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English Adjectives Used by Non-natives in ICNALE Spoken Dialogues

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to examine English adjectives found in spoken language corpus of English learners in Asia. This study employed theories of adjectives from language typology perspective by Dixon (2010) and Frawley (1992). Descriptive-qualitative approach was applied, using ICNALE *Spoken Dialogues* as the data source. This study utilized the corpus analysis tools AntConc. The results identified the top 20 adjectives in the corpus, with *Value, Human Propensity,* and *Difficulty* each representing 20% of the findings. This study has implications for the significance of foreign language learning. Teachers can use adjectives from these categories to teach students, as they are basic vocabularies for English learners. Students are also expected to gain a better understanding of the functional aspect of adjectives, which could improve their language performance. The interest of this study lies in the high frequency of occurrence in the corpus. However, some limitations should also be considered.

Keywords: *adjectives production, English adjectives, non-native speakers, ICNALE*

INTRODUCTION

Adjective is one of the word classes that define a noun class (Kridalaksana, 2008). Cross-linguistically, adjective forms are not always easy to differentiate and recognize, yet every language has at least one lingual form of an adjective. The adjective class is a distinguished word class, separate from noun and verb classes. Each word class has a distinctive conceptual property basis and grammatical function (Dixon, 2010; Dixon & Aikhenvald, 2004). In English, for instance, the noun class requires an article preceding the noun. Additionally, an inflectional process for plural marking cannot be applied to all nouns. Some nouns are exceptionally

irregular, so there is no clear form to mark plurality. As mentioned before, being a distinguished word class, adjectives also have certain characteristics, such as having comparative and superlative forms by means of the suffixes -er and -est or the premodifiers more and most. Adjectives also have three other characteristics: an attributive function, a predicative function, and the ability to be pre-modified by the intensifier very (Quirk et al., 1985, pp. 402–403).

Cross-linguistically, the adjective class exists (see Dixon, 2010; Dixon & Aikhenvald, 2004). However, the number of adjectives in different languages varies. According to their size and productivity, there are two classes of adjectives: large class adjectives and small class adjectives. The former refers to languages with limited adjectives. Some languages are reported to have very small adjective classes, such as Igbo and North Australian Malak Malak (see Dixon, 1982). The latter refers to languages that are more flexible in producing new adjectives from other word classes, such as English. In English, denominal and deverbal adjectives are common, such as *dangerous*, *dirty*, *comfortable*, *playful*, *suitable*, and *arguable*.

Later, Dixon (2010) differs adjective class semantically into thirteen categories. Dixon later divides them into three sets. Set A includes *Dimension, Colour, Value,* and *Age*. Set B includes *Physical Property, Human Propensity*, and *Speed*. Set C includes *Difficulty, Similarity, Qualification, Quantification, Position*, and *Cardinal Numbers*. Small adjective languages have at least Set A. Large adjective languages on the other hand, are possible to have numerous adjectives that cover those thirteen semantic categories.

Being distinctive from nouns and verbs, adjectives appear within certain slots in a sentence. Baker (2004) asserts that adjectives can be direct attributive modifiers, the complements of degree heads, and resultative secondary predicates. Meanwhile, Dixon (2010) asserts that adjectives can fulfill the roles of copula complement, noun modifier, parameter of comparison, and verb modifier. In English, adjectives generally appear as copula complements and noun modifiers. However, in colloquial American English, adjectives can modify verbs, e.g., "*He speaks (real) bad*" (Dixon, 2010, p. 71).

In relation to adjectives as noun modifiers, noun modification has two types of relations: categorematic and syncategorematic (Frawley, 1992, p. 446). The former means denotations that are independent, with a clear and distinct meaning. The latter means denotations that are dependent, with meanings that are unclear and relative. These relations are illustrated by Frawley with the phrase "*the wonderful singer*." The phrase has two interpretations: first, it may mean someone who sings wonderfully, or second, it may mean a person who is wonderful in person.

This study recognizes that studies about adjectives have been conducted before. There are studies discussing about language use in persuasion strategy (Blanco, 2020) or argumentative strategy (Ağçam & Özkan, 2015). Some studies are more social-approached, such as discussing about cross culture communication (Roivainen, 2013; Vainik & Brzozowska, 2019) or about cultural personality (Nuryantiningsih, 2022). Besides, adjectives have long been interesting topics in language acquisition. Several studies have been conducted using experimental methods with children (Blackwell, 2005; Fallah & Jabbari, 2016). Some studies have compared normal children with those who have impaired language skills (Walenski et al., 2024; Wright, 1981).

