



A Corpus-Based Study on Chinese EFL Students' Acquisition of "YET"

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Abstract

This essay investigates how Chinese students, who learn English as a foreign language ("EFL learners" for short), acquire the word "yet" by comparing Chinese Learner English Corpus ("CLEC" for short) and Corpus of Contemporary American English ("COCA" for short). The study finds that: "Yet" is not commonly used among Chinese EFL learners, except senior English majors; Compared with native English speakers, Chinese learners prefer to use "yet" as a conjunction, or use it as an adverb simply; and the error rate for using "yet" among Chinese students is relatively low.

Key words: Yet; Chinese EFL learners; Lexical acquisition; Language corpus

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INTRODUCTION

The burgeoning development in Corpus research in recent years leads to the development of corpus linguistics. Corpus with a large capacity, easy retrieval and high accuracy, has become more and more important to EFL researchers. Corpus is a large electronic library shaped by collection of naturally generated and continuous language and application of text or sound bites by random sampling method in accordance with specific linguistic principles. Most original resources in it can be directly used as language comparisons for foreign language teaching and

research. (Gui & Yang, 2003, p.33) There have been many researchers comparing and analyzing how EFL learners acquire English interlanguage terms in China, and many of them probe into the differences of high-frequency words between two languages, .

Research in second language vocabulary acquisition by comparing corpus resources is the development tendency of the current research. This kind of research usually investigates the common and different usage of one language between second language learners and native speakers, mainly by means of contrastive analysis hypothesis and error analysis (Gui et al., 2005), then attempts to make a reasonable explanation. With the growing of second language corpus, research in the corpus of "yet" is surging by comparing the foreign learner corpus with native speaker corpus. This paper aims at promoting the teaching research in second language vocabulary through analyzing Chinese EFL learners' acquisition of "yet" by means of comparing the retrieval results between CLEC and COCA.

1. RESEARCH METHODS

1.1 Corpus

Data obtained in this paper are mainly from CLEC and COCA. CLEC is the first English Corpus for Chinese EFL learners. It consists of five sub-corpora (ST2-ST6), including Middle School (ST2), College English Test Grade 4 (ST3), College English Test Grade 6 (ST4), primary English major (ST5) and senior English major (ST6). There are remarks for verbal blunders in these sub-corpora, and each corpus has about 200,000 words, totally one million words in CLEC. COCA is developed by Professor Mark Davies from Brigham Young University, it is the latest contemporary American English Corpus. Words are collected from many fields in United States between 1990 and 2009, a total of 400 million words in COCA.

1.2 Research Procedures

This paper analyzes the data obtained by retrieving “yet” in CLEC and COCA with the help of a software called My Finder. Firstly, respectively retrieve the usual frequency of “yet” in both corpora, figure out the normalized frequencies, and then analyze their differences. Secondly, retrieve the frequency of “yet” as a conjunction and an adverb separately in both corpora, compare the data, find out the different usages of “yet” between Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers, and then attempt to find out an explanation. At last, retrieve the frequency of error remarks in each sub-corpus of CLEC, analyze Chinese learners’ mistakes of using “yet”, and then propose constructive suggestions to improve English language teaching in China.

1.3 Research Questions

One can find out the characteristics of learners’ acquisition of “yet”, and furthermore the development process of English interlanguage term through analyzing and comparing Chinese EFL learners’ acquisition progress with native English speaker. For this purpose, three issues discussed by corpora are shown as follows:

(a) How often Chinese EFL learners use it? Do they use it more often than native English speakers, or less? Do they avoid using it?

(b) How often Chinese EFL learners use either part of speech of it? Do they use these two parts of speech as often as native English speakers? Do they prefer to, or try to avoid using either of these two parts of speech? What are the reasons behind this situation?

(c) What is the error rate of Chinese EFL learners use it, and the inappropriate way they use it?

2. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF DATA OBTAINED BY RETRIEVING

The writer retrieved the word “yet” in CLEC, each sub-corpus, and COCA, figured out the normalized frequency (per 100,000 words) in these corpora as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Normalized Frequency of “Yet” in CLEC and COCA
(per 100,000 words)

	Total	Frequency	Normalized frequency	
CLEC	ST2	208,088	11	5.3
	ST3	209,043	12	5.7
	ST4	212,855	14	6.6
	ST5	214,510	14	6.5
	ST6	226,106	85	37.6
		1,070,602	136	12.7
COCA	464,020,256	155,284	33.5	

One can find significant differences from Table 1. The frequency of Chinese learners’ using “yet” is lower than native English speakers on the whole. Data from the five sub-corpora of CLEC indicates that Chinese learners (including high school students, those who pass CET 4 and CET 6, and primary English major students) seldom use “yet” in the progress of acquiring it, and the frequencies of these four groups are nearly the same. While the frequency of senior English major is high, even higher than native speakers. It can be seen that “yet” is insufficiently used among Chinese learners in generally speaking. Afterwards the writer retrieves the use frequency of “yet” as an adverb and a conjunction in CLEC with My Finder and COCA on line, data obtained are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Frequency of “Yet” as Adverb and Conjunction in CLEC and COCA

	Yet		ADV.		CONJ.	
	Total frequency	Frequency	Rate	Frequency	Rate	
CLEC	136	49	36.0%	87	64.0%	
COCA	155,284	155,146	99.9%	138	0.1%	

Table 2 lists out the statistics of frequencies of “yet” used as an adverb and a conjunction. Chinese EFL learners prefer to use it as a conjunction with a frequency of approximately 64%, and the frequency of using “yet” as an adverb is about 36%. While the frequency of native speaker use “yet” as an adverb is up to 99.9%, only 0.1% as a conjunction. By comparing these two sets of data, the writer found that Chinese EFL learners are lack of experience in using “yet” as an adverb, while excessive in using it as a conjunction during the process of acquirement. Then the writer retrieved sentences in which “yet” is used as an adverb in CLEC, and found that the frequency of using “not yet” is really high; after that the writer retrieved “not yet” in COCA, the results of which are shown in Table 3. It can be seen from Table 3, the frequency of using “not yet” is much higher in CLEC than that in COCA; Chinese learners use “yet” as an adverb in negative and interrogative sentences with a frequency of 41, which is 83.7%. It can be seen that Chinese learners use “yet” as an adverb mostly in negative and interrogative sentences to express something not yet happened, especially in set phrase “not yet”. They rarely or even ignore to use it as an adverb in other ways.

Table 3
Frequency of “Not Yet” in CLEC and COCA

	Yet [adv.]		Not yet	
	Total frequency	Frequency	Rate	
CLEC	49	12	24.5%	
COCA	15546	14657	9.4%	

According to the research, not only did Chinese EFL learners seldom use "yet", or avoid using it, but also they make mistakes in using it. The specific usage of "yet" should be first analyzed before retrieving its mistakes. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (sixth edition), there are eight following ways of using "yet":

(a) Adv. use in negative and interrogative sentences to express something likely to occur but has not occurred yet. It is easily to be mixed up with "already" which is used in positive sentence to convey a meaning of something happened.

(b) Adv. means "right now", "at once" in negative sentence.

(c) Adv. still, from now on until a point-in-time.

(d) Adv. express something that may happen in the future, but no signs are showed to happen now. Usually in sentence pattern like "could, might, may, etc. do something yet"

(e) Adv. so far, up to now (the best, longest and so on). Can be used in "the best/longest yet"

(f) Adv. emphasize on the increase of frequency or quantity, common phrases are "yet another/more", and "yet again"

(g) Adv. emphasize on the increase of degree, such as "yet worse", "more importantly", etc..

(h) Conj. despite, however, synonymous with "nevertheless"

Besides, there is a collocation "as yet" means "so far" or "up to a certain moment in the past"

Quirk (1985) classified "yet" as a non-assertive word in English Grammar some day (1985). There are only a small number of non-assertive words such as "anything", "either", which are frequent used. The writer retrieved "yet" in CLEC again, and the results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Frequency of "Yet" Error in CLEC

	ST2	ST3	ST4	ST5	ST6
Frequency	2	2	1	1	2
Total error rate	5.9%				

The frequency in ST6 is obviously higher than those in other sub-corpora, but the error rate is relatively lower. A conclusion is drawn that the error rate of using "yet" will decrease along with the improvement of the standard of English. That's to say, Chinese EFL learners with low English standard use "yet" at a low frequency, but easily make mistakes; while those who have higher English proficiency and high frequency of using "yet" make less mistakes. The error rate in CLEC is about 5.9%. On the whole the error rate decreases with the improvement of the standard of English.

Moreover, it finds that there are six typical error when EFL learners using "yet":

(a) Redundancy. e.g. The winter holiday was short, but I felt happy yet.

