



Is “Absorb Knowledge” An Improper Collocation?

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Abstract

Collocation is practically very tough to Chinese English learners. The main reason lies in the fact that English and Chinese belong to two distinct language systems. And the deep reason is that learners tend to develop different metaphorical concept in accordance with distinct ways of thinking in Chinese. The paper, taking “absorb knowledge” as an example, intend to explore how to present the potential collocation patterns of “knowledge” in the learner’s dictionary for Chinese learners, based on a series of search results of BROWN and LOB as well as CLEC, by comparing the usual combinational patterns of “knowledge” of Chinese learners and English native speakers.

Keywords: Collocation, Corpus, Metaphor

After having mastered the basic grammar of a foreign language, “the key to determine whether the language a learner is using is native-like or not rests on collocations.” (Yang Huizhong, 2002, p27-28) Collocation is practically a hot potato for Chinese English learners. Learners are constantly under the influence of mother tongue which can be reflected in combinational habit in the two different languages. In fact, there are many collocations which sound a quite reasonable and sensible collocation for Chinese learners, but many linguists and lexicographers believe them unaccepted and erroneous. Taking *absorb knowledge* as an example, this paper explores into English corpus BROWN, LOB and Chinese Learners’ English Corpus (CLEC), compare the collocational tendency of knowledge of Chinese learners and English-native speakers, combine with the information of contemporary dictionaries to review and analyze *absorb* and *knowledge*, on the basis of which to explore the combination tendency of *knowledge* and the way to optimize this information in learners’ dictionaries so as to help learners to acquire correct collocational forms.

1. Is “*absorb knowledge*” Overused by Chinese Learners?

Once in a lecture Professor Wu Jihong put forward an idea: “*overuse* here refers to the learners’ overuse of figurative meaning in the combination, like the collocation *absorb knowledge*.”

Chinese word *XISHOU* has a higher metaphorical degree than its English peer *absorb*. Unaware of this, learners tend to make such mistake as overusing figurative meaning when producing collocations. Figurative meaning is also called metaphorical meaning.” In other words, according to what Professor Wu holds, learners lack in metaphorical thoughts and have insufficient knowledge of the non-equivalence between *XISHOU* and *absorb* so that they often produce improper collocations like *absorb knowledge*.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p5) said that “most of our thoughts are metaphorical, that is, to understand one thing in terms of another. Metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon, most important of all, but also a cognitive phenomenon of human beings and in essence it is a basic perspective and cognitive way in which people understand the surroundings. Metaphor refers to the way people choose to look on things and perceive reality.” “Different languages have distinctive metaphors, and thus reflecting various conceptual system.” (Chen Jiaxu, 2007, p85) It can be said that the languages we are using contains elements of metaphor in the form of metaphors. Metaphors reflect ways of thinking of language users in terms of language while differences between languages usually display in real language use.

Professor Wu’s idea is fairly novel and enlightening but as for whether the collocation *absorb knowledge* is improper or not, so far the author cannot draw a conclusion. In order to investigate the problem, we need to start from the real language in use.

2. Comparison of the Collocation Pattern *verb+knowledge*

Here is the result of the combinational pattern *verb+knowledge* found in CLEC by means of wordsmith, only 10 words with high frequency chosen, as shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 Here.

Among all the verbs listed in the table, except that words like *study*, *teach*, *grasp*, *go over*, *know*, *master* are not included in English Collocation Dictionary, the rest are considered accepted collocators of *knowledge*. In Oxford English Collocation Dictionary, verbs which can collocate with *knowledge* include *acquire*, *gain*, *have*, *demonstrate*, *flaunt*, *parade*, *show off*, *test*, *apply*, *share*, *spread*, *broaden*, *extend*, *improve*, *increase*, *deny*, etc. English Collocation Dictionary is produced by Japanese linguists, reflecting the collocations of English words as a second or foreign

language. Oxford English Collocation Dictionary, edited by English native speakers, though incomparable with English Collocation Dictionary in size, is based on native English corpus BNC. In this sense, Oxford English Collocation Dictionary provides native collocations for learners, which can help them acquire the native English combinational patterns.

