

Comparative Corpus-based Study of Evaluative it Patterns in Middle School Learners' Writing

-- Taking "it is ADJ that" Pattern as an Example

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Abstract

Evaluative it patterns, as an important device for writers to express attitudinal and evaluative meaning, have increasingly been one of the topics of Corpus Linguistics. By adopting the corpus-based approach, this paper explores the frequencies, types, and functions of the it is ADJ that subpattern in evaluative it patterns. Results show that: in terms of frequency, the use of it is ADJ that occurs significantly more frequently in native learners' texts than in Chinese learners' texts. In terms of types, there are obvious differences between the two. The types used by native learners are more diverse, while Chinese learners are more single. The function of it is ADJ that is mainly reflected in its adjective use, and the semantic preferences of the patterns of two are significantly different. Native learners make greater use of the patterns to assess likelihood of propositions whereas Chinese middle school learners use them more often to imply certainty. The results of this study shed light on the teaching of English teaching practice of this structure.

Keywords

English Writing; Evaluative it Patterns; It is ADJ that; Corpus.

1. Introduction

The existence of a large amount of evaluative language in English writing is one of the topics that have long been of interest in applied linguistics and corpus linguistics (Gómez-González, M. 1997; Stotesbury, H. 2003; Hyland, K. & Tse, P. 2005; Zhang Le & Wei Naixin, 2013; Orr, S. & Ariel, M. 2021; Zhou, H. & Chen, M. 2021). Evaluation is realized through various linguistic devices and grammatical patterns. For instance, individual words such as adjectives, adverbs, and meta-linguistic nouns that have evaluative functions (Hunston, 2004; Degaetano-Ortlieb, 2015; Jiang & Hyland, 2017; Pérez-Paredes & Bueno-Alastuey, 2019), and semi-fixed prefabrications that achieve evaluative meaning at the level of phrases and and clauses. The former has been the subject of major studies, while the latter has had fewer relevant studies. Type grammar considers the semi-fixed prefabricated phrases that constitute a single choice both as the central unit of linguistic meaning and structure and as the primary focus of linguistic analysis (Sinclair, 1991).

English writing is one of the important means of language output for English language learners. It carries the functions of interpersonal interaction, negotiation of meaning, and expression of ideas. Evaluative it patterns are important linguistic devices for expressing attitudinal meaning and constructing interpersonal relationships (Biber et al. 1999). At present, domestic academic research on evaluative it patterns focuses on academic theses or academic discourses. Zhang Le and Lu Jun (2015) investigated sentence-level chunks in English scientific and technical texts using it as a formal subject and expressing evaluative meanings, and established its Chinese counterpart. Zhang Jidong and Xi Longjing (2016) revealed the evaluation orientation

characteristics of it v-link ADJ that/ to-inf type in social science academic discourse. Wang Bingxin and Wei Naixing (2018) analyzed the evaluative it patterns and its characteristic significance in academic papers of Chinese and foreign scholars by means of a comparative study. It can be seen that domestic scholars have little research about evaluative it patterns on secondary school English writing. Therefore, the study adopts a data-driven approach to extract it is+adj that in the evaluative it patterns. By comparing the corpus of Chinese and foreign English learners' written language, we examine the frequency and type distribution of intermediate-level English learners' use of the pattern, as well as the characteristics presented in the semantics. The results of the research are with a view to providing suggestions and insights into the teaching of English writing in secondary schools.

2. Literature Review

The concept of "pattern" was first mentioned in the book *A Guide to Patterns and Usage in English* (Hornby, A. S. 1954). Patterns are relatively regular phraseology made up of a string of words controlled by a verb, adjective, or noun and often occurring with them (including prepositions, phrases, and clauses, etc.) (Hunston, S.&J. Sinclair, 2000). Patterns can be analyzed through a corpus-driven research approach with KWIC (key word in context). The evaluative it pattern is a phrasal unit, also known as an introductory it construction or an extrapositional construction. It refers to an informative element that is moved from the subject position to the right of the predicate and uses the pronoun it as the formal subject (Quirk et al., 1985). The pattern can adjust the information structure to conform to the principles of end-of-sentence center of gravity and focus (Biber et al., 1999). In the evaluative it pattern, adjective is the core of judgmental semantics and play an evaluative role in the discourse. For example, the adjective in it is + adj that is usually used to convey feelings, attitudes, evaluations of the writer about the proposition being conveyed. The main semantic category represented by the external that clause is epistemic modality, i.e. the speaker's perception of the external clause (Herriman., 2000).

