

Lexical Priming Effects of Textbooks on EFL Learners' Use of *Give*

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Received: August 16, 2015 Accepted: September 15, 2015 Online Published: September 16, 2015

doi:10.5539/elt.v8n10p123 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v8n10p123>

Abstract

The study aims to investigate to what extent Chinese EFL learners' language use is influenced by English textbooks. Such influence may suggest the existence of lexical priming effects. Based on detailed and systematic analysis of a learner English corpus, in comparison with a textbook corpus, the present study revealed striking similarities of the use of *give* ditransitive constructions between students' writing and the contents of textbooks. These similarities, at least to some extent, reflected lexical priming effects of English textbooks at the levels of colligations, collocates, and semantic associations. The study also offers suggestions for compilation of teaching materials and classroom teaching practice.

Keywords: lexical priming, textbooks, EFL learning, *give* ditransitives

1. Introduction

In the 2005 book of *Lexical Priming*, Hoey proposed the Lexical Priming theory, claiming that "every word is primed for use in discourse as a result of the cumulative effects of an individual's encounters with the word" (Hoey, 2005). To be more specific, the Lexical Priming accounts are stated as follows:

Whenever we encounter a word (or syllable or combination of words), we note subconsciously its collocations, colligations, semantic associations, pragmatic associations, textual collocations, the genre and/or style it is used in, etc. (Hoey, 2014)

This knowledge explains how speakers can use a language fluently, creatively, and naturally. For foreign language learners, especially learners at the initial stages, the major sources of lexical priming stem from language teaching materials. Previous literature (e.g., Elorza & García-Riaza, 2010; Yang et al., 2000) has suggested that English textbooks exert potential influence on EFL learners' language use. Therefore, the study aims to compare language use in Chinese EFL learners' writing and English textbooks from the perspective of lexical priming.

The target structure of the study is the English ditransitive construction of the verb *give*. *Give* can occur in a variety of grammatical structures, but most interestingly, it can alternate between the ditransitive construction and the prepositional *to*-dative construction. For instance,

- 1) a Mary gave me a book. (ditransitive)
- b Mary gave a book to me. (*to*-dative)

The investigation of the ditransitive verb *give* has been a topic of interest for a long time. A number of studies have focused on the use of *give*, for instance, Newman (1996), Mukherjee (2005), Bresnan and Hay (2008), Schilk et al. (2013), etc. It has been found that *give* is a high-frequency ditransitive verb. The major reason for the high frequency of *give* as a ditransitive verb is probably that the act of giving is considered as a "basic level category" (Newman, 1996), and *give* is a prototypical ditransitive verb in this category. However, most of previous studies only investigated native speakers' use of *give*. More research is needed to examine how *give* is used in learner English.

Through a contrastive analysis between a native English corpus and a learner corpus, Xu (2014) found that

compared to native speakers and advanced learners, beginning learners show an item-based learning process, with great dependence on the ditransitive construction, frequent use of pronouns, and less various semantic classes. Since it has been suggested that English textbooks may pose a potential influencing source for learners' language use, it will be intriguing to investigate the extent to which EFL learners' use of ditransitive *give* is affected by English textbooks.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Lexical Priming and Foreign Language Learning

Hoey (2005) hypothesized that "lexical priming is the driving force behind language use, language structure, and language change". In his view, lexical priming can take place at various linguistic levels, including colligations, collocates, semantic associations, pragmatic associations, textual collocations, textual semantic associations, etc. The accounts lend much support to the importance of co-occurrence information surrounding a word. The lexical priming theory is based on the assumption that the particular use we make of a word is conditioned by our previous experience in our encounters with it in texts and communication. In this regard, the features of linguistic input for foreign language learners are extremely important.

In an instructional environment like China, middle school students are normally presented with such linguistic input that is "controlled and structured by the teacher... and by the materials used" (Gass, 1990). In another word, the major sources of lexical priming for beginning learners stem from classroom instructions and language teaching materials. It is inevitable that there may be some drawbacks using textbooks as the major source of input, since learners may receive classroom instructions and obtain input from exercises and exams. Nevertheless, with reference to the research carried out by Xu (2008), in middle schools, most classroom instructions given by the teacher were in Chinese and the exercises were primarily based on textbooks. Additionally, learners had little access to other sources of linguistic input than textbooks. Therefore, Chinese EFL learners at initial stages are greatly dependent on English textbooks.

