

# *Intermediate to Advance L1 Chinese EFL Learners' Adverb Placement*

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on adverbial acquisition by examining sample essays written by 10 intermediate-to-advanced level L1 Chinese EFL learners. The result of the study, though different than previous research, further justifies the claim that Chinese L1 negative influence on English adverb acquisition is relatively small, and that instructions received during acquisition impact placement preference. Advanced EFL learners also decide the position base on their meanings and implication, similar to native speakers but with native language influence.

**Keywords:** second language acquisition, adverbial placement, language transfer.

## **1. Introduction**

It is not simple to grasp the complexity of English adverbials as an L2 learner. The freedom of placement that these phrases possess can cause confusion, and certain limitations put constrain on the writers. However, this aspect of the language acquisition may not be taught in detail since adverbials are not as essential as nouns and verbs and their established rules are harder to follow. Therefore, many of the students learn much about this by themselves, accumulating knowledge and acquiring habits on their own.

Language transfer refers to the interference of one's native language or languages as one tries to acquire a second language. Positive transfer facilitates acquisition, and negative may cause certain confusion. Overall, Chinese and English adverbials seem very similar, but their essential difference makes it harder for L1 Chinese EFL learners to fully grasp than some other parts of speech.

Many previous linguists have conducted studies to analyze the adverbials in these two languages. In 2004, Chu and Schwartz found through a comparison between French and Chinese EFL learners that unlike French, which has a set of grammar regarding adverbials visibly different from English, misleading input is the primary factor interfering second language acquisition in the case of Chinese speakers [1]. Zhang and Koller furthered the claim that adverb placements in the two languages are not tightly bounded. Their research indicated another reason for preferred adverbial placement in Chinese EFL learner groups: a result of the teachers' preference [2].

This study discusses some of the connection between Chinese and English adverbial structure and usage. Zhang and Koller's study only covered a small group within the range of L1 Chinese EFL

learners. The author of this study aims to confirm the discovered and point out any contradictions by taking a similar approach.

## 2. Brief Overview of the Two Languages

### 2.1. Overview of English Adverbials

English adverbials consist of adverbs of modality, manner, time, place, frequency, degree, and can be placed at the beginning, or the end of the clause. There are multiple possible positions to place adverbials, which is a source of confusion to second language learners. An example given by Ernst demonstrates the complexity:

(Stupidly,) they (stupidly) have (stupidly) been (stupidly) buying hog futures (, stupidly) [3].

These positions might not be taught in lessons directly in detail, so that much of the learning is done by the students.

If more than one adverbial is presented in a sentence next to each other, they align to a pattern in most cases that is:

Degree + modality + location + manner + time (1)

Smaller and more detailed units often precede larger and more vague units, and shorter words in length also come before longer ones such as the examples:

1. My son got up at six o'clock yesterday morning.
2. We lived in a Chinese restaurant in America.
3. The manager spoke fast but rhythmly.
4. John is very much afraid of his step mother.

[4]

There are certain exceptions; degree adverbials do not have such patterns but they have fixed collocation as demonstrated in example 4 above. An adverb modifies a verb, an adjective, another adverb, or a clause. This study focuses on sentence adverbs and VP (verb phrase) adverbs, as their placement is harder for Chinese EFL learners to acquire.

### 2.2. Overview of Chinese Adverbials

Native grammatical study about Chinese had not been developed before Western studies became available in China during the 19th century. The first indigenous book Ma shi wen tong was published by Ma Jianzhong in 1898. From there, the modern "standard" Chinese grammar came into existence in Zan ni han yu jiao xue yu fa published in 1956 with later editions [5]. Since Chinese has such a different structure and appearance than the Western language, it was proclaimed not having grammar and different parts of speech by William Durant in the twentieth century [6].

Chinese adverbs are defined to have a similar functions as English adverbs, which are to decorate or limit verbs or adjectives [7]. However, how to categorize these adverbs has been controversial throughout decades of research. Chinese adverbials are categorized into six types according to Huang and Liao lists as:

1. Punctual and frequency time adverb
2. Range
3. Degree
4. Modality and manner
5. Negation and affirmation
6. Mood

[8]

The default position of Chinese adverbs is in debate, as Liu claims that the Chinese adverbs typically come before the verb phrases they modify, while others discuss regular cases of post-verbal adverbials.

NP (Time AdvP) (Subject AdvP2) (Manner AdvP) (Place AdvP) VP (2)

孩子们昨天高高兴兴地连蹦带跳地向公园奔去。(Sentence adopted from Liu, 2004)

hai zi men [zuo tian] [gao gao xing xing de] [lian pao dai tiao de] [xiang gong yuan] ben qu。

Children yesterday happily by trotting and skipping towards park ran.

Yesterday, the children ran happily towards the park by trotting and skipping.

