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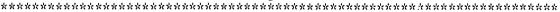   Learning; *Writing (Composition)
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ABSTRACT
        A study investigated the frequent choice of the term
"always" instead of the more appropriate term "often" in the essay
writing of native Chinese-speaking learners of English as a Second
Language (ESL), focusing on how problematic usage of "always" can
adversely affect perceptions of the student's competence in
undertaking an academic discussion. Successful diagnoses of the
problem and useful treatments are then sought in grammar textbooks.
The apparent persistence of the problem among Hong Kong undergraduate
students is then related to choices available in Cantonese and to
linguistic analyses of the descriptive facts and communicative
options in English. A small sample of concordance data is examined to
suggest how the practice of ESL student writers at the University of
Hong Kong compares with the usage of other writers in locally
published academic writing. Classroom techniques for teaching
alternative lexico-grammatical possibilities and their implications
are discussed. (MSE)

WHY 'OFTEN' ISN'T 'ALWAYS'

Desmond Allison

Introduction

The focus of this paper is sufficiently restricted to deserve an early justification. Its concern is to explore and explain an apparent tendency among Chinese learners of English at quite advanced levels (first year undergraduate students for whom English is a second language) to use the lexical item "always" in ways that will strike many experienced users of English in academic contexts as erroneous or misconceived. Since, at worst, preoccupations of this sort can be summarily dismissed as both prescriptivist and myopic, the following discussion is not without risks, especially if undertaken in the name of language awareness. It is nonetheless my belief that the judgements made by experienced users of English about students' writing are not adequately explicable as arbitrary exercises of power and whim, but that they quite often reflect values and priorities that it can be helpful for students to understand. To this end, it is worth moving beyond generalities (e.g. that students are sometimes adjudged to adopt an overly dogmatic tone and make unwarranted claims in their academic writing) in order to ask how readers' judgements could be influenced by specific linguistic choices. Rather than merely contrasting microlinguistic and macrolinguistic concerns, I shall attempt to show how local choices sometimes contribute towards the overall coherence, or lack of coherence, that academic readers find in students' writing.

Research into ESL writing has done much to characterise ways in which ESL students' writing often - though not always - lacks coherence in the eyes of academic staff. Some of the subject teachers interviewed in universities have commented freely on the "irrelevance" and "illogicality" that they find in ESL students' assignments (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991, p.20) or consider much ESL students' writing to be deficient in background knowledge, awareness of text macrostructures, planning, "conceptual imagination", vocabulary and objectivity regarding value systems (Johns, 1991, p.168). Johns herself observes of ESL writing in an adjunct class that "students tended to be general, to make knowledge claims that were inaccurate, unsupported, and therefore lacking in coherence for the target audience" (Johns, 1990, p.221). In a number of comparative studies of L1 and L2 writing, claims made by L2 writers are said to have been typically less fully supported and developed, less effectively linked and less adapted to a target readership than in otherwise comparable argumentative text structures produced by L1 writers (Silva, 1993, pp.664-665, reviewing the literature). Bruce and Lewkowicz (1991) point to a lack of initial direction, of clear transitions across levels of generality, and of a final synthesis, and to the common inclusion of unselective and uncritical listings of what other writers "said" [1], as characteristic shortcomings in samples of academic writing by students at the University of Hong Kong, as these were perceived and evaluated by language teachers and other disciplinary specialists in their comparative study.

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[1] Pickard (1994) has investigated the reporting verb SAY in students' and others' academic writing

The prevalence of such reactions to ESL students' writing quite properly motivates a great deal of critical discussion and investigation within applied linguistics. As several of the above sources point out, the expectations of academic staff are themselves not always (or perhaps even normally) clear, consistent and uniform. ESL student writers face considerable difficulties, and often show remarkable abilities, in reconciling their own comments, views and values with the obscure demands of teacher-readers that form an important part of the context for their writing. For my immediate purposes in this paper, I shall assume the context of an ESL writing class in which the teacher seeks to work with learners to explore and understand some of the demands of "academic writing" in English. I take the view that a critical exploration will avoid either imposing or opposing conformity to academic readers' expectations, but will seek to increase an appreciation of some of the textual origins and intellectual reasons that are likely to underlie these readers' reactions to students' writing.