Regretfully, many of the language teaching materials have provided learners with opportunities to encounter unhelpful lexical primings, such as overemphasis on certain kinds of language features, or on grammatical points.

Yang et al. (2000) investigated tense-aspect forms in English textbooks used in Hong Kong primary schools, and discovered the following characteristics:

- unbalanced distribution of different tense-aspect forms
- over-emphasis on basic interpersonal communicative skills and insufficient presentation of written language features
- lack of co-occurrence of different tense-aspect forms in the same texts
- unbalanced distribution of tense-aspect forms among verbs of different types.

By comparing English textbooks with Hong Kong students' written texts, Yang et al. (2000) detected similar problems in students' writing with those mirrored by textbooks. Their findings support the lexical priming effect of English textbooks on EFL learners' written production. However, the researchers failed to give sufficient explanations for the relationship between learners' language use and the contents of English textbooks.

Römer (2005) made a comparison between the use of progressives in native spoken English corpora (*The British National Corpus* and *Bank of English*) and in representations of spoken English used in German EFL textbooks. It was found that 30%-40% of progressives are used to indicate repeated actions or events in native corpora, while repeatedness is seldom expressed by progressives in textbooks, where more than 90% of the progressives refer to single continuous events, as in *What are you doing?* or *What have you been doing?* Römer (*ibid*: 284) cautions that "if we do not use more (real) examples which refer to repeated situations, learners might get the wrong impression that progressives can only be used to talk about single and not about multiple actions or events", and suggests that the function of repeatedness ought to be used more often in coursebooks especially with the verb forms such as *coming, doing, helping, playing*, etc.

To date, there is still a lack of research testing the effects of teaching materials on learner English. The present study will be a good contribution to this line of research.

2.2 Corpus-based Research on Lexical Priming

With regard to investigations of the lexical priming accounts, corpus has been proved as a useful tool for lexical priming research. As Hoey (2005) indicates, although corpus does not directly present information of lexical priming, it can provide data that a person may encounter when being primed, and suggest what kinds of features of words or word sequences may be primed. That is to say, corpus can be used to testify claims made about lexical priming.

In child language acquisition, adult language that is spoken to children is often regarded as the major input source for children (Yip & Matthews, 2007). Chan (2010) analysed the input data from *The Hong Kong Bilingual Child Language Corpus* (Yip & Matthews, 2007) and *The Hong Kong Cantonese Child Language Corpus* (Lee & Wong, 1998), and evaluated the role of input in bilingual children's acquisition of the Cantonese double object construction with *bei2* 'give'. Chan found that the inconsistency of input (for example, different word orders for the double object construction between Cantonese and English) contributes to bilingual children's vulnerability in learning this grammatical structure. The findings, to a certain extent, reflected the lexical priming effect of direct speech given to children on first language acquisition.

From the perspective of lexical priming, Yang and Yang (2010) compared the use of the lexical bundle *more and more* between *The Chinese Learner English Corpus* (CLEC) and *The British National Corpus* (BNC). They found that native speakers tend to use *more and more* less frequently than Chinese EFL learners, but with more varieties in terms of grammatical constructions, semantic collocation, and pragmatic functions. In addition, lexical priming from L1 Chinese was detected based on the fact that the Chinese equivalent of *more and more* is a frequently used formulaic sequence. It was thus suggested that both teachers and learners should make good use of linguistic resources like corpus and be aware of frequency distributions in English language use.

Xu (2014), through comparing CLEC and LOCNESS (*The Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays*), found that beginning learners perform quite differently from native speakers of English in terms of the verb *give*. The findings show that beginners rely heavily on ditransitive constructions (50.4%) among all the grammatical structures. With regard to ditransitive *give*, they frequently use pronouns as indirect objects (84.3%) and have a great preference of Transfer (39.5%) and Communication (17.4%) as major semantic classes. In stark contrast, native speakers use ditransitive constructions less frequently (34%), use fewer pronouns (45.8%), and prefer such semantic classes as Permission (37.3%) and Enablement (34%).

