TECCL- and COCA-Based Comparative Analysis of Synonymous Verb Collocation: "Help", "Assist", and "Aid"

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**ABSTRACT*:* *Synonymous verbs refer to verbs that share a similar core meaning but differ in usage, register, or collocation. Based on Ten-thousand English Compositions of Chinese Learners (TECCL) and Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), this study explores similarities and differences in the collocation of the assistance verbs "help", "assist", and "aid" between Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and native English speakers. The results show that there are significant differences between the two groups of speakers in the use of these three synonymous verbs. Compared with native English speakers, Chinese EFL learners tend to misuse them and employ them in a less flexible and authentic manner. This phenomenon occurs because Chinese learners have limited English proficiency and tend to transfer Chinese linguistic patterns negatively. The pedagogical implications from the findings relate to refining Chinese learners' use of synonymous verbs to achieve greater precision and professionalism in expressions.*

KEYWORDS – *Assistance verbs, Chinese EFL learners, Corpus, Native English speakers, Synonymous verbs, Verb collocation*

I. INTRODUCTION

Synonyms are words that possess similar or equivalent meanings, providing language users with a range of options to convey their thoughts. When it comes to verbs specifically, synonymous verbs share comparable meanings, but it's important to note that they are not entirely identical, as absolute synonyms do not exist. Consequently, there must be differences in the semantic features or semantic focuses of a group of synonymous verbs. English boasts a vast and diverse range of synonyms, and thus the correct usage of synonyms poses a challenge for numerous English learners, which in turn constitutes a difficult yet important point in English language teaching (Li, 2019). Furthermore, investigating the disparities in their collocation helps clarify the contexts and semantic distinctions in which the synonyms are used (Moon, 2013 & Ahmad et al., 2019). Nation (1990) argued that learners need to have a comprehensive understanding of a word's form, position, function and meaning. Additionally, Stubbs (2001) believed that the evaluative meaning of words can be conveyed not only

through the examination of individual words but also through phrases and collocational patterns. However, one of the main challenges Chinese learners face in English language learning is understanding and applying the diverse collocation of synonymous verbs. Although teachers often focus on explaining the rules and differences of synonymous verbs, their teaching methods usually rely on repeated practice and simple word definitions. These approaches often fail to help students truly understand how synonymous verbs are used naturally in real contexts.

Comparative analyses using corpus can help Chinese EFL learners better grasp the natural usage of synonymous verbs and provide new insights into the teaching of verb collocations. Through this approach, learners can not only learn the basic usage of synonymous verbs but also gain insights into their application in different contexts, thus achieving better results in English learning. Based on TECCL and COCA, this study aims to take the English synonymous verbs "help," "assist," and "aid" as examples, employing corpus-based analysis to explore the similarities and differences in their usage between Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers. This research primarily addresses the following research questions:

1) What is the overall frequency distribution of "help", "assist", and "aid" by Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers?

2) What are the similarities and differences in the verb collocation of "help", "assist", and "aid" between Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers?

3) What are the characteristics exhibited by Chinese EFL learners in the verb collocation of "help", "assist", and "aid"?

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

The assistance verbs refer to a lexical set comprising verbs such as "assist", "help", and "aid", which semantically converge on the notion of providing support to an entity in order to achieve a goal or enable the completion of an action. The presence of a large number of synonymous verbs presents considerable challenges for compiling English dictionaries, teaching English, and learning English, making synonym identification a crucial issue in linguistic research. Laufer (1997) highlighted that one of the most formidable aspects of English learning lies precisely in the myriads of synonyms within the English lexicon, thereby making synonyms a challenge in vocabulary acquisition. Building on this point, Folse (2004) stated that if learners fail to comprehend the majority of vocabulary in a language, then that language remains incomprehensible to them, which severely impedes their language acquisition. In 2012, Webb & Nation shifted the focus to argue that vocabulary constitutes a vital component and core element of language proficiency, with vocabulary instruction aiming to enhance both breadth (vocabulary size) and depth (form, meaning, and usage) of vocabulary knowledge. Finally, Sonbul (2013) concluded by positing that vocabulary teaching methods primarily fall into two categories: explicit instruction focusing on the form of words themselves and implicit instruction providing contextual usage of vocabulary.

