

Research Article

Comparison of Phrasal Verbs and Idioms of Verb: A Corpus-Based Study between CLEC and Brown

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This paper analyzes the use of verb, phrasal verbs, and idioms represented by the verb *keep* employed by Chinese non-English major students as well as by native speakers by way of corpora comparison and Contrastive Analysis. The corpora in this paper involve the English native speaker corpus (Brown) and the subcorpora St3 (non-English major Band 4) and St4 (non-English major Band 6) in the Chinese English Learner Corpus (CLEC). This thesis analyzes the use of phrasal verbs and idioms of verb *keep* which is commonly used by Chinese non-English major learners. The instruments employed in this thesis are Antconc, SPSS, Microsoft Excel, and so on. In addition, through corpora comparison and contrastive analysis, this paper contributes to explore whether Chinese learners' grasp of phrasal verbs and idioms of verb *keep* will get improvement as their English level develops. This research findings show that Chinese non-English majors' use of phrasal verbs and idioms of *keep* is far less plentiful than that of native speakers. The Chinese learners are liable to use only a small portion of keep phrasal verbs and idioms compared with the native speakers. Nevertheless, with the development of Chinese learners' English proficiency, their employment of keep phrasal verbs and idioms is getting much closer to that of the native speakers. Based on the above research, this paper also puts forward some teaching suggestions for verbs like *keep*. Some pedagogical implications are drawn on EFL teaching and learning. Microlecture videos can be employed for online and offline teaching, which is quite popular nowadays. The first five keep phrasal verbs should be attached great importance. As for keep idioms, the first six keep idioms should be emphasized. Some example sentences and related exercises can be involved. Students are also encouraged to use mind map during vocabulary learning.

1. Introduction

English has become an international language with the rapid development of globalization. Nowadays, English plays a critical part in international communication. A large number of people in China are learning English as a foreign language. That is, an essential part of language learning is word, which is unquestionable to all. Vocabulary also plays a crucial role in second language acquisition. Krashen and Terrell [1] noted that because it plays a prominent role in classroom success, vocabulary is of prime concern in foreign language settings. Wilkins [2] stated that little can be conveyed without grammar whereas nothing can be conveyed without vocabulary. As is shown in Jiang and Zhong [3], different sentence patterns are constructed by different types of verbs. English verbs are the most active

among all the parts of speech. It is of great importance and significance for English learners to master these verbs and their corresponding phrasal verbs and idioms. Despite most high-frequency verbs are taught at a relatively early stage of English teaching and learning, Chinese learners still do not fully grasp them and they are not quite familiar with all of the keep phrasal verbs and idioms. Chinese learners cannot employ these expressions freely in their output.

As is shown in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* by Summers [4], in both oral and written English in BNC, “keep” is listed as one of the most frequently used vocabulary. Since it is impractical to investigate all of the high-frequency verbs in this research, “keep” is sampled as their representative to be investigated in this present research.

1.1. Purpose and Significance. The purpose of this study is to investigate *keep* phrasal verbs and idioms used by Chinese non-English majors (St3 and St4 in CLEC) and native speakers (Brown). In general, the research questions of this study are as follows:

- (1) What are the most frequently used *keep* phrasal verbs by Chinese learners as well as native speakers? What exists in the similarities and differences between Chinese learners and native speakers in *keep* phrasal verbs? What are the possible reasons for these similarities and differences?
- (2) What are the most frequently used *keep* idioms by Chinese learners as well as native speakers? What exists in the similarities and differences between Chinese learners and native speakers in *keep* idioms? What are the possible reasons for these similarities and differences?
- (3) With the improvement of English proficiency, whether Chinese learners' use of *keep* phrasal verbs and idioms is closer to that of native speakers?
- (4) What are the implications on EFL teaching and learning in detail through the research?

1.2. Theoretical Background. Contrastive analysis is the main theory of language analysis. Contrastive analysis refers to the comparison between mother tongue and target language to figure out the similarities and differences between the two languages. Lado [5] said that "those elements similar to his mother tongue are very simple for him; however, those different elements are very difficult." Lado [5] first provided a comprehensive theoretical treatment and a systematic set of technical procedures for contrastive analysis. It includes describing the languages, comparing them, and foreseeing language learning difficulties.