On the basis of previous literature, the present study incorporates corpus tools in examination of lexical priming effects, aiming to answer the research question: To what extent do lexical priming effects of English textbooks occur in Chinese EFL learners' use of *give* ditransitive constructions?

3. Method

3.1 Corpora

The learner corpus adopted in the study is *The Chinese Learner English Corpus* (CLEC), which was released in 1998 in mainland China (Gui & Yang, 2002). It contains one-million-word essays written by Chinese learners at five different educational levels. The sub-corpus of the beginning-level learners, i.e. senior middle school students (ST2), was selected for comparison with textbooks. The size of CLEC_ST2 is 208,088 words.

With regard to the textbook corpus, it consists of two series of English textbooks, i.e. *Junior English for China* and *Senior English for China* published by People's Education Press (1996 version), with a size of approximately 207,000 words. *Junior English for China* was widely used in junior middle schools, and *Senior English for China* in senior middle schools. The major reason of choosing these two series of textbooks is that *Junior English for China* (first published in 1993 and received minor revisions in 1996) had been used by senior middle school students in CLEC_ST2 and *Senior English for China* was being used (published in 1996) while CLEC was compiled in 1998. Therefore, the textbook corpus can basically represent the input sources of the participants of CLEC_ST2.

3.2 Data Extraction

A corpus search was first conducted in CLEC_ST2 to extract ditransitive constructions of the verb *give*, and then in the textbook corpus. The extraction tool used was WordSmith 5.0. Since neither CLEC_ST2 nor the textbook corpus has been syntactically parsed, manual analysis was conducted afterwards. Given that similar procedures were used to extract data from both corpora, I will mainly demonstrate how to retrieve ditransitive constructions

in CLEC_ST2.

First, all the texts in CLEC_ST2 were selected in WordSmith 5.0 for data extraction. Then in the Concord window, a new search was established by typing in different forms of *give*, namely, simple present, third person present singular, simple past, past participle and the *-ing* form (i.e. 'give/gives/gave/given/giving'). After pressing 'OK', all the instances that contain various forms of *give* appeared automatically in a separate concord window. The retrieved concordances were saved in an Excel spreadsheet to facilitate further analysis. Similar procedures were carried out in the textbook corpus. As a matter of fact, data extracted at this stage include all kinds of transitivity types of the verb. Therefore, further analysis should be made in terms of ditransitivity.

3.3 Data Analysis

During the process of data analysis, the first step was conducting manual analysis to categorize all the grammatical structures where *give* has occurred, such as monotransitive, ditransitive, *to*-dative, etc. Then focus was put on the ditransitive construction of *give*, with an examination of the variables of pronominality and semantic classes. Based on Hoey (2005: 13), these variables can well complement each other by testing different aspects of lexical priming effects. Different grammatical structures that *give* can occur in correspond to the level of colligations, pronominality to collocates, and semantic classes to semantic associations.

- Grammatical structures: Every word is primed to occur in (or avoid) certain grammatical positions, and to occur in (or avoid) certain grammatical functions; these are its colligations.
- Pronominality: Every word is primed to occur with particular other words; these are its collocates.
- Semantic classes: Every word is primed to occur with particular semantic sets; these are its semantic associations.

The major grammatical structures that allow the occurrence of *give* are listed below with corresponding examples (IO represents indirect object, DO direct object, and PC prepositional complement).

Construction	Structure	Example
ditransitive	<i>give</i> + IO + DO	Mary gave me a book.
<i>to</i> -dative	<i>give</i> + DO + <i>to</i> + PC	Mary gave a book to me.
monotransitive	<i>give</i> + DO	Mary gave a report yesterday.
phrasal verb	<i>give</i> + particle	Mary finally gave up.

Pronominality is defined "to distinguish phrases headed by pronouns (personal, demonstrative, and indefinite) from those headed by non-pronouns such as nouns and gerunds" (Bresnan et al., 2007). In this study, analysis of pronominality is quite straightforward. IO and DO in the ditransitive construction were analysed for pronominality, i.e. whether it is a pronoun or not.

