A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF THE ENGLISH SYNONYMS ALMOST, VIRTUALLY, AND PRACTICALLY

BY

MRS. ROSAMARIN SORMET

AN INDEPENDENT STUDY PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING
LANGUAGE INSTITUTE
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ENTITLED

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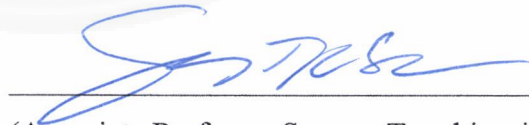
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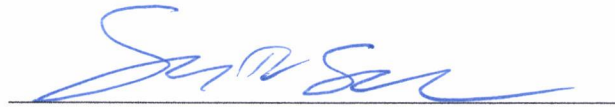(Assistant Professor Ketvalee Porkaew, Ph.D.)

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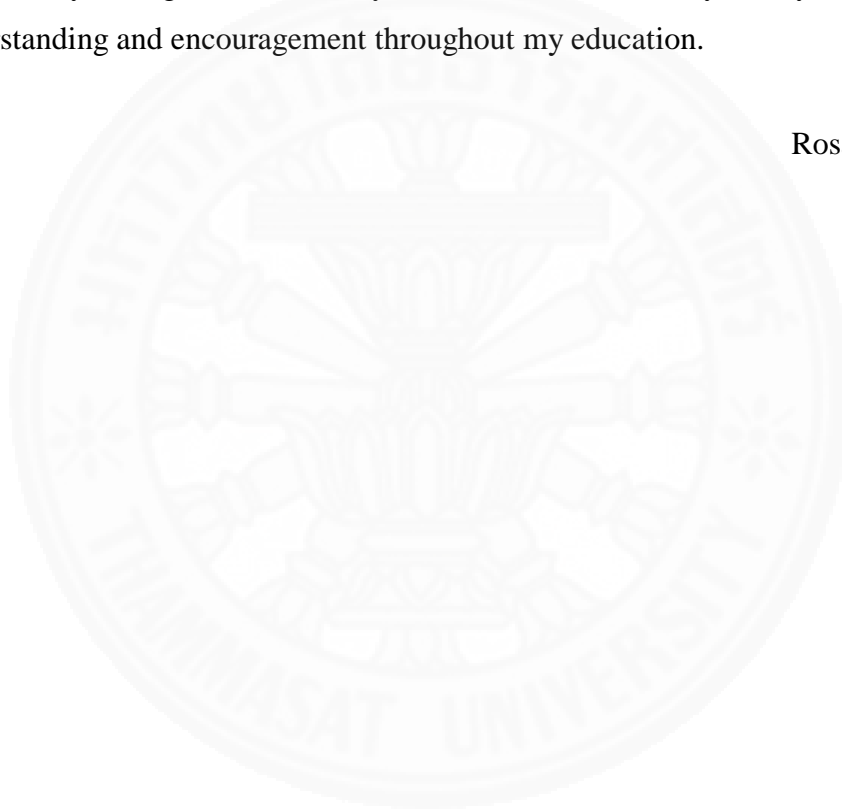|	
Independent study paper	A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF THE ENGLISH SYNONYMS ALMOST, VIRTUALLY, AND PRACTICALLY
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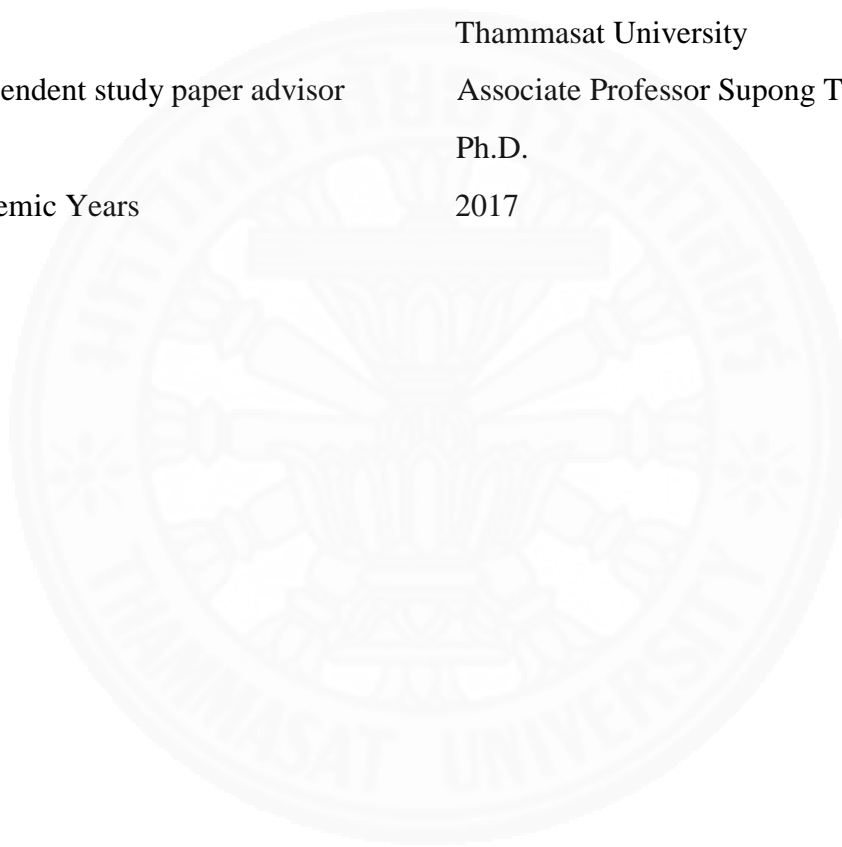
ABSTRACT

The English language has a vast amount of synonymy used to alter meaning or make output more colorful. The slight differences between these words can be difficult to both instruct to students and be comprehended by learners. This research study analyzes three adverbs: *virtually*, *almost* and *practically* using both dictionaries and a corpus to discern similarities and differences. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2015) and the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English for Advanced Learners (2014) was used to extract definitions, collocations and grammar patterns to be contrasted with concordance lines from the Corpus of Contemporary American English. Additionally the collocation frequency and word type between the three synonyms *virtually*, *almost* and *practically* were analyzed within the corpus findings for differences and similarities. Grammatical syntax for the synonyms was also analyzed and results from all the concordance lines demonstrated that these adverbs are near synonyms. Specifically the synonym *virtually* had higher collocation and syntax frequency when compared to *almost* and *practically*, which were used with more freedom of collocation choice. The research also suggests that the corpus, rather than a dictionary, is ideal for advanced learners in the ESL classroom as a way to study and learn synonyms.