(b) Wrong substitution. e.g. From this table we can see that life expectancy is about 40 in 1960, yet in 1990, it increases to 60.

(c) Adhesion sentence. e.g. The other three boats had reached the riverside, our boat hadn't gone through the bridge have yet a long time passed, our boats was driven towards the riverside.

(d) Incomplete sentence. e.g. Because he hasn't learned to walk yet even if he has learned it, we can't order him to run immediately.

(e) Structural defects. e.g. Although the high-speed development in our country, many areas can not shake off poverty yet and many innocent children are still encountering the fate of hopeless education

(f) Punctuation. e.g. The dance hasn't any acts yet so I have to organize it myself.

Among them, (b), (c), (d), (e) are four types of errors applied mechanically in English in accordance with the semantics of Chinese. The redundant phenomenon in (a) is due to the impact of transference of mother tongue. One wants to use "yet" to represent a turning point without knowing that "but" has expressed that meaning. The mistake in (f) is made due to carelessness of students in writing. Unlike English, Chinese is not case-sensitive, which students are often unaware of.

CONCLUSION

Through comparative analysis of the use of "yet" in CLEC and COCA, conclusions are drawn as follows:

(a) Compared with native speakers, Chinese EFL learners seldom use "yet", and there are two main reasons behind this phenomenon:

First, the interference of mother tongue, also known as transference of mother tongue. These two languages, English and Chinese, vary from means of expression, sentence structure, to cultural background. It is really hard to completely match Chinese with English in a context. However, Chinese learners may mechanically imitate or apply Chinese language rules or means of expressions into English, or just avoid using an English word or phrase entirely against Chinese language rules. Second, poor learning experience in class. English teachers seldom mention "yet" in class, thus most Chinese learners are lack of real language environment to practice the use of "yet".

(b) Compared with English native speakers, Chinese EFL learners prefer using "yet" as a conjunction to using an adverb. When it comes to use "yet" as an adverb, they mostly use it in negative and interrogative sentences to mean something not yet happened while ignoring the other use of this adverb. The reasons are: On one hand, the word "yet" is easy to memorize, and "not

yet” is more commonly used and easily acquired in oral English than any other phrases. Thus students tend to choose more familiar usages than unfamiliar ones when using “yet” as an adverb. One another important reason is the inappropriate teaching process. Teachers always emphasize on the common usage in order to improve students’ memory efficiency. However, this kind of teaching approach will lead to the simple application of the vocabulary. On the other hand, “yet”, as a conjunction, is simple in its meaning of transition and concessions, and in its word form, which contribute to the easiness of acquirement. Words like “yet” which is easy to be memorized and is likely to be used more often than their synonyms, will result in learners’ reducing the use frequency of their synonyms. Take “so” and “thus” as an example. The word “so” has a much simpler word form, and is first learned by students, therefore it is very impressive and easy to extract for EFL learners. On the contrary, the word form of “thus” is more complicated, and “thus” is usually used in formal context. These are reasons for the lower use frequency of “thus” than that of “so”.

(c) From data retrieved in the sub-corpora of CLEC, one can find that there is little difference in the frequency of use and error rate of “yet” between high school students, undergraduates who have passed CET4, or CET6, and even primary English major students in China; while Chinese senior English major students use the word “yet” at higher frequency than English native speakers, and their error rate is the lowest among students of all levels, which is owing to the two more years of professional learning, and more opportunities to involve in real language environment. Therefore, proper teaching

methods and more corresponding practice should be carried out to make students learn to correctly use “yet” for Chinese EFL learners.

This paper shows a relatively objective survey of Chinese English learners’ acquisition of the word “yet” through comparing CLEC with COCA. According to the survey, Chinese EFL learners, especially primary English major students, insufficiently use the word “yet”. And after further research, it can be seen that Chinese learners, compared with native English speakers, more often use it as a conjunction than as an adverb. The use of “yet” as an adverb is too simple in accordance with sample sentences in these corpora. The word “yet” is used mostly in negative and interrogative sentences to express things not yet happened but seldom seen in other ways. This phenomenon explains the disadvantages of overwhelming emphasis on common application of one word in traditional foreign language teaching. Therefore, one should acquire comprehensive the use of common vocabulary. Meanwhile, foreign languages teachers can get a clear picture of students’ acquisition situation by regarding corpus as an auxiliary teaching tool.

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