Evaluative it patterns are frequently used in academic discourse (Biber et al., 1999; Kaltenböck, G. 2005; Zhang, G. 2015; Larsson, T. 2017). Academic discourse is evaluative and interactive. Evaluation refers to the author's attitude, stance and point of view on matters and propositions. Interaction is a process in which the writer engages the reader in the discourse, assuming that they hold a particular point of view, recognizing their possible doubtfulness (Hyland., 2001). Hewings & Hewings (2002) comparatively analyzed the metadiscourse components of journal articles and academic papers. The study found that authors of academic papers make greater efforts to persuade readers of the truthfulness of their statements. Dong & Jiang (2019) investigated the variations in six different domains of the British National Corpus (BNC) of English. It was found that the evaluative it pattern is typical and representative, and this style is characterized by its frequency of use, evaluation adjectives, and evaluation clause pattern in different registers. Wang Z. et al. (2022) explored the significance of the evaluative it pattern with reference to the stance meaning of patterns associated with adjective and verb lexemes. The findings showed that the co-occurrence morphemes of adjectives and verbs were statistically and functionally significant for each stance type/subtype provided. In recent years, most of the domestic studies on evaluative it patterns have focused on the discourse function of academic discourse, evaluation patterns and meanings (Zhang Jidong and Xilongjing 2016; Wang Bingxin and Wei Naixing 2018), communicative functions, and so on.

Most of the current studies have focused on exploring the form and function of evaluative it patterns under different disciplines and genres (Biber et al., 1999; Herriman, 2000; Hyland, K. & Tse, P., 2005; Peacock, 2011; Larsson, 2018; Pérez Blanco, 2020), focusing on language use characteristics in specific professional domains. However, there has been little investigation

concerning the meaning features of adjectives in this pattern. Evaluative it pattern has an evaluative function. The realization of the function is mainly reflected on the use of adjectives. Therefore, it is necessary to deeply explore the semantic features presented by a particular type from the perspective of semantic categories. Francis et al. classified the meaning of the pattern into multiple semantic groups based on the meaning, and hence generalized the whole meaning of the pattern. For example, it v-link ADJ that primarily evaluates the likelihood, significance, importance of the proposition (Francis et al., 1998). Lemke generalized seven semantic types for evaluating propositions and offers, namely, availability, likelihood, normality, regularity, significance, obviousness, and seriousness (Lemke, 1998). Additionally, other relevant researches also exist similarities and differences among different writing groups in the use of evaluative it patterns (Groom, 2005; Larsson, T. & Kaatari, H. 2019; Larsson, T. 2016, 2019). However, most of such studies focus on intermediate and advanced learners such as experts, doctors and postgraduates. These studies mainly compared and analyzed the similarities and differences in their use of the style in academic discourse or abstracts of academic papers. Few explored the use of evaluative it patterns by secondary school English learners. Secondary English learners are an important part of English language learners. Exploring the usage characteristics of the evaluative it pattern helps to explore this pattern in depth. Therefore, the research on the aspect of the evaluative it pattern still needs to be further expanded.

Previous studies of evaluative it patterns have been conducted from multiple perspectives, including academic discourse, different disciplines, different genres, and stance expressions. However, the usage and semantic similarities and differences between scholars from different mother tongue backgrounds in the same discipline who use this pattern in a particular language domain have not been explored in depth. In view of this, based on the TECCL_MS and NESSIE corpora, the paper takes it is ADJ that as the object of study, and comparatively explores the differences and similarities between Chinese and English learners in terms of the overall frequency and type of use of this pattern. Lemke (1998) argues that the semantic nature words carried by propositions and suggestions are evaluative, namely It is + [nature word: evaluative] that [proposition or suggestion]. Using the semantic division criteria of Francis et al. (1998) and Lemke (1998), high-frequency adjectives are classified into three semantic groups in the paper. We compare the prominent meanings of it is ADJ that high-frequency adjectives in the written texts of Chinese and foreign learners from the standpoint of semantic categories. Simultaneously, the causes of the variations are examined from a variety of angles in an effort to provide some guidance on teaching English writing.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Questions