A previous study is a *corpus-based study of "Keep"* by Wang [6]. The research of Wang Ying is based on corpora LOB and SLESSON. LOB corpus is a British English Corpus modeled on the proportion of Brown corpus. SLESSON was a corpora constructed on the basis of a comprehensive set of English textbooks used in high school in China by He Anping. Consequently, Wang's study is a study of English textbooks instead of a study of the authentic employment of Chinese learners in this present thesis. In Wang's paper, merely twelve senses and the three patterns of Sense 1 are investigated. *Keep* phrasal verbs and idioms are not included in the research.

This present research concentrates on the authentic employment of *keep* phrasal verbs and idioms by Chinese learners in comparison with native speakers. Furthermore, the author points out whether the differences between Chinese learners and native speakers are significant or not with the help of computer instruments. In addition, some pedagogical implications and learning tips are provided accordingly in the research.

2. Research Methodology

The corpora involved in this thesis are CLEC and Brown corpora. And as to the process of the corpora, computer

instruments like Antconc, SPSS, and Microsoft Excel are employed to obtain the relative results related to the research according to Zhou [7].

2.1. Corpora. The databases involved in this study are Brown and CLEC. The Chinese Learner English Corpus (CLEC) is considered as the first authoritative learner corpus in China with a total of 1.1 million words according to Gui and Yang [8]. CLEC consists of five subcorpora, St2, St3, St4, St5, and St6. About 200,000 words are included in each subcorpus. St2 represents middle school students' writings. St3 represents non-English major students' CET-4 compositions. St4 represents CET-6 non-English major students' compositions. St5 represents freshmen and sophomore English majors' writings. And St6 represents English majors who have taken the test of TEM 8. Compositions in St2, St5, and St6 belong to free compositions that are written after class by respective students. On the contrary, compositions in St3 and St4 are test compositions that are written by CET-4 and CET-6 testees during CET-4 and CET-6 exams. Because St3 and St4 concentrate on compositions' test, they are suitable for the study of second language development model of Chinese learners.

Brown University Standard Corpus of Present-Day American English (Brown) is regarded as the first modern and computer readable general corpus. The corpus includes 1 million words of American English texts printed in 1961. Brown consists of 500 texts. And each text includes 2000 words. Brown takes samples from fifteen different text categories in order that the corpus can be a good reference. The fifteen categories represent the time's written American English. Consequently, the Brown size is compatible with the size of CLEC.

2.2. Instruments. The data needed are the sentences in which *keep* phrasal verb and idioms appear. Computer software has brought great convenience and efficiency in order that the data needed for research can be obtained. Antconc, SPSS, and Microsoft Excel were employed in this study [7]. Antconc is used to extract the required test words and expressions from the three corpora. SPSS software package is used for Chi-square test. Microsoft Excel is used to calculate and display the results by way of graphs.

3. Data Collection and Research Procedure

The corpora in this study are Brown and CLEC. This thesis chooses two subcorpora such as St3 and St4 in CLEC as the sample corpora of learner language among the five subcorpora in CLEC.

This paper focuses on features of *keep* in context, that is, *keep* phrasal verbs and idioms used by Chinese learners in St3 and St4 in CLEC as well as English native speakers in Brown. In addition, the similarities and differences between Chinese learners and English native speakers on the use of them are also investigated in the thesis.

The author first sorts out "*keep*" phrasal verbs and idioms from the above three corpora by means of Antconc [9]. All sentences containing "*keep*" can be sorted out. After that

keep phrasal verbs and idioms are sorted out and studied. Since it is still a controversial issue as to how to distinguish phrasal verbs and idioms, this research selected a solid gauge. The gauge is *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* [10]. All of the *keep* phrasal verbs and idioms are selected from this dictionary. This study discusses *keep* phrasal verbs and idioms, respectively. The author calculated and compared the results among the three corpora. Chi-square test is also utilized by SPSS [7]. The paper puts forward the characteristics of Chinese learners' use of these three expressions.

3.1. Comparison of Keep Phrasal Verbs among the Three Corpora. Above all, it is necessary to clarify what "phrasal verb" stands for. As the term "phrase" is full of ambiguity, the term "phrasal verb" is used in this paper. A phrasal verb is a combination of a verb and a preposition, a verb and an adverb, or a verb with both an adverb and a preposition. Different from the original verb, a phrasal verb has its own distinct meaning. Phrasal verbs are taken as parts of the syntax of sentences. Furthermore, they are regarded as complete semantic units.