A number of prior researchers have examined synonyms and their word collocations. John (2015) defined synonyms as "different phonological words with identical or highly similar meanings", yet English learners, particularly novices, often struggled with their accurate differentiation and employment, leading to confusion. Concurrently, Wang & Huang (2017) utilized the Chinese Word Sketch (CWS) to meticulously

compare the Chinese emotional words "愉快" (yúkuài, "pleasure") and "高兴" (gāoxìng, "happiness"), identifying usage similarities and differences. Further advancing the field, Sayyed & Al-Khanji (2019) conducted a comparative analysis of eight synonymous adjectives conveying "fear", expanding research within a specific semantic category. Collectively, these studies provide crucial references for synonymous verb collocation, facilitating a deeper understanding of synonym usage complexities and variations.

Traditional English synonym analysis predominantly relies on dictionary descriptions to summarize the lexical meanings of synonyms. However, this method heavily depends on intuitive introspection and struggles to fully capture the subtle nuances between synonyms, thus presenting numerous issues in practical application. In recent years, the rapid advancement of corpus linguistics has offered novel perspectives and methodologies for analyzing English synonyms. Hunston (2002) pointed out that a corpus refers to a large collection of authentic language materials specifically compiled for linguistic research, wherein the data can be accessed and processed by computer programs. Moreover, given its capacity to handle vast amounts of naturally occurring and genuine linguistic data, the corpus is regarded as an empirical approach to language analysis (Cheng, 2012). Song (2021) outlined three advantages of corpus: firstly, its ability to reflect the distribution of words across various text types; secondly, its capacity to list high-frequency collocation; and thirdly, its provision of contextual information regarding word usage.

This study selects three commonly used synonymous verbs, "help," "assist", and "aid" as its research subjects. These assistance verbs share the core meaning of providing support or facilitating an action. Through a corpus-based method, the verb collocation of Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers is compared to reveal the distinctive characteristics and potential deficiencies in the use of assistance verbs, facilitating Chinese EFL learners' deeper understanding of English synonymous verbs.

III.   METHODOLOGY

3.1 Instrument

3.1.1 Ten-thousand English Compositions of Chinese Learners (TECCL)

The materials used for Chinese EFL learners are sourced from TECCL, which is a corpus developed by Beijing Foreign Studies University specifically for Chinese EFL learners. TECCL contains approximately 10,000 writing samples of Chinese EFL learners, totaling 1,817,472 words. At a rough count, there are more than a thousand different essay questions covered in TECCL, providing rich language samples. In contrast to other English corpora of Chinese EFL learners, TECCL includes not only texts composed in class and under (time) pressure in testing context, but also those written after class. Importantly, texts in TECCL often include error annotations, which are particularly valuable for studying common errors and difficulties in language learning. As a teaching and research tool, TECCL provides valuable support for developing instructional materials, conducting linguistic research, and designing teaching strategies.

3.1.2 Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)

The materials used for native English speakers are from COCA, the world's largest balanced corpus of English. This corpus encompasses over one billion words of textual content, with an annual accumulation exceeding 25 million words spanning from 1990 to 2019. The texts are sourced from eight distinct genres: spoken language, fictional works, popular magazines, newspapers, academic publications, subtitles from TV programs and movies, blogs, and various other web pages. COCA boasts a broad scope and an ample volume, making it well-suited for comparison with the collocation of Chinese EFL learners.

3.2 Research Procedures and Statistic Measures

Corpus evidence indicates that due to different text types, there are variations in the word frequency of the same lexical item, and differences in its collocation behaviors. Firstly, searches were conducted in TECCL and COCA to obtain the occurrence frequencies of the assistance verbs "help", "assist", and "aid" (including inflected forms). Then their respective standardized frequencies were calculated. The raw frequencies of lexical items were standardized by calculating their occurrence rates per 100,000 words, with normalization based on corpus size (Gries, 2010). Synonym sets generally only share identical or similar conceptual meanings, while collocation cannot be arbitrarily substituted (Conzett, 1997). Using "help," "assist," and "aid" as node words, collocation was extracted with a span of five words set both before and after the node words. Finally, by utilizing the Key Word in Context (KWIC) function within the corpora, the author retrieved and analyzed the specific usages of "help," "assist," and "aid" in both corpora.