Students' writing may be found to lack coherence for many reasons. Among these, we should not overlook the effects on readers of specific linguistic choices in the textual development of a writer's argument and standpoint. Semantic values and pragmatic implications of ostensibly familiar words and phrases are liable to be diversely and sometimes imperfectly understood. These differences can form a locus of misunderstandings or disagreements between reader and writer that may have profound effects on, for example, a reader's judgements of a writer's viewpoint, or competence, or commitment. When viewed in this light, explorations of microlinguistic choices with ESL learners[2] can help teachers to actualise, in practical and accessible ways, some of the far-reaching concerns over relevance, consistency and warrant in argumentative discourse that arise in academic and professional deliberations over the development of advanced writing abilities. (Allison, in press, develops and illustrates this claim more fully.) Attention to specific choices can also take account of the expectations of teachers and learners who want to continue overtly to address matters of grammar and vocabulary in language classes.

The focus of this paper is on just one such linguistic choice, involving the word "always" and alternatives such as "often" that might have been chosen in its place. The paper takes an example of student essay writing (also presented and briefly discussed in Allison, in press) to suggest how problematic uses of *always* appear likely to reflect adversely on the student writer's perceived competence in undertaking an academic discussion. The status of this kind of problem as a "common error" is raised to find out whether any useful diagnoses and possible treatments are suggested in pedagogic grammars that are available to students in the teaching situation. The apparent persistence of such usage among Hong Kong undergraduate students is then related to choices available in Cantonese, and to linguistic analyses of the descriptive facts and communicative options in English. A small sample of concordanced data is finally examined to suggest how far the practice of ESL student writers at the University of Hong Kong may compare with the usage of other writers in locally published academic writing. The point of working with such data is not to establish authoritative truths, but to suggest how alternative lexicogrammatical possibilities and their implications can be investigated with benefit by students during group and class activities.

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[2]   Comparable issues will doubtless arise in other languages and will not be confined to second-language learners, as academic writing is first approached.

Illustrating a problem

As a working assumption, I shall take the following example as an instance of fairly widespread usage among first-year undergraduate writers in Hong Kong, and not a personal idiosyncracy on the part of the student writer. I base this assumption on my unquantified impressions of usage and comments by other students I teach, corroborative feedback from a number of colleagues in my teaching situation, and evidence below that *always* has been identified as a source of "common errors" among Hong Kong learners of English. The example in question has already served the pedagogic purpose of generating student discussion about linguistic choices and their effects on the claims a writer is making. Actual frequency of usage could also be explored by students through work on linguistic corpuses.

The introductory paragraph below is taken from an essay submitted by a first-year student in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Hong Kong who was following an English enhancement course and whose general English standard and results were somewhat above average. (Members of the class gave permission for extracts from their essays to be cited on the understanding that anonymity would be preserved.) The title of the essay was "The approaches, techniques and effectiveness of behavior therapy in helping a patient quit smoking". The topic and background source materials were chosen by the student and were said to be of interest: while such comments from student to teacher remain open to diverse interpretations, the thorough treatment of the topic in the essay tended to bear out this reported judgement. The source materials were mainly American in origin (and have influenced spelling choices). The opening paragraph was as follows:

> *Cigarette smoking is a very common habit in Hong Kong. Data from researches have well supported that cigarette smoking has a high correlation with lung cancer. And lung cancer is a great disease killer in Hong Kong. In view of this hazardous result of smoking, many smokers had tried to quit smoking. However, since smoking is a very addictive behavior, people who try to quit smoking always result in failure. There are actually many ways derived from studies in Psychology that can help people quit smoking. And these ways are always carried out in behavior therapy.*

The two uses of *always* in this short extract are, of course, not the only potential causes for concern about the writing as an introduction to an academic treatment of the topic. Among the intellectual errors that might be attributed to the student on the basis of this opening paragraph are the mistaken assumption that a high correlation is proof of cause and effect, since there is a leap from "high correlation" to "hazardous result" in the argument. There are also various syntactic infelicities (e.g. the collocation "people... result in failure": compare "people... meet with failure" or "people's attempts... result in failure"). Discussions of the extract in class might, therefore, elicit a number of different points of interest on different occasions.

