A corpus-based study of the alternating ditransitive verb TELL in native and Chinese learner English corpora

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Abstract
This corpus-based study compares the use of the alternating ditransitive verb TELL by native speakers and Chinese learners of English. The corpora used are the written sub-corpus of ICE-GB (the British component of International Corpus of English) and CLEC (the Chinese Learner English Corpus). CLEC consists of both low- and high-proficiency L2 learners' writing. By incorporating corpus contrastive interlanguage analysis and usage-based approaches to language acquisition, this study shows some distinctive patterns in the use of ditransitive TELL by Chinese L2 learners, including some speech-like features of L2 writing. The findings seem to support the 'pronoun island' hypothesis, and the item-based learning process in second language learning.

1 Introduction

Corpus-based research distinguishes itself primarily by the fact that it is based on authentic language in real contexts, thus providing a more concrete description of language. Corpora can be used in a wide range of research applications, including grammatical studies of specific structures, language variation, contrastive analysis, and language acquisition, to name but a few. Thanks to learner corpora, the application of corpora to second language acquisition research has also been emerging (e.g. Granger 1996, 1998). According to Meyer (2002), learner corpora refer to those containing spoken or written texts of individuals who learn English as a second or foreign language. As Xiao (2007) indicates, contrastive interlanguage analysis using learner corpora will yield fruitful results for SLA research.

Corpus linguistics, although still a relatively young discipline, has left quite a mark on theoretical linguistics (Gries 2012). In return, corpus linguistics also benefits from absorbing ideas from linguistic theories. By drawing on other branches of linguistic studies, it is possible for corpus linguists to "move from

the purely descriptive approach for which corpus linguists are often criticized to explanation, prediction, and the embedding into a larger context, or theory, or model" (Gries 2012: 51). Butler (2004) argues that a greater awareness of cognitive theory is needed in corpus linguistics. With that in mind, the cognitively inspired usage-based model seems particularly appropriate, considering that a lot of commonalities are shared by corpus linguistics and the usage-based model. The major elements in corpus linguistics include frequency, words and patterns, connection between syntax and lexis, co-occurrence information, etc. Similarly, in usage-based approaches to language acquisition, the language system is regarded as experience-driven, so the frequency of use of certain constructions plays a key role on the activation of linguistic knowledge; linguistic constructions are generally held to be meaningful linguistic symbols; focus is also on the item-based or construction-based process of language learning (Goldberg 2006; Tomasello 2003). For these reasons, fruitful results can be obtained by combining corpus-based studies with the usage-based model.

The present study focuses on the alternating ditransitive verb TELL. Ditransitive verbs denote the transfer of objects between people (Newman, 1996). In English, there are two related constructions, namely the double object construction (DOC), and the prepositional dative construction (DAT). Alternating ditransitives refer to those verbs that can occur in both DOC and DAT. Other verbs in the same class include *give*, *send,* and s*how.*

According to Construction Grammar (Goldberg 2006), the configurations of the two constructions are as follows:

DOC:	Subj	V	Obj1	Obj2
	agent		recipient	theme
	She	*told*	*me*	*a story.*

DAT :	Subj	V	Obj	PP
	agent		theme	goal
	She	*told*	*a story*	*to me.*

Through comparing the use of TELL by the native speakers and by the Chinese learners of English, the study aims to 1) find out the similarities and differences in the use of TELL by the native speakers of English and the Chinese L2 learners, 2) test the role of usage-based approaches to second language learning, and 3) provide some pedagogical insights into foreign language teaching.

2 Previous research

With the development of corpus linguistics, a growing amount of corpus-based research has sprung up on the study of ditransitive constructions, for instance, Gries and Stefanowitsch (2004), Gries and Wulff (2005), Callies and Szczesniak (2008), Stefanowitsch (2008), etc., and some research has also been carried out in the Chinese context (e.g. Gu 2009). What follows is a brief review of previous studies most relevant to my research.

Gries and Stefanowitsch (2004) conducted a corpus-based study of the British component of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE-GB). They investigated pairs of semantically similar constructions, including the English dative construction. A range of alternating ditransitive verbs were studied, with the ordering based on the ranking of 'distinctiveness' towards the double object structure or the *to*-dative structure. 'Distinctiveness' means the degree to which the lexemes are attracted to a particular construction. Table 1 is excerpted from their study (2004: 106).