Regarding semantic classes, Newman (1996) classified the meanings of *give* into literal and figurative usages. Literal *give* refers to "the transfer of some concrete object from one person to another" (*ibid.*: 133), while figural *give* involves a range of additional meanings which are extensions from the sense of 'transfer' within the framework of cognitive linguistics. A list of the major categories of figurative extensions was provided in Newman (1996), including interpersonal communication, causation, enablement, permission, schematic interaction, etc. Based on Newman's classification, Table 1 summarizes the eight semantic classes of the ditransitive *give* in the study, together with their specific meanings and examples.

Table 1. Semantic classes of *give* in the study

Semantic class	Specification	Example
Transfer	Transfer of ownership of concrete things	<i>give someone a book</i>
Communication	Communicative acts between people (or person-like entities)	<i>give someone advice</i>
Permission	Enabling the permittee to act in some way through exercising some authority,	<i>give someone the right(s)</i>
Enablement	Causation of a potential for some event	<i>give someone insight</i>
Causation	Causing someone to have problems; Having someone do something	<i>give someone trouble</i> <i>give someone homework</i>
Feeling	Making someone have a feeling	<i>give someone confidence</i>
Schematic interaction	Association with a schematic meaning which combines with the deverbial predicate	<i>give someone a kiss</i>
Idiom	Formulaic expressions	<i>give someone an impression</i>

4. Results

The corpus research reveals the following features of ditransitive *give* used in CLEC_ST2 and textbooks.

4.1 Grammatical Structures

Table 2 compares the proportions of each *give*-structure in CLEC_ST2 and the textbook corpus.

Table 2. Proportions and frequencies of *give*-patterns in both corpora

Constructions	CLEC_ST2		Textbook corpus	
	%	(Freq.)	%	(Freq.)
Ditransitive	50.4%	(172)	45%	(106)
<i>To</i> -dative	14.7%	(50)	11%	(26)
Monotransitive	15%	(51)	21.6%	(51)
Phrasal verb	14.4%	(49)	14%	(33)
Passive ditransitive	2.6%	(9)	5.5%	(13)
Passive <i>to</i> -dative	0.3%	(1)	3%	(7)
Idiosyncratic use	2.6%	(9)	0.0%	(0)
Total	100%	(341)	100%	(236)

It is shown in Table 2 that *give* is most frequently co-occurring with the ditransitive construction in both corpora. Slight differences lie in that ditransitive and *to*-dative constructions are used relatively more frequently in CLEC_ST2 than in the textbook corpus, while monotransitives and passive ditransitives are more frequent in the textbook corpus.

These various grammatical structures are well illustrated with the following examples.

- 2) Because sometimes I have no faith for my study, it gives me the courage. (Ditransitive) <CLEC_ST2>
- 3) On spring festival, the older give 'lucky money' to the younger. (*To*-dative) <CLEC_ST2>
- 4) Many offices use answering machines to give information. (Monotransitive) <Textbook corpus>
- 5) King called for black people not to give in but to continue the struggle. (Phrasal verb) <Textbook corpus>

- 6) Each group was given some pork, some chicken, some eggs and some vegetables and any kitchen-wares. (Passive ditransitive) <CLEC_ST2>
- 7) One half of his money and his goods shall be given to the city of Venice. (Passive *to*-dative) <Textbook corpus>
- 8) (?) In my opinion, I think the two-days weekend is good, it can help me to finish the homework and the housework, it can give me to have a rest, it can make me do a lot of things. (Idiosyncratic use) <CLEC_ST2>

4.2 Pronominality

Table 3 presents a sharp contrast of pronominality between the realizations of IO and DO in ditransitive constructions. IO is more frequently realized by pronouns, while DO is realized by noun phrases in both corpora. In previous research (Xu, 2014), it has been found that beginners tend to rely on pronouns as realizations of indirect object. A comparison with the textbook corpus indicates that pronouns are also frequently used after the verb *give* in textbooks (75.5%), although less often than in CLEC_ST2 (84.3%).