That said, it is worth pointing out the contribution made by the two uses of *always* to the text and to impressions to which it could give rise. The first instance is factually at variance with common knowledge, with the source texts used and with the essay itself. Even though failure is frequent, people's unaided attempts to give up smoking do sometimes succeed, hence do *not* "always result in failure". The rate of success in a population can even afford a benchmark against which the rate of success for particular forms of behaviour therapy are compared. (This point was discussed in a source cited and used by the student

writer.) The second sense is hard to interpret meaningfully. Does the use of *always* imply, for example, that every patient invariably follows the complete set of ways to help people quit smoking? In both cases, replacement of always by a term denoting what is frequent, or typical, such as *often* or *commonly*, would eliminate any contradiction or implausibility in what the student writer is asserting.

Searching for explanations

The complexity of the linguistic choices we make, and the limited access that we have to our own mental processes, conspire to render explanations a hazardous and speculative affair. The following discussion will seek to throw light on what is possible, but cannot hope to demonstrate what selection or combination of these possibilities underlay the choices made by one student writer on one occasion. Even the student's own comments (which in this case are reconstituted from the teacher's notes and recollections) cannot transcend these epistemological difficulties. They are, nonetheless, of special relevance as a source of insight.
Comments by students

Essentially, and summarised in the teacher's metalanguage, the student writer's own position was that these uses of *always* were intended to denote very high frequency, stronger than *often* or comparable terms, but not strictly to effect a universal claim. An account in terms of the L1 was also proposed, as the student claimed that Cantonese uses one and the same expression where English would use either *often* or *always* depending on emphasis and context. Other students questioned this judgement and pointed to a comparable distinction between two expressions in Cantonese. Students acknowledged this area of usage as sometimes problematic in English. For immediate purposes in class, matters were taken no further: the student writer had indicated agreement after small-group discussion that *often* would serve better to convey the intended meaning in the context. Whether such a change involves learning or token acquiescence is, of course, impossible to determine other than impressionistically. My judgement as teacher was that the student accepted the revision as an improvement but did not see the change as important; I felt that further discussion would have been a case of overkill.

The commentaries that follow arise from my own efforts to account for an apparent lack of awareness, on the part of a learner who appeared to be interested in English, of what is potentially an important linguistic difference in terms of whether claims being made in the course of an academic essay will appear defensible or not. This issue of sensitivity to a distinction needs to be distinguished from a question of interest, with which it is sometimes confused in shop talk among teachers. One can, after all, quickly recognise many distinctions without having any great interest in them. More to the point, a student can fail to see why a distinction would matter despite manifesting a genuine desire to improve his or her writing.

In what follows, we consider the status of *always* as a source of "common errors" among ESL users, look briefly at comparable expressions in Cantonese, and go on to examine linguistic arguments that challenge a categorical interpretation of *always* as strictly invariable in English. Having established the underlying complexity of the choices at issue and the largely inevitable limitations of pedagogic reference material, the paper calls for classroom exploration of appropriately chosen samples of usage.

In order to move beyond personal impressions derived from one classroom context, I decided to see how *always* was treated in three pedagogic grammars to which my students were already encouraged to refer on a self-access basis.

Bunton (1989) identifies overuse and misuse of *always* as a common error in English usage among Hong Kong learners (Bunton, 1989, p.5). Bunton's first example of an error is *I always listen to the radio*, which he contrasts with acceptable forms *I often listen to the radio, I listen to the radio every day* and *I always listen to the radio in the evenings*. Bunton observes: "*Always* means 'at all times', so *often* or *frequently* may be more accurate unless the situation is more clearly defined, e.g. *He always sits at the front of the class / She always goes to the cinema on Sundays*". In these examples, a situation has been defined by means of adverbial phrases of time (*on Sundays; in the evenings*) or place (*at the front of the class*), taken in conjunction with world knowledge (e.g. that *class* indicates an institutionalised event as well as a location). Though concise exposition is always a problem, it is perhaps a pity that Bunton does not go on to consider the potential acceptability of *I always listen to the radio* in more extended discourse contexts where a situation has been adequately defined in or can be understood from neighbouring utterances. (In the same way, I hope that my own generalisation, *concise exposition is always a problem,* is acceptably specified in the previous sentence by its context of occurrence in an academic discussion.) Bunton's exposition may serve to capture default expectations of fluent English users who play by the rules constraining short pedagogical grammars, but does not in this instance appear to do full justice to the contextual complexities that determine what can meaningfully be said.