Keywords: synonymy, corpus-based analysis, near synonyms, concordance lines

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations	Terms
Adv	Adverb
COCA	Corpus of Contemporary American English
ESL	English as a Second Language
LDOCE	Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English
L2	A second language
OALD	Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary
Syn	Synonym
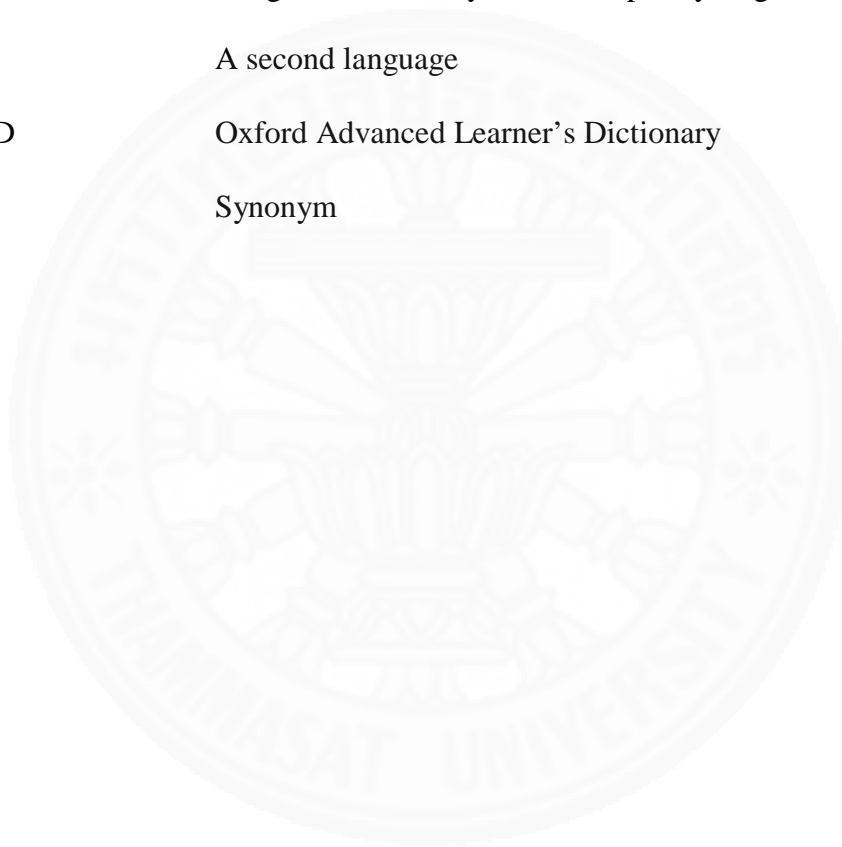
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

The Oxford English Dictionary S.E. (1989) has 171,476 words defined in English with a portion of 47,156 being obsolete. However this list does not account for word families, regional slang or even technical vocabulary which would see the amount rise considerably. Originally a Germanic language, English also includes words from Dutch, French, Latin and Greek and consequently English is seen as having more words than any other currently used language (Durkin, 2014).

This means that there is high level of synonymy, or many synonyms, in the English language. For second language learners, in theory learning synonyms would appear easy. For example if they know the word 'big' then they should be capable of acquiring the word 'large' quite easily with already having form, meaning and use of the original word. However, this is not the case. According to Laufer (1990) learning synonyms adds an extra task that L2 learners sometimes feel is unnecessary feeling that one word is enough. Additionally, L2 learners find it confusing when synonyms change with meaning in different contexts or word families. It gets more complicated than that, however, with Cruse (2000) showing the kinds of synonyms languages have to offer including near-synonymy, propositional synonymy and absolute synonymy. Additionally we see synonyms for words in regional dialects, with formality and collocations and also the syntax.

This range of meaning and similarity will be examined using the above construct for this study, which will examine three words that L2 learners might struggle with understanding: *almost, virtually* & *practically*. This set of synonyms will be analyzed in frequency using CORPUS data as well as attention paid to the differences in meaning, word families and syntax patterns.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.2.1 What are the collocational and grammatical patterns of the three adverb synonyms   *almost , virtually* and *practically* in terms of their similarities and differences?

1.2.2 How accurate is the information/definitions found in dictionaries in correspondence to the corpus data and examples of the three adverbs *almost, virtually* and *practically*?

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1.3.1 To examine the patterns, in terms of grammar and collocations, of the three adverb synonyms *almost*, *virtually* and *practically*.

1.3.2 To contrast the information found in standard dictionaries, the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2015) and the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English for Advanced Learners (2014).

1.4 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The adverbs *almost*, *virtually* and *practically* are technically synonyms that correspond to the same meaning as *nearly*; meaning that a verb is close to completion. Additionally these adverbs signify that a quantity is near 100 perfect of its full value. When examining these adverbs in authentic texts, however, the meanings appear to differ slightly in terms of how close or how complete the action actually is.

Compounded with these slight differences in meaning is a range of frequency and use of collocational patterns and grammatical patterns. The adverbs appear to be inconsistent with each other when linked with determiners, predeterminers, pronouns, nouns and verbs. Due to these discrepancies the synonyms *almost*, *virtually* and *practically* were selected for more in-depth investigation.

1.5 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The COCA, or Corpus of Contemporary American English, was used to produce approximately 500 concordance lines for each of the adverb synonyms *almost*,

virtually and *practically*. Additionally definitions in various dictionaries were added to the data to be examined.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In terms of English as a Second Language, both educators and students cannot avoid the instruction and acquisition of synonyms as this vocabulary is a vital part of the English language. The English language contains more synonymy than most languages in the world. For students there can be confusion as synonyms can differ slightly in meaning or situational use and drastically change with syntax and collocations. Teachers are limited by short definitions in dictionaries and their own examples which may not completely explain a word during a class.

Using a corpus to examine differences benefits both teachers and students and for this study, comparing the three adverb synonyms *almost*, *virtually* and *practically***,** not only benefits educators in their understanding of this vocabulary set more in-depth but also demonstrates how using a corpus in general could benefit ESL instructors in the classroom, the COCA corpus in particular.

1.7 ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

The study includes five chapters as follows:

Chapter One includes an introduction, describes the background of the study, research questions, objectives of the study, statement of the problem, scope of the study, significance of the study and organization of the study.

Chapter Two consists of a review of academic literature in four main areas: (1) synonymy (2) criteria for distinguishing synonyms (3) English language corpora (4) previous studies.

Chapter Three describes the subjects, materials, procedures and data analysis for this research.

Chapter Four provides the results of the study.

Chapter Five contains a statement of conclusions and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter reviews relevant academic literature in four main areas: (1) synonymy, (2) criteria for distinguishing synonyms (3) English language corpora (4) previous studies.

2.1 SYNONYMY

2.1.1 Definitions of synonymy

Kreidler (1998: 97-98) gives a definition of synonym as : "an instance of mutual entailment, and synonyms are instances of mutual hyponymy". He also reveals that synonyms differ in dialect, connotation and pragmatic value.

Cruse (2000: 156-160) states that: "synonym are words 1) whose semantic similarities are more salient than their differences, 2) that do not primarily contrast with each other; and 3) whose permissible differences must in general be either minor, backgrounded, or both" (Arppe & Jarvikivi, p.136).

Taylor (2002: 264) defines synonyms as 'the phenomenon whereby a single meaning is associated with more than one distinct item'. He examines two synonyms 'high' and 'tall' in terms of the co-extension relation which refers to a dominant and a recessive vantage. 'High represents the dominant vantage while 'tall' is the recessive vantage. He also states that most synonyms tend to be near synonyms rather than perfect synonyms.

