Usage-based indices of proficiency:
Verb-VAC and phrasal constructions in Mandarin

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Syntactic complexity has long been studied as a key construct in language learner development (Wolfe-Quintero et al., 1998). Recent work using strength of association between verb-argument constructions and the verbs that fill them in a native speaker corpus as indices of learners' syntactic complexity has shown that they are more effective than general measures (ex: mean length of T-unit, clauses per T-unit, etc.) at predicting English learners' proficiency (Kyle & Crossley, 2017). Similarly, the strength of association between lexical items in specific constructions (ex: adj + N, V + Object) has been shown to distinguish between English learner levels (Paquot, 2019). In both cases, higher level learners use combinations that have higher strengths of association.

Previous work on Mandarin has found that the frequency of one type of phrase, resultative verb compounds, overall distinguished between intermediate-low, Intermediate-high, and Advanced learners and native speakers (Zhang, 2014). In another study, Zhang & Lu (2013) found that both high and low intermediate learners used more classifiers than native speakers, and both groups used the general classifier (个 ge) significantly more than native speakers.

Both Zhang (2014) and Zhang & Lu (2013) use target language norms as a point of comparison between groups. In the present study, I extend this by directly using the target language norms as indices for learner data, as Kyle & Crossley (2017) and Paquot (2019) do. Specifically, this study asks: To what extent does the strength of association between the lexical items in noun-classifier pairs and resultative verb compounds in an L1 reference corpus account for writing proficiency in learners of Chinese? And how does this compare with other syntactic, lexical, and lexico-grammatical indices?

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