Whereas Bunton (1989) notes that one of the relevant problems in usage is an issue of what *always* means, Willis (1991, unit 34, pp. 68-69) simply lists *always* and *often* among twelve "adverbs of frequency" and then discusses placement of such adverbs in relation to BE, other main verbs, auxiliaries and modals. The subsequent exercises appear to assume that meanings are known and not at issue. Although he treats adverbs of frequency together with adverbs of probability in the same unit, Willis does not discuss the semantic relationship between these two forms of modification, with the result that the similarities in their syntactic placement might be inferred as the sole reason for the joint treatment.

In a more sophisticated exposition, Leech and Svartvik (1975) display some of the correspondences between several areas of meaning relating to positions "on a scale of amount" (section 68, p. 52). Their treatment of *always* distinguishes between duration, with *always* and *for ever* both meaning 'for all time', and frequency, for which *always* serves to express the upper limit 'on every occasion' (sections 156 and 157, p.81). *Always* and *never* are presented as the upper and lower limits on a scale of indefinite frequency, which in "a rough indication" includes *often* and *frequently* at the level of 'on many occasions' (section 157, p. 81). Where frequency is concerned, this exposition therefore assigns *always* and *often* to different, non-overlapping parts of a scale. This appears to capture default expectations over usage, while the admission that the account gives a "rough indication" implicitly makes room for contextually determined variations in interpretation of specific instances. Figure 1 is extracted and slightly adapted from one column in the table presented by Leech and Svartvik (1975, p.52); it shows how such information might appear for frequency terms.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

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Consultation with a native speaker of Cantonese and applied linguist (K.S.Ip) immediately elicited familiarity with the problem of overuse of *always* by Cantonese users. The expression 常 常 (seung seung) and the variant form 時 常 (si seung) were cited as synonymous forms that were likely to be translatable either into *always* or *often* in English, depending on context, with uses of *always* corresponding to common uses in informal spoken English (e.g. *She's always putting him down!*). Another expression, 永 遠 (wing yuen), corresponds to a stricter English interpretation of *always* ('for ever, opposite of never'). As other consultations with students and colleagues also made clear, accounts of what is possible and acceptable in Cantonese can vary considerably among authorities; my expert informant has nonetheless made it clear that a strict notion of "invariably and without exception" can be encoded in one lexeme in Cantonese. Indeed, any lack of correspondence between the semantic ranges of the Cantonese and English terms in this area appears to be that Cantonese 永 遠 (wing yuen) has a narrower range of meaning (permanency and invariability) than English *always*. Further consideration of the lexeme *always* may therefore prove instructive.

Semantic and pragmatic considerations: Does a word always mean what it says?

Our exposition so far has broadly assumed with Bunton (1989) that *always* means 'at all times', or on all occasions, and our comments on academic writing have implied that this meaning itself holds good at all times in academic writing. Yet such an account offers at best a convenient oversimplification. For one thing, we know from less formal contexts that *always* can indeed be used, in conjunction with a continuous tense, to mean much the same as *typically* or *very often* (*She's always putting him down!*). Such use is also possible in conjunction with a simple tense (*You always say that!*). Although their occurrence in an academic context or genre might be marked as unusual, it seems unlikely that academic writing should prove wholly impermeable to such possibilities in English. Students could in fact be encouraged to look out for such instances in the writing they encounter.