Based on the Chinese and foreign learners' composition corpus, this study investigates the differences in the usage of it is+adj that in writing, focusing on the following three questions:

- (1) What are the similarities and differences in the frequency of it is+adj that in TECCL_MS and NESSIE?
- (2) What are the similarities and differences in the types of it is+adj that in TECCL_MS and NESSIE?
- (3) What are the characteristic meanings of Chinese secondary school students' use of it is+adj that in their writing compared to native speakers?

3.2. Corpus

The corpus used in this study comes from two composition corpora: (1) Ten_thousand English Compositions of Chinese Learners (TECCL V1.1); (2) Native English Speakers' Similarly and Identically-prompted Essays (NESSIE V1.0).

(1) Ten_thousand English Compositions of Chinese Learners, referred to as TECCL V1.1 corpus, which was constructed by Xu Jiajin's team in 2015, and all the corpora were generated in the period of 2011-2015. The size of the corpus is about 10,000 compositions and 1,817,335 formants. English compositions from students at three distinct learning levels--elementary school, secondary school, and university--make up the corpus. Time-limited classroom compositions, homework assignments completed after school, midterm and final exams, speeches prepared for in-class presentations, and group collaborative compositions are among the several sorts of compositions. Furthermore, the sampling distribution is accurately represented, and the corpus is gathered from every province and area in the nation (Xu Jiajin, 2016). Since the target of this study is English language learners in the secondary school level. Therefore, this study extracts the writing corpus of secondary school students from the TECCL corpus and builds the TECCL Middle School Chapter sub-corpus, referred to as TECCL_MS (TECCL_Middle School) sub-corpus, which contains 2,801 texts and 429,091 morphemes. (Xu Jiajin, 2015).

(2) The China Foreign Language Education and Research Center creates and builds the Native English Speakers' Essay Corpus, also known as NESSIE V1.0 Corpus. It is a 180,000-word-size corpus of English essays by native English speakers, containing 256 texts with 193,844 symbols. The corpus is primarily composed of English essays written by native speakers of British and American languages in accordance with the essay topics of Chinese university English grade 4-6 and English major grade 4-8. A portion of the corpus also comes from essay texts with similar topics in the corpora of British and American university students, such as BAME, MICSUP, and so forth.

3.3. Research Instruments

(1) BFSU Power Conc1.0: it is a concordancers and query tool. In the current English teaching, the fixed collocation types and frequency in the corpus of students' compositions can help investigators to find the differences in frequency data more accurately, as well as the differences in the use of giant types and semantics.

(2) Chi-square and Log Likelihood Calculator: it is used to test whether two or more samples come from the same probability distribution. It can be used to test whether there are significant differences among multiple samples, infer the size of the overall parameters, estimate the estimators needed to fit the model, and make a comparative study. This paper makes a comparative study based on the data of two corpus.

3.4. Research Procedures

The first step is to retrieve data .We use the concordance function of PowerConc 1.0 to search for it @be #adj that in TECCL_MS and NESSIE respectively. Then we use the statistics function (Stats.) to count the types (Types) and frequencies (Tokens) of the collocations in the two corpora, hoping to find out the different patterns of the use of the collocation.

The second step is to obtain statistics. Since the two corpora are of different sizes, we thus need to convert the retrieved absolute frequencies (also known as observed frequencies) into relative frequencies (also known as normalized frequencies) when performing it is+adj that frequency and type statistics. Subsequently, we employed Chi-square Calculator 1.0 (Liang Maocheng, 2010) to assess whether there was significant variability between the frequency and type of it is+adj that in the two corpora. When the absolute value of the Loglikelihood ratio (abbreviated as LL) was larger than 3.83 and the Significance (abbreviated as p) was less than 0.05, with a 95% confidence level of the data, a statistically significant difference between the two was considered. When the absolute value of the Loglikelihood ratio (abbreviated as LL) was larger than 6.64 and the Significance (abbreviated as p) was less than 0.01, with a 99% confidence level of the data, a statistically significant difference between the two was

