The Use of Shall/Will with Pronouns: Collocations in L1 and L2 Writing

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Introduction

Shall and *will* are "double-faced" words in that they serve as modal verbs expressing personal will and determination, and at the same time as tense marking auxiliaries in contemporary English. Usage of these two words in contexts varies in the literature. The change of their meanings over time (ancient English to modern English, see Gotti, 2006; Lightfoot, 1974) and space (British English, American English and other varieties, see Szmrecsanyi, 2003) also arouses heated discussion. Most past research (e.g., Hoye, 1997; Salkie, Busuttil, & van der Auwera, 2009) has focused on the diachronic (e.g., Gotti, 2006; Nadjia, 2006) or morpho-syntactic (e.g., Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973) description of *shall* and *will* while L2 learners' acquisition of these words was much less touched upon in the literature, still less is an in-depth discussion on L2 learners' use of these two words in comparison to native English speakers in past research. This paper attempts to fill the gap by looking into the collocations of *shall* and *will* with pronouns among Hong Kong university students. A corpus-based approach was adopted to examine the similarities and differences between native and non-native student English writings and to explore potential pedagogical implications for L2 teaching.

Literature Review

The etymology of *shall* and *will* shows that these words can find their origin in Old English where they appeared as content verbs *sculan* and *willan* (Larreya, 2009; Lightfoot, 1974). The former means "owe /be in debt" while the latter denotes "wish", which were both transitive verbs followed by objects. Then they evolved into *sceal* and *will*, expressing the notion of "be obliged to/have to" and "wish to/be determined to" respectively. At that time *sceal* and *will* had already become auxiliary verbs that required a bare infinitive to go along with them (He, 2003). Different opinions exist as to when *shall* and *will* emerged as tense marking auxiliary verbs. Storms (1961, p. 304) maintained that before 14th century there was no such usage of *shall*

and *will* to purely express future time. Wekker (1976) believed that *shall* and *will* did not become future tense auxiliary verbs until the Middle English. From then on, shall and will can be used as not only modal auxiliary verbs (example 1 and 2 below) to indicate the speaker's attitude towards or his/her concern about the effects of what s/he is saying on the interlocutor (*Collins Cobuild English Grammar,* 1992) but also future tense marking auxiliary verbs (example 3 and 4 below) for time reference in English.

Examples:

1) You *will* not feel much love for him at the moment. (Expressing modality only but not marking future time reference)

2) After ten o'clock there *shall* be quietness on the upper corridor. (Expressing obligation only but not marking future time reference)

3) I *shall* grow old someday. (Expressing a future time reference point but not modality)

4) Betty *will* come back tomorrow. (Same as 3))

The historical evolution of *shall* and *will* has been examined more persuasively with the help of corpora of early English. For example, Gotti (2003) analyzed the use of *shall* and *will* for first person subject in future time reference based on a corpus of Early Modern English texts. The analysis focused on the uses of these modal auxiliaries both in interrogative and non-interrogative sentences, and compared their occurrences in different text types and for the performance of various pragmatic functions (e.g. prediction, intention, promise and proposal). The findings largely confirmed the above-mentioned evaluation paths along the history of English language.

In a similar vein, Nadjia (2006) studied *shall* and *will* from a diachronic perspective on the ARCHER (A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers) corpus of 19th century British English as well as a "quick-and-dirty" corpus of contemporary English compiled from the Internet. In addition to the overall changes in the relative occurrences of the three forms (*will, shall, 'll*), the changes in three types of linguistic contexts (person, negation, and if-clause environments) were also investigated. One of the main differences found in the results based on these two (types of) corpora was the development of *'ll* : While the results from ARCHER pointed to a decrease in this expression in the 19th century (both in fiction texts and overall), the results from the fiction corpus showed an increase. A closer examination revealed considerable inter-textual variation in the use of this

form. The analysis demonstrated that, although not reliable as the only source for diachronic analysis, a quick-and-dirty corpus from the web could yield insights that supplemented those obtained from a traditional corpus.

While the temporal perspective of *shall* and *will* reveals considerable change in their use, geographical variation also seems quite evident in the literature. Yang (2006) conducted a corpus-based study which found, through the comparison between the British corpus FLOB (The Freiburg-LOB Corpus of British English) and the American counterpart FROWN (the Freiburg-Brown corpus of American English), the traditional notion about these two words was outdated. First person pronouns "I" and "we" were followed by *will* 1.5 times more than *shall,* while for the second and third person, will outnumbered shall even more significantly. That is, will is on the way of replacing shall as a universal modal verb and tense marking auxiliary verb. This is confirmed by Sarmento's (2005) multi-corpus research where the use of *will* was overwhelmingly more than that of shall in all contexts by 10 to 20 times. At the same time, the belief that British people tend to use these two words more traditionally than American people was only weakly supported.