In this thesis, *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* [10] is seen as a gauge to determine *keep* phrasal verbs. There are thirteen phrasal verbs of *keep* in the dictionary at all. They are listed in Table 1 according to the alphabetical order.

The overall frequencies of *keep* phrasal verbs in Brown, St3, and St4 are listed in Table 2 to examine whether Chinese learners have a tendency to overuse or underuse *keep* phrasal verbs compared with English native speakers.

Table 2 shows that there exists difference on using *keep* phrasal verbs by Chinese learners and native speakers. St3 is listed as the highest by 27.67%, which is 6% to 7% higher than the other two corpora. St4 shows the lowest percentage among the three corpora by 20.16%. In Brown, the percentage of *keep* phrasal verbs' occurrences is narrowly higher than that in St4. Table 2 also exhibits that Chinese learners' employment of *keep* phrasal verbs is much closer to that of native speakers with their English competence's development. To determine whether the difference in the employment of *keep* phrasal verbs among the three corpora is significant or not, Chi-square tests among the three corpora are carried out in Table 3.

The critical value for all Chi-square tests is 3.84 for one degree of freedom at five percent level. Table 3 shows that there is no significant difference across the three corpora as to the use of *keep* phrasal verbs. In spite of this, it is rather possible that the employment of each phrasal verb across the corpora is different. Table 4 is offered to investigate the thirteen *keep* phrasal verbs employed by Chinese learners and English native speakers in detail. In Table 4, phrasal verbs are arranged in the sequence from high frequency to low frequency in Brown.

As exhibited in Table 4, it is evident that the top five *keep* phrasal verbs among the three corpora are compatible. They are "*keep from*, *keep on*, *keep up*, *keep out of*, and *keep up with*." Nevertheless, "*keep at*" is not used in any corpora. The

reason may be that the meaning of "*keep at*" overlaps the meaning of "*keep on*." However, the phrasal verb "*keep on*" is used so frequently by both native speakers and English learners that "*keep at*" is ignored. The rest seven phrasal verbs only account for about one fifth of the overall *keep* phrasal verbs in Brown. However, the percentage is even lower for St3 and St4 with about 4 to 5 percent for each corpus. Despite that the top five *keep* phrasal verbs in the three corpora are compatible, the sequences of the distribution of these five phrasal verbs in each corpus are rather different. Figure 1 aims to show the sequence of the frequencies of the top five phrasal verbs among the three corpora according to the order from high to low frequency in Brown.

As shown in Figure 1, it is quite apparent that compared with native speakers, Chinese learners have a tendency to overuse phrasal verbs "*keep on*" and "*keep up with*." In the meantime, St3 learners have the highest frequency of "*keep on*" among the three corpora, which is sufficiently twice of that in Brown. "*Keep up with*" by St4 learners is five times of that in Brown, and it is four times of that in Brown in St3. The reason for Chinese learners' overuse of "*keep on*" and "*keep up with*" maybe that the two phrasal verbs are taught at comparatively earlier stage than the other phrasal verbs during EFL learning. As a result, they leave deep impression in Chinese learners' mind. In addition, "*keep on*" and "*keep up with*" are listed as the top two phrasal verbs in both St3 and St4 learners despite their orders are quite the opposite. Nevertheless, Chinese learners tend to underuse the rest three phrasal verbs: *keep from*, *keep up*, and *keep out of*. The use of "*keep from*" in Brown almost doubles that in St3 and St4. The use of "*keep up*" in Brown almost doubles that in St3 and St4. Chi-square tests are carried out in Table 5 to examine whether there are significant differences among the top five *keep* phrasal verbs across the three corpora.

As shown in Table 5, there are significant differences in terms of the use of "*keep on*" and "*keep up with*" as for St3 and brown. There is no significant difference among "*keep from*," "*keep up*," and "*keep out of*" with regard to St3 and brown. There is a significant difference on the use of "*keep up with*" with regard to St4 and brown. In the meantime, there is no significant difference between the two corpora with regard to the first four phrasal verbs. There is no significant difference on the use of *keep* phrasal verbs in St3 and St4.