Table 1: Collexemes distinguishing between the ditransitive and the *to*-dative

Ditransitive[2] (N=1,035)		To-dative (N=1,919)	
Collexeme	*Distinctiveness*	*Collexeme*	*Distinctiveness*
give (461:146)	1.84E-120	*bring* (7:82)	1.47E-09
tell (128:2)	8.77E-58	*play* (1:37)	1.46E-06
show (49:15)	8.32E-12	*take* (12:63)	0.0002
offer (43:15)	9.95E-10	*pass* (2:29)	0.0002
cost (20:1)	9.71E-09	*make* (3:23)	0.0068

Table 1 shows that *give* distinguishes between the two constructions by most significantly preferring the double object construction to the *to*-dative, while *bring* favours the prepositional dative construction. The research is of great significance in that it gives a satisfactory account of the relationship between verbs and constructions by presenting empirical corpus data.

In an attempt to discover the patterns of use of ditransitive constructions in Chinese learners' writing, Gu (2009) studied the *Chinese Learner English Corpus* (CLEC), and compared the data with those in the native-speaker BROWN corpus. Following Goldberg's Construction Grammar, the author made an analysis of the results from the perspectives of verb types, construction senses, and argu-

ment roles. The general findings showed that Chinese learners tend to overuse the ditransitive constructions, with a smaller range of verb types, compared to the native speakers. What is more, learners of different proficiency levels exhibit dissimilar features in the use of the ditransitive constructions, with the advanced learners having a better mastery of ditransitives. However, Gu (2009) focused on the double object construction only, without reference to the dative construction. In addition, the analysis was primarily based on the Construction Grammar approach, ignoring other aspects of the usage-based model of language acquisition, such as the item-based learning process.

Based on Callies and Szczesniak (2008), Manzanares and López (2008) presented some evidence proving the role of item-based learning in second language learners. The research consisted of three sub-studies, namely a sentence sorting experiment, a corpus study, and an acceptability rating task. The corpus study compared the use of 12 frequently occurring ditransitive verbs in the *British National Corpus* (BNC) and in the Spanish component of the *International Corpus of Learner English* (ICLE). The results showed that in the Spanish data, some verbs are particularly associated with the ditransitive construction, while others are associated with the prepositional dative construction. The results corresponded well to previous findings in Gries and Stefanowitch's (2004) analysis of ICE-GB. Most importantly, it was found that in the Spanish learner data, the thematic role of recipient was most commonly realized by a pronoun. That is, structures like *give + Pronoun + Theme* were found to be more frequent than *give + Proper Noun + Theme* or *give + Full Noun + Theme*. Drawing on Tomasello's (2003) notion of 'constructional islands', Manzanares and López (2008: 215) argued that "language learners master first a specific form of the construction with pronouns, which later on gets extended to proper nouns and other types of phrases".

The above arguments are reasonable based on relevant studies in first language acquisition. For instance, Tomasello (1992) first proposed the 'verb island' hypothesis, later stating that "each verb is its own island of organization in otherwise unorganized language system" (Tomasello 2003: 117), and emphasized the important roles played by specific verbs in the early acquisition of syntactic constructions. Some scholars have argued that other concrete linguistic materials can also play the role of 'island', such as the 'pronoun island' (cf. Jones *et al.* 2000; Childers and Tomasello 2001; Ibbotson *et al.* 2010). In two novel verb experiments, Childers and Tomasello (2001) found that children are likely to build their early linguistic constructions around some particular lexical or morphological elements, especially around certain pronouns.

However, given the limited data in Manzanares and López (2008) and the fact that the recipient argument is typically pronominal even in English native speakers' speech and writing (Goldberg 2006: 139), their explanations with regard to the 'pronoun island' assumptions, although quite intriguing, are still not convincing enough. Only by systematic and detailed comparison of use by native speakers and second language learners, as well as by learners of different proficiency levels, and even by conducting relevant experiments, can we further examine the role of 'pronoun islands' in second language learning.

