

# A Study on College English Majors' Writings from the Perspective of Appraisal Theory

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**Abstract**—This paper explores the features of the top 30 appraisal words in students' essays from the perspective of Appraisal Theory. The distributions of the Appraisal words are not even in the writings. Attitude system comes first followed by Graduation system and Engagement system. With the analysis of the features and distributions of the top 30 appraisal words, it reveals some problems related to usage of appraisal resources in the writings and based on which the paper tries to give some suggestions both for students and teachers.

**Index Terms**—Appraisal Theory, appraisal words, English writing

## I. INTRODUCTION

English writing ability is an important part among the four basic skills in language learning and also a method to measure the output of language. (Nie, 2005). In any kinds of exams, there are specific requirements for English writing. For example, one of the most important English exams, TEM-8. The requirements about it going as “*students can write essays of different topics, what's more, the essay should be informative with right vocabularies and phrases and well expressed.*” Its' requirements emphasizes that the content of senior English major student should be enriched with some deep thoughts.

Appraisal theory aims at discussing how vocabulary conveys meaning and offers information that are the basic function of writing. Therefore, it is reasonable and applicable to analyze the vocabularies in essays under the framework of Appraisal system which can provide a new tool and perspective to study writing. The thesis collects 71 pieces of English essays from senior English students of a college and explores the features of the top 30 Appraisal words in the essays hoping to give some suggestions both for students and teachers.

## II. APPRAISAL THEORY AND COLLEGE ENGLISH WRITING

Appraisal Theory is put forward by some linguists leading by Martin in 1990s. It is a new breakthrough to the study of interpersonal meaning within the framework of System Functional Linguistics. The origin of theory comes from one of the practices in the secondary schools and workplace of New South Wales, Australia, which fundamentally decides the practicability of the theory itself. (Wang, 2001). Appraisal Theory is consisted of three subsystems namely Attitude, Engagement and Graduation.

Attitude is concerned with our feelings, including emotional reactions, judgment of behavior and evaluation of things (Martin & White, 2008). At the same time, Attitude, as the core and basic part of Appraisal Theory, can be further divided into three subtle systems called Affect, Judgment and Appreciation which are traditionally referred as emotion, ethics and aesthetics. In all, Attitude is a framework for mapping feelings as they are constructed in English texts. (Martin & White, 2008).

Engagement is the second part within the framework of Appraisal Theory. It concerns with how people employ strategies to express their points, positions, and feelings towards people, product and phenomena. What's more, it deals with meaning in context rather than grammatical forms.

Graduation is achieved in terms of focus and force. Focus is applied into the categories which “from an experiential perspective are not scalable. For instance, *He is a true friend*. When “friend” seen as a whole, the definition of it is clear and distinct. Force covers assessments as to degree of intensity and as to amount. It can be realized through deploying adverbs of degree and adjectives and so on. For example, *slight* sad, *greatly* encouraged, *large* amount, *many* people and so on.

It is common to find that students are required to write argumentation or description in writing part of English exam. As a matter of fact, any kinds of discourses are of dialogism. According to the perspective of SFL linguists whether personal monologue or written texts, they are not isolated instead the dialogue and interaction between writer and reader. (Halliday, 2004). This can be interpreted from the view of Appraisal Theory that the writer shows his/her point through various methods whether implicit or explicit ways due to stimulation to feelings that have different levels. Appraisal Theory mainly explores how lexical resources convey meanings and provide information especially the evaluative meaning of adjectives, verbs, nouns and adverb. (Li, 2004).

Therefore, by analyzing the top 30 appraisal words in students' essays has important instructions for writing.

### III. THE TOP 30 APPRAISAL WORDS IN STUDENTS' ESSAYS

The data of this thesis collects from senior English writing course test of English major students of a university. All the papers have been marked by at least two teachers in order to make sure fair and square. The students are in the third years of English major. With the aid of Antconc 3.35, key word list will be generated and this study will focus on adjectives, adverbs, verb and nouns containing evaluative meanings. Based on the statistic output by Antconc 3.35 and combined with manual work, the top 30 appraisal words are listed as following.