Elgin (1992: 15) said that synonyms are: 'two differing sequences of language that have the same meaning'. She explained that phrases act like synonyms in a strict manner by being precise in their use and explanation of the context. However, she indicated that this definition was not really true by giving some examples of pair sentences of synonyms that showed the differences according to some factors such as the exact meaning of the single word, semantic focus or the use of sentences.

Fromkin and Rodman (1978: 173) describe synonyms as words containing different sounds but having the same meanings. Similarly , they argue that there is scarcely a perfect synonym such as the word sofa and couch. Some interpret them as

the same meaning but actually the similarity depends on a great extent of semantic properties.

2.1.2 Types of synonymy

2.1.2.1 Absolute Synonymy

This kind of synonymy must meet the criteria, as stated by Lyon (1995) in that an absolute synonym must be identical in all meanings and used in the same context, with the same collocations and grammatical syntax and imply the same meaning without any change (as cited in Dvorak & Dawson, 2011). Examples of this include words like 'drunk' and 'drank', which can both be used as a past participle for 'drink.' To follow this guideline, absolute synonymy must see the same attitude, register and style when substituting words and according to Cruse (2000) there may not be any true absolute synonyms in English. Additionally, Stanojeveic (2009) argues that it is not natural for languages to have absolute synonyms as over time one of the pairs would be used less and eventually cease to be used. It is therefore quite rare to see any absolute synonyms that have the complete same meaning. However there are some examples that are close to this concept in English, such as 'large' and 'big.' So why are both still used? According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2005):

Big: large in size, degree, amount, etc.

Large: big in size, quantity

The slight differences here seem to be with classification, with large used with some quantities and big for some degrees. Therefore 'big' and 'large' are not absolute synonyms and Cruse's statement of absolute synonyms not actually existing in English holds true. Edmonds and Hirst (2002) state that research shows synonyms will evolve over time and that eventually the words can take on different meanings. Thus it seems to be a natural occurrence for language speakers to want to use synonyms for different situations and contexts, and that the more a word pair is used the further it goes away from absolute synonyms.

2.1.2.2 Propositional Synonymy

Propositional synonyms are also sometimes called cognitive, descriptive, or referential synonyms. According to Cruse (2000), this instance synonym can be replaced with a word to simply refer to the same truth

conditions. There might be a different possible definition or manner of change to the words but in the context the words could be interchanged. It can also occur in a declarative sentence and does not change its truth value. For example, the words 'begin' and 'commence' are considered to be in this category:

The class *begins* at 7.00.

The class *commenced* at 7.00.

He also argues that propositional synonyms can, however, change their definitions slightly with the way the speaker or writer expresses themselves. Examples include:

Expression: jolly/ very, father /daddy , infant/ baby,

Level of formality: obtain/get, provide/give, procure/get) and the field of discourse. (as cited in Stanojevic, 2009).

According to Edmonds and Hirst (2002) propositional synonyms will differ by smaller details. An example of this is the spectrum for word like 'important,' 'crucial' or 'necessary.' These are all adjectives but very small differences can be implied by just how valuable a noun using this adjective is for the context.

Stanojeveic (2009) ultimately states that as long as the words follow the same truth condition in the context, that there might be a different possible definition or manner of change to the words otherwise makes them propositional synonyms. An example of this is within the context of:

'She is *sick*.'

'She is *ill*.'

These two words, sick and ill, are about the same state of feeling. However, they are not absolute with the word 'sick' also being able to be use for slang to mean 'cool' and 'ill' having other meanings as a prefix meaning wrongly, such as ill-informed.

2.1.2.1 Near-Synonymy

Also referred to as loose synonyms, a large majority of synonyms are in this category. This means that they have definitions that are explained in the same way but cannot be necessarily interchanged due to a variety of factors. One reason might be the scale in its meaning, for example, with words like 'sad' and

'devastated.' The word 'devastated' has stronger implications and degree than the word sad. There could be a difference in use with the subject, with words like 'characteristic' more commonly used with people and 'feature' linked with objects.

According to DiMarco, Hirst, and Stede (1993) the semantic and stylistic differentiations demonstrate that near synonyms are different in semantic and stylistic characteristics. Their examples include the following:

1. I made (an error / a blunder) in introducing her to my husband.
2. The police (questioned the witnesses / interrogated the suspect) for many hours.

According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English for Advanced Learners (New Edition, 2009), in (1) the word "blunder" semantically makes the mistake at a level more serious than "error". Stylistically, it is both more forceful and is a more concrete. In (2) the word "interrogate" is use in a more adversarial situation and is a more formal word.

There are some factors such as dialects, formality and form that differentiate between near synonyms. Often a region has its own dialect which can provide nearly the same meaning. For example the word haystack, haymow and hayrick are different dialects that belong to different regions. Therefore, it is not possible that words from different dialects can be absolute synonyms because they can not always be replaced in sentences. The listener or reader must understand the truth condition, and if not familiar with the word 'hayrick' as a synonym for 'haystack' then the condition is not met. Additionally, words can be different in formal and informal style as in gas/ gasoline, try/ attempt : the first one is informal and the second is formal.

The last factor is form in difference of range of patterns which can modify meaning as in the word 'receive.' The verb 'receive' can transform in:

'receiver' (the listening end of a telephone)

'receptor' (the receiving element in the nervous system)

'recipient' (the person to whom something has been given)

'receptionist' (the person who receives clients ,patients, or visitors)

'reception' (a party or gathering to welcome or congratulate someone)

(Clark, 1992)

2.2 CRITERIA FOR DISTINGUISHING SYNONYMS

2.2.1 Region

Regional dialects and vocabulary changes are unaccounted for in many dictionaries and add to the number of synonyms in English. As previously mentioned, English was affected by region as it originated as a Germanic language and still has words originating from that language (Byrne, 2011). However, languages are always evolving and change and new synonyms can be created based on a local an area. Sociolinguistics has seen that speakers in a community change words to help identify area for ideology, personality and identity (Asnaghi, 2012). Additionally, words can be different based on region with the same meaning simply due to settlement and migration. In the United States, for example, settlers from England came in three main waves in the 1600s and created regions that still to this day have a variety of words (Vaux, 2003).

2.2.2 Euphemisms

According to the Macmillan English Dictionary (2007), a euphemism is 'a word or expression that people use when they want to talk about something unpleasant or embarrassing without mentioning the thing itself.' The choice to use a synonym in place of a word that is stronger or more harsh allows a speaker or writer to communicate in a softer way. Instead of using the word 'die', for example, an English speaker could instead use the euphemism 'pass away.' Additionally, euphemisms can be used to not only soften a word but even deceive the listener or reader. Munoz (2011) states that governments, corporations and military institutes will carefully choose words that hide the meaning and nature of a negative vocabulary choice. A common example found in the news is 'collateral damage' which, according to the Macmillan English Dictionary S.E (2007) is defined as 'ordinary citizens who are killed during a war.'