According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of English Language* (1996), when expressing the simple future tense, *shall* can only be applied to the first person pronouns "I" and "we", while *will* is restricted to the second and third persons; when expressing determination, promise or obligation, *will* can go with first person pronouns and *shall* can apply to second and third person. At the same time, the dictionary reminds us that usage as such is changing with these two words. Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) mentioned that *will* was no longer confined by the second and the third person use; it is applicable to first person pronouns as well. In addition to their evolving usage with personal pronouns, in professional English, *shall* has been claimed to be one of the most misused words in legal writing (Kimble, 1992), which was surprisingly a pervasive phenomenon around the world as argued in American English (Adams, 2007), Australian English (Eagleson & Asprey, 1989; a contrasting view in Bennett, 1989), Hong Kong English (Watson-Brown, 1998), and European Union English writing (Foley, 2001). If the correct use of *shall* (and *will* to some extent) has imposed difficulty among native speakers, it is likely to be a bigger hurdle for L2 learners. We shall turn next to this point.

The importance of correct use of modal verbs was delineated and exemplified in Hita (2008). He discussed the complexity of the modality system (Halliday &

Matthiessen, 2004) in English and provided a sample lesson to teach students how to use *shall, will* and other modal verbs in appropriate contexts. In Jaroszek's (2011) longitudinal study of thirteen advanced English learners over a three-year period, the developmental path of three modality aspects (namely epistemic modality, specific modality and modality diversity), were examined on a weekly basis. It was found that though teacher contact hours had an effect on students' construction of modality knowledge construction, exposure to a large amount of authentic English exhibited a stronger impact on the development of natural deontic (obligatory) and specific modality use. A commendable point here is the use of native-speaking data reference to the learner data in this research. Jaroszek (2004) suggested that though students did not deviate much from native speakers' use of modality, they however had a poor repertoire of modality resources at their disposal as evidenced by their predominant use of deontic *should* and epistemic *maybe* instead of other more proper modal verbs in certain contexts. This finding pointed out that learners might adopt an avoidance strategy in actual use of modal verbs like *shall* and *will*, which warns us against simple observation of statistics from corpora. Some in-depth qualitative analysis on their distribution and the contextual clues should be in order in addition to corpus search.

More relevant to L2 classrooms, Vethamani, Manaf and Akbari (2008) investigated the use of modals in two written tasks by secondary school students in Malaysia from the EMAS Corpus (the English of Malaysian School Students Corpus). They discovered that *would* and *shall* were found in the narrative compositions though they were not stipulated in the syllabus, indicating that some extra-class exposure might help contribute to the acquisition of the modals. Secondary school students were aware of the auxiliary function of modal verbs and as a result they knew modals should be followed by a verb. In line with Jaroszek's (2011), students repetitively used only a few of the same modals for a wide range of functions. They also had confusion in the semantic choice of modals which lead to miscommunication.

Taken together, several issues in the literature warrant further scrutiny. First, the complexity of English modality in general received quite extensive attention but specific and in-depth exploration of words like *shall* and *will,* particularly when it comes to L2 learners, is rare, not to mention their collocational patterns with pronouns. Second, though corpora appear to be highly facilitative in both L1 and

L2 research, the practice of systematically comparing learner data to native speaking benchmark needs more advocating in research. Third, as suggested in Jaroszek (2011) and Vethamani, Manaf and Akbari (2008), there is a need to go beyond quantitative results and to look into the qualitative aspects of corpus entries. The linguistic environment within and outside of the collocational distance may also reveal important insights into the actual knowledge of second language learners in the use of *shall* and *will.*

Such motivations gave rise to the present research which employed two relevant corpora (one learner corpus and one comparable native corpus) in an attempt to unveil the use and usage patterns in *will* and *shall* and their collocation with pronouns among L1 and L2 English students. The two corpora are native English corpus LOCNESS (The Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays) and its non-native counterpart LEC(HK) (Learner English Corpus of University Students in Hong Kong) through comparison and categorization (see the Methodology section below for the detailed description of the two corpora). The following sections will present the research questions and the hypotheses, then delineate the research methodology, followed by both quantitative and qualitative findings. Next the discussion section will explain and interpret the results based on which the pedagogical implications are offered.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Two general research questions guided the present research:

1) What are the usage patterns of *shall* and *will* in L2 writing?
2) Are there any differences between L1 and L2 students in the use of *shall* and *will*?