In the context of language acquisition, there is a tendency for children to acquire certain adjectives much earlier than the others. Blackwell (2005) found that *Colour* (i.e., *red, blue, black*) and *Physical Property* (i.e., *sticky, smooth, broken*) are adjectives those are acquired earlier. *Colour* adjectives are often attributive adjectives which show the categorematic relation. The study is significantly correlated to the nature of children's early lexicons in relation to referents or objects they engage. However, Walenski et al. (2024) found that attributive adjectives are challenging for children with grammatical impairments. The study found a significant correlation between producing attributive adjectives and complex syntactic structures. This research has further implications for the treatment and recovery of agrammatic language.

The studies reviewed above generally focus less on adjectives used by language learners from non-native speaking countries. This gap, left by most studies, is worth discussing, especially when reconsidering the following studies. For example, a study about different writing patterns between non-natives and natives (Ağçam & Özkan, 2015) highlights these differences. Other studies have found that non-natives still face difficulties in foreign language learning, such as in collocation (Cao & Badger, 2021; Thongvitit & Thumawongsa, 2017) and in synonymous words (Platon, 2013).

Since studies on adjectives used by learners from non-English speaking countries have been limited, this study seeks to address this gap. The aim is to describe the English adjectives frequently used in the ICNALE Spoken Dialogues corpus, which is a compilation of English spoken interviews from 425 college students affiliated with several universities in ten Asian countries.

This study underscores the urgency of further describing English adjective acquisition. It hopes to provide a clearer depiction of learners' language patterns and to benefit foreign language pedagogical strategies. Thus, there are two research questions proposed: (1) What are the top 20 adjectives frequently used in the ICNALE Spoken Dialogues? and (2) What are the syntactical functions of the adjectives found?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach and was designed as corpus-based research. The data were taken from ICNALE, an international corpus network of Asian learners of English initiated by Shin'ichiro Ishikawa. The corpus can be accessed publicly at https://language.sakura.ne.jp/icnale/download.html. This corpus was chosen because it is well-systemized, annotated, and regularly updated with additional data.

The study examined the spoken language corpus called ICNALE Spoken Dialogues (henceforth ICNALE SD). The chosen corpus consists of spoken dialogues between learners and interviewers discussing certain given topics in English. This study focused on one topic: part-time jobs (Ishikawa, 2019).

After downloading the corpus, the researcher used the AntConc software tool (Anthony, 2005) to collect and analyze the data. Several corpus analysis tools were used, such as word query search and word concordance. To identify the correlation of high frequency and usage, this study focused on the highest frequency of

occurrences, limited the data to the first 500 tokens, and selected the top 20 most used adjectives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study found the top 20 adjectives frequently used by the learners in ICNALE SD. The 20 adjectives were identified semantically and analyzed based on the syntactic environments in sentences.

Semantic Category

Table 1 shows the top 20 adjectives that have been classified in accordance to of adjectives' semantic categorization (see Dixon, 2010; Dixon & Aikhenvald, 2004). The further discussion about the findings follows Table 1 below.

Table 1. Semantic Categorization of The Top 20 Adjectives

No	Category	Adjective	Amount	%
1	Dimension	*'high', 'big', 'long'*	3	15
2	Age	*'new'*	1	5
3	Value	*'good', 'important', 'bad', 'free'*	4	20
4	Human propensity	*'nervous', 'social', 'afraid', 'happy'*	4	20
5	Difficulty	*'easy', 'hard', 'difficult', 'convenient'*	4	20
6	Similarity	*'different'*	1	5
7	Quantification	*'few', 'little', 'small'*	3	15

According to Table 1, there are 7 categories of adjectives namely *Dimension, Age, Value, Human Propensity, Difficulty, Similarity,* and *Quantification*. Among them, *Value, Human Propensity,* and *Difficulty* become the three most dominating categories. This finding shows that the learners have a tendency to use adjectives from the identified categories frequently. Moreover, the high frequency of the adjectives can be correlated to a state that the words are identified as basic vocabularies in a language. As in line with Dixon & Aikhenvald (2004), *Dimension, Age, Value,* and *Colour* are the four core categories that tend to commonly present and categorized as main adjectives in languages. Interestingly, this theory is supported by a study that found that adjectives '*good*' and '*bad*' have been acquired much earlier by 2-3 year old English natives (Blackwell, 2005).