THE TOP 30 APPRAISAL WORDS

Word	Frequency	Word.	Frequency
will	549	highest	50
more	335	better	49
can	264	help	45
not	166	importance	45
many	116	great	42
but	104	less	39
however	104	therefore	36
so	103	poor	32
may	82	advantages	29
good	77	could	29
burden	70	most	29
pressure	67	stress	26
much	64	well	26
should	61	higher	25
important	52	would	24

The number of the top 30 Appraisal words is 2740 which takes up about 72.5% of total Appraisal words which surely reveals the features of Appraisal resources in students' essays and gives some thoughts for both students and teachers in English writing. In order to make it clear, the distribution of the top 30 Appraisal words among three-subsystem of Appraisal Theory is presented as the following table:

Three-subsystem	Frequency of the words	Percentage in the top 30 Appraisal words
Attitude	1367	49.89%
Engagement	513	18.72%
Graduation	860	31.39%

#### A. Distribution of Attitude System in Top 30 Appraisal Words.

In the top 30 Appraisal words there are 14 Attitude words whose frequency is 1367 which takes up 49.89% of all the top 30 Appraisal words. These words are: *will, can, good, burden, pressure, should, important, help, importance, poor, advantages, stress, well and would* among the top 30. The following examples will explain and confirm the correctness. It is impossible to show all the examples thus some typical examples will be presented.

*will* counted 549 ranks the first of all the Appraisal words in the 71 pieces of essays. On average, each essay has at least 7 *will*. As a matter of fact the word *will* belongs to the Judgment, the subsystem of Attitude. The direction of essay is to talk about an English reform. They had to assess the effects and results of the English reform from different perspective. The examples are given as following:

(1). If English withdraws, the CET-4 and CET-6 *will be influenced*, too. Without the long-time and continuous learning of English, students *will spend* more time in passing these exams.

(2). Mastering English still *will be* a advantage for students in hunting for jobs and this reform *will* have a bad effect on the cultivation of English talents definitely.

(3). Another benefit is that it *will* strengthen students' comprehensive ability. If exams in the future *will* focus more on application skills instead of useless content as the minister of education announced students' attitude towards English language learning *will* change accordingly.

*will* in above examples chose by writers to show their attitudes towards English reform in an indirect way in the essays. The suitable usage of *will* conveys writer's stance and judgment of a thing and builds good inter-personal relationship while too many of it has a side effect on expressions. It seems to be a common problem in both low and high mark group of the essays. Just as, Xiang ping in 2009 found that the usage frequency of *will, must should and can* in corpus of Chinese students was much higher than American students. When *will* seen as verb, it can be "used for stating what you think is probably true" which is exactly the meaning appearing in the above examples. Thus, too many *will* in the essays certainly decrease the credibility of the essays. Under the aid of software, an essay by student with the highest frequency of *will* is noticed by the author. There are together 25 *will* occurring in the essay. Here is a paragraph from the essay:

*First of all, students will benefit the most from the reform. Firstly the situation of one exams decides everything will be changed. A small mistake in the exam might deprive a student of the only chance of entering a college. Once the reform is carried out. The highest score of English tests held during the three years in high school will be recorded as a*

student's final grade and students **will** have more chance to get a better grade. Secondly, students who have achieved their ideal English level can spare their time to other subjects such as Chinese and Math. This **will** help them to improve their grades of weak subjects. Thirdly, students who are weak at English **will** have more opportunities to refresh their records of English test. This **will** help to reduce their study burden and psychological burden to a large extent. It is not an exaggeration to say that the reform **will** make students' future brighter.

It is easy to see that the idea of this paragraph is quite subjective without specific details to support the main idea. In the first sentence, the student clearly presents his/her opinions about the English reform then with three reasons to support his/her opinions. However, the three reasons are not persuasive enough to back the argument instead they are related with each other which makes them doubtful. The student states too much what he/she thinks is probably true without providing enough proofs and examples to confirm what he/she says. This leads to the essay less convincing and sound like preaching without any vividness.

Among the listed 14 Attitude words, the word *good* is a typical one falling the subsystem of Affect that lays in the central subsystem of Attitude system. Affect refers to people's emotional reactions to behaviors which is more subjective and directive. The word *good* is a positive assessment of manners. There are also negative Affect words showing bad emotions. In the corpus, the word *good* appears 77 times, ranking 9<sup>th</sup> of the top 30 Appraisal words. The examples are given as following:

(1). In the past many students, especially boys, have a *good* performance in science, but they are weak in English. Most of them fail to be admitted into their ideal colleges because of their lower English grades.

(2). Passing the English exam ahead of time is a *good* way to relax while students are all under the pressure of the national college entrance exam.

(3). To sum up, I'm in favor of the reform because there are many advantage of it, such as reducing pressure for students, doing *good* to the study of Chinese and sparing more free time.