Drawing on the relevant literature, three hypotheses were formulated in this study:

Hypothesis 1: L2 students will use more shalls with first person pronouns than will the native-speaking students, because these L2 students' knowledge of English is the result of formal instruction and is thus more "grammar-book-like".

Hypothesis 2: Given the difficulty of *shall* being a modal verb other than a tense auxiliary verb, L2 students will employ fewer *shalls* with the second and the third person pronouns.

Hypothesis 3: The use of *will* in L2 students' writing is similar to that in native English students' given these L2 university students' higher proficiency as university English majors.

Methodology

Description of the corpora

As shown in the Table 1 below, the LEC(HK) is a developing learner corpus that consists of about 200 argumentative essays written on various topics. The authors were 2nd and 3rd year English majors at a university in Hong Kong with Cantonese as their mother tongue. The students, on average, had studied English for at least 15 years before attending the university. They should have also shown that they had a more than satisfactory command of English in public examinations before they were admitted into the English Department. The students then studied English literature and linguistics. The present study, therefore, considered this particular group of students advanced English language learners in Hong Kong. The corpus amounted to 177,000 words at the time of this study.

In comparison, the control corpus LOCNESS was comprised mainly British university student essays of approximately 600 words in length. It is obvious that the corpora in use are not totally comparable in size (approximately 1.8:1 in ratio for non-native to native). To standardize the count of search results, the findings from the native data are multiplied by 1.8 to level the ground. Based on random sampling assumption, we can then increase comparability between the two corpora after such standardization. This principle will be applied throughout the calculation of all research data in this study.

Table 1. Corpus Description

	LEC(HK)	LOCNESS
Full Title	Learner English Corpus of University Students in Hong Kong	Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays
Language Data Type	Written language produced by English majors at a university in Hong Kong	Written language produced by native British university students
Size	177,000 words	95,695 words

Software

Concordance Application (ConcApp) V4 (Greaves, 2005) was employed as the concordancing program for abstracting the frequency and actual samples of *shall* and *will* from the LEC(HK) and the LOCNESS Corpora. ConcApp allows for the search of a word, phrase (20 characters maximum), or any occurrence of a word with a given prefix/suffix (C.f. Rodriguez, 1999). SPSS 18.0 was used to process statistics obtained from the corpora.

Procedures

First, concerning the use of the two words in statements, <I shall> <I will> <we shall> <we will> <you shall> <you will> < he/she/it shall > <he/she/it will> <they shall> <they will> were searched in LEC(HK) and LOCNESS respectively. At the same time <I'll> <we'll> <you'll> <he'll> <she'll> <it'll> <they'll> were also found and added to the will frequency.

Secondly, as for the use of the two words in interrogative sentences, <shall I> <shall we> <will we> <shall you> <will you> <shall he> <shall she> <shall it> <will he> <will she> <will it> <shall they><will they> were researched in the two corpora respectively.

Thirdly, their frequency in the two corpora were tallied and compared with statistical procedures (Chi-square tests) to be reported in the next section (Results). Specific corpus entries were also analyzed from a qualitative perspective.

Finally, the possible patterns from the data were categorized to provide a basis for theoretical interpretation and discussion.

Results

Use of *Shall* and *Will* with Pronouns in Statements

Table 2 shows the overall frequency of *shall* and *will* in the two corpora. It seems that the L1 students had very parsimonious use of *shall* in their writing (3.6 weighted instances, 17% of all *shall* occurrences in both corpora). However, their L2 counterparts appeared to include more *shalls* (18 instances, 83% of all *shalls*). In spite of the seemingly significant contrast in *shall* ratio between the two corpora, the small number in each indicates that *shall* was under-used by university students nowadays, no matter whether English is their L1 or L2.

The case of *will* was markedly different from *shall*. First, as can be seen from Table 2, *will* was almost evenly distributed in both LEC(HK) and LOCNESS, which is indicative of a similar overall frequency of *will* among L1 and L2 students. Second, the large number of occurrences proved a high frequency of *will* in both L1 and L2 university writing.