Table 3. Pronominality of objects in ditransitive constructions

Object	Pronominality	CLEC_ST2		Textbook corpus	
		%	(freq.)	%	(freq.)
IO	Pronoun	84.3%	(145)	75.5%	(80)
	NP	15.7%	(27)	24.5%	(26)
DO	Pronoun	1.2%	(2)	2%	(2)
	NP	98.8%	(170)	98%	(104)

The high frequency of pronoun use may be under the influence of the text types in CLEC_ST2 and the textbook corpus. The texts in both corpora mainly consist of narrations and descriptions, which are more likely to prompt the use of personal pronouns. Below are some example sentences.

- 9) She gave me two present on my birthday. <CLEC_ST2>
- 10) They have to give us a talk about the zoo next month. <CLEC_ST2>
- 11) Mrs. King asked me to give you this note. <Textbook corpus>
- 12) Did you give our English teacher a card for Teachers' Day? <Textbook corpus>

4.3 Semantic classes

With regard to semantic classes, previous research found that beginning learners prefer to use concrete senses such as Transfer and Communication, instead of abstract senses such as Enablement and Permission.

Table 4 shows that Transfer and Communication are the two most favored semantic classes shared by two corpora. In particular, the textbook corpus is primarily restricted to the use of Transfer (54.7%) and Communication (32.1%). By contrast, other semantic classes are used less frequently in both corpora. Newman (1996: 2-3) considers the act of giving, especially giving “concrete, easily visualizable entities”, as a “basic level category”, and this level was said to be learned earliest. To be more specific, transfer of objects requires less cognitive processing, thus making it easier for beginning learners to learn. It is therefore not surprising to see *give* more frequently used in the sense of Transfer by beginners and low-level textbooks. In comparison, the senses of Enablement and Permission are relatively more abstract, and require higher language proficiency.

Table 4. Proportions and frequencies of different semantic classes of ditransitive *give* in both corpora

Constructions	CLEC_ST2		Textbook corpus	
	%	(Freq.)	%	(Freq.)
Transfer	39.5%	(68)	54.7%	(58)
Communication	17.4%	(30)	32.1%	(34)
Enablement	11.0%	(19)	5.7%	(6)
Permission	3.5%	(6)	2.8%	(3)
Causation	3.5%	(6)	2.8%	(3)
Schematic	6.4%	(11)	1.9%	(2)
Feeling	9.3%	(16)	0.0%	(0)
Idiom	1.2%	(2)	0.0%	(0)
Idiosyncratic usage	8.1%	(14)	0.0%	(0)
Total	100%	(172)	100%	(106)

What should be noted is that under the influence of different topics and based on their writing needs, beginners' use also covers the senses that are of low frequency in textbooks, for instance, Schematic interaction and Feeling. This suggests lexical priming is also sensitive to the contexts (textual, generic, social) in which the lexical item is encountered. Contexts are important in that only with contexts will the word be appropriately primed (Hoey, 2005). Sentences 13-19 are some examples of different semantic classes.

13) She gave me two pens on my birthday. (Transfer) <CLEC_ST2>

14) I give her some bird food every day. (Transfer) <Textbook corpus>

15) She gave me some advice on how to learn the foreign language, English. (Communication) <CLEC_ST2>

16) Miss Zhao asked Jim to give the class a talk. (Communication) <Textbook corpus>

17) Here she did everything, from washing floors to giving sick people new hope. (Enablement) <Textbook corpus>

18) Though I know the final is nothing with me, I (was) glad to join in the match, because it gave me a chance to practise. (Permission) <CLEC_ST2>

19) They thanked us for supporting their education and giving them so much happiness. (Feeling) <CLEC_ST2>

Additionally, a number of idiosyncratic usages were detected from the beginner corpus (14 instances in *give* ditransitive constructions). One commonality shared by these idiosyncratic cases is that the ditransitive constructions are syntactically correct, but semantically inappropriate in English. They seem to be direct translations from Chinese meanings. Sentences 20-22 are some examples of idiosyncratic usages by beginning learners.

20) (?) The new playground gave me a new looking

21) (?) Get up early can give you a good habit.

22) (?) If you want to talk with me, then I will give some face to you.