However, euphemisms can also be considered as more formal or sophisticated language (Jackova 2010). Examples for this are given by Alkire (2002) with words in society like 'educator' and 'attorney' to replace 'teacher' and 'lawyer.' These euphemisms seem to elevate a word to higher status in the context in which they are used. Also for taboo words that might cause the speaker or writer embarrassment, such as the topic of sex, euphemisms give synonyms that also soften the direct

meaning of a word. Linfoot-Ham (2005) noted that in the west, many English speakers in history find euphemisms like 'make love' to replace stronger words on this subject.

Euphemisms are taught to second language learners as seen in this list from New Headway Advanced (2009) at an advanced level and are an important feature of the English language.

pet	companion animal
die	pass away
crippled	disabled
poor	lower income bracket
talk	have a dialogue
Ministry of War	Ministry of Defense
stupid	low IQ
killed	neutralized
ill	under the weather
unemployment benefit	job seeker's allowance

Table 1 shows pairs of words, one of which is informal and another of which is formal

2.2.3 Academic Writing

Synonyms are used often as a lesson in academic writing for both L2 speakers and native speakers of the English language. Students who study for the IELTS test to further studies in higher education are told to avoid repeating words and instead learn as many groups of synonyms as possible (Black & Capel, 2006). This concept makes writing more colorful and the thought process behind it is to avoid making the reader bored and instead make the writing interesting. Having a range of vocabulary helps writers also create their own style. When taught these phrases and synonyms, writers can choose the words that sound the best for them and and in textbooks phrases for academic writing are straightforward and present similar to how absolute synonyms are defined with no acknowledgement of different meaning.

Oshima and Hogue (2006) give students learning academic writing lists to choose from, for example when concluding an essay:

All in all, …

In brief, …

In short, …

To conclude,...

To summarize, …

In conclusion, …

In summary, …

For these reasons, …

Therefore, when writers have time to think about what words they use and imagine the reader, they use synonyms not because of a slight change in meaning or to soften a word but instead make writing more varied in its language.

2.2.4 Subtle Meaning Changes in Synonyms

It is important to know that many words in English have multiple meanings. Normally, the most frequent meaning sense will be acquired earlier than less frequent ones. However, learning low-frequency meanings is also essential to obtain more knowledge regarding vocabulary words (Schmitt, 2010). Ruhl (1989) argues that two principle sources to understand a word in context are its definition or inherent lexical meaning without context and the inferred meaning from context. Therefore a word has a range of senses that are related to each other. This lead to the idea of the meaning from concreteness to abstractness. (as cited in Nation I.S.P. ,2001)

Gries (2010) proposed the notion for studying the meaning of words called contextual representation, a term by linguists Charles and Miller which states that 'Some abstraction or generalisation derived from the contexts that have been encountered ...a mental representation of the contexts in which the word occurs, a representation that includes all of the syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and stylistic information required to use the word appropriately.'

Sinclair (1991) also argued that "most everyday words do not have an independent meaning, but are components of a rich repertoire of multi-word patterns that make up a text." Patterns are related to meanings because the multiple meanings

can be distinguished by the different patterns. Clark (1992) argued that "For certain meanings there is a form that speakers expect to be used in the language community." For example, the word "come" in the pattern of 'Subject + Verb + Object' means result from something as in "Some good may come of all this" (Huston and Francis, 2000) while according to the Oxford dictionary (2015) "come" with no object and that is followed by adverbial of direction means move or travel toward as in "Jess came into the kitchen". Finally, there is an individual view of the meaning of words depending on the style, such as gender neutral or specific to a gender in use (Arppe & Jarvikivi, 2007).

2.2.5 Collocations

According to Benson (1985), "collocations are fixed, recurrent combinations of words in which each word basically retains its meaning." There are two types of collocations, which are grammatical collocations and lexical collocations:

Grammatical collocations are composed of open class words (content words) and closed class words (specifically prepositions)

Noun + preposition	:	an increase in
Verb + preposition	:	sympathize with
Adjective + preposition	:	keen on
Preposition + noun	:	in reality

In comparison to grammatical collocations, lexical collocations consist of two equal content words such as: :

Verb + adverb	:	speak fluently
Verb + noun	:	undergo an operation
Adjective + noun	:	valuable knowledge
Adverb + adjective	:	truly remarkable
Adverb + verb	:	strongly agree
Noun + verb	:	dust accumulates

These combinations are related in syntactically and semantically linked pairs that work together. Therefore, it is important for learners, both native and L2, to know the collocational components. This can limit the difficulty and burden of learning certain words. Pawley and Syder (1983) stated that the those who speak their

first language fluently do so because of the large numbers of memorised sequences in their brain. So they do not have to construct these pattern each time when producing sentences. (as cited in Nation I.S.P., 2001).

Further important research of collocation use comes from Sinclair (1991), who reported that where "two words of different frequencies collocate significantly is a collocation". The collocation has a different value in the description of each of the two words. It is classified into two categories, that is upward and downward collocation. Upward collocations show a weaker pattern in statistical terms and the words tend to be elements of grammatical frames or superordinates. Downward collocations, by contrast, give us a semantic analysis of a word. Sinclair provides an example of the word "back" by illustrating different functions of collocates. Examples of upward collocates are given below:

Upward collocates : back

Preposition / adverbs/ conjunction : at, from, into

Pronouns : her him me she them we

Possessive pronoun : her his my

Verb : get , got

For example : I followed him back *into* the wood.

She has gone back to *her* parents.

I must *get* back to work.

Downward collocates

Verbs : arrive bring climbed come drove

Prepositions : along behind onto

Adverbs : again forth slowly

Adjective : normal

Nouns : garden home hotel

For example : verbs : You *arrive* back on the Thursday.

Prepositions : Hand held *behind* his back.

Adverbs : Later we came back *again*.

Adjective : Things would soon get back to *normal*.

Nouns : Not a bit like his back *garden.*

2.2.6 Grammatical Patterns

In order to use a word it is necessary to know what part of speech it is and what grammatical patterns it can fit into. Many linguists now consider the lexicon to play a crucial role for syntax. Sinclair's (1987) corpus based research suggested when we choose a verb that will then affect how the syntax of the grammar is used to make a sentence. Traditionally grammar and lexis would be separated. Later, many linguists described a relationship between the unity of lexis and grammar. Hunston and Francis (2000) described how the term lexicogrammar came about, which is a combination of both lexis and grammar. Lexical items in English associate with the grammatical patterns. Biber (1998: 95-100), illustrated that some words have the same meaning but they own some patterns or function (as cited in Arppe & Jarvikivi, 2007). An example is the word "fear" and "afraid". They have the same meaning but different functions. According to the Oxford dictionary (2015), 'fear' is a verb and noun while 'afraid' is strictly used as an adjective. Therefore, the grammatical patterns will change with these synonyms.

Adjective patterns: adjective + preposition + noun e.g.

Are you afraid of the dog?

Verb patterns: verb + noun

I fear dogs.

Sense and pattern do not happen with fixed meaning. For example, the verb "conceive" in the pattern of V of N means plan something as in: " They conceived of a plan to rob the Kremlin" and another meaning is disbelieve, as in: "She could not conceive of a worse plan." (Hunston and Francis , 2000 p.84). Also, Sinclair works with compilers of the 1987 C dictionary and argues that: "for nearly every case, a structural pattern seemed to be associated with a sense. In the vast majority of cases, the compiler, in choosing typical instances, had little doubt about the kind of syntactic pattern that would have to be featured," (as cited in Hunston and Francis , 2000 p.20).