A more radical difficulty for our account arises from no less a source than Halliday (1985), who argues that expressions such as *always* and *certainly* are not in fact wholly determinate in meaning. This begins to suggest that a rigorous linguistic treatment of the expressions we are studying will prove more challenging and elusive than has appeared up to now. How far difficulties in describing and explaining linguistic choices can usefully be captured rather than avoided in pedagogic accounts may then vary according to the aims and target audiences for those accounts, but it seems important that teachers at least should be aware of them. Halliday's position is stated as follows:

In a proposition, the meaning of the positive and negative poles is asserting and denying: positive 'it is so', negative 'it isn't so'. There are two kinds of intermediate possibilities: (i) degrees of probability: 'possibly / probably / certainly'; (ii) degrees of usuality: 'sometimes / usually / always'... (Degrees of usuality) are equivalent to 'both yes and no', i.e. sometimes yes, sometimes no, with different degrees of oftenness attached. It is these scales of probability and usuality to which the term 'modality' strictly belongs.... Note also that even a high value modal ('certainly', 'always') is less determinate than a polar form: ... *it always rains in summer* is less invariable than *it rains in summer*. (Halliday, 1985, p.86)

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Halliday's account rejects a distinction in kind between *always* and *often* and presents both as conveying (different) "degrees of oftenness" on an intermediate scale of usuality.[3] As Halliday notes, the use of any such marker of modality in a declarative statement is an expression of speaker opinion. His argument is that expressions of speaker opinion - even claiming certainty or invariability - render the speaker's (or writer's) claims less determinate than when they are asserted without modification. Lyons (1977, p.809) also claims that "there is no epistemically stronger statement than a categorical assertion". This is not quite the same position as Halliday's, as it allows logically for the possibility of markers of speaker opinion that would neither strengthen nor weaken a claim. Lyons goes on, however, to point out that introducing markers of modal meaning into an utterance "has the effect of making our commitment to the factuality of the proposition explicitly dependent upon our, perhaps, limited knowledge" (p.809): this could imply that claims are weakened.

Responding to the above statements by Lyons (1977), Palmer (1986) argues that it is easy to imagine contexts where markers of speaker commitment:

".. strengthen the commitment rather than weaken it after a declarative statement, as in the following conversation:

John is at home
I don't think so
Oh yes he certainly is/He must be."

(Palmer, 1986, p.87).

Palmer thus takes the opposite view to Lyons (and Halliday). Palmer's examples, however, are a little cryptic and they remain open to different interpretations. As I would read them, imagining the conversational context and tones of voice, "Oh yes he certainly is" makes an emphatic reaffirmation of the earlier statement "John is at home", effectively strengthening the commitment as Palmer maintains, and thus demonstrating his general argument. On the other hand, despite Palmer's claim, I find that "He must be" actually introduces doubt: compare "He's gone out? I don't believe it!", meaning "I am astonished (but in fact do believe it)". I therefore agree with Palmer's general claim that "Expressions of the speaker's commitment do not necessarily weaken it" (loc. cit.); yet one of Palmer's own examples serves to remind us how easily such expressions can introduce doubt. We shall need to be open to the possibility that use of *always*, and of other terms at the limits of a scale, may render an utterance less determinate than an unqualified assertion, but we need not follow Halliday in assuming that this will necessarily be so.

Another perspective on the issue of speaker opinion and its effects on epistemic status of assertions would acknowledge that the marking of speaker or writer commitment to a claim will carry pragmatic as well as semantic implications. The meaning of expressions such as *always* or *often* will then appear particularly sensitive to the contextual constraints that realise, neutralise or suspend the meaning potential of lexical items as part of the language system. Levinson (1983, pp.37-38) has developed an interesting line of reasoning in relation to the

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[3]   Halliday has also spoken in lectures about possible slippage of terms along such scales over time, e.g. *surely* conveys less confidence than *certainly*. (Surely you would agree?)

words *some* and *all*: rather than seeing these expressions as mutually exclusive, Levinson argues that the semantics of *some* include in its scope the meaning *all* (some, and perhaps all...), but that pragmatic constraints sometimes add further constraints on interpretation (some, but not all). Comparably to Levinson, we can argue that the semantics of *sometimes*, *often* and *always* relate to the varying degrees to which frequency is specified, but do not map onto discrete parts of a frequency scale. Thus, in its meaning potential, *sometimes* is simply indefinite as to the frequency with which something happens, except for the crucial point that *never* is excluded. A default pragmatic reading of *sometimes* is then that it denotes only moderate frequency, in contrast with more marked expressions such as *rarely*, *often* and *always*, but this default expectation is easily cancelled without semantic contradiction (invented examples):

(1) Sometimes, though I have to say rarely, we manage to agree.
(2) Sometimes, in fact very often, we differ.
(3) Sometimes, and perhaps always, invented examples simplify the problem.