considered. When the absolute value of the Loglikelihood ratio (abbreviated as LL) was larger than 10.83 and the Significance (abbreviated as p) was less than 0.001, with a 99.9% confidence level of the data, a statistically significant difference between the two was considered. The third step is to classify. We extract the high-frequency adjectives appearing in the it is + adj that pattern in the two corpora. Based on semantic properties, the adjectives are grouped into multiple semantic categories. We compare and analyze the characteristic meanings of the patterns used by Chinese and foreign learners. In this paper, we cite the categories of Francis et al. (1998) and Lemke (1998). And then we identify three semantic groups of this pattern: necessity, certainty, and likelihood based on the data of this study.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Frequency of Use of it is +adj that

In comparison analysis, the number of tokens, absolute frequency and relative frequency are compared. The number of tokens is the total number of words contained in the corpus. Absolute frequency is the actual count of occurrences of a particular linguistic feature in the corpus, which in this study refers to the frequency of occurrence of it is+adj that. Relative frequency is the number of occurrences of the word per million words and can be used for comparison between two or more corpora. To facilitate the comparison, the absolute frequency of this study was converted to relative frequency. The calculation process is as follows: relative frequency = (absolute frequency of the node word ÷ total words tokens in the corpus) × 100,000. According to the corpus search tool PowerConc 1.0, in the TECCL_MS corpus, the absolute frequency of occurrence of it is+adj that is 29 times, and the relative frequency is 6.76 times per 100,000; in the NESSIE corpus, the absolute frequency of occurrence of it is+adj that is 30 times, and the relative frequency is 15.48 times per 100,000, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency information for it is+adj that in TECCL_MS and NESSIE

	TECCL_MS	NESSIE	LL	P
Tokens	429,091	193,844		
Absolute frequency	29	30	-9.89	0.002
Relative frequency	7	16	-14.31	0.000

Note: Relative frequency = number of occurrences per million words; LL = log-likelihood ratio; P = significance value; “+” and “-” stand for overuse and underuse in TECCL_MS; Significance < 0.05 indicates significant discrepance.

The frequency of learners using it is+adj that is shown in Table 1. As can be seen, the frequency of retrieval of it is+adj that in TECCL_MS and NESSIE is 29 and 30 respectively. after preliminary test, LL=-9.89, p=0.002 (p<0.01). the LL is negative and the absolute value is greater than the critical value of 6.64, which indicates that there is a significant difference between the two in terms of the overall use of it is+adj that. Therefore, it is 99% certain that Chinese learners of English are underusing it is+adj that compared to native speakers. For further validation, the absolute frequencies obtained were converted into relative frequencies, which were 6.76 in TECCL_MS and 15.48 in NESSIE. It can be seen that the native language learners used it is+adj that almost twice as often as the Chinese secondary school learners. The log-likelihood ratio test shows that there is a fairly significant difference between the two (LL=-14.31, p=0.000). The LL is negative and the absolute value is greater than the critical value of 10.83, p<0.001. This means that it is 99.9% certain that Chinese secondary school learners use the collocation fairly significantly less than native speakers, and there is a tendency to use it too little. The results of this study are consistent with the conclusions drawn from the study by Zhang Lei and

Wei Naixing (2017).They came to the conclusion that, compared to Western legal academics, Chinese legal scholars employ standard evaluation patterns far less frequently. One of the typical evaluation styles contains it v-link ADJ that, which is generally consistent with the styles studied in this paper. With roughly twice as tokens in the reference corpus (Western) as in the target corpus (Chinese), there may be a significant disparity in corpus capacity as one of the causes of this phenomena. It seems sense that the larger the corpus size, the higher the probability of retrieving the target collocation.

4.2. Type of Use of it is +adj that

As counted by the corpus search tool PowerConc 1.0, the absolute frequency of it is+adj that usage type in TECCL_MS is 12 times, and the relative frequency is 2.8 times per 100,000 times; in NESSIE, the absolute frequency of it is+adj that usage type is 12 times, and the relative frequency is 6.19 times per 100,000 times. As shown in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. Type information for it is+adj that in TECCL_MS and NESSIE

	TECCL_MS	NESSIE	LL	P
Tokens	429,091	193,844		
Absolute frequency	12	12	-3.69	0.06
Relative frequency	3	6	-4.79	0.03

Note: Relative frequency = number of occurrences per million words; LL = log-likelihood ratio; P = significance value; “+” and “-” stand for overuse and underuse in TECCL_MS; Significance < 0.05 indicates significant discrepance.