In spite of the fact that both L1 and L2 researchers have paid considerable attention to ditransitive constructions, corpus-based work is still insufficient in terms of the systematic analysis of the alternating ditransitive constructions used by Chinese EFL learners. Furthermore, there is a lack of evidence for usage-based models in second language studies. Against this background, it will be promising to find empirical evidence for usage-based approaches to SLA from corpus research.

On the basis of previous literature, the research questions of the present study are as follows:

Question 1: What are the ditransitive complementation patterns of TELL in a native English corpus and in a Chinese learner corpus of English? What are their similarities and differences?

Question 2: In terms of the learner corpus, is the use of TELL influenced by proficiency levels?

Question 3: What evidence can be drawn from the corpus data to contribute to usage-based approaches to SLA?

Question 4: What pedagogical implications can be drawn for second language teaching in a Chinese context?

3   Methodology

3.1   Corpora description

A contrastive analysis was carried out between the British component of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE-GB) and the *Chinese Learner English Corpus* (CLEC).

The native corpus – ICE-GB
ICE-GB is a fully annotated corpus of approximately one million words, containing both spoken data (c. 600,000 words) and written data (c. 400,000

words). The focus of the present study is the use of written language by both native speakers and second language learners of English, so only the written part of ICE-GB was used (referred to hereafter as ICE-GB-W). ICE-GB-W consists of a wide range of registers, including student essays, exam scripts, social letters, business letters, academic writing, press news reports, etc. The range of text types in ICE-GB-W offers a suitable benchmark for writing by native speakers of English.

One of the most distinctive advantages of utilizing ICE-GB is that the grammatical structure of every sentence has been parsed, and is shown in the form of a searchable phrase structure tree diagram. Three different aspects are used to present every node in every tree, namely, form, function and additional features (if applicable). For example, in the sentence *I'll tell a story to you,* the verb *tell* is labeled as follows:

MVB	V
montr infin	

The top row indicates that the function of *tell* is Main Verb (MVB), and its form is Verb. The lower row labels of 'montr' (monotransitive) and 'infin' (infinitive) specify additional features.

Using the ICE Corpus Utility Program (ICECUP) (Nelson *et al.* 2002), researchers can make use of Fuzzy Tree Fragments, or FTFs, to extract grammatical structures based on syntactic features. The software makes it possible and convenient to retrieve all clauses with the ditransitive complementation pattern. However, the prepositional dative construction is not specifically labelled as such in the corpus, so that a manual search of the relevant verb followed by a PP is required.

The Learner Corpus – CLEC

The CLEC corpus was released in 1998 in mainland China (Gui and Yang 2002). This one-million-word corpus contains essays written by Chinese learners at five different educational levels: high school students (ST2), junior and senior non-English majors (ST3 and ST4), and junior and senior English majors (ST5 and ST6) (Xiao 2007: 10). For the purpose of testing proficiency effects on language learning, I selected ST2 as a source for the beginning learners, and ST5&6 as high-proficiency learners. CLEC is fully error-tagged, but it has no part-of-speech tagging.

CLEC was chosen for contrastive analysis for three main reasons. First, it contains a large number of texts (more than one million words), so there will be sufficient data for analysis. Second, the learners in the corpus represent different proficiency levels, which allows the influence of proficiency levels on the use of ditransitive constructions to be examined. Third, CLEC has been adopted by previous studies concerning L2 learning of English by Chinese learners (e.g. Xiao 2007; Gu 2009), and proved to be a useful tool for Chinese learner English analysis. Table 2 summarizes a comparison of the two corpora:

Table 2: Comparison of ICE-GB-W and CLEC (ST5&6 and ST2)

Variable	ICE-GB-W	CLEC_ST5&6	CLEC_ST2
Size	423702 tokens	440616 tokens	208088 tokens
Text type	student essays, exam scripts, social and business letters, academic writing, popular writing, newspaper reports, administrative writing, novels and stories, etc	exam essays and non-exam essays	
Genre	Multiple	Mainly argumentative	Mainly expository and descriptive
Time of completion	1993	1998	

3.2 Data extraction

The corpus search was first conducted in ICE-GB-W to extract ditransitive constructions of the target verb, and then in CLEC. The procedures will be delineated below.