There are a lot of complexities when comparing synonyms in the English language. The small differences in meaning can be due to a collocation, a speaker's tone or region or the grammatical structure of a sentence. The word family can change the meaning as well, simply by changing the form. Additionally dictionaries

contradict each other and linguists seem to believe there are no absolute synonyms in the English language. Communicating figuratively or literally causes a synonym to have its meaning adjusted and even the form, like academic writing, can prompt use of a different word for no other reason than style.

2.3 ENGLISH LANGUAGE CORPORA

2.3.1 The Corpus of Contemporary American English

A corpus, COCA, or the Corpus of Contemporary American English, is the primary means of data collection used for the research questions in this study. It holds over 500 million words of text and covers fiction, newspaper articles, and academic writing. The search functions of the corpus allow the researcher to choose specific fields to narrow down their desired range of what vocabulary words and/or collocations can be viewed with what genre.

The reason for choosing corpus based research was that the accessibility and data available online is vast and also covers a variety of English genres. Academic writing, magazines and newspapers as well as fiction, such as plays and even radio shows can be assessed and analyzed easy. For COCA the addition of TV shows for fiction examples helps increase the range of English works available as well.

2.4 PREVIOUS STUDY

Poocharoensil (2010) investigated the similarities and differences between a set of five synonyms and the corpus data. A set of five synonyms 'ask, beg, plead, request and appeal' were investigated in terms of lexical, syntactic, and stylistic information. Data was collected from World-smith Tools (version 3.0) and three learner dictionaries that were the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD, 2005), the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE, 2009), and the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (CALD, 2009). He demonstrated that loose synonyms can not be used interchangeably in every context and teachers should understand this concept when introducing new synonym vocabulary to students and make the learners aware of this situation.

Castello (2014) analyzed the adjectives 'powerful' and 'strong' in a corpus based study that went in depth over the meanings and grammatical patterns of these words. The study acknowledges that using authentic corpus text lines as a means to examine words for small details is beneficial and expands the understanding of near synonyms various uses and meanings. The corpus used for the study was the BoE (Bank of English) corpus which covers three regional uses of English: British English, American English and Australian English. It was found that although the words follow almost identical syntax as adjectives, yet the subtle meanings change with collocations. For example, the adjective 'strong' can be used to demonstrate that something is sustained over time. 'Powerful' was used to cover a larger degree in terms of the range of the nouns it modified. These differences found demonstrate how beneficial having access to a corpus can be, as the dictionaries used in the study did not mention these findings. However Castello (2014) also points out that while a deeper understanding of synonymy differences and similarities can be found, there might be more examples not found even in the corpus. For example, much corpus texts omit rude or offensive sentences that would add some insight to collocations or meanings.

Yang (2015) examined the differences between the verbs to 'learn' and to 'acquire' based on the author's student confusion over the definitions of these words in a dictionary. The meanings were identical but ESL learners were confused by different collocations, such as *acquire knowledge* but not *learn knowledge*. The BNC, British National Corpus, was used for the study as well as the SKE, or Sketch Engine corpus tool. The study found that power of *Sketch-Engine* and the BNC to demonstrate what collocations are common and what collocations are rare can benefit both teachers and students understanding of synonyms. The author concluded that because there are so many synonyms in English and dictionaries provide limited collocation examples, teaching students to use a CORPUS during self study would help them learn near synonymy efficiently.

Uba (2015) explored the grammar patterns of a set of near synonyms: important, essential, vital, necessary and crucial. He focused on the types of nouns that each adjective modifies and then compared and contrasted the patterns from dictionaries and the corpus data. This study used the British National Corpus (BNC) and nine

traditional reference materials that is, five dictionaries and three thesauri. The results revealed that the types of nouns that modified these synonym words were different from the corpus data. For example, *vital* is modified by abstract nouns in many examples in dictionaries, while the corpus data revealed that concrete and dual nouns are mostly used. Therefore, it is important to apply corpus data in teaching because it will provide detailed information that can not be found in the dictionary.

Punyasuth (2014) studied the similarities and the differences of the two synonyms, adjourn and postpone, in terms of grammatical patterns, collocations and formality in context. He compared the information from the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary Online (OALD, 2011) and the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online (LDOCE, 2015) with 500 concordance lines used from the Corpus of Contemporary American English. The result showed that these synonyms provided the same core meaning but they are different in their usage so they can not be used interchangeably in all contexts.
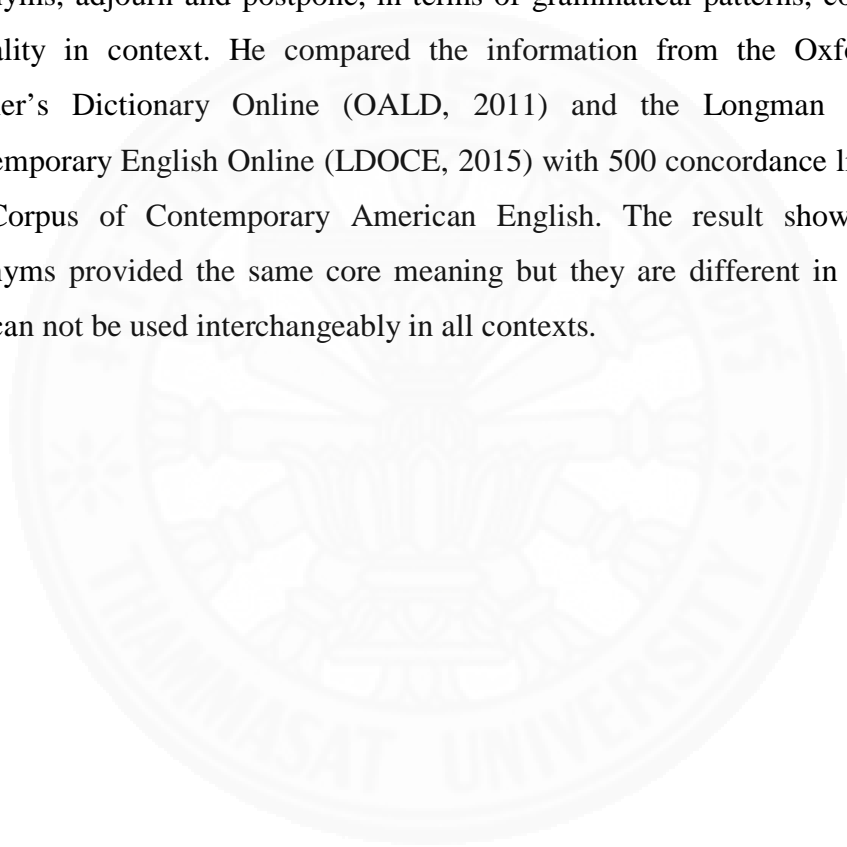
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes: (1) the subjects, (2) the materials, and (3) the procedure.

