

William J. Crawford
Department of English, Northern Arizona University
william.crawford@nau.edu

Is L2 writing like native-English conversation?

Research on learner corpora has allowed second language acquisition researchers and teachers to gain a more accurate picture of the type of language used by English language learners (e.g., Granger, 1998, Granger, Hung, & Petch-Tyson, 2002, Sinclair, 2004). Many studies in this area have found evidence of the “spoken nature” of learner writing by reporting on an overuse of linguistic features reflective of spoken language (Biber and Reppen, 1998; Granger and Rayson, 1998; Petch-Tyson, 1998; Aijmer, 2002; Hinkel, 2002). Interestingly, while all of these studies use a corpus methodology to quantify a certain feature in the learner corpora, not all of the studies are based on comparable empirical analyses of spoken native-English corpora. For example, Hinkel (2002) reports that learner overuse of *be* copular verbs is reflective of spoken discourse but provides no empirical support to substantiate this claim. In fact, the *Longman grammar of spoken and written English* (LGSWE, 1999) finds *be* copular verbs to be most common in academic writing.

In the present paper, I take a complementary approach. Most studies have first identified overused features in learner corpora, and then interpreted those features relative to claimed patterns of use by native English speakers. In contrast, I first identify a set of features that are especially characteristic of native-English conversation based on prior corpus-based research, and then illustrate the extent to which these features are found in learner corpora. Specifically, using the *LGSWE* as a guide, this paper identifies 62 lexical items from four different grammatical categories (nouns, verbs, modals, adverbs) that are markedly more frequent in conversation. These features are then compared across three different learner corpora from the International Corpus of Learner English (Spanish, German, Finnish), as well as compared to a native corpus of student essays (The Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays), to indicate the extent to which learner language actually reflects the features of native-English conversation.

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