The top 20 adjectives used by the learners represent a wordlist of New General Service List (NGSL) project which project has been renewed by Browne (2013). NGSL is a project of approximately 2.800-vocabulary with the highest of occurrence and the most used in English. Eventually, what can be inferred from Table 1 is, that the learners who are non-natives, have acquired several crucial vocabularies in English. This fact can be implied further to how English pedagogical importance to teach the such basic vocabularies in English to the students.

According to the top 20 adjectives, this study also assumes that adjectives the learners use highly influenced by the topic of interview. The interview is mainly about part time job. This study found a correlation between the topic and adjectives the learners use accordingly. The 20 adjectives simply portray how the learners

describe and argue about part time job using adjectives like *'good' 'nervous' 'important', 'social'* and *'hard'* (see data 1-5).

Nonetheless, the most frequently used adjectives found in the corpus were less advanced. This condition correlates to Ağçam and Özkan's study (2015), that found such adjectives like '*main*' and '*important*' were overused by the non-native students rather to use '*crucial', 'essential', 'fundamental', 'trivial'* etc. Adjectives like '*bad', 'good', 'boring', 'interesting'* were also identified to be used more frequently than the natives. Al-khresheh and Alruwaili (2024) found that Saudi EFL students got language interference in use of English adjectives. This study accordingly has provided further example the difference of English adjectives used by non-natives.

This finding on the other hand has offered to an implication about some other basic English vocabularies that can be used teachers to teach the students. The teachers can start to advance the vocabularies. The words are none other than words that seem closely related to the daily basis. The teachers can teach words related to people and the surrounding – the words from *Value* category such as, '*functional', 'proper', 'precise', 'luxury', 'concrete',* or from *Human Propensity* for example, '*ashamed*', '*cruel', 'gentle', 'innocent', 'anxious', 'attractive'* or words from *Difficulty* adjectives like '*simple', 'tough', 'comfortable'* (see the NGSL wordlist at https://www.newgeneralservicelist.com/new-general-service-list).

Syntactic Environment

Adjectives in English have two functions; as copula complement and noun modifier (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 417). Among the top 20 adjectives found in the corpus, this study examined the adjectives are distributed into both functions.

Copula Complement

Adjectives as the copula complement are also known as predicative adjectives. This function relates to the core argument or subject complement. This study found that *Value* adjectives (see data 1) were commonly used predicatively by the learners.

(1) *It is **good** for my career*.
[It] CS [is] CP [good] CC [for [my] [career]]
'*Ini baik untuk karir saya*'

In data (1), the unit *It* fulfills as the copula subject or the subject. The unit *is* fulfills as a copula predicate or the verb and *good* fulfills as the copula complement or the core argument in the sentence since adjective *good* presents to explain the subject. This finding seems different from Blackwell' study (2000) that found *Value* adjectives were commonly found as noun modifier (cited in Dixon & Aikhenvald, 2004, p. 5). This study found the learners inclined to give short answers, so they produced less words as reflected in (1) positioning adjective as copula complement.

(2) *In public, I feel very **nervous**.*
[[In] public] ADV [I] CS [feel] CP [[very] nervous] CC
'*Di depan umum, saya merasa sangat malu*'

Data (2) shows *Human Propensity* adjectives are placed as copula complement. On top of that, this study found that adjectives in the corpus was frequently produced being modified by the adverb *very.* This fact was not limited to data (2) but also in (3). By relating to Ağçam and Özkan's study (2015), it is possible to assume that the adverb *very* is overused. In English, there are several alternatives that can be used as well, for example to describe something to a great degree, such as *extremely, incredibly,* or *highly* and to describe something to a full degree, like *completely, fully,* or *totally.* By this finding eventually can be used to teach the students about the alternatives to adverb *very.*

Relating to Table 1, data (2) shows that adjective *nervous* has become the learners' favorite. There are other words the learners to know like *uneasy* and *anxious* (see Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2024). The such words should also be recognized. The learners accordingly are expected to produce more English vocabularies and to give better language performance.

Noun Modifier

Adjectives can also fulfill noun modifier. This function occurs when the adjectives placed before the noun-following they aim to modify. This study found Value adjectives (see data 3) are distributed as noun modifiers.

