



'Proper vocabulary and juicy collocations': EAP students evaluate do-it-yourself corpus-building

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the feasibility and value of an approach to teaching EAP writing in which students construct and examine their own individual, discipline-specific corpora. The approach was trialed in multidisciplinary classes of advanced-level students (mostly graduates). The course consisted of six weekly 2-h sessions. Data were collected from initial and final questionnaires, which provided background information and asked students to evaluate the corpus work. Data from 50 participants are presented and show generally positive results. Over 90% of students found it easy to build their own corpora and most succeeded in constructing a corpus of 10–15 research articles. Most students were enthusiastic about working with their own corpora: about 90% agreed that their corpus helped them improve their writing and intended to use it in the future. This suggests that even corpora of this size and type can provide a useful resource for writing discipline-specific texts. The paper discusses the data on participants' attitudes and experiences and considers the issues and problems that arise in connection with do-it-yourself corpus-building. It argues that this approach need not be restricted to small groups of well-resourced students, but can be implemented in mainstream EAP classes.

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1. Introduction

The use of corpora and concordances by students taking EAP writing courses was pioneered by Johns (1991, 2002) and has been increasingly described and investigated over the last two decades. Researchers have reported on the direct use of corpora in relation to several different aspects of academic writing, including, for example, lexis (Thurstun & Candlin, 1998; Wu, Witten, & Franken, 2010), grammatical and lexico-grammatical features (Boulton, 2010; Cresswell, 2007; Granath, 2009), error correction (Gaskell & Cobb, 2004; Gilmore, 2009) and genre (Weber, 2001).

One of the issues that arises from this work is the type of corpus employed. There seems to be something of a divide between those, often teachers of language or translation students, who use large general corpora (e.g., Estling Vannestål & Lindquist, 2007; Varley, 2009) and others, often teaching single-discipline classes, who compile relatively small purpose-built corpora of texts within the students' own field. Where students share a common subject of study, the case for small, domain- or genre-specific corpora has been persuasively argued (Gavioli, 2005; Tribble, 2002). In particular, their limited size means that the student is not overwhelmed with data and the familiarity of the language makes concordance lines easier to read.

Gavioli (2005), for example, suggests that small specialised corpora are particularly useful in helping students to understand and conceptualise the world of the discipline and illustrates this approach using purpose-built corpora with medicine and economics students. Similarly, Bondi (2001) compiles a corpus of economics abstracts for genre- and discipline-specific teaching, while Mudraya (2006) teaches engineering lexis from a corpus of the textbooks used by the students. Further

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examples of discipline-specific corpus work are provided by Hafner and Candlin (2007) for law and Bianchi and Pazzaglia (2007) for psychology.

However, the ability to carry out such tailor-made corpus work depends upon having single-discipline classes and this may not be the case on many EAP programmes. One possible solution is provided by Lee and Swales (2006), who describe a course in which a mixed-discipline group of advanced-level graduate students built their own corpora from research articles (RAs) in their individual fields. However the number of participants was small (6) and thus the study does not provide sufficient quantitative data to enable an accurate assessment to be made of the feasibility and value of do-it-yourself (DIY) corpus-building. The current study takes this work further: it reports on an EAP course in which students constructed their own corpora and presents data on their evaluation of this process. It aims to address the question of whether self-compiled corpora can provide a viable alternative to large general corpora and small teacher-compiled corpora for mainstream EAP courses.

2. Rationale for a DIY corpus-building approach

The work described here was carried out at Oxford University Language Centre in 2009. The DIY corpus approach was introduced to all students taking the course in academic writing and now forms an integral component of the programme.

Several reasons for introducing DIY corpus-building here are similar to those given by Lee and Swales (2006). Most importantly, classes are multi-disciplinary, with around 12 disciplines represented in each group. This means that each student has their own specialist needs, corresponding to the requirements and conventions of their discipline and under these circumstances, it is clearly impossible for the tutor to respond in detail to all individual demands. The ability to tailor the material more closely to each student's needs would seem to be a great advantage and students were expected to welcome this possibility. Like those on the Lee and Swales course, many students are also working in less-researched disciplines, including a relatively large number in humanities (e.g., music, classics) and for these students there may well be few or no disciplinary resources or guidance available.

As studies by Starfield (2004) and Yoon (2008) show, corpus use enables students to take more responsibility for their own writing and to become more independent learners. An important reason for promoting DIY corpus-building is that it can extend learner autonomy in several ways. First, it is the student who decides what to put into the corpus and what to omit. Thus not only do they have an intimate knowledge of the contents of the corpus, but they also have control over the resources they use for learning. Students can modify their corpus at any time, deleting or adding files as necessitated by their own changing writing circumstances. Further, consultation of their own discipline-specific corpus has the potential to reduce reliance on outside agencies, whether native-speakers, supervisors or proofreading services, to achieve their writing goals. Finally, the DIY corpus is a resource which is not dependent upon an internet connection or any technology apart from the writer's own computer. Once built, it is freely available and remains accessible wherever and whenever it is needed.

There is, however, a further reason for adopting this more individualised approach: the extent of *interdisciplinary* research. For example, of the 158 students who took the academic writing course in 2009–2010, 43% regarded their study as inter-disciplinary. Such students face a particularly challenging task, since they have to master the discourse conventions of more than one discipline and then effect a synthesis which will simultaneously satisfy supervisors and examiners in each field. However, such writing needs are highly specific and there are unlikely to be sufficiently large numbers of students with exactly the same combination of fields to warrant a teacher's construction of purpose-built corpora. Thus there is a risk that some of the students in greatest need may be left without access to appropriate resources.

It could be argued, however, that DIY corpora do not have sufficient additional benefits over ready-made corpora to justify the amount of time spent on constructing them. There are a number of counter arguments to this view. First, it is unlikely that even a large general corpus will provide adequate data to respond to the highly discipline-specific queries of specialist students. Thus users may find that there are few or no examples, or that the examples retrieved are irrelevant, or even misleading. Second, I would suggest that the process of building their own corpus allows students to achieve deeper and more critical insights into the nature of corpus data itself. This understanding helps them to interpret corpus data more perceptively and to gain a greater appreciation of the pitfalls as well as the benefits of the approach. Thus DIY corpus-building can also provide a good foundation for corpus consultation, even if students go on to use ready-made corpora later.

3. Methods and participant data

The data consists of two questionnaires completed by participants. The initial questionnaire, adapted from Yoon and Hirvela (2004), comprised 19 questions and collected information about the students' backgrounds. The final evaluation questionnaire consisted of 10 statements about corpus work rated on a 5-point Likert scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* (see Table 2). These were followed by four closed and six open-ended questions to allow more detailed individual responses and to probe the reasons behind them. Fifty students completed both questionnaires and their data form the basis of this study.

3.1. The participants

The participants were advanced-level non-native speakers (NNS) of English; 62% were doctoral and 30% Master's students. Data on target genres is available for 41 students, 81% of whom listed both thesis/dissertation and research article.

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