Unlike *sometimes*, the word *often* already denotes relatively high frequency on a scale. For this reason, example (4) is semantically anomalous and not just pragmatically unusual.

(4) * Often, though rarely, he gets to work on time.

The notion of "relatively high frequency" remains quite broad. In particular, it does not exclude the upper bound of the frequency scale: that is to say, it includes *always* within its scope. However, there will sometimes be a pragmatic tendency to restrict interpretation of *often* to mean "but not always":

(5) Linguists often go into too much detail.

A speaker or writer may specify such a restriction, rather than leaving it only to inference:

(6) Linguists often, though not always, go into too much detail.

Alternatively, any pragmatic restriction on the meaning potential of *often* can be blocked without leading to the kind of anomaly seen in (4) above:

(7) Linguists often, and perhaps always, go into too much detail.

There appear to be good reasons to doubt the descriptive adequacy of pedagogic accounts of *often* and *always* that assign these expressions to different non-overlapping parts of a scale of frequency (or "usuality" if we follow Halliday, 1985). Instead, we can posit a semantic relation of inclusion (*often* includes *always*) that is asymmetrical (*always* does not include *often*). Similar arguments will apply to other terms on a scale of frequency and to terms on a scale of probability. Some terms cover larger semantic areas; this semantic coverage will sometimes be restricted pragmatically in contexts of use. For pedagogic purposes among others, a writer or speaker's choices can be related to notions of being sufficiently informative and not overly restrictive in selecting and contextualising expressions from a relevant scale, rather than to partitioning the scale into mutually exclusive segments.

Looking for applications

The account we have just given will probably not translate very easily into teaching tips. It could, however, inform the presentation of information and examples in pedagogic grammars, by not restricting the meaning potential of such terms as *sometimes* or *often* more narrowly than is actually warranted. To this end, a presentation as in Figure 2 that shows relations of inclusion would be more informative than that seen in Figure 1.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Pedagogic material focussing systematically on this area of language might also introduce examples in which *always* and *often* occur together (*often, and perhaps always; often, though not always; always, or at least very often*), rather than focussing solely on paradigmatic choices in which one term is substituted for the other.

Even if a particular use of *always* is taken to acknowledge some degree of doubt about the self-evident truth of a claim, to which the speaker or writer reacts by adding emphasis to the assertion, this is not to say that *always* means much the same thing as *usually* or *often*. Unless *always* is actually negated (*not always*) or hedged (*almost always*) by a speaker or writer, use of the term remains incompatible with quantified exceptions to a claim that something is always the case. The use of *often* does not mean that there can be no exceptions, even though a purely semantic account does not exclude the upper bound of the frequency scale from its range.

Why authentic examples are often best

Invented examples can sometimes serve purposes of linguistic exposition. The preceding discussion has (certainly) shown that linguists (always?) differ in their preferred accounts of the meanings and implications of apparently familiar lexical items like *certainly* and *always*. Such discussions, though, easily become arid, not least in the judgements of students and teachers who are not oriented towards linguistics. From an ESL teacher's perspective, more may be gained by looking with students at how the lexical item *always* and related lexemes are used in different corpuses of spoken or written English. Authentic data from larger corpuses can also extend and improve linguistic analysis (Sinclair, 1991), but such research falls beyond our limited scope in this paper.

Corpus-based investigations can serve several teaching and learning purposes. For example, a teacher might need to be convinced that it was worth spending time on a given lexical item, and might study a corpus of student writing to see how widespread or rare were the uses and possible misuses of that item. Assuming that the data warrant further interest, the teacher might then want to compare contexts of occurrence (e.g. associated tense choices) across different corpuses (e.g. student writers and "expert" writers). Such comparisons might also be undertaken by students, either as a class activity or as out-of-class work by interested individuals. (For fuller discussion, references and illustration of corpus-based work, see Benson et al, 1993.) We should bear in mind that "findings" from such studies will only be suggestive when small corpuses are used. As students in many disciplines will be well aware of sampling problems, and used to the idea of small pilot studies, involving them in small-scale linguistic enquiries ought to be possible without misrepresenting the research process.