IV.   RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Frequency Analysis

Frequency distribution also reflects the probabilistic nature of the language system (Halliday, 1991). In TECCL, the total frequencies of "help", "assist", and "aid" are 2592, 50 and 24 times respectively, while in COCA, the total frequencies are 735415, 735415 and 84753 times. Table 1 shows the frequency of these three assistance verbs. Overall, "help" is used much more frequently than "assist" and "aid", making it a more common choice in assistance verbs.

Table 1: Frequency of "help", "assist", and "aid" in TECCL and COCA (including inflected forms)

	Help		Assist		Aid	
	TECCL	COCA	TECCL	COCA	TECCL	COCA
Raw frequency	2,592	735,415	50	36,736	24	84,753
Standard frequency (Per million)	142.62	73.54	2.75	3.68	1.32	8.48

4.2 Analysis of Collocation Usage

4.2.1 Collocation Usage of "Help"

By analyzing the search results obtained from TECCL, we can find that the most frequently used

collocation of "help" by Chinese EFL learners is "help + infinitive" (Example 1), which is in line with the result in COCA. However, there may also exist some differences in the use of "help" between Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers, mainly in the following two aspects.

Example 1

Engaging in deep breathing exercises, yoga, or meditation can help promote relaxation, reduce physiological responses to stress, and strengthen our … (TECCL)

In terms of vocabulary and collocation, native English speakers naturally use fixed expressions such as "can't help but," "help oneself to," and "help out" (Example 2). In contrast, Chinese EFL learners might be unfamiliar with these fixed expressions and use them awkwardly or unnaturally (Example 3). Additionally, native English speakers are familiar with different forms of "help", such as gerunds, infinitives, and object clauses. However, Chinese EFL learners may be influenced by their native language and might confuse "help" with other synonymous verbs. In Example 4, a more natural expression would be to replace "aid" with "help".

Example 2

I can't help but wonder. (COCA)

Example 3

The lack of sleep contributes to the phenomena that some college students can't help deserting. (TECCL)

Example 4

To achieve this, there are several ways that can markedly aid in passing Chinese cultural traditions down to future generations. (TECCL)

From the grammatical structure perspective, both Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers most commonly use the "help + infinitive" structure (Example 5). However, Chinese EFL learners may sometimes add "to" when using this structure (Example 6). While "help + to + infinitive" is correct, native English speakers often prefer the more concise "help + infinitive" structure. When asking for help, native English speakers emphasize politeness and use more courteous expressions (Example 7). In contrast, influenced by Chinese, Chinese EFL learners might translate expressions directly, which can seem less polite or formal (Example 8). Native English speakers are familiar with various complex sentence structures and use "help" flexibly (Example 9), enabling them to express ideas smoothly and accurately. In contrast, Chinese EFL learners tend to rely on simpler sentences and avoid complex structures (Example 10).

Example 5

Engaging in deep breathing exercises, yoga, or meditation can help promote relaxation, reduce physiological responses to stress, and strengthen our … (COCA)

Example 6

The negative consequences of uncontrolled tourism growth, limiting tourist development can help to safeguard fragile environments, preserve cultural heritage, and avoid widening social … (TECCL)

Example 7

Could you please help me with this? (COCA)

Example 8

Help me with this. (TECCL)

Example 9

We should help those who are in need. (COCA)

Example 10

Study harder and harder help me realize it. (TECCL)

4.2.2 Collocation Usage of "Assist"

Through an analysis of the search results obtained from TECCL and COCA, it can be concluded that for both Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers, the most prevalent collocation of the word "assist" is "assist + in + gerund". Moreover, the potential differences in the usage of "assist" between the two groups of speakers can be observed and analyzed through two key aspects.