As it is possible to have a series of adverbs strung together in Chinese, Robson purposes a structure [9].

Subject + time (punctual) AdvP + location AdvP + VP + time (duration) AdvP (3)

This structure is similar to how English adjectives come in a certain order, where the modifiers serving different functions are placed differently in a sentence.

As Guo put forth, adverbs in the two different languages are essentially different despite their apparent similarities in form and usage [4]. The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary (5th edition) recorded 923 Chinese adverbials, while English includes a total of 2885 adverbs. This vast number of words adds to their complexity. Also, Chinese adverbials can make an expression more vivid and concise while English adverbials cannot.

### 3. Previous Study Results

Chu and Schwartz concluded that the main reason for error for Chinese speakers is not the L1 grammar but misleading adverb input in English. They compared and contrasted English adverbials with those in Chinese and French. French EFL learners are more likely to be influenced by negative transfer of their native language. Chinese learners, on the other hand, are less affected. Because the VP adverbs and sentential adverbs in the two languages have very similar placement rules, negative transfer has less of an impact. However, English adverb input could be misleading to an EFL learner because adverbials can have ambiguous interpretations.

Zhang and Koller's study in 2015 demonstrate an abundant usage of sentence-initial (37.45%) and post-verbal adverbs (32.00%) in advanced EFL learners' writing. They concluded that it may be caused by language transfer, instruction during acquisition, and a possible perception of prestige. They proposed that many teachers prefer their students to place their adverbials in sentence-initial or post-verbal position, and this heavily influences the students' writing tendency.

The study did not cover a far range of age and experience. This study was conducted on a group of students enrolled in college ESL program. Many of these native Chinese students have been under Chinese education during primary school, middle school, and even high school. Through a similar approach, the author conducts a study on a different group with an acquisition process that is not entirely the same. The goal is to examine whether the same results of adverb placement can be obtained, and what may cause the differences in the results.

### 4. Methodology

The author produces a similar analysis to Zhang and Koller by gathered essays written by 14–16-year-old English second language learners who attend international school in Guangzhou, China. They all have been exposed to English in English from a relatively early age, and all courses except

Chinese in the school are taught only in English. Despite the students all have varying English skill levels, their ability to learn in English immersion makes them qualified to be intermediate to advanced English learners. The samples are taken from ten students. The writings are mostly argumentative essays produced as Honors Language and Composition homework with additional analytic writings done outside of school.

## 5. Results of Data Collection

Table 1: Data collected from sample essays.

Position of adverbials	Sum	Frequency
Beginning of sentence	17	19.8%
After subject (before auxiliaries)	24	27.9%
Between two auxiliaries	4	4.7%
Before the main verbs (after auxiliaries)	21	24.4%
After the VP	16	18.6%
Ungrammatical	4	4.7%
Total (excluding the ones modifying adjectives/ adverbs): 86		

The data is surprising in the sense that the numbers are quite contrary to Zhang and Koller's result—the record shows a tendency for students to prefer placing adverbials in the middle of the sentence, either right after the subject or right before the main verb. Placing adverbs at the beginning of the sentence or after the verb phrase are popular choices, but still lesser than the SAVO structure.

## 6. Analyzing the Results

The results vastly differ from the previous study; this could be because the respondents are from different background. However, the apparent contradicting numbers demonstrate a consistent determiner in adverb placement regardless of age group. The preferences are caused by received instruction and language transfer. Also, the advanced learners gradually gain the ability to distinguish subtle effects resulted from different placements. They have accumulated knowledge about certain fixed collocation of adverbials.

### 6.1. Influenced by Explicit Instructions

Zhang and Koller mentioned that the explicit instructions during language acquisition may have a strong impact on the students' writing. Many students have been encouraged to use more sentence-initial adverbials in their early stage of English acquisition. This causation of explicit instruction seems to also be the case in this study.

The teenagers in an international school learn the language in a way that is quite unlike how it is taught in public schools. They have a much more immerse English learning environment than students in a Chinese public school. Also, the testing system in public education system focuses on the reading, listening, and writing aspect of a foreign language which results in students having much weaker speaking ability. The "correctness" of grammar is emphasized, and this may be the cause of adverb placement preference since adding an adverb in a ASVO or SVOA structure interfere less with other components of a sentence. This also avoids the trouble of struggling with the auxiliary verbs. In this way, students ensure that their sentences are correct and clear even if these types of sentences are relatively more rigid and inflexible.

On the other hand, students have much more opportunities to practice less formal English. The respondents in this study have been taught by native English speakers for at least two years, some of

whom had explicitly forbidden excess use of certain adverbs such as the words “firstly” and “secondly” which are typically put at the initial position. Students are still encouraged to write down adverbs indicating the logic sequence of the paragraph so that many will use adverbs such as “consequently” and “overall”. This could be the main reason to why the samples taken demonstrate such a contrary number compared to what was found. Therefore, this difference does not necessarily undermine previous results, but confirms the validity.