Corpus search in ICE-GB

It is straightforward to search for the double object constructions in ICE-GB, because in the labeling system, all of the ditransitive verbs occurring in double object constructions have been annotated as 'ditr' (ditransitive). In terms of prepositional dative constructions (DATs), however, they are not coded in ICE-GB. In order to overcome this, a manual search was required. First, an FTF was used to define the verb TELL as monotransitive, which would extract all and only the cases of typical monotransitive complementation, excluding complex

transitive and ditransitive patterns. Then, all the instances were searched for those followed by a prepositional phrase with *to*. This study is only concerned with prepositional phrases whose semantic role conforms to the recipient typical of indirect objects. Other cases deviating from the above standard have been ignored (mainly *locatives*), simply because no alternation is possible (Ozòn 2009: 89), such as the following sentence:

(1)   As you are aware further troops are being *sent to the Gulf.* <ICE-GB: W1b-016 #129: 10>

After the completion of all the searches in ICE-GB-W, the data were saved in Microsoft Excel tables with the help of WordSmith 5.0, and used for further analysis.

Corpus search in CLEC
WordSmith 5.0 was used to conduct searches for both DOC and DAT constructions of TELL in the CLEC corpus. As well as correct instances, incorrect instances of TELL were also recorded. Regarding misuses of the ditransitive TELL, only a few errors occurred in CLEC_ST2, including incorrect tense marking (e.g. *After I telling him…*), and incorrect forms of the indirect object (e.g. *she/his*). However, since these errors had no direct effect on the use of ditransitive constructions, they were also regarded as valid instances, and have been included in the data analysis.

4   Results and data analysis

In the process of data analysis, one issue has drawn my attention; i.e. in most cases, the direct object of the ditransitive TELL is realized by a clause, such as a *that*-clause, a *what*-clause, etc. For instance,

(2)   I hope Simon *told* you that I rang last night. <ICE-GB:W1B-004 #54:1>

(3)   If you could *tell* us what the books are, I'll see they're returned to you. <ICE-GB:W2F-009 #96:1>

All of these were excluded from the study since they cannot alternate with *to*-dative constructions (Ozòn 2009: 113). The total number of these excluded items amounted to 109 cases in ICE-GB-W, 112 cases in CLEC_ST2, and 135 cases in CLEC_ST5&6. After the above exclusion, Table 3a presents the pro-

portions and frequencies (in brackets) of TELL used in DOC and DAT constructions by native speakers and Chinese learners.

Table 3a: Proportions of DOC and DAT in ICE-GB-W and CLEC (ST5&6 and ST2)

	ICE-GB-W	**CLEC**
TELL in DOC	94% (33)	92% (152)
TELL in DAT	6% (2)	8% (14)
Total	100% (35)	100% (166)

Table 3a shows that TELL overwhelmingly appears in DOC compared to DAT in ICE-GB-W, and in CLEC, which proves that TELL alternates between the two constructions with much more preference of DOC over DAT. Similar to native speakers, Chinese learners also exhibit knowledge about such verb-specific construction alternations. Additionally, Table 3b shows that both advanced and beginning learners significantly prefer to use TELL in DOC.

Table 3b: Proportions of DOC and DAT in Chinese learners

	CLEC_ST5&6	**CLEC_ST2**
TELL in DOC	92% (83)	90% (69)
TELL in DAT	8% (7)	10% (7)
Total	100% (90)	100% (76)

Due to the low frequencies of TELL in the DAT construction, only usages in DOC will be analyzed in this study. The basic structure of a DOC construction is shown below:

tell + indirect object (**OI**) + direct object (**OD**)

Based on the basic structure, two fundamental variables are concerned in this construction: 1) types of the indirect object (Noun Phrase/Pronoun), 2) types of the direct object (Noun Phrase/Pronoun).

Comparisons were made not only between native speakers and Chinese learners, but also within Chinese learners with different proficiency levels (CLEC_ST5&6 and ST2). By sorting the data according to each variable, the results are presented in the following sections.