From the vocabulary and collocation perspective, native English speakers can accurately grasp the subtle differences of "assist" in different contexts and proficiently use fixed collocations. For example, native speakers know that "assist + in + gerund + something" means to provide help in a certain area (Example 11), while "assist + someone + with + something" means to help someone do something (Example 12). These collocations are not only accurate but also adjusted according to the specific context to ensure appropriate and fitting expressions. Additionally, native English speakers are familiar with the formal usage and common collocations of "assist", making them able to use it appropriately in formal situations, such as in business or academic settings, where using "assist" appears more formal and professional. In contrast, Chinese EFL learners might be influenced by their mother language, leading to incorrect use of fixed collocation with "assist". For example, Chinese learners might incorrectly say "assist + someone + to + infinitive" instead of "assist + in + gerund" or omit the preposition (Example 13), which leads to unnatural expressions. Using "assist + someone + to + infinitive" is understandable, but it might sound slightly awkward to native speakers. Moreover, when using "assist" in formal contexts, Chinese EFL learners might choose inappropriate expressions due to unfamiliarity with related collocation, lacking a deep understanding of the formal usage of "assist". For example, they might misuse "assist" with "help" (Example 14). In Example 14, "assist" is inappropriate and the correct expression should be "Since cheating can help students get satisfying grades easily …" This error may sound unnatural and affect the accuracy of the expression.

Example 11

She assists in organizing events. (COCA)

Example 12

He assists the professor with research. (COCA)

Example 13

…which reduces my stress and assist[s] me to forget unhappy things. (TECCL)

Example 14

Since cheating can assist students in getting satisfying grades easily … (TECCL)

From the grammatical structure perspective, native English speakers typically use "assist" correctly with the "assist + noun," "assist + in + gerund" and "assist + someone + with + noun" structures (Example 15-17). These structures are very common in English, making the expressions clear and precise. Additionally, native English speakers know that "assist" is often used in formal or semi-formal contexts, so they maintain the formality and politeness of the sentences when using it. In contrast, Chinese EFL learners often make grammatical errors when using "assist". For example, they might apply "assist" as a transitive verb without a preposition (Example 18). Moreover, when using the "assist + in + gerund" or "assist + someone + with + noun" structures, Chinese EFL learners might omit the necessary preposition, leading to incomplete or inaccurate expressions. Example 19 misses the crucial preposition "with", which could stem from an insufficient understanding of English sentence structures.

Example 15

She assisted the manager with the report. (COCA)

Example 16

He assists students with their homework. (COCA)

Example 17

She assists in managing the project. (COCA)

Example 18

She assists the project. (TECCL)

Example 19

They assist the students their homework. (TECCL)

4.2.3 Collocation Usage of "Aid"

Through analyzing search results in TECCL and COCA, the possible differences between Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers in the use of the verb "aid" can also be observed and analyzed in two

key aspects.

From the vocabulary and collocation perspective, native English speakers can accurately grasp the subtle differences of "aid" in different contexts and proficiently use fixed collocations. For example, native English speakers know that "aid in something" means to provide help in a certain area (Example 20) whereas "aid + someone" means to help someone (Example 21). These collocations demonstrate not only semantic precision but also contextual adaptability, ensuring linguistically appropriate and pragmatically fitting expressions. Native speakers are familiar with the formal usage and common collocations of the verb "aid". Consequently, they are capable of using it appropriately in formal settings, such as government, medical, or charitable fields, where the use of "aid" conveys a sense of formality and professionalism. They also correctly use "aid" with other phrases, such as "financial aid", "medical aid", etc. In contrast, Chinese EFL learners might be influenced by their mother language, leading to incorrect use of fixed collocations with "aid". Furthermore, when using "aid" in formal contexts, Chinese learners might choose inappropriate expressions due to unfamiliarity with collocations, lacking a deep understanding of the formal usage of "aid". They might confuse "aid" with other synonymous verbs or use incorrect prepositions, affecting the accuracy and professionalism of their expressions. For example, learners might mistakenly use "aid + to + infinitive" instead of "aid + in + gerund". These errors usually result from not understanding the rules for using fixed collocations in English. Example 22 demonstrates linguistic awkwardness resulting from improper collocation, while the expression "The charity aids the poor." is both grammatically correct and pragmatically optimal.