The types of learners' use of it is+adj that can be seen in Table 2. It is+adj that has retrieval types of 12 and 12 in TECCL_MS and NESSIE, respectively. a preliminary test shows that LL=-3.69, p=0.06, and the absolute value of LL is less than 3.83, p>0.05. The result suggests that there is not much difference between Chinese secondary school learners of English and native speakers of English. Subsequently, the absolute frequencies were converted into relative frequencies, which were 2.8 in TECCL_MS and 6.19 in NESSIE. It can be seen that the variety of types in which native learners use it is+adj that is about twice as large as that of Chinese secondary learners. The result of the log-likelihood ratio test is LL=-4.79, p=0.03. LL is negative and the absolute value is greater than the critical value of 3.83, p<0.05. This indicates that the difference is significant. Therefore, it is 95% certain that native learners use and choose it is + adj that in a richer and more varied way; in contrast, Chinese secondary school learners use the collocation in a more homogeneous way, and there is the phenomenon of dependence on a fixed word collocation. This is in line with the findings of Lou Baocui and Wang Mimi (2021), who found that word chunks are used more uniformly and that fixed class phrase chunks are used by Chinese scholars. The primary causes of this phenomena include native language transfer as well as the learners themselves. Chinese secondary school students, on the other hand, can have a less varied vocabulary, be less proficient in language, and hence have less type variety. Chinese secondary school students are second language writers who inexorably carry over their mother tongue writing habits and idioms into their English writing. Each of the two languages has unique traits: English is a flexionist language with rich morphological alterations, whereas Chinese is an isolating language with no strictly meaningful morphological changes. Furthermore, Chinese secondary school students have been studying their mother tongue for a considerable amount of time. This, coupled with the heavy emphasis on memorization and excessive reinforcement of this kind in English classrooms, makes it easy for them to become unaware of morphological changes and to use homogeneous types and vocabularies.

4.3. Characteristic Meanings of it is +adj that

The TECCL_MS and NESSIE corpora are the sources of data retrieved in this paper. And with reference to Francis et al. (1998) and Lemke (1998), high-frequency adjectives are categorized into three semantic groups: certainty, likelihood, and importance. Certainty, namely, the extent to which the writer expresses confidence in the proposition or the degree to which the writer is certain about the material in question; The likelihood, i.e. the author presenting the viewpoint or proposition in a modest, discrete, and humble manner; Importance--that is, the degree to which the author believes the relevant proposition to be important or the purpose of the evaluation to be important. The type's semantic group distribution is displayed in [Table 3](#).

Table 3. Semantic groups of the it is + adj that

Semantic groups	TECCL_MS			NESSIE		
	Adjective	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency	Adjective	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency
Certainty	obvious(13) clear(1)	14	3.3	clear(5)	5	2.6
Likelihood	possible(2)	2	0.5	possible(7) likely(5)	12	6.2
Importance	necessary(3)	3	0.7	necessary(2) important(2)	14	2.1

Note: Frequency of adjectives in brackets.

In the comparative analysis of frequency data, it is found that the frequency of using collocations such as it is possible that, it is likely that and it is clear that is significantly lower than that of native speakers, which also shows that Chinese students express their views more directly and subjectively in the process of writing. On the other hand, the articles of British students are more in line with the requirements of diluting personal roles and highlighting research content in academic writing. The findings of this study are consistent with the view that Hyland & Milton (1997: 183205) non-native language students are more likely to use first-person pronouns with cognitive verbs. Here are some typical examples:

- 1) I do not agree with this opinion, because it is obvious that the Internet is not always useful. My personal view is that(TECCL).
- 2) for this is that they hold it, but others are not.it is obvious that we are living in a dog-eat-dog time, and competition is so(NESSIE).
- 3) It is natural that such a hardworking student should pass the exam.(TECCL).
- 4) It is natural that a person with poor eyesight should wear glasses or contact lens.(NESSIE).
- 5) It is possible that we all have compromised conversational intelligence.(TECCL).
- 6) It is possible that there is a definite relation between these paintings and the markings that some times accompany them.(NESSIE).
- 7) It is likely that they would go into hiding for a few weeks,and resurface when the publicity has died down.(TECCL).
- 8) It is likely that babies are not born knowing the basic fact of the universe;not are they ever clearly taught it.(NESSIE).