To conclude what I have discussed, Chinese learners tend to mainly use phrasal verbs "*keep from*, *keep on*, *keep up*, *keep out of*, and *keep up with*." In terms of the other phrasal verbs, Chinese learners seldom use them. Chinese learners are inclined to overuse "*keep up with*" remarkably compared with native speakers. In addition to "*keep up with*," St3 learners are likely to overuse "*keep on*." When it comes to the diversity of *keep* phrasal verbs, Chinese learners still need improving compared with native speakers.

3.2. Comparison of Keep Idioms among the Corpora. Above all, it is necessary to clarify what "idiom" stands for. An idiom is an expression which serves as a single unit.

TABLE 1: Thirteen *keep* phrasal verbs.

Phrasal verbs	Meanings of keep phrasal verbs
Keep at	(cause sb to) continue to work at sth
Keep away (from)	(cause sb/sth) not to go near sb/sth
Keep back	Prevent sth from moving; refuse to tell sb sth; remain at a distance from sb/sth
Keep down	Not show where one is; repress or oppress; not raise a part of the body
Keep from	Prevent sb/oneself from doing sth; not tell sb sth
Keep in	Detain (a child) after normal school hours as a punishment; not express an emotion; give or allow oneself/sb a regular supply of sth; continue to be friendly with sb, especially in order to gain some advantage
Keep off	(of rain, snow, etc) not begin; not approach, touch, etc sb/sth; not eat, drink, or smoke sth; cause sb/sth not to approach, touch, etc. sb/sth
Keep on	Continue one's journey; continue (doing sth); continue to employ sb; continue talking (to sb) in an irritating way (about sb/sth)
Keep out of	Not enter(a place); prevent sb/sth from entering a place; not expose oneself/sb to sth
Keep to	Not wander from or leave (a path, road, etc); avoid meeting people socially; not tell other people about sth
Keep under	oppress sb; control or suppress sth
Keep up	(of rain, snow, good weather, etc.) continue without stopping; prevent sb from going to bed; prevent sth from falling down; move or progress at the same rate (as sb/sth); rise at the same rate (as sth)
Keep up with	Continue to be in contact with sb; inform oneself or learn about (the news, current events, etc.)

TABLE 2: Distribution of *keep* phrasal verbs among the three corpora.

Corpus	Phrasal verbs	Total occurrences	Percentage (%)
Brown	110	518	21.24
St3	57	206	27.67
St4	25	124	20.16

TABLE 3: Chi-square tests on phrasal verbs among the three corpora.

St3 vs. brown		St4 vs. brown		St3 vs. St4	
X^2	P	X^2	P	X^2	P
2.103	0.147	0.046	0.831	1.429	0.232

Nevertheless, the meaning of the expression cannot be figured out from the separate words but as a whole.

"*Keep*" idioms are marked clearly as shown in *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* [10]. The overall frequencies of *keep* idioms in brown, St3, and St4 are shown in Table 6 to check whether Chinese learners are likely to overuse or underuse *keep* idioms compared with native speakers.

According to Table 6, Chinese learners are inclined to underuse *keep* idioms compared with native speakers. St4 learners' use of *keep* idioms is closer to that of native speakers compared with St3 learners.

Tables 7 and 8 are offered, respectively, according to the frequencies of *keep* idioms among the three corpora to examine the idioms employed by native speakers and Chinese learners.

According to Tables 7 and 8, it is quite apparent that the native speakers use *keep* idioms in a much wider range compared with native speakers. There are twenty-seven various *keep* idioms in Brown at all. Nevertheless, only six various *keep* idioms are used by Chinese learners. The top six *keep* idioms that are used in Brown are "*keep an eye on, keep*

TABLE 4: Distribution of each phrasal verb among the three corpora.