3.1 SUBJECTS

The adverb synonyms *almost*, *virtually* and *practically* have been chosen for analysis in this study.

3.2 MATERIALS

The tools and instruments used for this corpus based study included various dictionaries to compare and contrast the base definitions and the concordance lines in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).

(1) The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2015) (OALD), from the Oxford University Press, is one of the standard dictionaries for English learners around the world. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English for Advanced Learners (2014) (LDOCE) has more words than other advanced dictionaries, totaling over 235,000 words.

(2) The Corpus of Contemporary American English consists of 560 million words which is more than other corpuses, such as the BNC. Academic text, newspapers, plays and fiction are some of the authentic texts found in this corpus.

3.3 PROCEDURE

3.3.1 Data collection

The two dictionaries, the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 2015 (OALD) and the Longman Dictionary for Contemporary English 2014 (LDOCE) for Advanced Learners were used to extract the definitions and information of the synonyms *almost*, *practically* and *virtually* for comparison and contrast. The Corpus of Contemporary American English generated concordance lines to then correlate the

definitions with their use in authentic texts to discover and examine any differences and/or similarities.

      3.3.2 Data analysis

          Over 500 concordance lines were used for the data analysis in the following ways. Firstly, the meanings of the adverbs *almost*, *practically* and *virtually* were examined by looking at the context surrounding the words in the concordance lines. Additionally the collocations for each word were looked at by creating quantitative data for the frequency of use with determiners and, predeterminers to find the frequency of use with each word. Finally the concordance lines were used to discover patterns in grammatical syntax between the three adverb synonyms.
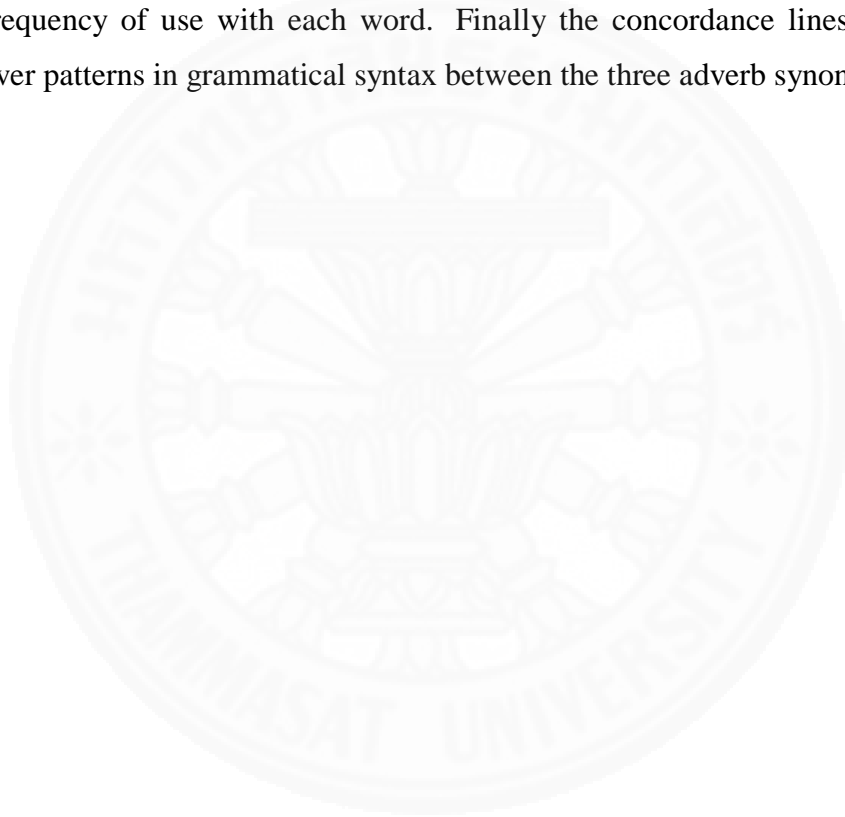
CHAPTER FOUR
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter reports the results collected from 500 concordance lines from the Corpus of Contemporary American English and the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2015) , and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English for Advanced Learners (2014). These two dictionaries gave the following results in accordance with definitions, collocations and grammatical patterns.

4.1 Definition from the dictionaries

ALMOST (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2015)

Adv. not quite SYN: nearly

I like **almost** all of them.

It's a mistake they **almost** always make.

Almost no one (= hardly anyone) believed him.

ALMOST (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English for Advanced Learners ,2014)

Adv. nearly, but not completely or not quite SYN: nearly

The story is **almost** certainly true.

 He's **almost** as old as I am.

 Almost all/every/everything

 SYN: nearly

 SYN: practically/virtually - *very nearly*

4.2 VIRTUALLY (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2015)

Adv. almost or very nearly, so that any slight difference is not important

To be virtually impossible.

Virtually all students will be exempt from the tax.

He **virtually** admitted he was guilty.

This year's results are **virtually** the same as last year's.

 VIRTUALLY (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English for Advanced

Learners, 2014)

Adv. almost SYN:practically

Virtually all the children come to school by bus.

He was **virtually** unknown before running for office.

4.3 PRACTICALLY (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2015)

<u>*Adv.* almost; very nearly SYN: virtually</u>

The theater was **practically** empty.

I meet famous people **practically** every day.

PRACTICALLY (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English for Advanced Learners, 2014)

Adv. (especially spoken) almost SYN: virtually

I've read **practically** all of his books.

She sees him **practically** every day.

4.4 SYNONYM NOTE (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2015)

These two words have similar meanings and are used frequently with the following words:

Almost	Practically
certainly	all
all	every
every	no
entirely	nothing
impossible	impossible
empty	anything

These are used in positive sentences. Practically is used more in spoken than in written English. Almost and practically can be used before words like *any, anybody, anything,* etc.

4.5 Collocations

Corpus data

Almost

500 concordance lines from *Academic, Spoken, Newspaper, Fiction,* and *Magazine* COCA Corpus samples:

TABLE 2. The frequency of words collocated with almost

Rank	Word	Type of Word	Frequency
1	all	determiner	21
2	every	determiner	17
3	like	preposition	16
4	entirely	adverb	13
5	no	determiner	10
6	certainly	adverb	9
7	never	adverb	8
8	to	preposition	7
9	always	adverb	7
10	impossible	adjective	6

The determiners *all* and *every* are the most common collocations used with *almost* from the corpus. Additionally, there were no nouns in the top ten, with five adverbs being used as well as the preposition *like* and the adjective *impossible*.

Virtually

500 concordance lines from *Academic, Spoken, Newspaper, Fiction,* and *Magazine* COCA Corpus samples:

TABLE 3. The frequency of words collocated with *virtually*

Rank	Word	Type of Word	Frequency
1	all	determiner	62
2	every	determiner	60
3	no	determiner	48
4	impossible	adjective	29
5	any	determiner	16
6	nothing	pronoun	15
7	identical	adjective	14
8	No one	pronoun	10
9	Non existent	adjective	9
10	The entire	adjective	7

Table 3 shows three types of word in collocations with *virtually* which are the determiners, adjectives and pronouns. The determiners are the highest frequency words collocated with virtually, followed by adjectives and pronouns. The determiner *all* occurred with *virtually* at a very high frequency of 62 times and the determiner *every* at an almost equally high frequency of 60 times. Adjectives and pronouns were lower frequencies, with *impossible* at 29 times and the pronoun *nothing* at 15 times.