Example 20

The new policy aids in reducing carbon emissions. (COCA)

Example 21

The organization aids refugees. (COCA)

Example 22

The charity aids for the poor. (TECCL)

Native English speakers typically use "aid" correctly with structures like "aid + noun" or "aid + in + gerund" (Example 23 & 24). These structures are very common in English, making the expressions clear and precise. Native speakers also understand that "aid" is often used in formal or semi-formal contexts, so they maintain the formality and politeness of the sentence when using it (Example 25). However, Chinese EFL learners often make grammatical errors when using "aid". For example, they might incorrectly use an intransitive structure or omit necessary prepositions, leading to incomplete or inaccurate sentences. Example 26 may be more idiomatically as "This program aids in the development of new skills." Additionally, Chinese EFL learners might confuse the use of "aid", "assist", and "help" (Example 27). A more appropriate expression for Example 27 would be, "To achieve this, there are several ways that can greatly help pass Chinese cultural traditions down to future generations." Similarly, Example 28 would sound more natural if "aid" is replaced with "assist".

Example 23

She provided aid to the victims. (COCA)

Example 24

This program aids in the development of new skills. (COCA)

Example 25

The government aids developing countries with financial support. (COCA)

Example 26

This program aids developing new skills. (TECCL)

Example 27

To achieve this, there are several ways that can markedly aid in passing Chinese cultural traditions down to future generations. (TECCL)

Example 28

Mobile phones also considerably aid in everyday tasks. (TECCL)

4.3 Collocational Characteristics of Assistance Verbs Used by Chinese EFL Learners

4.3.1 Overuse of Certain Verbs

Chinese EFL learners often show a marked preference for the verb "help" over its synonymous verbs "assist" and "aid" when suggesting or discussing assistance. This stems mainly from "help" being simpler, more common, and frequently featured in teaching materials, making it easier for learners to understand and remember. Consequently, students tend to overuse "help" and its common collocations like "help someone do something", restricting language flexibility and potentially affecting communication accuracy in certain contexts.

"Assist" and "aid" are more commonly employed in formal writing or academic settings. However, these verbs are underutilized in TECCL, which suggests that many Chinese EFL learners rely solely on "help" when using assistance verbs, ignoring "assist" and "aid". This is primarily because students have limited exposure to these two verbs in the classroom and daily conversation, leading to a lack of confidence when using them and resulting in their frequent avoidance of these two verbs. This may also result from unfamiliarity with the subtle differences among these synonymous verbs or insufficient learning exposure and practice. Chinese EFL learners are usually more familiar with "help" as it is a basic and common verb. Thus, they might habitually say "I help" in various situations, limiting language richness and expression accuracy. Yet, they overlook "assist" and "aid" which are more suitable for some formal or professional contexts. Using "help" repeatedly in formal writing instead of "assist" makes expressions monotonous and seem unprofessional.

To effectively address these issues, Chinese EFL learners ought to delve into and practice a broader range of assistance verbs along with their various forms and usages. Through extensive reading and practical

exercises, they can better grasp the nuances of synonymous verbs and use them flexibly, making their English more authentic and effective. Additionally, mastering the usages and collocation of "help", "assist", and "aid" can greatly improve their language proficiency and communication skills, especially in academic writing.

4.3.2 Failure to Use Correct Collocations

Accurate use of assistance verbs and their collocations is a common challenge for Chinese EFL learners. When using "help", "assist", and "aid", they may encounter difficulties, such as errors in collocation and grammatical structures. Learners often use incorrect collocation in sentences. Similarly, they may confuse the collocations for "assist", saying "assist + someone + to + infinitive" instead of "assist + someone + in + gerund".

In formal settings, Chinese EFL learners may overlook specific collocational requirements for "aid", such as saying "aid + someone + to + infinitive" instead of "aid + someone + in + gerund." Moreover, learners may incorrectly employ definite or indefinite articles with these verbs, such as saying "give an aid" instead of "give aid." This misuse indicates a lack of familiarity with the correct collocations of these verbs, potentially leading to misunderstandings and inaccurate expressions.