A lot of verb collocators of knowledge appearing in CLEC reflect the combinational habit of Chinese learners. In Chinese, *ZHI* refers to learning or knowledge. Knowledge can come from books as well as pass down from ancestors. In Chinese books are usually compared to teachers, representing the sources of knowledge. China is a country which honor teachers and respect morals and knowledge should learn from teachers so in Chinese there is a collocation *QIUXUE*, also *QIUZHI* Chinese learners transfer it into English and create collocations like *learn/ study knowledge*, *teach/ give knowledge*, *grasp/master knowledge*, etc. In the Corpus of Contemporary American English constructed by Mark Davies from Brigham Young University, the most frequent collocator of *knowledge* is *impart*, followed by *acquire*. Its other most remarkable verb collocators go to *synthesize*, *possess*, *accumulate*, *gain*, etc. In other native English corpus like BROWN, LOB, the most frequent verb collocator of *knowledge* is *have*. Other collocators only appear once or twice. In the two corpuses, all the common collocations used by Chinese learners do not appear in CLEC, but there is one point worth noticing, in LOB there is one sentence:

But pointed out that the E31 185 capacity to absorb technical knowledge differed from the hard realism E31 186 of routine catering

The author also found 18 times of *absorb...knowledge* in Corpus of American English, seen in Table 2:

Among them, except 4 which are unable to explain *absorb* can collocate with *knowledge*, the rest 14 examples fully exemplify the real existence of collocation *absorb knowledge* in native English corpuses, especially in American English.

What's more, in order to make a parallel comparison the author made other exploration of other verbs which Chinese learners believe to be able to collocate with *knowledge*. The results are shown in Table 3,

If *learn/ teach knowledge* is not native collocation in English, it is easier to understand, not only because they are not combined with *knowledge* in English but also because there are no similar examples found in all dictionaries. As for *absorb knowledge*, it has received some attention in learners' dictionaries such as Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary and the alike. Furthermore, once participating in an online discussion section of ESL forums on the website of **Using English.com** on whether *study/ learn knowledge* is correct collocation, the author found that almost all participants agreed that *knowledge* is not the object of study, but the result. Thus, if to comment on whether *absorb knowledge* is correct or not, the author believes that we should be cautious to make the judgment.

3. Investigation of Collocations of *absorb* and *knowledge* in Dictionaries

First we compare meanings of *absorb* and *knowledge* in two authoritative monolingual learner's dictionaries: *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (LDOCE) 4th edition, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (OALD) 4th edition, *A Multifunction English-Chinese Dictionary* and *The New Century Multifunctional English-Chinese Dictionary*. In OALD 4th, *absorb* has one sense meaning "take (sth.) in; suck up". It indicates that whatever things, concrete or abstract, can be used together with the word. In LDOCE 4th, *information* is directly informed to be its potential object. And the headword *knowledge* in the same dictionary is defined "the facts, skills and understanding that you have gained through learning or experience; information that you have about a particular situation, event, etc". In other words, *knowledge* can be a potential collocator to *absorb*.

Then we investigate the presentation of *absorb* collocations in 11 learners' dictionaries, centering on comparison of examples and other information. The results of investigation are shown in Table 4.

Through the investigation, we find there are no direct examples to show the existence of *absorb knowledge* except in the fourth edition of Oxford Advanced Dictionary (OALD4) and A Multifunction English-Chinese Dictionary. The other English monolingual dictionaries show in examples that words like *information* can be objects of *absorb*. Also, in Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture (LDOELC) and OALD4 labels are utilized to suggest that *absorb knowledge* belongs to figurative usage, that is, metaphorical use.

Now let's turn to the collocations of *knowledge* in learners' dictionaries. Generally, definitions and examples in dictionaries are most possible to instruct the combinational patterns of a lemma. Take LDOCE4. The common sense of *knowledge* is the facts, skills, and understanding that you have gained through learning or experience. And the given Chinese equivalents are *ZHISHI* and *XUEWEN*. Through the definition, users are told that when *knowledge* takes up this meaning, then the potential verb collocator is *gain*. What's more, from the given examples users can know it often appears before prepositions like *of* or *about*. *Knowledge* is also considered as a near synonym of *information*, which appears in the fourth sense, saying "information that you have about a particular situation, event, etc". In this sense, it often co-occurs with verbs or verb phrases like *deny*, *come to* or *bring something to*.

