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Concordancing in L2 writing class: An overview of research and issues

Choongil Yoon*

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, Ontario, Canada

A B S T R A C T

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Direct corpus use by learners or learner concordancing has been hailed as one of the promising areas that can revolutionize L2 writing and language pedagogy as a whole (Conrad, 2000; Hyland, 2003). It has been discussed to promote data-driven learning (Johns, 1988), to provide authentic contexts in which linguistic items are used, and to serve as a reference tool that students can use for language problems. However, these benefits have been more talked about than tested with empirical studies, and only recently researchers have started to conduct studies in this area. Focusing on L2 writing, the present study explored how and to what extent this potential of concordancing has been realized by reviewing the relevant studies. The inclusion criteria for the current review were studies that provide information on the effects of corpus concordancing by learners of L2 writing and on learners' evaluation of it. Twelve studies included in the review show that if proper training and assistance are provided, learner concordancing can be a viable research and reference tool for enhancing the linguistic aspects of L2 writing and for increasing learner autonomy. Future studies are also suggested based on the gap identified in the reviewed studies.

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1. Introduction

Corpus linguistics provides a powerful research methodology for almost every language-related field ranging from lexicography to language teaching (Lee & Swales, 2006). L2 writing pedagogy is one of those areas where corpus-based research has made a considerable impact. Corpus analysis has particularly made significant contributions to the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). It has provided detailed descriptions of the linguistic features (e.g., lexico-grammatical patterns and phraseology) of academic discourse, and analyses of linguistic variation across academic disciplines and genres (Biber, Johansson, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999), especially with the help of specialized corpora of academic discourses like Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE). Meanwhile, research on learner corpora has yielded new insights into L2 writers' patterns of misuse, overuse, and underuse of linguistic features in their writing (Gilquin, Granger, & Paquot, 2007; Granger, 2009).

More recently, direct corpus use by learners or learner concordancing has been emerging as another area where corpus-based approaches have made contributions to L2 writing and EAP. Since the late 1980s, corpus investigation in the classroom has been hailed by some L2 writing researchers as one of the most promising areas that can inform L2 writing pedagogy and broader language teaching and learning (Bloch, 2007; Conrad, 2000, 2008; Granath, 2009; Hyland, 2003; Johns, 1988; Stapleton & Radia, 2009).

* Tel.: +1 647 863 2457.

E-mail address: topher.kris@gmail.com.

However, this area remains yet under-researched. Although much has been talked and written about what can be done with corpora in the classroom, little has been tested about how effective and useful corpus use actually is for learners of L2 writing (Boulton, 2009; Gaskell & Cobb, 2004).

In this article, I will provide an overview of the potential benefits of learner concordancing for L2 writing, and examine what empirical studies there have been in this specific area, and what has been proven of its potential. I will then discuss common insights and issues from the reviewed studies, and make some suggestions for future research.

2. Corpus use in the classroom

In corpus linguistics, a corpus is usually defined as a principled collection of naturally occurring texts for linguistic study (Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1998) and a concordancer is a computer software program that rapidly searches a corpus and produces a list of incidences of a given linguistic item (a word or phrase). In its most common format or Keyword in Context (KWIC), a concordancer displays the given term in the center together with its immediate context on both sides (see Fig. 1 for an example of KWIC concordance output). Concordance outputs provide, horizontally read, how particular items are used in context and, vertically read, repeated patterns associated with those items (Tognini Bonelli, 2010).

The potential benefits of learner concordancing for language learning are manifold (Bernardini, 2004; Bloch, 2009; Johns, 1988, 1991; O'Sullivan & Chambers, 2006; Yoon & Hirvela, 2004). First, corpora provide students with rich exposure to most common and typical language forms and patterns that they are likely to encounter outside the classroom. Second, students can have a rich experience of "real language," or language used in authentic contexts as opposed to invented or contrived examples in a grammar book. Third, concordance examples show the functions of words in different contexts and genres, and thereby raise learners' contextual and linguistic awareness. Fourth, students can find patterns and forms (lexical, grammatical, and lexico-grammatical) that would not be obvious or visible through other sources such as dictionaries and grammar reference books or a native-speaker's intuition. Finally, drawing on all aforementioned benefits, corpus use by learners can foster inductive learning through analyzing a large amount of language examples. Inductive learning through corpus analysis in particular is grounded in what Johns (1988, 1991) introduced as *data-driven learning* (DDL) and has later been expanded as *discovery learning* (Bernardini, 2004). In DDL, the teacher as a *coordinator* engages learners as *researchers* in the analysis of corpus data and encourages them to make their own discoveries about how language works that may not be possible without the use of corpora. In other words, learners are encouraged to learn from examples provided by a concordancer rather than categories and definitions provided in dictionaries or grammar books. Within the constructivist perspective, it is argued that this type of learning facilitates long-term acquisition of language and helps learners, in the process, develop cognitive and metacognitive skills such as noticing, hypothesizing, and verifying (Boulton, 2009; Cobb, 1999; O'Sullivan, 2007). Therefore, through DDL, students can take a more active role in their learning and become more autonomous (Bloch, 2007; Boulton, 2010; Keck, 2004). By this inductive nature of corpus investigation, it is often assumed that concordancing is more suitable for advanced-level students and especially those who "prefer unstructured and discovery-oriented learning" (Bloch, 2007, p. 187).

Concordancing is considered particularly useful in the L2 writing class for a number of reasons (Flowerdew, 2010; Hyland, 2006; O'Sullivan & Chambers, 2006; Yoon & Hirvela, 2004). Corpora are primarily written discourses (although more and more spoken corpora are being compiled) and therefore expose users to the features and patterns of written language. With specialized corpora compiled for specific genres or disciplines, learners can discover vocabulary, word combinations and grammatical patterns that characterize those genres and disciplines. Corpora can also be a good reference resource. They can

ition in her chair to render a pompous tone. "An EXAMPLE from the history of our own time is a lady
 anguage by an independent semantic technique (for EXAMPLE denotational) and prove that this is congr
 cedents for this, too, in 19th-century opera (for EXAMPLE, the last act of Rigoletto). But this scen
 l machinery for dealing with finite programs (for EXAMPLE Theorem 1) there are advantages in only ha
 mponents of PAR, alphabets might be altered. (For EXAMPLE, by commuting a communication through PAR
 on vary in some easily- recognised parameter (for EXAMPLE; adult size/shell shape/shell thickness/bo
 the form of minor revolts, mass insurgencies (for EXAMPLE, Bulavin, Pugachev), large-scale banditry
 ventional mini or mainframe operating system (for EXAMPLE, that it needs a RETURN to terminate user
 "scope" of another is stronger than it. The above EXAMPLE also illustrates the point that if, in &fo
 a. Difficulties such as those posed by the above EXAMPLE will be avoided by making sure that any bo
 directors, more than anyone else, have to set an EXAMPLE on pay restraint. "Directors should take t
 physical factors of climate, relief and soil. An EXAMPLE of this approach is provided by the Minist
 , the patron saint of France, whose bravery is an EXAMPLE to all girls. If you were a girl Wolf Cub
 chines with a technological life of their own. An EXAMPLE of this has been evolving at IBM for many
 d develop and market the products accordingly. An EXAMPLE of how this works in practice is the marke

Fig. 1. KWIC concordance output of the word "example".

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