4.1   Indirect Object (OI)
The role of indirect object in DOC constructions is restricted to two types, that is, Pronoun and Noun Phrase (NP).
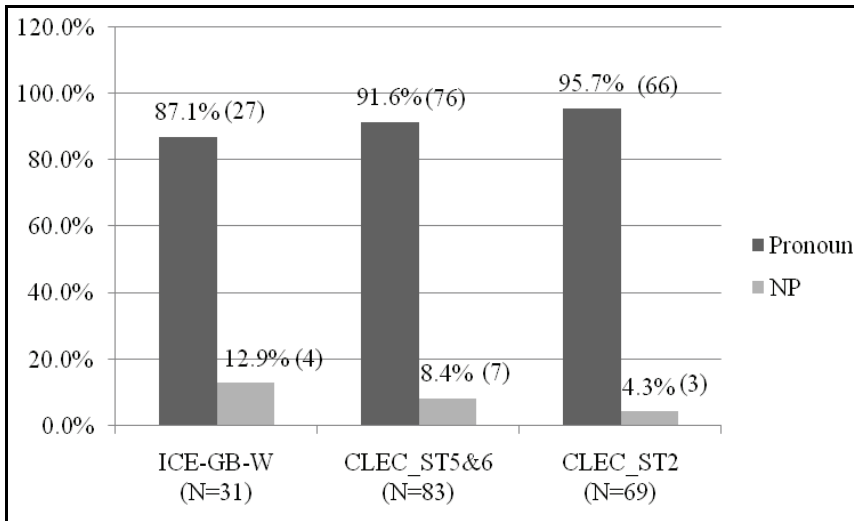

Figure 1: Proportions of Pronoun and NP as OI in all three corpora[3]

Figure 1 shows that the indirect object is most frequently realized by a pronoun across all three corpora but that low-proficiency learners are most likely to choose a pronoun (95.7%), compared to high-proficiency learners (91.6%) and

native speakers (87.1%). Table 4 provides a more detailed analysis of the various realizations of the indirect object.

In all three corpora, *me* and *you* rank as the top two most frequently used pronouns. However, native speakers tend to use a much wider range of pronouns, with a comparatively more even distribution of specific pronouns. In contrast, advanced learners (CLEC_ST5&6) mainly restrict their use to *you* (65.8%), while beginners exhibit a preference for *me* (54.6%). In order to examine these differences in more detail, the contexts of use were examined, which revealed several recurrent patterns typically used by the Chinese learners.

Table 4: Different pronouns used as OI in all three corpora

ICE-GB-W		CLEC_ST5&6		CLEC_ST2	
Specific pronoun	Percentage	Specific pronoun	Percentage	Specific pronoun	Percentage
me	29.6% (8)	*you*	65.8% (50)	*me*	54.6% (36)
you	29.6% (8)	*me*	21.1% (16)	*you*	19.7% (13)
us	14.8% (4)	*us*	6.6% (5)	*us*	10.6% (7)
them	11.1% (3)	*him*	3.9% (3)	*him*	10.6% (7)
her	7.5% (2)	*her*	2.6% (2)	*her*	3% (2)
herself	3.7% (1)			*them*	1.5% (1)
everyone	3.7% (1)				
Total	100% (27)	**Total**	100% (76)	**Total**	100% (66)

Table 5 shows that the advanced learners are very much in favor of such patterns as *I'd like to tell **you**…*, *I'm glad to tell **you**…*, *I will tell **you**…* etc. A closer look at the texts shows that most of the topics concerned concentrate on festivals and job situations in China, and learners tend to use such structures to introduce the given topics.

Table 5: Recurrent patterns using *you* as OI in CLEC_ST5&6

Pattern	Example sentence	Frequency
*I'd/I would like to tell **you***…	*I'd like to tell you* something about the Mid-autumn Festival	12
*I have NP to tell **you***…	Here *I have a notice to tell you.*	10
*I'll/I will tell **you***…	*I will tell you* something about the Dragon Boat Festival.	8
*I'm glad to tell **you***…	*Im so glad to tell you* a piece of good news.	4
*Let me tell **you***…	*Let me tell you* one of the most important festivals, Mid-Autumn Festival.	2

Gilquin and Paquot (2008: 48) also found that "learners are often too visible when introducing new topics or ideas" by frequently using expressions such as *I would like / want / am going to talk about*… These expressions have been found more frequently used in speech than in writing, and native writers are likely to avoid personal references. Therefore, Chinese advanced learners' preference for the above-mentioned patterns indicates the spoken-like features of their writing.