The word *good* in example (1) presents writer's support for English reform by giving fact that many students, even talented in science, due to lower English grades, miss the chance to get into their ideal colleges. In (2), the student explicitly shows his/her favor of English reform by describing it as "a *good* way to relax". Example (3) is the conclusion of the student's stance as well as his/her reasons for it. One of the reasons is that the reform will bring benefits to the study of Chinese. Most of Affect words are related with emotions and moods which will directly affect readers' feelings. They are more emotional and less reasonable which influence the objectivity of argumentation. When it comes to positive feelings, students think of the word *good* at first that is the reason contributing to *good* appearing many times in the corpus. The author looks through the corpus and finds out the some collocations of the word *good* in an essay with the highest frequency. For examples:

- ① look forward to getting *good grades*
- ② students who are not *good* at English can't be admitted by some *good universities*
- ③ provide them with *good English teachers and facilities*
- ④ these students who are *good at English*
- ⑤ for their *good English*
- ⑥ don't require so *good English*
- ⑦ not so *good* as before

With careful manual operation and the aid of software, the author finds that above examples related with collocation of the word *good* actually include most phrases of it in the corpus which reflect students' weak at vocabulary usage. They do not have rich vocabularies to freely refer to what they want to convey which to some degree limits their express ability and affect the quality of the essays like the word *good* occurring so many times in the essay. Some words have the same positive meaning as *good*, eg:

- ① look forward to getting *ideal grades*.
- ② students who are not *good* at English can't be admitted by some *prestigious universities*.
- ③ provide them with *high-quality English teachers and facilities*
- ④ these students who *have strengths* in English
- ⑤ for their *excellent English*
- ⑥ don't require so *well English*
- ⑦ not so *wonderful* as before

According to the statistics and analysis, the author finds some advanced Affect words occurring only once in the 71 pieces of the essays, such as *profound*, *aspired*, *conductive*, *critical* *persevered* and so on. This manifests students' weakness at vocabularies both in amount and usage.

As for the last subsystem of Attitude, appreciation, is about the evaluation of events and products. To be more specific, it is about people's reactions to them whether they are good or not. Among the top 30 Appraisal words, the word *important* is a representative one which appears 52 times in the corpus. Here offers some examples:

(1). First of all, needless to say, in the education system of our country, English occupies a most *important* position and consumes a large variety of education resources.

(2). In conclusion, English is very *important* in today's world. It is better to retain English in college entrance examination.

(3). Though most students have made full preparations for the exam, they will still feel nervous during the test and miss the important things of hearing part.

(4). Once they get favorable marks in one of six exam according to their own desire, they can focus less on English and spare more time to study subjects *important* for individual's career.

In above example, students all want to present their assessments of objects. The first two are the evaluation of the role of English. There are some alternative words can convey the same meanings, such as *significant*, *vital crucial* and *far-reaching* so on.

The author searches the word *significant* in the corpus which turns out only 6 times.

In example (3), similar expression can be used like "key points in hearing part" instead of "the important things" which looks too informal in writing. In example (4), one exact word like *conductive* is better than the word *important* to embodies the idea the student want to express. It is easy to find out that students can not use alternative words to make their expressions more vivid which affect the quality of the essay.

#### B. *Distribution of Engagement System in Top 30 Appraisal Words.*

Engagement is about writer/speaker how to affect readers/ listeners by adopting different ways to present their stances. The usage of language is a kind interactive behavior instead of just self-expressions. Whatever people write or say, they all want to convey their voices and want to influence others. In the Engagement system, there are 5 words which are *not*, *but*, *however*, *so* and *therefore* among which *but* and *however* have the same frequencies in the corpus. The word *no* belongs to Disclaim among the four subcategories of Engagement. It ranks 4<sup>th</sup> in the top 30 Appraisal words and appears 166 times in the corpus. What's more, it is a deny word used by writer showing his/her attitude against existing opinion. At the same time, it also contracts the space for different voices and makes the conversation between writer and reader less negotiable. The following are some examples from the essays:

(1) Nevertheless, the reality is *not* so optimistic. Students almost have no extra time or energy to elaborately design an excellent learning plan by themselves unless with the help of experienced teachers while the reform will inevitably urge them to compress their teaching programs

(2) Few of them learn the Chinese grammar because most people take it for granted that it is *not* necessary for Chinese people to learn the Chinese grammar.

(3) The advantage of the new policy is that students can choose when and how often they take the test according to their ability. That is to say, students do *not* have to spend so much time preparing for the English test, which is a big relief for them.

In example (1), the write resorts to deny word *not* against the current view that some people are optimistic about the reality and puts the reasons right after his/her opinion which makes his/her opinion sound more reasonable. In example (2), the writer employs negative word to emphasize his/her agreement with the idea that Chinese people can learn Chinese well without learning Chinese grammar. In example (3), the writer shows hi/her support for the new policy by citing the current fact that students have to spend too much time preparing for the English test.