Even if a classroom enquiry around concordanced outputs from small corpuses has originated in a teacher's concerns that certain lexical items appear to be misused or overused

by student writers, the outcomes of such work are not determined by the teacher. The linguistic judgements of students and teacher alike can then take account of what is seen in the course of a corpus-based study. Even a small corpus can offer some points of reference with which to compare one's own impressions or linguistic preferences. In this way, judgements and descriptions can be mutually informing.

Pickard (1994) has defended the practice of comparing a small corpus of student writing (essays by first-year social science undergraduates) with a small corpus of papers in linguistics and language teaching mainly written by English language teachers at the same university. Even though the topic areas are distinct (with some overlap), the comparison permits students and teachers to compare teachers' fairly general advice on aspects of academic writing with their own or their colleagues' practice in academic writing. Such work moves beyond teacher pronouncements to collaborative explorations of academic writing practices. In the teaching situation I outlined above, following Pickard, I provided my students with concordanced printouts for three lexical items or phrases: "always", "to...extent" and "society" from these two corpuses.[4] Below, I reproduce the "key word in context" information for *always*. For ease of reference and reprographics, I have numbered the examples and reduced the context to seven words on each side of the italicised keyword. For class use, original printouts were used to emphasise how the data were obtained.

Examples (student writing)

S1 ...as the climate of Hong Kong was *always* hot and humid during the years, and...
S2 ...repeat and faithful consumers. Their customers are *always* our target customers. So it
       is efficient...
S3 ...time to time so that it can *always* be fully and aptly utilized. For those...
S4 ...so as to be as useful as *always*. Language, too, needs 'revision' every now and...
S5 ...which language is unavoidably engaged. It is *always* a mystery to me how people
       manage...
S6 ...knowledge of the language one learns are *always* one's assets which can be used
       everywhere...
S7 ...and type of concert, we are still *always* so close to the foreign, especially western...
S8 ...to the society policy. Human beings are *always* living in society. We should not
       isolate...
S9 ...unpredictable and even impossible turns. People have *always* been intrigued by dreams,
       seeking to find...

Examples (academic papers)

A1 ...2, but that the converse does not *always* hold among the "poor" scripts. What seems...
A2 ...nouns. For example, numerals (more than one) *always* precede plural nouns, whereas
       some other modifiers...

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[4] Both corpuses can be analysed (within working memory limitations) by students and teachers using the Longman Mini-Concordancer in a self-access facility at the University of Hong Kong. The student essays came from coursework. The academic papers came from *Hong Kong Papers in Linguistics and Language Teaching*.

A3 ...and (15) illustrate two forms that are *always* plural (in the sense that they are...

A4 ...plural non-head nouns, and nouns which are *always* marked for plural but which some HKE...

A5 ...a mass noun, one of the *(sic)* is *always* followed by a plural noun. However, the...

A6 ...on an individual basis, & not necessarily *always* from the classroom teacher. Eventually, one would...

A7 ...a left-dislocated topic in English is nearly *always* used to refer to something known to

A8 ...that this type of topicalisation in TL *always* involves the precise placement of a comma...

A9 ...puzzling, since often, but by no means *always*, the TL used is ordered in a syntactically...

A10 ...found in Chinese, if transferred to English, *always* have the potential to suddenly introduce a...

A11 ...competence. (As a rule, Native Speaker Cantonese *always* say 'yes' to negative questions in Cantonese)....

A12 ...'mistake') of a particular problem is not *always* clear, and that in any case students...

A13 ...moderation since some of the items can *always* be eliminated if they do not work...

Such data could lend themselves to investigation and discussion along many parameters. It should be emphasised again that the samples are far too small and restricted to be taken as representing "student writing" and "academic writing" (even if we are prepared to assume that such broad categories are meaningful). All that is suggested is that the samples offer an opportunity to raise questions and to begin to look at instances of usage. At this stage of our discussion, only one or two such questions can be very briefly considered, to echo ome earlier themes.