One of the most remarkable features of Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary (CALD) is the emphasis of lexical collocations. In this dictionary, readers can find collocation column of *knowledge*, in which the listed verb collocators include *acquire*, *gain*, *have* and so on. When collocated with these words, *knowledge* means "understanding of or information about a subject which has been obtained by experience or study, and which is either in a person's mind or possessed by people generally".

Comparatively speaking, *acquire* or *gain knowledge* is more common to English native speakers. Though *absorb knowledge* is not as common as *acquire knowledge*, it is not too hard to understand. It's because English word *absorb* shares much common in semantics with Chinese word *XISHOU*. One sense of *absorb* is "to take sth. into the mind and learn or understand it", and *XISHOU* means "to distill instructive elements".(seen on the website of Han Dian) "To distill" is based on "to understand knowledge".

4. Exploration of Combinational Pattern of *knowledge* in Learners' Dictionary

The difficulties learners meet when learning English, besides linguistic reasons, mainly originate from Chinese and English thinking pattern difference.(He Yihui and Hu Wenfei, 2007, p85) Generally, if there are similar collocations in English and Chinese, the mother tongue has positive transference and helps the acquisition of English collocations. If not, the mother tongue exerts negative transference and thus interfere acquisition. However, due to the enormous difference between thinking patterns, English and Chinese usually have few complete-equivalent vocabularies.

For Chinese learners, the acquisition of collocations is still a tough problem. In order to warn learners of the combinational patterns of *knowledge*, the dictionary can adopt collocation column as in CALD but the content shown or displayed in the column should be arranged in the light of the characteristics of Chinese learners. The advised presentation of collocations is shown in the following box:

WORDS THAT GO WITH *knowledge*

v+ knowledge (Note: *learn/teach/study/grasp/master knowledge* are all considered Chinglish combinations, which are really used by English native speakers.)

gain/acquire/have knowledge

deny (all) knowledge **of** sth

In general, it is essential for learners' dictionaries to adopt extrovert methods to attract users' or learners' attention to collocations which differ greatly due to different ways of thinking. By doing so, learners' dictionaries can play an effective role in guiding their studies so that mistakes like *learn knowledge* which are affected by mother tongue can be avoided.

5. Conclusion

Compared with *learn knowledge*, *absorb knowledge* cannot be regarded as collocational mistakes, which has been fully explained by native English corpus. Whether the advised presentation of *knowledge* in the learners' dictionaries really is really helpful to learners' acquisition of the combinational forms of knowledge or how much help it can provide need experiments and further studies.

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Table 1. the combinational pattern *verb+knowledge* found in CLEC by means of wordsmith

Level v+knowledge	st2	st3	st4	st5	st6
1	learn	learn	learn	learn	have
2	have	have	study	get	learn
3	go over	get	get	have	get
4	study	use	have	master	gain
5	teach	know	improve	enrich	enlarge
6	give	study	master	use	improve
7	grasp	master	use	gain	enrich
8		increase	know	broaden	master
9		put...into practice	give		
10		teach	grasp		

Table 2. 18 times of absorb...knowledge in Corpus of American English

1991	FIC	BkGen:TreasureSun	attend a college. Most lawyers apprentice themselves to another lawyer until they absorb the knowledge they need. If I hadn't been a woman, my uncle would have
1992	MAG	American Spectator	appear to grasp how spontaneously evolved social institutions like the family absorb and retain knowledge and wisdom through the ages, an ignorance typical of the left to which she
1992	ACAD	Arabstudies	the culture-wide appreciation for learning. Education furthers the national capacity to acquire scientific knowledge and to absorb new technology. At the most basic level, it is a
1995	ACAD	PerspPolSci	United States that with democracy all around them, students will absorb the necessary knowledge and the appropriate views without explicit teaching or discussion. In newer democracies, "
1995	ACAD	AfricanArts	donning the carvings, the younger men would acquire power; they would absorb knowledge stored in the masks. # These ideas may seem somewhat quaint, but they
1999	MAG	Inc.	they add to the bottom line but for their willingness to absorb and share knowledge . By taking time when it comes to hiring and training, willfully shutting out
1999	NEWS	NewYorkTimes	in a stress-filled and windowless kitchen in return for the chance to absorb the knowledge and mysterious skills of a star chef, and maybe even bask in reflected glory
2000	ACAD	Education	resistance to change, inhibited communication and possibly even an inability to absorb new knowledge . Therefore, bad management often weakens the organization through its insensitivity towards and lack