With regard to beginning learners, the most frequently occurring pattern is *tell + me + NP* (31 times), together with a strong preference for the past tense form. For example:

(4)   She *told me* <u>an interesting story</u>.

(5)   It (Geography) *told me* <u>a lot of knowledge about the earth</u>.

(6)   The book about science can *tell me* <u>the strange thing I dont know</u>.

Tell + me + NP is the most basic structure of a ditransitive construction, which is taught at the initial stage of English learning. Beginners' frequent use of this structure, involving a high percentage of pronouns, seems to echo the 'Pronoun Island' assumption mentioned above. With the help of pronouns, *me* in particu-

lar, beginning learners have developed the knowledge of how to use the verb TELL in the double object structure. Such recurrent patterns of usage are also in accord with the item-based learning process, which is one of the key ideas in usage-based approaches to language acquisition.

4.2   Direct Object (OD)

NPs and Pronouns are also the two major realizing types for OD. Figure 2 shows a comparison of their frequencies across three corpora.

NPs are least frequently used by native speakers (24.2%), while they are most preferred by beginning learners (87%), with advanced learners at the intermediate level (59%). In contrast, the use of pronouns as OD is exactly the opposite – native speakers show a strong preference for the use of pronouns (75.8%), while in the beginner corpus, pronouns represent a very small percentage (13%). The following analysis will attempt to reveal the reasons for such differences, looking first at pronouns and then at NPs.
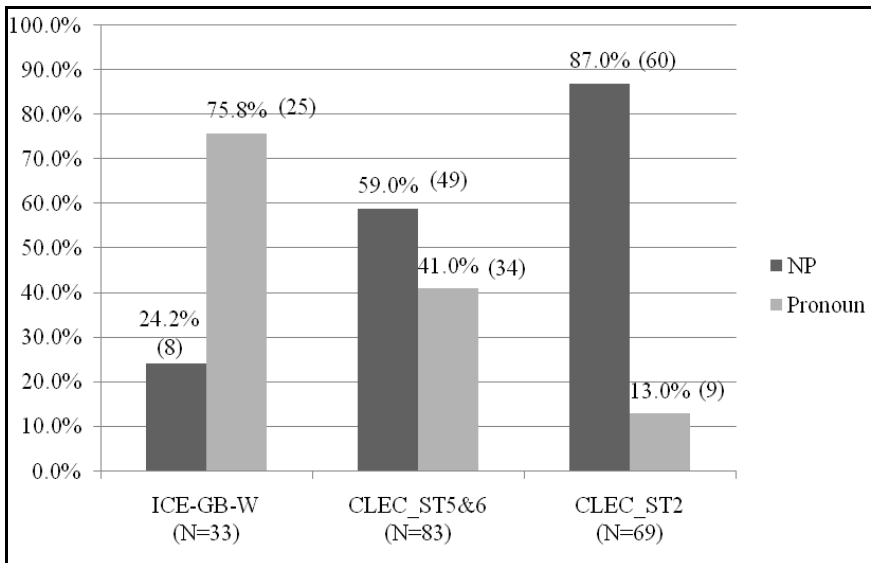

Figure 2: Proportions of NP and Pronoun as OD in all three corpora

Pronouns

The pronoun types were further divided into Pronoun, Pronoun + PP, Pronoun + AdjP, etc., as presented in Table 6. Obvious differences can be found in the use of Pronoun + PP, which predominates in the learner corpus.

Table 6: Different pronoun types as OD in three corpora

ICE-GB-W		CLEC_ST5&6		CLEC_ST2	
Pronoun type	**%**	**Pronoun type**	**%**	**Pronoun type**	**%**
Pronoun	48% (12)	Pronoun+PP	79.4% (27)	Pronoun+PP	89% (8)
Pronoun+PP	36% (9)	Pronoun+AdjP	14.7% (5)	Pronoun+AdjP	11% (1)
Pronoun+AdjP	8% (2)	Pronoun	5.9% (2)		
Proform (so)	8% (2)				
Total	100% (25)	**Total**	100% (34)	**Total**	100% (9)

In ICE-GB-W, the mostly used pronoun type is a single pronoun (sentences (7)–(8)), followed by Pronoun + PP (9), Pronoun + AdjP (10) and a proform (11). Here are some example sentences.

