2a). This possibility seems to apply only for punctual time adverbs, but not other kinds of adverbs. For example, sentence (2)

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[1] According to Liu, adverbs like <totally> and <partially> belong to range rather than degree when they modify a verb

is still grammatically correct when the time AdvP moves in front of the main verb, as shown in (2a)

(2) 我明天要去公园。

    wo   ming   tian   yao   qu   gong   yuan

    I   tomorrow   will go   park.

  Tomorrow, I will go to the park

(2a) 明天我要去公园。

   ming tian wo ____ ____ yao qu gong yuan

   Tomorrow I will go to park

An additional detail noted by Robson (2012) is that Chinese adverbs of time are positioned differently depending on whether they refer to frequency, duration, or punctual/point of time.

Liu (2004) states that the default position for Chinese AdvPs is before the verb phrase (VP). Gouguet (2006) and Robson (2012), however, both offer descriptions and examples of regular post-verbal adverbials in Chinese. This is similar to the debate between theoretical and traditional grammarians over the default position of English adverbs. Robson asserts that, in fact, "the durational time expression …stands after the main verb phrase" (p. 9) and she offers the following structure:

> Subject + time (punctual) AdvP + location AdvP + VP + time (duration) AdvP

Gouget (2006) explains that in Chinese, preverbal AdvPs "situate the event in time or space, express manner or speaker attitude" (p. 156) while post-verbal AdvPs are related to the internal argument of the verb and may also include some frequency adverbs, manner adverbs, and resultative clauses.

As can be seen by the examples above, some Chinese adverbs are not as flexible as their English counterparts in their ability to move around in sentences, though there are several English temporal adverbs such as "no longer," "just," and "never" that have fixed positions which occur before main verb (Fromkin & Rodman, 2014, p, 108). Also unlike English sentences, which normally have no more than two or three adverbs modifying a single verb, adverb, or adjective (Koffi, 2010), Chinese often has up to four adverbials strung together in one sentence. The more adverbials there are modifying the verb, the more the reader or listener will focus on the verb (Liu, 2004). Moreover, when there is more than one adverbial in a Chinese sentence, there are some rules for the order of the adverbials. An example of this is shown in (3). There are four adverbials before the main verb "ben qu" (ran) which, according to Loar (2001) must be placed in the following order:

NP (Time AdvP) (Subject AdvP[2]) (Manner AdvP) (Place AdvP) VP

(3) 孩子们昨天高高兴兴地连蹦带跳地向公园奔去。(sentence adopted from Liu, 2004)

hai zi men [zuo tian] [gao gao xing xing de] [lian pao dai tiao de]

Children   yesterday   happily by trotting   and skipping

[xiang gong yuan] ben qu。

towards park   ran.

Yesterday, the children ran happily towards the park by trotting and skipping.

Through the previous example we can see that there is an adverbial word order hierarchy in Chinese similar to the adjectival order hierarchy in English (Koffi, 2010, p. 242). The fixed order of adverbial phrases is somewhat inflexible.

When we put Loar, Robson and Gouget's descriptions together we come up with the following phrase structure for Chinese adverbs:

$(AdvP^1)$ **Subject** $(AdvP^{1,2})$ $(AdvP^3)$ $(AdvP^4)$ **VP** $(AdvP^{2,3})$
Adverbial types: ^{1}Time punctual; ^{2}Time duration &frequency; ^{3}Manner; ^{4}Place

We did not find any specific placement rules for degree or modality adverbs.

5.0 Methodology

We examined written works of Chinese students enrolled in College ESL and recorded where they placed adverbs and adverbial phrases in English. Most of the samples are from 11 students' free-style writing on the D2L discussion board. These consisted of 46 postings made over the course of a semester. Additionally, we investigated another 3 students' impromptu essays. We then categorized their placements of the five different classifications of adverbs and adverbials.

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[2] Liu makes a distinction between manner adverbs that describe the subject directly or indirectly, we will not make that distinction in our analysis

6.0 Data and Analysis

No	Positions of Adverbials	SUM	Frequency
1	_____ S Aux1 Aux2 V O (**beginning of sentence**)	297	37.45%
2	S_____ Aux1 Aux2 V O (**after subject**)	8	1.00%
3	S Aux1 _____ Aux 2 V O (**between two auxiliaries**)	9	1.00%
4	S Aux 1 Aux 2 _____ V O (**before the main verbs**)	134	16.90 %
5	S Aux 1 Aux 2 V O_____ (**after the VP**)	254	32.00 %
6	**Directly preceding adjectives or adverbs**	91	11.48%
Total number of data: 793			

Table 1: Frequency of Adverbial Placements by Students

The students used a total of 793 adverbs or adverbials in their writing. Table 1 shows the different positions that students chose to place adverbials. As we can see, sentence-initial and post-verbal show the highest frequency placement, neither of which are considered by Liu (2004) to be the default position in Chinese.