2001	MAG	USAToday	progressives " long have believed that many children shouldn't be pushed to absorb knowledge beyond their limited innate capacities, and that they are better off with teachers who
2001	MAG	Newsweek	'America is under attack.' I'm trying to absorb that knowledge . I have nobody to talk to. I'm sitting in the midst of
2001	ACAD	MusicEduc	of their own and other cultures' symbol systems so that they can share knowledge , absorb wisdom, and gain the power to use these symbols in ways that
2003	ACAD	SocialStudies	, 445). Because there are already complaints about the vast amount of knowledge to absorb in the world history course, it is doubtful that history educators or
2004	ACAD	AmerIndianQ	eighteen-ceremony ecological calendar, so while learning the language, students also absorb some knowledge of Aztec history and culture. These ceremonies deal with rain, germination, ripening
2005	MAG	RollingStone	the only things consistent about her career is her ability to absorb and incorporate knowledge at an alarming rate, allowing her to stay one step ahead of critics,
2005	MAG	Smithsonian	into how much he cared about the underprivileged around the world and how much knowledge he could absorb and retain. I knew then I would have a friend and
2005	MAG	MusicEduc	constructivism, one theme seems to prevail: students do not simply absorb conceptual knowledge ; they actively construct it by combining and reorganizing preexisting bodies of knowledge. (n1
2006	ACAD	ABAJournal	it will be the liability system that gives them the incentive to absorb new knowledge into their practice and change their behavior. " # McLeod shares that view.
2006	ACAD	CollegeStud	or that those with positive attitudes are more likely to seek and absorb the knowledge was not explored. However, Engeland et al (2002) found that attitudes

Table 3. other verbs which can collocate with knowledge

CONTEXT	TOT	ALL	%	MI
LEARN	83	47981	0.17	0.79
TEACH	63	21048	0.30	1.58
ABSORB	18	3544	0.51	2.34
MASTER	22	20814	0.11	0.08
GRASP	20	5319	0.38	1.91
GIVE	100	134844	0.07	-0.44
KNOW	140	564684	0.02	-2.02

Table 4. the presentation of *absorb* collocations in 11 learners' dictionaries

forms dictionaries	EXAMPLE	SENSE	LABEL	OTHERS
Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary (CALD)	it's hard to absorb so much information.	to understand facts or ideas completely and remember them	/	/
Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture (LDOELC)	So many new ideas! It's all rather too much for me to absorb all at once.	to take or suck in	figurative	/
Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE) 4th Edition	I haven't really had time to absorb everything that he said.	to read or hear a large amount of new information and understand it	/	/
Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (MEDAL)	1) Over the centuries, they gradually absorbed Islamic ideas about design and architecture. 2) We had to absorb a lot of new information very quickly.	1) to allow ideas, methods etc to become part of your own way of thinking or culture 2) to learn and understand new facts, so that they become part of your knowledge	/	assimilate as its synonym
Collins COBUILD Advanced Learners' Dictionary (CCALD)	Too often he only absorbs half the information in the manual.	If you absorb information, you learn and understand it.	/	digest and assimilate as its synonyms
Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary (OALD) 7 th Edition	It's a lot of information to absorb all at once.	to take sth. into the mind and learn or understand it	/	take in as its synonym
Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary (OALD) 6 th Edition	It's a lot of information to absorb all at once.	to take sth. into the mind and learn or understand it	/	/
Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary (OALD) 4 th Edition	Clever children absorb knowledge easily.	take (sth.) in; such up	figurative	/
A Multifunction English-Chinese Dictionary	absorb knowledge	xishou, lijie (zhishi deng)	/	/
English Etymological Dictionary and Thesaurus	/	/	/	using synonym association column (in which some abstract concept like knowledge, idea, etc can be its object.)
The New Century Multifunctional English-Chinese Dictionary	She absorbed everything in the book.	jiqu (zhishi deng)	/	/