(7)   Connie hadnt *told* them that. <ICE-GB:W2F-006 #190:1>

(8)   It was difficult to believe in the reality of what she *told* me. <ICE-GB:W2F-014 #14:1>

(9)   …and their predominantly martial character may *tell* us something about the ethos of Edward's household in the 1290s. <ICE-GB:W2A-010 #58:1>

(10)   I will change the subject now and *tell* you something different. <ICE-GB:W1B-008 #88:3>

(11)   I've *told* her so myself, many times, but she doesnt heed me. <ICE-GB:W2F-007 #126:1>

Compared with native speakers, on the one hand, Chinese learners seldom use single pronouns as OD (5.9% in CLEC_ST5&6, and none in ST2); on the other hand, the frequency of Pronoun + PP is surprisingly high in the learner corpus (79.4% in ST5&6, and 89% in ST2). Furthermore, the realizations of Pronoun + PP are almost always *something about…* (12), or *something + AdjP + about…* (13).

(12) …and its my pleasure to *tell* you *something about* the situation of looking for jobs in China**.**

(13) But, Ill *tell* you *something interesting about* my childhood holiday.

It should also be noted that *something about…* often co-occurs with patterns like *I'll / I'd like to / I'm going to tell you***…**, as shown in (13). In addition to the explanations in relation to spoken-like features, it is also interesting to consider the high frequency of *something about…* in the Chinese learners' writing.

In the native speakers' writing, a variety of pronoun types are employed, such as *what / everything / anything / all about… / more about… / much about… / nothing of…*, to name but a few. The repeated use of *something about…* by Chinese learners suggests that they lack the ability or awareness to use varied structures. One possibility is that learners are probably not familiar with other alternatives, therefore they are likely to overuse the basic and dominant patterns. This may be accounted for by the contents of textbooks or other teaching materials, where such expressions are also of high frequency. However, only after a close examination of the materials used by learners can we come to such a conclusion.

Noun Phrases
Chinese learners' use of direct objects is more likely to revolve around common nouns, and this is especially true in the beginning learners' writing. As shown in Table 7, *thing(s)* and *story/stories* are the most frequently used common nouns by both beginners and advanced learners. However, beginners adopt a wider range of common nouns as direct objects, such as *way(s)*, *knowledge*, *secret*, *reasons(s)*, and many others. In comparison, only eight common nouns are used as OD in the native corpus.

Table 7: The most frequently used NPs as OD in three corpora

ICE-GB-W		CLEC_ST5&6		CLEC_ST2	
Specific NP	**Frequency**	**Specific NP**	**Frequency**	**Specific NP**	**Frequency**
thing(s)	*2*	*thing(s)*	*12*	*thing(s)*	*11*
truth	*2*	*story/stories*	*11*	*story stories*	*11*
news	1	*festival(s)*	4	*way(s)*	7
story	1	*situation*	3	*knowledge*	4
nonsense	1	*news*	2	*secret*	3
context	1	Other	17	*reason(s)*	3
				Other	21
Total	**8**	**Total**	**49**	**Total**	**60**

Some example sentences written by beginning learners are presented below:

    (14) She *told* me some funny <u>things</u> of her school.

    (15) I *told* him the <u>story</u> about "Three Pigs and the Wolf".

    (16) She always *told* us many <u>ways</u> to be a good student.

    (17) I like reading books, because it *tells* me some <u>knowledge</u>.

Combining the use of OI and OD, the preferred structure of TELL by beginners can be summarized as *tell + Pronoun + NP*. The striking differences reflected in the double object structure patterns adopted by Chinese advanced learners and beginners give a clear demonstration of developmental processes in second language learning: from basic uses to more varied types, but also that advanced learners still lack, to some extent, the ability to distinguish clearly between written and spoken registers.

5   *Discussion and conclusions*

It is not surprising to find some different patterns for the use of ditransitive TELL among beginning learners, advanced learners, and native speakers of English. Nevertheless, a detailed analysis has indicated interesting results that deserve our special attention.

