



Can Data Driven Learning address L2 writers' habitual errors with English linking adverbials?



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ABSTRACT

Previous studies in second language (L2) writing emphasize the importance of cohesiveness to fluent academic writing, yet L2 writers tend to over-use and misuse linking adverbials (LAs), including both subordinating conjunctions (because) and transition words (however), which reduces the cohesion and readability of their texts. This study explores how Data Driven Learning (DDL) affects students' ability to use LAs correctly within their persuasive essays. Twelve participants, under instructor guidance, accessed a website with links to the Michigan Corpus of Upper Level Student Papers (MICUSP), a list of keywords, and instructional materials. After finding Key Words in Context (KWICs) in MICUSP, students induced the rule for each keyword. Students' pretest essays produced ample documentation of misuse of LAs, echoing previous research. Pretest and posttest essays provided data for measuring improvement in accuracy of students' use of LAs. Posttest essay results indicate a change in correct use of LAs by the treatment group, from pretest (87.7% correct) to posttest (91.4%). Comparing the treatment and control groups, the mean percentage of correctly used LAs in the posttest essays was 88% for the comparison group and 91% for the treatment group. Discussion includes a comparison to previous research and suggestions for instructors and researchers.

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1. Introduction

Since Johns' (1988; 1991) seminal work with integrating corpus consultation into the classroom began nearly three decades ago, Data Driven Learning (DDL), the approach of having students interact with one or more corpora in order to improve their second language (L2) written production or related skills has gained attention (Boulton & Pérez-Paredes, 2014). Implicit in the effectiveness of this is students' noticing of correct forms and how they differ from the common errors. Recent research on DDL suggests that giving the students access to corpora with guidance from an instructor promotes hypothesis formation and testing (Mishan, 2004; Smart, 2014), improved use of the target forms (Huang, 2014; Yeh, Liou, & Li, 2007), improved discipline-specific academic writing (Celik, 2011; Chang, 2014), and effective use of rhetorical moves (Henry, 2007). Researchers have identified areas of concern in L2 writing which have been addressed both in grammar textbooks and in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classrooms with the use of Data Driven, corpus-based materials (Gilquin, Granger, & Paquot, 2007). Linking adverbials (LAs) are often used incorrectly by learners of English, which detracts from the quality of their writing (Boulton, 2009; Cotos, 2014; Garner, 2013). The instructional intervention, which involves DDL and LAs, aims to address this problem.

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This article is organized as follows: The first section reviews the literature on DDL, its theoretical basis and its application in the L2 writing classroom, including also studies that specifically address LAs. The next section has detailed descriptions of the MICUSP and the instructional website, along with the method and data collection procedures. After that, the results are reported, including both the quantitative and qualitative aspects. The next section includes the interpretation of these results within the framework of existing research. Finally, the implications for instruction and further research are discussed.

2. Review of literature

Although using printed corpus data in the classroom appeared as early as the 1980s, it was Johns (1991) who became associated with DDL and the use of authentic corpus derived materials (or direct corpus access) with students in L2 grammar and writing classrooms. No consensus exists among teachers and researchers who employ DDL regarding how it should be implemented. Johns (1991) explained, “The use of concordancing in language learning: (a) interjects authenticity (of text, purpose, and activity) into the learning process; (b) learners assume comparison of that process; and (c) the predominant metaphor for learning becomes the research metaphor” (Johns, 1988 as cited in Cantos-Gomez, 2002, p. 131). Johns (1991) explains how the role of the teacher must change to support the learner in his/her process of making generalizations about language use based upon copious examples. Unlike traditional education, wherein the teacher provides the rule, gives examples to illustrate it, and guides students in practice, the roles are now reversed. In DDL “the task of the learner is to work backwards and to recover the rules from the examples (Johns, 1991, p. 2). Even though instructors’ view on how to apply DDL in instruction may vary, ranging from deductive and teacher-centered to highly independent and inductive, DDL entails having learners access authentic data from a native speaker corpus to observe how proficient writers employ vocabulary and/or another component of effective writing, either at the sentence or the discourse level.

Previous research has identified several areas of weakness particular to L2 writing, which DDL may be able to address. First, L2 writers tend to phrase common collocations in a non-standard way (Flowerdew, 2009; Gaskell & Cobb, 2004; Gilquin et al., 2007; Koosha & Jafarpour, 2006; Tono, Satake, & Miura, 2014). Semantic misuse of lexical (Tono et al., 2014) and transitional words (Cotos, 2014; Yoon & Hirvela, 2004), detracts from clarity. Finally, L2 writers have been observed to use informal and conversational terms, particularly LAs, in academic texts (Cotos, 2014; Garner, 2013; Liu, 2008). Textbooks have not adequately addressed these errors (Gilquin et al., 2007; Nesselhauf, 2004), and except for errors in collocations, few DDL studies have explored them. Garner’s (2013) study on LAs, which the current study intends to partially replicate, acknowledges these errors but lacks an analysis of how DDL can be used to address errors that have been specifically identified as weaknesses in the previous texts of the participant group. Furthermore, textbook instruction in fine-points of writing may not result in uptake. Some intractable errors in phraseology, among others, persist despite presentation and practice. Nesselhauf (2004), suggests that DDL instruction may help L2 learners overcome such habitual errors.

2.1. Theoretical basis for DDL

Usage Based Linguistics (UBL) posits that learners develop a mental blueprint for the structure of a language through repeated exposures to it. From the flood of input, learners acquire a mental reservoir of meaningful linguistic signs, such as words and constructions, and then crystallize this into specific syntactic patterns (Ellis, 2006). Traditionally, the instructor provides input, practice opportunities, and feedback. S/he may also offer guided induction, eliciting from students the process used in formulating a rule or generalization based upon numerous exemplars (Herron & Tomasello, 1992). First, the instructor models the process of induction and then provides hints as students “work backwards” (Johns, 1991, p. 2) to find the rule. Smart’s (2014) study specifically investigated the effects of a guided induction approach to DDL. Smart defines guided induction “... as an approach that provides a structured, scaffolded framework for inductive learning, places the learner at the center of the learning task, with the learner seeking to discover the nature of the grammar structure through interacting with the language” (p. 187). Importantly, this is not synonymous with how a researcher investigates. Rather the instructor designs the tasks and guides students toward the discovery even though s/he does not explicitly state the rule.

2.2. Classroom application of DDL

2.2.1. The continuum from inductive to deductive DDL

Applications of this approach within the L2 classroom (and the studies that investigate such use) vary in four major ways, which we shall call strands. First is the continuum from *deductive and teacher directed* to *inductive and discovery based*. This difference in the implementation of DDL proceeds from the researcher/instructor’s conceptualization of this approach and his/her role within the classroom and from his/her beliefs. Beliefs about teaching and learning may influence whether the instructor implements DDL that is inductive and discovery based, or teacher directed and deductive. An inductive approach positions the instructor as a guide who first, acquaints students with the materials and provides the target forms and then monitors students’ use. In the latter case, learners use corpus material in the form of printouts or perhaps access the corpus, but the instructional sequence is traditional in that the teacher gives instruction in target forms and the established rules for

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