(3) *I can have very* ***important*** *experience*.
[I] CS [[can] have] CP [[very] [important experience] CC
'Saya dapat pengalaman yang sangat penting'

Data (3) shows that adjective *important* fulfills as a modifier the following noun. Despite being similar to be the copula complement of sentence as in (1), this data (3) mainly serves to attribute the noun *experience.* According to Oxford online learner's dictionary (2024), the noun *experience* often used together such as *personal experience, past experience,* or *valuable experience.* While adjective *important* often used in a such argumentative speech as the copula complement instead.

(4) *It is also* ***hard*** *experience.*
[It] CS [is] CP [also] ADV [hard experience] CC
'*Ini juga pengalaman yang sulit*'

Data (4) shows that *Difficulty* adjectives are placed as noun modifiers. Data (4) appears to be the similar case as in (3). Adjective '*hard'* fulfills the function of noun modifier and placed before the noun *experience.* However, adjective *hard* is commonly found to describe something difficult to do. This adjective often paired with copula subject and predicate '*it is hard to see'* or *'conditions were extremely hard'* etc. (see Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2024).

(5) *I want to have opportunity to work with real* ***social*** *people.*
[I] CS [want to have] CP [opportunity] CC [to work] CP [with] PREP [real social people] CC

'*Saya ingin memiliki kesempatan berkerja dengan orang-orang yang berjiwa social*"

Data (5) shows *Human Propensity* adjectives are distributed as noun modifiers. Compared to data (3), adjective '*social*' appears the same as how the word normally placed in a sentence instead. Several examples in Oxford online dictionary show the word is normally used pre-modifying the noun, '*social life', 'social skills', 'social problems'.* In terms of the noun modification, data (5) reveals the syncategorematic relation. The interpretation seems unclear and vague. The phrase '*real social people*' means people who come from a society or people who are friendly.

On top of that, it should be emphasized that this study provides further evidence that according to the denotation relation in noun modifications, *Dimension, Age, Difficulty,* and *Similarity* are categorematic-type. This gives further support to the previous study, as Blackwell (2005) mentioned, *Colour* adjectives are categorematic type. This study also supports Frawley's idea (1992) that *Value* and *Human Propensity* adjectives are syncategorematic-type.

In sum, this study provides further support to previous studies (Ağçam & Özkan, 2015; Al-khresheh & Alruwaili, 2024) on the issue that English learners from non-English-speaking countries presumably still experience language interferences. This condition refers to the effect of learners' L1 on their foreign language learning. Besides, learning difficulty experienced by the learners contributes to their progress by have not yet improved to the advanced level.

This issue is presumably caused by challenges inherent in the language that learners want to learn, such as different grammar rules. This fact contributes to the potential difficulties that learners may experience. In line with Wierzbicka (2006), English lexical variation is unique compared to other Indo-European languages. English, in this context, is a foreign language in most Asian countries. Another factor may be a lack of language competence, resulting in improper use of the language (Cao & Badger, 2021). As this study found, basic vocabulary words like '*good*', '*important*', and '*bad*' are often used improperly. Nonetheless, another implication of this issue is that such simple words—'*good*', '*important'*, '*bad'*—indicate the nature of spoken language.

CONCLUSION

This study identified the top 20 adjectives commonly used by learners. Among these, the most frequently occurring categories are *Value*, *Human Propensity*, and *Difficulty*, each containing four adjectives. The adjectives used as copula complements are likely influenced by the fact that learners tend to give brief responses in their speech. On the other hand, the discussion about adjectives used as noun modifiers suggests that learners tend to overuse them. For some adjectives, they were used in ways that differ from their typical syntactic order.

This study has provided further examples of how English is used by non-native speakers. It offers implications for foreign language learning, suggesting that English teachers can begin teaching students vocabulary from the *Value*, *Human Propensity*, and *Difficulty* categories. However, it is also important to teach alternative vocabularies. Ultimately, learners are expected to be able to produce a wider variety of vocabularies and improve their language performance.

Some limitations and suggestions for future studies should be considered. This study utilized a spoken language corpus that does not separate utterances according to language proficiency levels. Therefore, the generalizations made in this study should be reconsidered. The analysis focused primarily on high occurrence frequency, so other possible functional aspects need further exploration. Finally, English produced by non-natives always presents other significant problems and gaps for discussion. This study suggests that future research should be enhanced to help address these identified issues.

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