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A corpus-aided approach for the teaching and learning of rhetoric in an undergraduate composition course for L2 writers☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates a corpus-aided approach for the teaching and learning of rhetoric in an undergraduate writing course for second language writers. The twenty-one international students in the course read and analyzed texts produced by a local environmental group and an international mining company regarding a proposed copper mine in the U.S. southwest. The textual analysis was enhanced and supplemented by a series of activities using corpus data derived from collections of texts from the opposing groups. The contrastive analyses made possible through the study of texts and corpus data from the sharply distinct groups enabled students to notice, analyze, interpret, and discuss the meaningful and purposeful linguistic and rhetorical variation present in the texts, the corpus data, and the debate. This implementation of localized, specialized corpora comprised of texts with immediate relevance to the students' campus and community provides a means to incorporate corpus study in the writing classroom from a rhetorical perspective. This article details the principles guiding the design of the approach, explains the corpus-aided activities, reports students' attitudes to the use of corpus data in their academic writing classroom, and offers suggestions for implementing similar activities in L2 writing classrooms.

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1. Introduction

Data-Driven Learning (DDL) (Johns, 1986, 1991) for direct in-class corpus study, the corpus-based CoBuild dictionaries and materials (Sinclair, 1987), and the concordancing method (Tribble & Jones, 1990) are generally considered the first applications of corpus linguistics for language learning classrooms and materials design. In the years following these early developments in corpus-aided pedagogy, there has been an "explosion of studies devoted to various aspects of the use of corpora in language learning" (Chambers, 2005, p. 111) with the teaching and learning of vocabulary through corpus consultation most often the focus (e.g., Bernadini, 2002; Chambers, 2005, 2007; Cobb, 1997, 1999; Horst, cobb, & Nicolae, 2005; Johns, 1997; Tribble & Jones, 1990; Varley, 2009).

While these studies have indeed been insightful and the benefits of corpus study and consultation have generally been confirmed, much of this work also reflects the characteristics of corpus pedagogy that have been criticized: bottom-up practices with little attention to context and too much attention to linguistic features. However, Flowerdew (1998) noted

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an emerging shift in corpus pedagogy as researchers increasingly completed genre and discourse analyses which moved beyond "the surface of the collocational patterns" to investigations of "functional patterns" for more applied pedagogical ends (p. 547). Several years later, Flowerdew (2005) further refuted the critiques against corpus-based methodologies while detailing the increased use of top-down strategies influenced by ESP genre theory as well as the use of small, specialized corpora where context is more easily accessed and authenticated by language learners. Thus, in recent years, while valuable grammatical and lexical based study continues, research in corpus-aided discourse analysis and pedagogy has increasingly shifted to more discourse and genre-specific approaches, resulting in deeper insights into particular genres of EAP and ESP interest and more comprehensive explanations of the pedagogical implications (e.g. Charles, 2007; Hyland, 2009; Henry & Roseberry, 1996, 2001; Flowerdew, L. 2003; Flowerdew, J. & Wan, 2006, 2010; Flowerdew, J. & Forest, 2009; Upton & Connor, 2001).

Despite the continued advancement of corpus approaches for language teaching and learning, Römer (2010) comments that it would, however, be false to claim that corpora and corpus tools have changed the "pedagogical landscape" (p. 18) and Boulton (2010) laments that corpus research "seems largely invisible downstream to teachers and learners" (p. 129). Further, while corpus approaches have been assessed for a variety of purposes and contexts, investigations of corpus approaches for writing instruction have been few (Ädel, 2010). Ädel comments that although corpus consultation for developing writing skills seems clearly beneficial, corpus study in L2 writing contexts "seems not to be widely practiced", especially beyond the teaching of vocabulary and collocation (p.40). Reflecting Ädel's comment, Boulton (2010) meta-analysis of 27 studies assessing learning outcomes from corpus study includes only two studies with writing as a focus.

This slow uptake of corpus pedagogy in the writing classroom has prompted many to rethink corpus approaches, and in recent years, researchers have positioned corpus pedagogy as a supplement to existing methods and curriculum rather than a stand-alone pedagogical approach. Conrad asserts that if corpora and/or corpus data are to be utilized in the classroom, corpus approaches should be integrated within existing pedagogy rather than presented in isolation (2000), serving to "complement traditional language learning resources" (Chambers, 2005, p. 111). Reinhardt suggests, "(corpus) approaches are commensurable with, and can be scaffolded into, more familiar approaches that focus on learning through meaningful language use and the development of critical thinking and autonomous learning skills" (2010, p. 247). While Reinhardt was writing specifically with SL/FL contexts and classrooms in mind, this statement alludes to the potential for the integration of corpus approaches in undergraduate L2 writing courses.

Informed by corpus findings in EAP/ESP pedagogical contexts and guided by the suggestions of Conrad (2000), Chambers (2005), and Reinhardt (2010), this paper details the rationale, design, and implementation of a corpus-aided approach in an undergraduate L2 writing class engaged in the study of rhetoric, a common curricular topic in first year composition which requires students to analyze the rhetorical strategies present in texts. While some language teachers and writing instructors have knowledge of corpus pedagogy, it seems few instructors possess the strategies for integrating meaningful corpus study into their courses. The approach illustrated here provides a model for incorporating corpus study in the L2 writing classroom as it details how corpus-aided pedagogy using keyword analysis from a rhetorical perspective can be effectively introduced into an L2 writing classroom. As will be discussed, this contrastive corpus approach's use of corpora of texts from opposing groups in a contentious debate of immediate relevance to the students' campus and community facilitated the noticing (Schmidt, 1990), analysis, and discussion of meaningful and purposeful language use by highlighting the sharp variations in language and rhetorical practices from the two groups.

1.1. Corpus approaches in ESP & EAP writing

Corpus linguistics has increasingly contributed to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) research in recent years (Biber, Reppen, & Friginal, 2010) and corpus pedagogy has been adopted and implemented more frequently in EAP and ESP classrooms. As previously noted, a turn to more applied pedagogical ends for corpus research was evolving in the mid 1990s (see Henry & Roseberry, 1996), but it was Flowerdew (1998) challenge which sparked corpus researchers to be more explicit with the pedagogical value of corpus findings for ESP and EAP curriculum and materials design. Asserting the need for greater attention to the pedagogical implications of findings and for more genre-informed practices, Flowerdew (1998) helped usher in a new era of discourse-sensitive corpus pedagogy which mitigated critiques of the bottom-up quality of corpus instruction as more top-down functional approaches were developed, especially in L2 writing contexts.

Early representatives of the shift to more functional, discourse-oriented approaches in L2 writing, Henry and Roseberry (2001) and Henry (2007) assessed a corpus-informed approach for the teaching and learning of a genre of particular ESP interest, the letter of application. In the first analysis, Henry and Roseberry (2001) reported the findings of a corpus-informed genre analysis of a small, specialized corpus of application letters with particular attention to reporting pedagogical best practices. Similarly, Henry (2007) assessed the effectiveness of the corpus-informed genre analysis approach in a classroom setting and investigated whether corpus consultation could lead to the successful transfer of rhetorical moves and corpus-attested features by the learners to successful production of a letter. After study of the online corpus materials, the 13 Bruneian undergraduates did include and successfully realize a greater number of moves, and a keyword analysis of second drafts displayed increases in the students' usage of lexical items and discourse patterns presented through the corpus instruction.

Within EAP writing corpus pedagogy, Charles (2007, 2011) continued the pedagogical movement toward more top-down genre-informed approaches. As is common in many corpus-informed writing interventions, the researcher/instructor

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