It is obviously to see that by using deny words to challenge the current standpoints or facts and explaining the reasons makes the writers' voice more definite and natural for others to accept.

On average, each essay has 2 deny word *not*. As a matter of fact, the word *not* comes the first among all the Engagement words which reflects students prefer to use it to make their views more reasonable and reliable. However, it must be mentioned that this does not means that the more the deny words, the better. Without supported details and reasons, it only makes the essay subjective and narrows the space for more voices. An essay with 8 deny words *not* is noticed by the author. Here is one small paragraph from the essay:

*This reform put English in a position that is **not** that important, which cause our parents, teachers **not** paying much attention to this lesson. Therefore, school will **not** arrange many English lessons for students and parents will **not** force their children to take part in a variety of English clubs during weekends, which will win a lot of time for students to do something they like and relax.*

The usage of deny word *not* in this paragraph makes it less logical because too many of them leads to people's doubts about the truth. The student expresses what he/she believes is true without citing any examples or giving any details which is not convincing instead subjective.

#### C. *Distribution of Graduation System in Top 30 Appraisal Words*

There are 11 words in Graduation system which accounts for about 36% in the top 30 Appraisal words. The words are: *more*, *many*, *may*, *much*, *highest*, *better*, *great*, *less*, *could*, *most* and *higher*. It is easily to find out that among the 11 Graduation more than half of them are related with comparative or superlative words

By employing Graduation words can help build interpersonal relationship in the context. There are two subcategories under Graduation named Focus and Force. Focus is mainly about the sharpening or softening of categories that are not scalable from experiential perspective. There is no Focus word among the top 30 Appraisal words and the number of the Focus words is small in the whole corpus. The most common expressions of it are *truly*, *real*, *kind of* and so on. The realization of Force covers quantification and intensification. The word *more*, a comparative word, comes second among the top 30 Appraisal words and appears 335 times in the corpus that is a typical realization of quantification which involves scaling with respect to amount(eg, size, weight,number), and with respect to extent, with extent

covering scope in time and space and proximity in time and space (Martin & White, 2005). The following are some examples from the essays:

(1). The aim of the reform is to ease students' burden and make them have *more* free time for their own.

(2). Hence, we can put *more* emphases on listening and speaking in the reform to improve students' abilities of English application. In a word, the reform is still a long way to go.

(3). Because now they have *more* changes and choices to demonstrate their strength or to improve themselves if they won't get their ideal scores.

Through the usage of the word *more*, the writer tries to make his/her opinion clearer and give others' deeper impression. Example (1) talks about the aim of the reform "making students have *more* free time", which indicates that students do not have much free time now. Thus, forming a contrast contributes the vividness of the statement. In example (2), in fact, the writer use the word *more* to point out drawbacks of the reform which makes alliance with most people unconsciously because the writer has considered different voices. In example (3), the writer deploys comparative words to express his/her strong support for the English reform.

With the assistance of AntConc.3.35 and careful manual work, the author finds that students of high mark group prefer employing the word *more* to stress attitudes and opinions of theirs and further convince others which is also a skill used in argumentation.

In conclusion, the distributions of different Appraisal words are not even in the top 30 Appraisal words. However, by listing the top 30 Appraisal words and giving representative examples, how students resort to different Appraisal words to construct interpersonal relationship and the main features of Appraisal words in the essays by students can be analyzed. At the same time, some problems can also be detected in the essays.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The study of students' essays from the perspective of Appraisal Theory has practical meaning both for students and teachers. Through this tentative analysis of students' essays, it is easily to see the distributions and features of students' Appraisal words, especially what problems they have in deploying Appraisal resources in the essays.

Students need to rich expressions instead of repeating the same Attitude words and phrases in the essays many times which indicates the poor language ability. The basic unit of an essay is word that is an important part of an essay. Students having problems in vocabularies can not express their ideas well in English. Therefore, students should pay more attention to some similar expressions to flexibly transform and increase the diversities of language in essays.

Teachers can instruct students to writer simple paragraph centering around some Appraisal words. (Liao, 2011). Some Appraisal words or key words suggest the main idea of the paragraph then students are required to provide enough proofs to confirm it. Through this exercises together with the instructions from teachers, students can learn how to use Appraisal resources in the writing little by little and understand the meaning of evaluation. Appraisal resources can be used across the whole essay and it had better step by step make sure the opinion logical and reasonable.

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