One of the authors of this study learned English in China and recalls being told that it is good to place English adverbials in the sentence-initial position because it won't affect the rest of the sentence grammar and will make the writer sound more native-like. Perhaps our sample writers were taught the same. L1-Chinese writers may like this rule of thumb because it corresponds with the way they communicate in Chinese, building the anticipation toward the main point of the utterance.

It is not uncommon for Chinese interlocutors to place up to four adverbial clauses in a row at the beginning of a sentence to draw attention to the verb. In examining the writing samples, we came across numerous examples of two and three adverbials strung one after another in the sentence-initial position such as:

Student sample 1: "Half a year ago, when I was still a high school student, what invariably happened was that I imagined how my college life would be."

Student sample 2: "For example, when studying physics in high school, you may probably learn the Newton's Law."

Students also placed more than 30 percent of their adverbials after the VP. It is not known if they were directly taught this default position or just picked it up along the way. It is interesting to note that many, if not most, of those were sentence-final. Were these learners taught to play it safe as Koffi (2010) suggests, by always putting the adverbial after the direct object if there is one? Here is one typical example:

Student sample 3: "I can have a good future and catch my goals after several years."

There were relatively few adverbs placed between auxiliaries and some of those were grammatically questionable. Not all sentences have two auxiliaries so it makes sense that there are fewer inter-auxiliary placements.

Types of adverbials	Sentence initial	Before first Aux	Between two Auxs	Before Main verb	After VP	Before Adj/Adv	Sum
Manner	10	0	0	34	87	0	130
Locative/Place	21	0	0	4	73	0	98
Time (frequency & duration)	11	1	2	11	17	0	41
Time Punctual	81	0	1	1	46	0	129
Modality	176	6	5	38	28	0	253
Negation	0	1	1	46	3	0	51
Degree	0	0	0	0	0	91	91
Total number of data:793							

Table 2: Frequency and Placement of AdvPs

Frequency of students' adverb choices:

Modality > Manner > Time Punctual > Place > Degree > Negation > Time frequency

A quick glance at Table 2 reveals that modality adverbs are the ones most frequently used by this group of writers and they preferred putting them in the sentence initial position. The frequency is not surprising as the online discussions were mostly about the students' views on given topics and modality adverbs are used to express a writer's feelings about the events in a sentence (Koffi, 2010). The placement is also not unexpected because in fact, one of the tests Koffi offers to determine if a word is a modality adverb is whether or not it can be moved into that sentence initial position and convey "degrees of certainty, obligation, necessity, or probability" (p. 266). Sentence-initial is a common placement for modality adverbs in English.

Manner and punctual time were also adverbial categories used quite frequently by the students. Student sample 1 above was a typical structure used by several students: stringing a couple of time adverbs together to describe a past situation. One reason for the abundant use of punctual time phrases could be that the syntax for Chinese phrases that begin, "dang (when)…" translates directly the same into English making it an easy construction to learn. The same is true for the modality adverbs <firstly, secondly…>.

7.0 Pedagogical Implications
      Teachers may want to encourage Chinese students to limit the number of sentence-initial adverbials they use in their writing. While we certainly do not want to discourage their descriptive language, a little restraint might be necessary from time-to-time. As mentioned, a number of students made abundant use of <firstly…secondly…>. This is, in fact, a very useful construction in academic essay writing. Rather than suppress its use, teachers may simply want to watch for overuse and suggest alternative transitions if a student's writing becomes redundant. The students in this study are advanced English language learners. Further studies with beginning and intermediate learners may be helpful in learning more about adverbial usage of L1-Chinese writers.

8.0 Conclusion
      Most of the L1-Chinese students in this study show competence in placing AdvPs in the sentence-initial position. We were a bit surprised to see in our data that there was no strong connection between the assumed default position for Chinese adverbs and students' placement in English sentence. It seems that other factors influenced students to place their adverbs primarily in sentence-initial and post-verbal positions. These may include the ease and prestige associated with sentence-initial placement and the default position for English adverbs. Teachers can help Chinese ESL students to enhance and vary their writing by directing their attention to the similarities and differences in Chinese and English syntax regarding adverbs and adverbial phrases.

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