Table 2. Overall Frequency of *Shall* and *Will*

	LEC(HK)	Ratio	LOCNESS	Ratio
shall	18	83%	3.6	17%
will	679	53%	608.4	47%

Note: the LOCNESS numbers were weighted figures being the original number multiplied by 1.8 as discussed in the methodology section. The same is applied below

More intriguing findings would emerge through a closer examination of the collocations of the two words with pronouns, as displayed in Table 3. For *shall*, identical instances (2 in each) were found in both corpora where only the first person plural "we" were followed by *shall*. Very unexpectedly there was no any other pronoun to go with *shall* in statements (that is, *shall* appears to the right of the pronouns), especially in the case of "I", in either of the corpora.

When it comes to *will*, two interesting points can be observed. First, except the case of "he", L2 learners generally had a significantly higher frequency of *will* ($x2 = 60.27$, $p = .000$ for *will*; $x2 = 64.35$, $p = .000$ for *will + 'll*), with "you" as the highest (five times more in L2 than in L1 use). Interestingly, native students use will four times more often with "he" than the L2 learners. Second, it seems that both cohorts of students were aware of formality in academic writing so that they only had a limited number of the contracted form of *will* (*'ll*). Though L2 students appeared to favour contraction more than L1 students (14 versus 6 instances), the Chi-square test proved that there was no significant difference ($x2 = 6.81$, $p = .15$). In sum, though L1 and L2 students had comparable overall frequency of *will*, the specific distribution of this word with pronouns showed distinctive patterns between the two groups of writers.

Table 3. Distribution of Shall and Will with Pronouns in Statements

	LEC(HK)		LOCNESS	LEC/LOC	
	shall	*Will + 'll*	*shall*	*Will + 'll*	
I	0	19 (17+2)	0	12.6 (12.6 + 0)	1.35
We	2	66 (57 + 9)	3.6	25.6 (21.6 + 4)	2.64
You	0	20 (18 + 2)	0	3.6 (3.6 + 0)	5
He	0	13 (13 + 0)	0	54.2 (52.2 + 2)	0.25
she	0	5 (4 + 1)	0	3.6 (3.6 + 0)	1.11
it	0	53 (53 + 0)	0	37.8 (37.8 + 0)	1.40
they	0	70 (70 + 0)	0	25.2 (25.2 + 0)	2.78

Note: the two numbers in the parentheses show the specific distribution of *will* and *'ll*.

Use of *shall* and *will* with Pronouns in Interrogative Sentences

There existed very few interrogative sentences with collocations of *shall/will* + pronoun (8 in LEC(HK) and 1 in LOCNESS). Specifically, there were only two *shall* instances in LEC(HK) and zero case in LOCNESS, along with six *wills* in LEC(HK) and 1 *will* in LOCNESS, when *shall/will* occurred in subject-modal inversion to form interrogative sentences.

Discussion

Hypothesis 1 predicted that L2 students would tend to use more *shalls* with "I" and "we" since this is what grammar books and dictionaries prescribe. However, this hypothesis is rejected as the learners demonstrated very similar patterns of shall to those of native speakers in which both groups avoided using *shall* with pronouns in statements except with "we" (but the two instances in each corpora were too low a frequency to be significant). This confirms Yang (2006)'s claim that in statements, both British and American students are gradually replacing *shall* with *will* as a general tense auxiliary verb. What could be added to this claim from the current study is that second language learners also demonstrate a very similar developmental trajectory. There appears to be a linguistic economy principle (Martinet, 1955) in operation in that the simpler the rule is, the easier it would be for learners to acquire. Zipf (1949) proposed the "principle of least effort" which argued that linguistic changes that cause excessive efforts and constitute an obstacle to comprehension will be automatically removed or avoided (cited in Vicentini, 2003). When both *shall* and *will* are able to serve the same function of marking future time reference, it is obvious that the more versatile *will* will be prioritized by learners and *shall* (re-

stricted to only first person pronouns) will be left out. Learners tend to pick up the simpler usage of future tense auxiliary verbs once they encounter such use, no matter whether it runs counter to the most traditional and presumably authoritative definitions in dictionaries or grammar books. What appears to be quite clear is that the "traditional wisdom" as reflected in hypothesis 1 that L2 students would take a more conservative stance in *shall* and *will* is not supported.