Practically

500 concordance lines from *Academic, Spoken, Newspaper, Fiction,* and *Magazine* COCA Corpus samples:

TABLE 4. The frequency of words collocated with practically

Rank	Word	Type of Word	Frequency
1	every	determiner	16
2	all	determiner	13
3	nothing	pronoun	11
4	impossible	adjective	6
5	feel	verb	5
6	nonexistent	adjective	5
7	The same	pronoun	5
8	about	preposition	5
9	live	verb	5
10	guarantee	verb	3

Table 4 shows that the adverb *practically* has a high rank of determiner collocations although they were used at a low frequency per word. After determiners there were pronouns, adjectives, verbs and prepositions in the top ten most frequent collocations. The next highest rank was the pronoun *nothing,* occurring 11 times. *Impossible* occurred six times and the verb *fee*l five times.

Collocation Discussion

The data from the corpus shows many similarities and differences when comparing *almost, virtually* and *practically* to each other. Although the synonyms *almost, virtually* and *practically* have determiners as the most frequent collocation pairs, specifically *every* and *all*, it is notable that the synonym *virtually* has a much different set of collocations to that of *almost* and *practically*. Firstly, *virtually* has a much higher frequency of fewer words than *almost* and *practically*. This could mean that when English speakers and writers use the word, they are thinking of it in a phrase rather than as a separable adverb. *Practically* and *almost*, however show more freedom when the writer or speaker chooses a word to collocate with. The frequency use of *virtually* to the collocations *all* and *every* consist of 122 out of 500 of the concordance lines. *Practically* and *almost* are nowhere near that high a frequency, with *every* and *all* combined collocations only consisting of 29 and 38 out of 500 lines respectively. *Practically* differs from *almost* and *virtually* by having a higher variety of word types at the higher ranks, including prepositions and verbs.

As for the collocations themselves, the synonyms *practically* and *virtually* shared more similar word choices than *almost* and *virtually* as the data have shown from the Tables 1, 2 and 3. For example, *practically* and *virtually* have the same word collocations, such as *every, all, nothing, impossible* and *nonexistent.*

These results show some inconsistencies with the Oxford and Longman dictionaries, which also conflict with each other. The Oxford dictionary compared more favorably *almost* and *practically*, as seen in a special synonym note. However, the dictionary did use *almost* as part of the definition of *virtually*. Longman compared *practically* and *virtually* as very close synonyms.

As for the collocations, the similarities and differences are seen with information from the dictionary and the corpus itself. For *virtually*, both Longman, Oxford and the Coca Corpus had *all* as the most frequent synonym, therefore correctly demonstrating that *virtually* is most frequently used with determiners. Additionally Oxford had *impossible* as an example of a collocation and the Coca Corpus showed this as well. Differences were found with the word types. The dictionary had example collocations with verbs, such as 'virtually admitted' from Oxford while the Coca data showed a low frequency use with verbs

themselves. Coca had pronouns as high frequency words, such as *nothing* and *none* both in the top ten most frequent collocations while both Oxford and Longman failed to show any examples of pronoun collocations.

The adverb *almost* had many inconsistencies with the dictionary information compared to the corpus as well. Although both dictionaries and the corpus demonstrated *all* and *every* as common collocations, both Longman and Oxford had examples of *certainly* as a common, or the most common collocation. The corpus had *certainly* at a frequency of only 9/500 lines. Oxford also has *impossible* and *empty* as collocation examples however the corpus saw these collocations at a rate of less than 1%.

Practically compared more favorably between the corpus and the dictionaries. The determiners *all* and *every* were shown in all three tools with determiners and pronouns being the most common word pairs.

4.6 Grammatical Patterns/Syntax from the Dictionaries

Almost

1. Almost + determiner
- I like ***almost all*** of them.

    (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2015)

2. almost + adverb
- It's a mistake they ***almost always*** make.

    (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2015)

3. Almost + adjective

- Dinner's ***almost ready***.

    (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2015)

4. Almost + verb
- Have you ***almost finished***?

(Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English for Advanced Learners, 2014)

5. Almost + pronoun
- ***Almost nothing*** was done to improve the situation.

(Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English for Advanced Learners, 2014)

6. Almost + as...as

- He is *almost as* old *as* I am.

(Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English for Advanced Learners, 2014)

Corpus data

Pattern from COCA

    The patterns which appeared in both dictionaries and corpus data are shown in table 5

Table 5. The frequency of grammatical patterns of almost from COCA corpus

Dictionaries	Corpus	Frequency	
		lines	percentage
1.almost + determiner	1. almost + adjective + noun	112	22.4%
2. almost + adverb	2. almost + verb	67	13.4%
3. almost + adjective	3. almost + adverb	66	13.2%
4. almost + verb	4. almost + determiner + noun	45	9%
5. almost + pronoun	5. almost + adjective	43	8.6%
6. almost + as...as	6. almost + noun	21	4.2%
	7. almost + preposition + noun	17	3.4%
	8. almost + pronoun	16	3.2%

Dictionaries	Corpus	Frequency	
		lines	percentage
	9. almost + as…as	10	2%
	10. almost + as soon as	4	0.8%
	Excluded patterns	99	19.8%
Total		500	100%

The examples of patterns, drawn from corpus concordance lines, are shown below.

1. almost + adjective + noun

He pointed to the cup of *almost colorless liquid*.

2. almost + verb

I *almost died*, Blaine.

3. almost + adverb

Thus, discussions of productivity have *almost never* entered into the debates about educational policy.

4. almost + determiner + noun

The evaluation found evidence of positive changes in *almost all target capacities*.

5. almost + adjective

Determining the size and extent of this deviation is *almost impossible* given the secrecy surrounding compensation.

6. almost + preposition + noun

The township system was left *almost without support*.

7. almost + pronoun

"This guy wasn't a right winger, but an unstable maniac who hated *almost everybody*, Carlson said,"

8. almost + noun

It took Joel *almost an hour* to get the car clean and dry.

9. almost + as…as

Almost as interesting as the fact of this regulation is the way in which it arose.

10. almost + as soon as

Almost as soon as the election was over, leading conservative voices began to call for.

Patterns from the dictionaries

Virtually

1. virtually + determiner

- *Virtually all* the children come to school by bus.

     (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English for Advanced Learners , 2014)

2. virtually + verb

- He *virtually admitted* he was guilty.

     (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2015)

3. virtually + adjective

- This year's result are *virtually the same* as last year's.