5. Discussion

It is undeniable that there are a variety of influencing factors on Chinese EFL learners' use of the ditransitive verb *give*, such as L1 influence, classroom teaching, text type, learners' developmental stages, etc. However, the primary goal of the current study is to explore the potential effect of English textbooks. An examination of the beginning learner corpus and the English textbooks data suggests the possibility of lexical priming effects of textbooks on foreign language learning of *give* ditransitive constructions. By means of three variables (grammatical structures, pronominality, and semantic classes), the present study found different levels of lexical

priming, i.e. colligations, collocates, and semantic associations. In a foreign language learning environment like China and many other countries in the world, beginning EFL learners' encounters with English language mostly come from English textbooks. Findings in the study, at least to some extent, support the lexical priming effect of English textbooks on learners' use of *give*, although no clear-cut one-to-one correspondence was detected.

The study provides implications for teaching materials compilation. Based on descriptions of the contents of English textbooks (version in 1996) given by Adamson (2004), a large number of texts included are anecdotes and stories. These two text types mainly reflect spoken language features, rather than written language.

A major consequence of the narrow range of text types is that learners have little access to other registers of writing, and there is less possibility for them to be aware of genre differences in writing. This, to a certain extent, explains the speech-like features in Chinese EFL learner's writing, for example, frequent use of personal pronouns. It is therefore suggested that an increasingly diversified variety of registers should be included in textbooks at higher educational levels. Teachers are also encouraged to provide learners with supplementary readings of different genres/registers.

Another consequence of textbooks' focus on anecdotes and stories is the limitations in semantic usages of verbs. It has been found that the use of *give* in English textbooks mainly involves senses of Transfer and Communication, with a lack of semantic categories at a more abstract level (for example, Enablement and Permission). It is important to gradually enlarge the vocabulary size, but what is equally important is to enrich varied usages of basic verbs like *give*.

This corpus-based research also provides valuable insights for classroom teaching. As far as foreign language teaching is concerned, we should be wary of the lexical priming of learners' first language. Unlike first language acquisition where children acquire their first language in naturalistic environments, L2 learners are mostly confined to classroom settings which can, to some extent, distort the input patterns (Ellis & Laporte, 1997). Exposure to the target language is normally far from sufficient for L2 learners to override the influence from their mother tongue. Evidence of L1 influence has also been discovered in the study, for instance, learners' idiosyncratic usages of semantic classes. Once given a single word translation of an item to be learnt in the foreign language, the learner will easily and immediately activate the lexical primings from the first language. The danger lies in that learners are not able to distinguish words that bear the same meaning in two languages but differ greatly in terms of lexical primings for L1 speakers regarding collocations, colligations, and semantic associations. Therefore, what EFL teachers should do is reduce L1 effect to the maximum degree, rather than enlarge its influences.

In traditional teaching of a verb, for instance, teachers usually first teach how to spell and pronounce it, and then explain its equivalent meaning in Chinese. What is worse, teachers also translate the example sentences into Chinese. This will strengthen the association between the English word and its Chinese meaning and usage. Teaching words in isolation is not effective enough for students to apply them into practical use. It is therefore suggested by Hoey (2005) that foreign language learners "should be exposed to authentic data wherever possible, and the data should both reinforce existing priming (i.e. by overlapping with previously encountered material) and permit new priming to take place".

Among various methodologies, concordance-based exercises have been proved to be an effective complement to traditional teaching strategies (Granger, 2002, 2009; Meunier 2002). As suggested by Römer (2009), "corpora and concordance packages present very useful resources for the creation of exercises that motivate the learner and promote her/his language awareness".

Based on detailed and systematic analysis of learner English, in comparison with the textbook corpus, the present study has provided implications from both theoretical and pedagogical perspectives. It presents evidence for the potential lexical priming effect of textbooks on EFL learners' language use, and also gives specific suggestions for compilation of teaching materials and classroom teaching practice. For future research, it will be worth the effort exploring the textbooks' potential effect of lexical priming on learners' use of other grammatical structures.

Acknowledgements

The study is supported by Innovative School Project in Higher Education of Guangdong, China (GWTP-BS-2015-20). I would like to thank Professor Gerald Nelson for his insightful guidance and the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments and suggestions.

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