Our original concern was with student uses of *always* that appeared to make unmodified claims that readers might reasonably regard as excessive. One area of interest is therefore to see how often *always* is either negated 'or otherwise departed from in the two concordances. There are no such cases among the 9 student examples. There are 4 cases of negation among the academic paper examples: "not always" (A1, A12); "not necessarily always" (A6); "often, but by no means always" (A9). Example A9 is an authentic instance of explicit reduction of the meaning potential of *often*, in which the upper bound of the frequency scale is excluded from the possible range of interpretation. Other instances in which *always* has been adverbially modified are A7 "nearly always" and (arguably) A11 "As a rule, ...always". Extended discussion of examples in class would not normally be needed: just identifying some of the possibilities in action can encourage students to reflect on their own writing as it takes shape. (How far it actually does so in a particular class setting could be the focus for an action research study.)

Some of the students who looked at the concordanced material were interested in the tense options that writers used. We may note here that the data included only one instance of a continuous tense, in example S8, and that this tense choice appears to sit oddly with kind of generalisation that the writer seeks to advance. There are two instances of occurrence with a modal ("can always be"): S3 and A13. While not particularly striking, this last example indicates that similarities as well as differences can be found when comparisons are made.

Conclusion

One aim of this paper has been to show that a very narrow focus, on a lexical choice between two items, already creates a need for several explanatory perspectives if even preliminary justice is to be done to the complexities that underlie such choices. The perspectives taken here have included cross-language comparison, commentary on pedagogic guidance available in grammars, study and criticism of more sophisticated accounts in English linguistics, and a preliminary look at how concordanced data might encourage attention to specific language points without basing attention to lexis and grammar on prescriptive input from teachers. Many other perspectives have been ignored in the paper (specifics of the writing tasks, for example), as its main focus was on how certain highly specific linguistic choices may be influenced and how they may then contribute to reader perceptions of writer competence and stance. To ignore other perspectives for one's own purposes in one discussion is not, it needs to be said, to suggest that these other perspectives are less important or less relevant to academic writing taken as a whole. I do, however, want to question any belief that specific attention to linguistic features in texts is in conflict with general concern for the academic situation, the development and the integrity of student writers. It is through linguistic choices that writers position themselves and are positioned by their readers. Attention to the likely effects of such choices in students' writing is a small but focussed contribution to their academic education.

ESL teachers will obviously approach such implications of linguistic choices in many different ways. It is unlikely that detailed linguistic accounts will engage the minds of ESL learners (although students of English language may have greater tolerance and interest than others). I have suggested that one useful way of looking at linguistic choices is for students to discuss selected features from short extracts from their peers' writing, as illustrated for the use of *always* in the extract chosen for illustration. Another complementary possibility is to work with concordanced data, from small corpuses, that can rapidly be examined with the help of starter questions to give focus to the comparisons that students make and to any lessons they may draw from this. These suggestions are methodological commonplaces and have not been developed in any detail. The main focus of the discussion has been on the actual linguistic point at issue. This has proved complex, perhaps sufficiently so to make it unremarkable that ESL students among others do not always tune into the semantic values and pragmatic implications of common lexical items in English (or of grammatical expressions), and that "common errors" often persist in advanced writing.

Prescriptivism remains a danger in working in these areas, and not only because of entrenched attitudes on the part of teachers. Students may also try to do what they think the teacher wants without understanding or caring why the teacher wants this. Exploring alternative choices that are made, and suggesting reasons for and effects of some of these choices, does not eliminate this danger. Such activities should, however, increase the likelihood that students will come to make their own judgements about the effectiveness of linguistic choices by writers, and about why readers might react to some of these choices in ways that the writer would not have hoped or intended.

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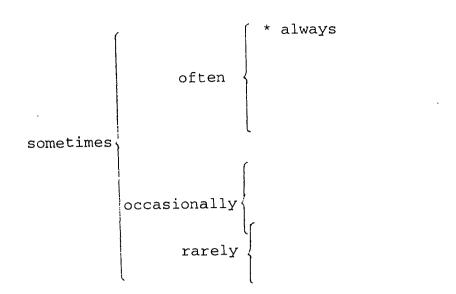
FIGURE 1. Six 'frequency' terms presented as discrete categories.

always
often
sometimes
occasionally
rarely
never

(Adapted from part of a table in Leech and Svartvik, 1975, p.52)

FIGURE 2. Six 'frequency' items shown in a relational diagram