Three semantic groupings are shared by the two data sets, as Table 3 illustrates. In assessing propositions, certainty, likelihood, and importance are the characteristic meanings of the it is + adj that type of phrase that are presented here. Furthermore, there are differences in the way Chinese and foreign secondary school students apply the pattern. While native language

learners assessed propositional statements with the highest frequency of likelihood, Chinese secondary school students evaluated them with the highest frequency of certainty. There is a fairly significant difference in the characteristic meanings of likelihood use ($LL = -18.03$, $p = 0.000$). The absolute value is higher than the critical value of 10.83, $p < 0.001$, and the LL is negative. This suggests that there is a 99.9% certainty level that learners of native languages are more likely to assess the likelihood of propositions. As shown by the transformed relative frequencies, native language learners make greater use of likelihood the significance of this attribute than do secondary school students in China.

The findings of Wang Bingxin and Wei Naixing (2018) about the shared characteristic meaning of academic papers are in line with this. They contended that whereas Western scholars typically express significance and likelihood meanings, Chinese scholars typically express difficulty and certainty meanings. Yang Yanling and He Huaqing (2016) in the study of English learners' use of lexical chunks, it is found that English learners tend to express their views directly and absolutely while native English speakers will express their views in a slow and euphemistic way. The two following factors could be the primary causes of this discrepancy: On the one hand, appraisal is influenced by the community's deeply ingrained cultural customs (Hunston, 2011). There are certain distinctions in thought and expression between Chinese and Western cultural traditions since they are not the same. Native speakers typically leave some room for conversation with others, communicate their thoughts euphemistically and indirectly, and have a feeling of reader participation. A speaker can exhibit greater humility and acceptance the more discursive room they provide for potential readers (Martin, J. & White, P., 2005). Conversely, Chinese secondary school students are more strong and direct in their writing because texts are seen as vehicles for imparting information and truth (Matalene, 1985) and because Chinese rhetorical tradition tends to establish textual authority; On the other hand, due to the language context, there is a discrepancy between their pragmatic and strategic abilities. Given their exposure to the English language and their superior overall ability, native speakers are well-suited to convey attitudinal connotations through the language. On the contrary, Chinese secondary school English learners are less competent in all domains and are constrained by their limited knowledge and competence when expressing themselves. Because they do not have access to a genuine language environment and foreign language instruction typically occurs in the classroom. This should be one of the main distinctions between Chinese secondary school students and their native speakers when it comes to how they employ the adjective to convey attitude meaning.

5. Conclusion

Utilizing Corpus Linguistics research methodology, the paper compares and analyzes the use of it is ADJ that pattern in the compositions of Chinese and foreign secondary English learners. The findings reveal the following distinctions between Chinese secondary English learners and native language learners with the frequency, type, and characteristic meaning of the usage of this pattern in English writing: first of all, Chinese secondary English learners tend to apply this pattern too little and far less frequently than native learners do. Second, the types used by native speakers are richer and more varied, whereas the types used by Chinese secondary students are more mechanical and homogeneous. Finally, in terms of characteristic meaning, Chinese secondary English learners tend to express deterministic meaning in their writing; native learners tend to express significance and likelihood meaning. This study has the following implications for English teaching in secondary schools. In real teaching, teachers should create specific and authentic contexts to guide students to learn written expressive language instead of mechanically teaching it in the classroom in order to improve their pragmatic and strategic abilities. First-line teachers can make use of the corpus linguistics

method to compare and analyze the similarities and differences in the use of a particular pattern between China and foreign countries, and then use it as a basis for organizing the teaching content. The evaluative it pattern is an important academic text resource. Learning English at secondary level lays the foundation for all subsequent levels of study. Therefore, secondary English teachers consciously guide students to acquire the characteristic meaning and type of this pattern. This will play an important role in the ability of future students to adequately express the importance of evaluative attitudes in academic writing.

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