

FUNCTION WORDS IN SLW: FROM CORPUS TO PROBABLE GRAMMAR TEACHING

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This is a pilot study for the researcher's dissertation topic, which will focus on a contrastive corpus analysis of the usage of prepositions in NS and NNS academic essays submitted for freshman composition classes at a four-year university over the past two years.

John Sinclair (2005) and Michael Lewis (2000) contend that the separation of grammar and lexis in language teaching goes against natural language learning processes. In a more "lexical approach," by teaching frequent collocations and phrasal patterns in the ESL/EFL classroom rather than isolated vocabulary lists and abstract grammar rules, instructors can better prepare the NNS to compose on a par with native speakers in university content classes.

In a corpus comparison of the frequency of word classes in use across various registers, Biber et al (1999) found that nouns and their colligates (determiners and prepositions) are most common in news and academic prose and least common in conversation, where more verbs and adverbs abound. So the building of complex noun phrases would be a very practical skill for students learning to write academically in English, yet most traditional grammars of English tend to focus on mastery of the extensive verb system.

Function words in English are particularly troublesome for non-native speakers even at advanced levels of academic writing, especially because they tend to be reduced in speech and neglected in grammar and vocabulary textbooks and lessons. This study seeks to identify the percentage and types of errors in NNS academic writing with regard to articles and prepositions by speakers of vastly differing native languages. The research questions for the present study are:

Are English articles more difficult to master for native speakers of Asian languages?

Are English prepositions more difficult to master for native speakers of Spanish?

Are errors with regard to function words identifying of non-native speakers?

How can we better address such deficiencies earlier in the ESL grammar curriculum?