## 6.2. Language Transfer

Since Chinese and English have similar syntactic structure in adverbial placements, as Chu and Schwartz’s analysis and this study demonstrate, it can be concluded that transfer from L1 Chinese to L2 English is not the main factor for placement errors such as the structure SVAO, which is ungrammatical in both English and Chinese.

In contrast, positive transfer from Chinese can provide help with English adverbial placement as the two languages share a similar sentence structure regarding basic adverbs. Most Chinese adverbial modifying verbs directly precede the verbs, just like usual English ones. The following clause is taken from one sample essay as an example:

[M]any Disney movies since the 1990s have actively promoted multi-culturalism and an openness toward each other.

“Active” modifies the verb “to promote”. The verb phrase in this case is consist of more than one word, but the main verb is much more important and the adverbial is still put before it instead of the auxiliary verb.

English adverbials can also be put in between two auxiliaries, for example:

He **is** [silently] closing the door.

Chinese has auxiliary verbs, and similar to English, more than one auxiliary can exist in a verb phrase. However, the adverb position between two Chinese auxiliaries is incorrect.

他可能会[悄悄地]关门。

Ta **ke neng hui** [qiao qiao de] guan men。

He **might will** [silently] close door.

He might silently close the door.

“Silently” directly proceeds “close”, the verb it describes.

The percentage of adverbials placed between auxiliary verbs is the smallest because the students’ use of more than one auxiliary verb is not frequent, and adding adverbials on top of that would make writing even harder. From this and the previous analysis about preferring the ASVO and SVOA structure, we can see that the EFL learners tend to simplify their sentences in order to avoid mistakes. The students who placed adverbials between two auxiliaries have a relatively high TOEFL score in the group, and their English ability may be the key for them to use longer verb phrases.

### 6.3. Different Meanings and Implications of the Adverbials

Confusion may arise from the complex pragmatics and the different nuances between them when a second language learner advances beyond the fundamentals since the two languages are essentially different.

There are two types of adverbs: sentence adverbs and VP (verb phrase) adverbs. Sentence adverbs modifies entire clauses and can be put in any reasonable places in English. VP adverbs modifies the verb, and focus on the verb phrase. An ASVO structure emphasizes the adverb,

The sentence

Obviously, he should come.

Has an emphasis on “obviously” and shows the speaker’s attitude, whereas the sentence, and

He should obviously come.

Can be interpreted that the subject of the sentence comes in an obvious manner. Advanced English learners may not realize their reason to decide their placement, but the subtle implications have their influence.

Comparing to Chinese adverbials, English adverbials are clearer in definition and categorization. Chinese grammar study is an extension of Western linguistic system, meaning that the categorization may not be a best fit. For example, Cai stated that both languages have adverbials indicating time, but certain words like “today” and “yesterday” can also function as nouns [10].

Many adverbials frequently used in Chinese do not have a prominent common feature that indicates them being adverbials (such as the -ly in English). It could be more complex and difficult to categorize them. Many native Chinese speakers do not notice their adverb usage. Chinese adverbs have a much smaller number in total, but they are formed by single characters. The combined morphemes can result in a sentence or phrase being controversial. The same character may be present in different phrases functioning as different parts of speech. Students often do not identify the morphemes in longer words and phrases in daily usage. For example, the word “jiu [就]” has multiple meanings in various situations.

Forming adverbials:

我就要到了。

Wo [jiu yao] dao le.

I [almost] arrive (perfect).

I am arriving soon.

Forming verbs:

高不成低不就

High not able low not accommodate

Be unfit for a higher post but unwilling to take a lower one

(A Chinese proverb)

The subtle implications differ in the two languages, and the inability to interpret them can lead to students writing sentences that are grammatically correct but less accurate. When the aspect is acquired by the learner, it affects their choice of placement.

## 7. Conclusion

To conclude, advanced L1 Chinese EFL learners depend mostly on the context and emphasis of the adverbials they are using. The language acquisition and the perceptions that the students gained during the process may shape their understanding about adverbials. At the same time, their native language understanding and learning process also contribute to their placement decision.

The collected data demonstrate a preference of mid-sentence adverbials over sentence-initial and post-verbal positions, quite contrary to previous findings. However, these results are consistent with previous studies in that the samples are taken from a different group with another experience of language learning. This confirms the consistency of the hypothesis in these two groups with different age and different academic background. This study only focuses on a small sample, and may not be the most precise representation for a group. Future studies may come to a more inclusive conclusion.

It is interesting to see how the Chinese L1 EFL learners respond to learning this aspect of English. They are affected by the same factors and arrived at different destinations. Future studies can explore the influence be a common mindset of having a same native language during the process of acquisition.

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