Phrasal verbs	Corpus					
	Brown		St3		St4	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
(1) Keep from	34	30.91	10	17.54	4	16
(2) Keep on	18	16.36	19	33.33	7	28
(3) Keep up	16	14.55	4	7.02	2	8
(4) Keep out of	11	10	3	5.26	2	8
(5) Keep up with	8	7.27	18	31.58	9	36
(6) Keep down	5	4.55	0	0	0	0
(7) Keep off	5	4.55	0	0	0	0
(8) Keep to	5	4.55	0	0	0	0
(9) Keep away (from)	4	3.64	2	3.51	0	0
(10) Keep under	2	1.82	0	0	0	0
(11) Keep back	1	0.91	1	1.75	1	4
(12) Keep in	1	0.91	0	0	0	0
(13) Keep at	0	0	0	0	0	0

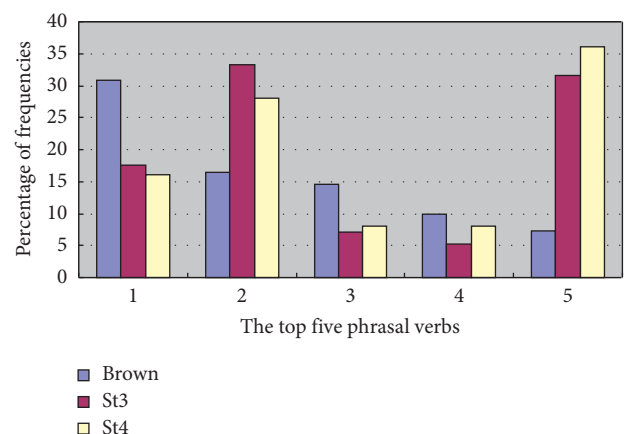


FIGURE 1: The top five phrasal verbs across the three corpora.

TABLE 5: Chi-square tests of the top five *keep* phrasal verbs among the three corpora.

Phrasal verbs X^2 & P	St3 vs. brown		St4 vs. brown		St3 vs. St4	
	X^2	P	X^2	P	X^2	P
Keep from	2.090	0.148	1.357	0.244	0.021	0.885
Keep on	3.842	*0.050	1.185	0.276	0.120	0.729
Keep up	1.623	0.203	0.600	0.439	0.021	0.884
Keep out of	0.941	0.332	0.078	0.780	0.199	0.655
Keep up with	11.665	**0.001	10.303	**0.001	0.077	0.782

TABLE 6: Frequencies of *keep* idioms among the three corpora.

Corpus	Idioms	Total occurrences	Percentage (%)
Brown	74	518	14.29
St3	21	206	10.19
St4	14	124	11.29

TABLE 7: Twenty-seven different *keep* idioms in brown.

Idioms	Idioms used in brown	
	Frequency	%
(1) Keep an eye on	15	20.27
(2) Keep one's eyes/ears open	6	8.11
(3) Keep quiet about sth	6	8.11
(4) Keep sth in mind	6	8.11
(5) Keep in touch (with)	4	5.41
(6) Keep one's word	4	5.41
(7) Keep abreast of	3	4.05
(8) Keep pace (with)	3	4.05
(9) Keep sb company	3	4.05
(10) Keep the peace	3	4.05
(11) Keep one's mouth shut	3	4.05
(12) Keep track of	2	2.70
(13) Keep house	2	2.70
(14) Keep a close eye on	1	1.35
(15) Keep an eye open/out	1	1.35
(16) Keep one's eyes peeled/skinned	1	1.35
(17) Keep one's own counsel	1	1.35
(18) Keep a straight face	1	1.35
(19) Keep count (of sth)	1	1.35
(20) Keep one's nose to the grindstone	1	1.35
(21) Keep one's fingers on the pulse	1	1.35
(22) Keep sb waiting	1	1.35
(23) Keep clear (of sb/sth)	1	1.35
(24) Keep up appearances	1	1.35
(25) Keep up with the joneses	1	1.35
(26) Keep faith with sb.	1	1.35
(27) Keep sth at bay	1	1.35

TABLE 8: *Keep* idioms by St3 and St4 learners in CLEC.

St3			St4		
Idioms	Frequency	%	Idioms	Frequency	%
(1) Keep in touch with	11	52.38	(1) Keep in touch (with)	6	42.86
(2) Keep an eye on	3	14.29	(2) Keep sth in mind	5	35.7
(3) Keep pace (with)	2	9.52	(3) Keep an eye on	1	7.14
(4) Keep track of	2	9.52	(4) Keep pace (with)	1	7.14
(5) Keep sth in mind	2	9.52	(5) Keep track of	1	7.14
(6) Keep sb in the dark	1	4.76			

one's eyes/ears open, keep quiet about sth, keep sth in mind, keep in touch with" and "*keep one's word.*" In the six idioms, three of them are used by Chinese learners. They are "*keep an eye on, keep sth in mind, and keep in touch with.*" "*Keep pace with*" and "*keep track of*" are used by native speakers as well as Chinese learners. And the frequencies of them are three and two in Brown, respectively. The top five keep idioms utilized by St3 and St4 learners are exactly the same despite the proportion of them are different. "*Keep sb in the dark*" is unique in St3. Despite there is some difference in the use of keep idioms by native speakers and Chinese learners, in Chi-square test, there is no significant difference among the three corpora. Consequently, Chi-square test is not carried out.