     (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2015)

Pattern from COCA

Table 6. The frequency of grammatical patterns of virtually from COCA corpus

Dictionaries	Corpus	Frequency	
		lines	percentage
1.virtually + determiner	1. virtually + determiner + noun	154	30.8%
2.virtually + verb	2. virtually + pronoun	62	12.4%
3.virtually + adjective	3. virtually + adjective	62	12.4%

Dictionaries	Corpus	Frequency	
		lines	percentage
	4. virtually + verb	54	10.8%
	5. virtually + adjective + noun	42	8.4%
	6. virtually + adjective + preposition + noun	17	3.4%
	7. virtually + adverb	16	3.2%
	Excluded patterns	93	18.6%
Total		500	100%

The examples of patterns, drawn from corpus concordance lines, are shown below

1. Virtually + determiner + noun

There is ***virtually no*** evidence of that.

2. Virtually + pronoun

Virtually no one in the American establishment gave serious thought to the here-today, gone-tomorrow possibility.

3. Virtually + adjective

Despite Gatter's sample's strange plumage, the DNA was ***virtually identical***.

4. Virtually + verb

Palmeiro is ***virtually banned*** and is off the ballot to boot.

5. Virtually + adjective + noun

But those who buy ***virtually identical policies*** outside covered California won't face the surcharge, which is a pity.

6. Virtually + adjective + preposition + noun

DeMarre Carroll was left ***virtually alone to guard James*** straight up, and the results were disastrous for the Raptors.

7. Virtually + adverb

Even when statistics such as these are not gamed, they ***virtually never*** end any debates.

Patterns from the dictionaries

Practically

1. practically + determiner

- She sees him **practically every day**.

   (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English for Advanced Learners , 2014)

2. practically + adjective

- It's **practically impossible** to predict what will happen.

(Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English for Advanced Learners , 2014)

3. practically + verb

- My essay is **practically finished** now.

   (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2015)

Pattern from COCA

Table 7. The frequency of grammatical patterns of virtually from COCA corpus

Dictionaries	Corpus	Frequency	
		lines	percentage
1. practically + determiner	1. practically + verb + preposition + noun	63	12.6%
2. practically + adjective	2. practically + adjective	59	11.8%
3. practically + verb	3. practically + adjective + noun	37	7.4%
	4. practically + determiner + noun	34	6.8%

Dictionaries	Corpus	Frequency	
		lines	percentage
	5. practically + preposition + noun	28	5.6%
	6. practically + pronoun	23	4.6%
	7. Practically + noun	22	4.4%
	Excluded patterns	234	46.8%
Total		500	100%

The examples of patterns, drawn from the corpus concordance lines, are shown below

1. practically + verb + preposition + noun

And I was *practically living out of my jeep*.

2. practically + adjective

The combinations are *practically limitless*.

3. practically + adjective + noun

I was slowly improving, but I still had a ways to go on my *practically nonexistent athleticism.*

4. practically + determiner + noun

Practically every aspect of modern life requires access to the Internet.

5. practically + preposition + noun

Well now she is accused of tying them up and hauling them off *practically with a rope.*

6. practically + pronoun

Practically everyone on the Festspielhaus stage has a constantly shifting gender.

7. practically + noun

Frederica Wilson was *practically a member* of their family and was among a group of people listening to Trump.

Grammatical Patterns Discussion

Both the corpus and the dictionaries had a range of possible grammatical patterns for the synonyms *almost, virtually* and *practically*. Comparing the adverbs with each other in the corpus also shows many disparities. One reason for this is the nature of the word types themselves. Adverbs are very flexible in English with collocations, and can link with adjectives, nouns, prepositions, adverbs, pronouns and of course verbs. This means that the inconsistency of grammatical patterns simply represents the flexibility of the word type.

However, with the most collocations for all three synonyms consisting of determiners, we see from the Coca corpus that only *virtually* has the determiner syntax with 'virtually + determiner + noun' at 30.8% for the highest rank. *Almost* had syntax linking almost + adjective' at 22.4%, 'almost + verb' at 13.4% and 'almost + adverb' at 13.2% before the 9% of 'almost + determiner.' *Practically* was similar with 'practically + determiner' ranked 4th in frequency at 6.8%.

Therefore, while the grammatical syntax varies with the word type, the corpus again shows that *practically* and *almost* have a higher frequency range of syntax use, making these words more flexible compared to *virtually*.

CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The findings can be summarized in the following main points:

1) The use of a corpus, specifically the COCA corpus, provides an almost infinite amount of examples for given words to study. This is authentic text that is not outdated or limited to page space when compared to a dictionary.

2) The similarities between the synonyms *almost, virtually* and *practically* are found in collocations and grammatical syntax. This is to say that, based on the findings, there is no collocation that can be done with one synonym that is not seen with an other. Additionally, as adverbs, they all can be used interchangeably with different grammatical structures that are not exclusive to one of the synonyms.

3) The differences between the synonyms *almost, virtually* and *practically* consist primarily in the frequency of both collocations and grammatical patterns between the three are inconsistent with each other and dictionaries.

5.2 CONCLUSION

The three synonyms of *almost*, *virtually* and *practically* are all adverbs and therefore follow many of the same grammatical patterns. All three showed a wide variety of possible patterns, although *virtually* had a lower frequency of variety. Additionally the collocations between the three synonyms were also consistent, with *virtually* having a much lower frequency of range.

This could suggest that when English speakers use the word *virtually*, they think of the collocation first rather than with *almost* and *practically*, where they think of the meaning and apply it to the word. The collocation *virtually impossible* is an example of this.

This study ultimately shows that these synonyms sometimes conflict with each other and with the dictionary examples and represent the idea of near synonyms. Inconsistencies in collocation frequency and frequency of grammatical patterns demonstrate that native speakers and writers use these words differently.

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There are two recommendations for further research proposed after this study. First would be a more in-depth analysis of how the synonyms almost, practically and virtually vary across the fields of spoken English, academic English, fiction, newspapers and magazines. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary mentions that the synonym *practically* is used more commonly in spoken English. For this study all five sections were used with 100 lines each for quality control and consistency; however they were not compared to each other.

Additionally, a higher number of concordance lines could be used to increase the validity of the quantitative data found in this study. There is a possibility that with 1,000 lines for each the three synonyms, the rankings of both frequency of collocations and frequency of grammatical patterns could change slightly and affect the conclusions made.

Related to this is how to use a corpus in the second language classroom. Further research to test these synonyms with student understanding, rather than academic understanding would be beneficial as the goal in mind is for students.

5.3 SIGNIFICANCE IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

The findings in this study suggest that while dictionaries are correct in their summary of vocabulary, for second language learners the tool of the corpus could provide a more in depth tool for looking at word patterns with collocations and grammatical syntax. Additionally, the corpus provides data that can be used to compare and contrast words, an area that dictionaries are not designed for as they provide mostly definitions. Grammatical patterns, while more advanced for learners can also be observed and compared and contrasted.

As this research demonstrated, the collocations and their frequency reflect the real use in the English language. For second language learners, the following recommendation is made. Firstly the teachers must demonstrate the power and use of the corpus as a technological tool. This includes using the menu and the precaution not to overwhelm students with too many lines. Secondly the student must make a habit of using the corpus as a tool to control their learning. This follows the current

student centered learning environment of student autonomy. However this is nothing new, as students have used dictionaries on their own for many decades. One goal of a second language learner would be for the student to regularly check their corpus along with their dictionary when learning synonym pairs.

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