
This paper uses a subcorpora in *International Corpus of Learner English* (ICLE), namely the German L1 speakers’ corpora, to investigate learners’ difficulty in English “support verb constructions” such as *give an answer* or *have a look*. The corpus-based study finds several factors, including the choice of the verb, the inappropriate usage, the wrong noun complementation, are posing the problem. Nesselhauf further cautions readers in translating the corpus study findings to teaching implications.

Nesselhauf gives the prototypical definition of “support verb construction” as thus: the construction of *have, take, make* and *give* used in a delexical sense, optionally followed by an indefinite article, and an eventive noun that is identical or derived from a verb. The verb and the construction are roughly synonymous. Examples are “have a smile”, “take a breath”, “take action”.

Nesselhauf extracts the support verb construction from the German ICLE. He adopts a rigid standard for marking “acceptability”: Three dictionaries and the written part of the *British National Corpus* are used. In cases of ambiguity, two to four native speakers are consulted, thus resulting in five degrees of acceptability, ranging from undoubtedly acceptable to clearly unacceptable.

The data finds that while the majority of the support verb constructions by the learners are acceptable, 45 out of 251 are clearly wrong, with most problematic items
with “give” (15 mistakes) and “make” (19 mistakes). Nesselhauf further identifies typical difficulties according to mistaken element of the construction. Contrary to popular assumption that only the “verb” is problematic, the study finds learners sometimes wrongly used support verb construction for verbs (e.g. *give solutions* instead of *solve*). Other problematic areas include wrong noun complementation (e.g. *take care for* instead of *take care of*) and wrong noun usage (e.g.: *make a trial* instead of *make an attempt*).

Based on this finding, Nesselhauf pointed out previous studies may have overlooked inappropriate usages and contexts.

According to Nesselhauf, several factors need to be taking into consideration when translating corpus finding to teaching. One should of course consider the structure’s frequency of occurrence in the target language, but Nesselhauf warns that teachers should take varieties of English (American or British?) into consideration; the frequency of elements in learner language should also be studied (since learners are more likely to continue producing these features). Lastly we should also consider the degree of disruption.

The researcher wants the teachers to pay special attention to cases where the noun looks like the verb but is used in a different sense (e.g.: *take measurements* vs. *measure*), because such mistakes are likely to create confusion. Apart from focusing on verb, Nesselhauf also notes that noun complementation and prepositions/particles after verb (e.g.: *have a look* at vs. *look after, look around*) should also draw teachers’ attention.

Nesselhauf critically evaluates previous assumptions of the learners’ mistakes. It
demonstrates how corpus-based research can be informative in teaching. Nesselhauf also notes the different levels of acceptability in different English varieties. Because a clear-cut distinction between the right and wrong may not always be available in language studies, and one should especially caution in using such labels to describe the learner language. Nesselhauf’s marking of different degrees of acceptability is especially enlightening and offers an excellent example for future researchers to model after.

Reviewed by Yi Xu, 2005.