Corpus tools as an affordance to learning in professional legal education

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Abstract

Considerable research has now been undertaken into the development of different approaches to exploiting language corpora for pedagogic purposes in the context of ESP. The question of how language corpora might be utilized by students beyond the immediate language-teaching context is, however, one as yet seldom addressed in the literature. This study attempts to explore the relationship between student use of online corpus tools and academic and professional discourse practices in the context of a professional legal training course at The City University of Hong Kong. Students enrolled in this course were given instruction in how to consult an online concordancer as language support when completing their legal writing assignments. Drawing on narratives of student experience, and other informant data including detailed logs of searches and the outcomes of assessments of English language proficiency, the paper discusses the ways in which students make strategic use of the corpus tools provided to develop competence in writing for legal purposes. The paper concludes by appraising the potential of corpus-based methods as an affordance for studying the practice of Law, in particular as a means of enhancing the acquisition of professional expertise by novice lawyers.
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1. Introduction

The flexibility of corpus resources and tools encourages diversity in corpus-based approaches to teaching languages for specific purposes. As an example, at one level, corpus investigation may inform course designers of the particular lexico-grammatical features of the target discourse and genre structures relevant to the curriculum (Flowerdew, 1993). Similarly, a corpus may act as a source of examples of authentic language in use, which can be exploited in class by teachers (Cobb, 1997; Johns, 1991; Stevens, 1991; Thurstun & Candlin, 1998). At another level, students may be actively involved in the use of computerized corpus tools to explore text in order to complete a particular pedagogical task, such as a discourse analytical study of relevant journal articles (Swales & Lee, 2006), or a project involving the serendipitous discovery of language forms in context (Bernardini, 2000). Further examples involving active corpus use by students include making use of the corpus as a feedback tool for students, frequently mediated by a teacher's comments (Gaskell & Cobb, 2004; Milton, 2006).

Much of the literature on active student use of corpora (e.g., Bernardini, 2000; Chambers, 2005; Chambers & O'Sullivan, 2004; Gaskell & Cobb, 2004; Swales & Lee, 2006) describes activity that has been mandated by the teacher in order to complete a project or homework assignment of some kind (for example a proofreading, or discourse analysis project). In these studies there is a clear concern to establish authenticity of task, in the sense that students interact with the corpus tools and resources to make meaningful discoveries. Such authenticity of task may be promoted in one or more of the following ways. Students may be involved in the construction and analysis of their own corpora (Gavioli, 2005, p. 84; Pearson, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2000), the formulation of their own research directions and communicating their discoveries with their peers (Bernardini, 2000; Chambers, 2005; Swales & Lee, 2006). Alternatively, students may be trained to use corpus tools as a reference resource to discover appropriate language patterns in context, assisted by feedback from their teacher (Chambers & O'Sullivan, 2004; Gaskell & Cobb, 2004; Milton, 2006). The advantage of the latter approach is that it can more easily be integrated directly into the disciplinary activity of the students, for example writing term papers or other such academic tasks. It should however be noted that in practice, students are often withdrawn from their academic environment and focused by a series of guided data-driven learning tasks in the manner described above.

An assumption that appears to underpin much of the work in the area of corpus consultation is that students will go on to use corpus-based resources once they have understood and benefited from the process. As yet we know rather little about how students approach independent corpus consultation, however. Partly, this is due to a reliance on indirect observation methodologies, including self report and the analysis of tasks related to the corpus consultation, for example presentations or proofreadings (e.g., Bernardini, 2000; Chambers & O'Sullivan, 2004; Swales & Lee, 2006; Yoon & Hirvela, 2004). In general, there is a lack of direct evidence of students' self-directed use of corpus tools. A notable exception to this is the study by Gaskell and Cobb (2004), where the researchers maintain a log of IP addresses and the searches made by students. In that study, students were provided with feedback on their errors in homework assignments, in the form of pre-cast concordancing links. It was found that after feedback was halted, 7 out of 20 of the students continued to use the concordancer to search for language patterns in context.