To avoid these errors, Chinese EFL learners need extensive practice to become familiar with the correct collocations and usages of these verbs. They can achieve this by reading and mimicking authentic English expressions, memorizing fixed collocations, and repeatedly applying these learned expressions and collocations in real contexts. Through continuous practice and feedback, learners can gradually master these subtle usage differences, accurately use the assistance verbs and improve their language skills.

4.3.3 Reliance on Single Collocation

When lacking appropriate expressions, learners tend to use a word with a similar meaning as a substitute (James, 2001). Many Chinese EFL learners tend to rely on single expressions when using assistance verbs, frequently using "help" while neglecting other synonymous verbs such as "assist" and "aid." This might be due to unfamiliarity with the subtle differences among these verbs or a lack of exposure and practice during the learning process. For instance, learners might repeatedly use fixed collocations, such as "help + with", but are less familiar with "assist + with" or "aid + in". This fixation on certain collocations makes them prone to avoid more complex collocational structures. Additionally, single collocation limits the richness of their language and the accuracy of their expressions, potentially affecting the diversity and effectiveness of their assistance-related expressions.

To overcome this, Chinese EFL learners ought to conduct in-depth exploration and engage in more extensive practice regarding assistance verbs and the various collocations, so as to better adapt to diverse contexts. By extensive reading and practical exercises, learners can better understand the nuances of these synonymous verbs and use them flexibly in appropriate contexts, making their English expression more authentic and effective. For Chinese EFL learners, mastering the different usages and collocation of "help", "assist", and "aid" can significantly help them communicate more effectively with native English speakers and improve their academic

writing proficiency, which could enhance their communication skills and language proficiency.

V.   CONCLUSION

This study compares the collocation of synonymous verbs "help", "assist", and "aid" in TECCL and COCA. It also examines the characteristics of Chinese EFL learners and native English speakers in terms of the collocation of assistance verbs. The results reveal several problems in Chinese EFL learners' use of assistance verbs and collocation. To begin with, it is evident that some Chinese EFL learners exhibit a strong tendency to overuse the verb "help" compared to its synonymous verbs "assist" and "aid". This preference for "help" indicates a lack of variety in their verb selection. Moreover, a portion of learners encounter difficulties in forming correct collocations. They often confuse "help", "assist", and "aid", and this confusion subsequently leads to the creation of ungrammatical collocations. Furthermore, the collocations employed by Chinese EFL learners are far from ideal. Their collocation patterns lack richness, and their word choices are not refined enough. Specifically, they tend to rely excessively on some high-frequency collocation while underusing the authenticity collocation that is commonly adopted by native speakers.

The main influencing factors of Chinese EFL learners' problems in using synonymous verbs stem from negative transfer from their mother tongue and their relatively low second language proficiency. Compared with native speakers, Chinese EFL learners are still in the language learning phase. They show relatively insufficient mastery of various expressions and often struggle to employ sophisticated academic terms precisely. Additionally, they frequently employ their mother tongue as a bridge during second language acquisition, which can sometimes lead to both positive transfer facilitating comprehension and negative transfer. Moreover, this study has some limitations. The materials of Chinese EFL learners are selected from TECCL, which consists of students' writing. The genre of the materials is limited, and this may influence the results of the research. For example, some of the collocation of assistance verbs may be used more frequently in writing. However, we failed to find a balanced corpus from which to select the materials of Chinese EFL learners. In future research, we will attempt to construct a balanced corpus for Chinese EFL learners, collecting the texts they produce across a wider range of genres. This will enable us to make a more effective comparison between learners and native speakers regarding the use of assistance verbs and further compare the differences in the use of assistance verbs across different genres.

When teaching English vocabulary in the classroom, English teachers could use a corpus as an auxiliary tool to strengthen the analysis of synonymous verbs through authentic corpus data, thereby avoiding confusion and misuse. At the same time, it can also be applied to expand learners' understanding and mastery of the refined meanings of synonymous words, collocational styles, and usage scenarios, so as to cultivate English logical thinking. Additionally, English teachers should cultivate learners' ability to use corpus search tools by guiding them to independently analyze high-frequency words and collocations used by native speakers. These approaches not only facilitate positive mother tongue transfer but also enhance their vocabulary collocation proficiency, ultimately promoting comprehensive second language development.

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