Shall can go with the second and the third person pronouns/nouns to express obligation and the speaker's objective judgment in addition to marking the future tense (*Collins Cobuild English Grammar*, 1992). It would denote a current relation between the speaker and the main verb in a present tense. For example, your wish *shall come true* expresses the belief on the part of the speaker, but not the subject of the sentence. Given its usage difficulty in comparison to that of tense auxiliary verb, the second hypothesis argues that L2 learners will tend to avoid using *shall* with the second and the third pronouns. This hypothesis is partially confirmed in that it correctly predicts the evasion of such a usage in LEC(HK). But unfortunately, it is not supported when it comes to the contrast with LOCNESS since native speaking students in their writing also shunned *shalls* with pronouns other than first person ones. This highlights the fact that the use of *shall* with the second and third person pronouns among this group of L2 learners is quite similar to that in their native counterparts. It appears as if *shall* has been gradually replaced by *will* across pronouns.

If the results for the two aforementioned hypotheses on *shall* are somewhat unexpected, the last hypothesis is met with no less surprise. The restrictions on will nowadays already seem so lenient that it can be applied everywhere with pronouns both in being a modal verb expressing willingness and a tense auxiliary verb. However, inferential statistics (Chi-square test) show that, despite their relatively high proficiency, these L2 learners' use patterns of will significantly deviate from their native speaking counterparts'. An in-depth analysis of each pronoun reveals that "you" and "he" are two pronouns where L2 and L1 students vary much more than other pronouns. Drawing on the qualitative data of all instances, it was found that such a discrepancy may result from Chinese students' inclination of using "you" as a universal reference pronoun while British students prefer "he" to sound more objective. For instance:

LEC(HK) (Line No. from original concordancing results):

3) If one day you become a slave of money, ***you will*** <u>be</u> totally controlled by money

5) when you start to learn another language, ***you will*** <u>eventually</u> fail someday.

6) ***You will*** <u>find</u> learning English is challenging but interesting…..

7) If you are graduated from one of those, probably ***you will*** have a greater chance to be hired.

LOCNESS

1) which comes from knowing that so long as he is free ***he will*** <u>always</u> have to decide alone, he can't count on an

11) that the knowledge that he is free will mean that ***he will*** <u>have</u> to take his decisions alone and in anguish an

The above examples suggest that Chinese students tend to be more personal in tone referring to other people while British students remain more impersonal and objective. This may be due to their cultural backgrounds, cliché as it may sound. The belief that the national culture in China and other Chinese-majority societies is "collectivism" or "low individualism" is well documented (Hofstede, 1984, 2001). This cultural imprinting is reflected in the collocation between modal verbs and the pronouns. At the same time, it should not be neglected that classroom instruction on stylistic issues in academic writing, such as formality and tone, would also have a role to play. If the choice of diction and an impartial third person perspective in formal writing are not properly emphasized in the L2 classroom, learners naturally have to reply on their intuition or prior L2 knowledge to write. This issue has gone beyond what these two corpora can offer, but further studies are needed in this area.

Pedagogical Implications

Based on the findings, both the confirmation and rejection of the hypotheses would have relevance for L2 teaching as outlined below:

First of all, the rigid traditional usage of *shall* and *will* with first person pronouns seems outdated. There appear no differences between them as future tense markers. It follows that teaching such a strict distinction in class should be handled with caution.

Then, collocational patterns of *will* with pronouns in academic writing at the tertiary level should be emphasized. Though this may be less concerned with the

modal *will* per se, the use of personal pronouns in this context is an important area in L2 instruction.

Thirdly, it will be beneficial if teachers can look into the phenomenon that students avoid using *shall* with second or third person pronouns as shown in the data. If the avoidance strategy does prevail, the functions of *shall* as objective judgement and obligation should be reiterated in the class.

Last but not the least, in teaching English L2 writing, teachers may consider comparing "cultural stereotypes" across languages as well as related stylistic issues (formality and tone, for instance). This may foster awareness of cultural-linguistic schemata among L2 learners and help them employ appropriate styles when writing in the target language.

Conclusion

This study adopts a corpus-based approach to investigating the collocations between *shall / will* and pronouns. Based on the results obtained from a learner corpus (LEC(HK)) and a native British student corpus (LOCNESS), it was found that the traditional distinction of *shall* to go with the first person pronouns and *will* with second and third pronouns was outdated. In addition, L2 learners appeared to have very similar usage patterns of *shall* to L1 colleague student writings. However, these L2 learners deviated significantly from native students in terms of will use in the collocational patterns with personal pronouns. The results also yield several pedagogical implications for teaching English L2 writing, especially in the use of *shall/will*, personal pronouns and styles. It is hoped that a focused study like this could provide a platform for in-depth discussion in an intriguing area that would provoke further research in L2 teaching.

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