Item-based learning

Previous literature has shown that the indirect object in the DOC construction has a tendency to be pronominal, and this study has proved that it is indeed the case, at least in terms of the verb TELL. However, what makes it intriguing is that beginning learners were found to use a larger percentage of pronouns as the indirect object compared with native speakers and advanced learners. Applying the 'pronoun island' concept, it is reasonable to postulate that similarly to children learning their mother tongue, pronouns also play an important role in forming linguistic schemas for L2 learners, especially at the initial stages.

To further illustrate the 'pronoun island' assumption, it is necessary to bring the item-based learning process into consideration. The most frequently occurring configuration of *tell + Pronoun + NP* in the beginner corpus can be attributed to the fact that the second language is learned on an exemplar-based model. Through a step-by-step learning process, L2 learners first get familiar with the fundamental usages of the ditransitive structure, and as learning continues, they will gradually master more complicated patterns. For further illustration, native speakers make use of more various types of elements as the OD, including pronouns, Pronoun + PP, Pronoun + AdjP, NPs, and the proform (*so*). In comparison, beginners' realizations are primarily restricted to NPs, such as *thing(s)*, s*tory/stories*, *way(s)*, *knowledge*, etc. It is thus suggested that at the beginning of learning ditransitive constructions, learners mainly encounter or learn the structure of *tell + OI + NP*, and that not until a later stage will they learn relatively complex configurations like *tell + OI + Pronoun + PP*, *tell + IO + Pronoun + AdjP*, as shown in the advanced learner corpus.

Speech-like features in learners' writing

The Chinese learners' writing has shown some speech-like features, especially in the case of introducing new topics. L2 learners' writing is often narrative in style, as if they were speaking to another person. In this case, they tend to use more pronouns, especially first or second person pronouns. Previous work has already provided evidence for L2 learners borrowing spoken strategies in their writing (e.g. Gilquin and Paquot 2008). However, the reasons for the phenomenon are still under investigation. Such explanations as the influence of speech, L1 transfer, teaching-induced factors, and developmental factors have been discussed. It is also proposed that all these factors are interacting with each other. Therefore, Granger (2004) suggests carrying out studies by integrating the interacting factors, and test their effects in learners' writing.

Influence of register variations

In addition, another important factor contributing to group differences is text type influence. ICE-GB-W contains multiple types of texts, while CLEC is a collection of student essays covering various kinds of topics. The topics in CLEC_ST5&6 are mostly argumentative, while those in CLEC_ST2 are mainly expository and descriptive. The variation in text types is quite likely to result in different realizations of OI and OD. As regards OI for instance, *you* is most frequently used by the advanced learners to introduce new topics in their argumentative essays; in comparison, *me* is more likely to be used in the beginner corpus since beginning learners are often required to describe their own experiences or feelings in the writing tasks.

Teaching implications

Although this study is concerned with only one ditransitive verb, it still sheds some light on second language teaching. The native speakers' usages of various patterns can be made use of for the benefit of L2 learning and teaching. For instance, the comparison of preposed ODs among different groups shows that the advanced learners overuse such expressions as *I have + NP + to + tell + OI*, while the native speakers' use is more varied:

(18) Having said that there are <u>one or two thing</u>s *I want to tell you*. <ICE-GB:W1B-008 #74:3>

(19) I just dont know <u>what</u> *to tell Dr Carson*. <ICE-GB:W2F-006 #211:1>

(20) <u>Nonsense</u>**,** she *told herself*. <ICE-GB:W2F-020 #24:1>

Based on native speakers' usages, well-designed exercises will probably improve advanced learners' ability to use the target construction in a more flexible way.

The investigation of the ditransitive verb TELL has provided some evidence for the role of pronouns in L2 learning of argument structures, and the item-based learning process advocated by usage-based linguists. Useful teaching implications, despite being limited in scope, are also drawn from this study. Further research with reference to more alternating ditransitive verbs will be worth our efforts.

Notes

1. I owe special thanks to my supervisor, Prof. Gerald Nelson, for his inspiring guidance on this research project, and his tremendous help revising this article. I also would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for his/her valuable suggestions.

2. In Gries and Stefanowitsch (2004), the term 'ditransitive' is used to refer to the double object structure.

3. In ICE-GB-W, two instances of TELL in a DOC construction are used in the passive voice, for example, *they were told the context of the period*. In a sentence like this, there is no indirect object. Therefore, the two instances were excluded from the analysis of the indirect object.

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