The use of idioms stands for the purity of the grasp of English language to some degree. It is rather apparent that compared with the twenty-seven use of keep idioms by native speakers, Chinese learners' master of keep idioms is lacking in purity. Chinese learners need to enrich their idioms to make their English more native-like.

4. Summary

This thesis focuses on comparison of use of keep phrasal verbs and idioms by Chinese learners and native speakers. Therefore, we can figure out the characteristics of Chinese learners' use of keep phrasal verbs and idioms. And the limitations of Chinese learners' employment of keep phrasal verbs and idioms are discovered compared with native speakers. Consequently, vocabulary learning of Chinese learners can be improved. The following three parts conclude the three main aspects in this thesis:

- (1) Comparison of keep phrasal verbs across the corpora: the top five keep phrasal verbs across the three corpora are the same, namely, "*keep from, keep on, keep up, keep out of, and keep up with.*" Chinese learners are inclined to overuse phrasal verbs "*keep on*" and "*keep up with*" and at the meantime apt to underuse phrasal verbs "*keep from, keep up, and keep out of*" compared with native speakers. Chinese learners hardly use the rest eight phrasal verbs. The reason may be that during Chinese learners' English learning, the top five phrasal verbs are emphasized; however, the rest ones are not mentioned frequently. In addition, prepositions and adjectives are always difficult points in language learning. As a result, Chinese learners are inclined to use those expressions they are quite familiar with. Neither native speakers nor Chinese learners ever employ "*keep at.*" Because of the familiarity of "*keep on,*" "*keep at*" is rarely used by both native speakers and Chinese learners. To sum up, Chinese learners do not fully grasp keep phrasal verbs. They should attach great importance to learning of phrasal verbs and try to use them in context.
- (2) Comparison of keep idioms across the corpora: with regard to the idioms used by native speakers and Chinese learners, Chinese learners are likely to underuse keep idioms compared with the native

speakers. Furthermore, Chinese learners only employ six idioms compared with native speakers' twenty-seven various idioms. "*Keep sb in the dark*" is unique in St3 compared with St4. The reason maybe that idioms are closely correlated with national culture, background, and so on. Native speakers are more familiar with idioms in English. Many idioms are not learnt in class, but in daily life. As a consequence, Chinese learners only know a limited range of keep idioms. Chinese learners should learn in special cultural background and try to enrich their idioms.

- (3) Generally speaking, with the improvement of English proficiency, Chinese learners' use of keep phrasal verbs and idioms is closer to that of native speakers.
- (4) Some pedagogical implications can be drawn on EFL teaching and learning. There are twelve out of thirteen keep phrasal verbs and twenty-seven keep idioms employed by native speakers. Therefore, it is difficult for teachers to cover all of these expressions during school hours. As a result, microlecture videos can be employed. As hybrid online and offline teaching is quite popular nowadays, students can be provided microlecture videos on the use of keep phrasal verbs and idioms before class and after class. Teachers can search some appropriate microlecture videos online or make microvideos by themselves before class. In these videos, the first five keep phrasal verbs should be given great importance. At the same time, the rest eight phrasal verbs should also be covered. And that the use of "*keep at*" is similar to "*keep on*" is supposed to be pointed out. Furthermore, some example sentences and related exercises can be provided. Related exercises can be translation, multiple choice, and so on. As for keep idioms, the first six keep idioms should be emphasized. And the rest twenty-one idioms should also be included. The same with keep phrasal verbs, some example sentences, and related exercises can be involved. Students are also encouraged to use mind map during vocabulary learning, in which not only keep phrasal verbs and idioms but also different senses can be included.

To sum up, as to keep phrasal verbs and idioms, Chinese learners only use a smaller portion in comparison with native speakers. Chinese learners ought to improve their use of keep in context.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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