

Chapter XIV

EFL through the Digital Glass of Corpus Linguistics

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ABSTRACT

Like the advent of the telescope, computers today can provide ways of looking into language patterns that cannot be seen with the naked eye. From this perspective, this chapter argues for the centrality of corpus use in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. It shows how the computer can offer new ways of looking at language and of relying on real data to see how language is used. A historical background is provided so as to enable an approach to corpus linguistics, one which moves away from reliance on intuitions and abstract examples. Having made the claim for the strengths of corpus linguistics as a way to develop students' autonomy in language learning, an online corpus and some concordancers are provided, and examples are offered of how they could work in a classroom. The chapter ends with research and educational prospects in the area.

INTRODUCTION

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice suggests a new way of perceiving the world. She tells the cat: “First, there’s the room you can see through the glass—that’s just the same as our drawing-room, only the things go the other way” (Carroll, 1972, p. 181). This chapter follows the example by go-

ing through the looking-glass of language to see what can be revealed. As Sinclair (1991) stated, “the most exciting aspect of long-text data-processing, however, is not the mirroring of intuitive categories of description. It is the possibility of new approaches, new kinds of evidence, and new kinds of description” (p. 36). Later, he added that “we must gratefully adjust to this new situation

[the growing evidence of language in use] and rebuild a picture of language and meaning which is not only consistent with the evidence but also exploits it to the full” (Sinclair, 2004d, p. 10).

Having said that, for a long time, the input available to language students had been restricted to what could be contained in a single book. As Frankenberg-Garcia (2005) explains:

Not very long ago, learners had to be content with little more than traditional dictionaries, which focused more on what words meant than on how they were used...Language learners wishing to overcome this limitation had to rely to a large extent on what native speakers believed sounded right. (p. 335)

Along the same line of thought, Johns (1991) had already stated that most grammars used to be based on intuitions rather than on authentic data. In sum, in those days, students had to rely on their course books, reference books, or teachers as the only sources of learning and solving their doubts (Aston & Burnard, 1998, p. 20).

That was not an ideal world for at least two reasons. First, no matter how complete a textbook was, it could not possibly keep up with the constant changes of a given language. This means that most course books ran the risk of becoming anachronisms when made available to the market. There are also other issues these publications did not address explicitly, such as the kind of language they used as models (McEnery & Wilson, 1996, pp. 103-104), the choice of these models, the extent to which they represented the different registers students would have to deal with, the making up or editing of texts, and the extent of their authenticity. As a result, many of these textbooks did not reflect the real-world situations students would have to face when interacting with other people in English.

Second, research in the corpus tradition can now offer solid ground to claim that speakers’ intuitions are not reliable enough in language

teaching. Sinclair and Renouf (1988) illustrated this point by showing that the most frequent use of ‘see’ is not the action performed by one’s eyes, as most speakers of English as a first language (henceforth EL1) would have it, but in the expressions ‘you see’ and ‘I see’. Over a decade ago, Sinclair (1991) argued that “the problem about all kinds of introspection is that it does not give evidence about usage...Actual usage plays a very minor role in one’s consciousness of language and one would be recording largely ideas about language rather than facts of it” (p. 39). The same view was later reinforced by Hunston (2002), who stated that “corpora can give information about how a language works that may not be accessible to native speaker intuition” (p. 13).

The problem with intuition and introspection is further explained by Tsui (2004) in that “they describe what people *know about* language, or what they *perceive* language to be, rather than how language *is used*” (p. 39). It is true that speakers can judge whether sentences are well-formed based on grammatical rules. However, this is not enough, especially if we understand form and meaning to be inseparable (Stubbs, 1993, p. 2). When it comes to the possible combination of words, grammatical rules may not explain what occurs. Besides, they do not tell us anything about word or pattern frequency in a given register (Granger, 2002, p. 4). In a word, as Francis (1993) puts it, “the evidence of the ways in which language is really used is available in plenty, and there is no longer any need to invent example sentences in the time-honoured way” (p. 138).

Actually, the age of sole reliance on books and intuition began to fall with the rise of corpus linguistics in the 1980s. According to Meunier (2002), “corpus research has highlighted the patterned nature of language, both lexically (collocations, recurrent word combinations) and grammatically or syntactically” (p. 121). Similarly, Granger (2002) argued that “it is quite clear therefore that the enriched description of the target language provided by native corpora is a plus for foreign

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