

Chapter 53

Corpus Linguistics: An Exploration of the Possibility of Improving ELS Learning and Teaching in the Zimbabwean High School

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is an attempt to investigate the possibility of integrating computer-assisted ESL (English as a Second Language) learning and teaching in the Zimbabwean high school. With the ever-growing number of schools acquiring computers, even in the rural areas, quite a significant number of high schools in Zimbabwe are now ready to implement language programmes like corpus-based studies. The research attempts to show how concordancing technology could be integrated in ESL learning and teaching by including some practical activities using a computer. Findings after the study have indicated that computer-aided language programmes do help in ESL, and incorporating Corpus Linguistics would bring a major boost to students' (and teachers') ESL levels at a much faster rate than conventional methods. If such programmes were to be integrated in the high school, then the computer would become an indispensable teaching and learning tool.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is an attempt to investigate the possibility of integrating computer assisted ESL (English as a Second Language) learning and teaching in Zimbabwe. The chapter focuses on the application of concordancing in the language classroom. It is not exhaustive of the many pos-

sibilities of concordancing in the classroom. The research put together a corpus of two million words and made some test runs using a concordance, in a pilot study that showed that it is possible to integrate corpus linguistics in the study of ESL. The inclusion of corpus studies could go a long way in providing students with the much needed input for the acquisition of language learning.

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BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In the Zimbabwean education context, English Language, along other subjects like Mathematics, is considered to be the basic foundation for either further studies or employment opportunities. According to the Curriculum Unit Standards, for someone to be deemed a successful 'O' Level graduate, English language, together with Mathematics and Science, should be part and parcel of the 'O' level certificate. This means that if one attains passes in all other subjects except English Language, one may have difficulties in career opportunities particularly in tertiary institutions. Employers also insist on English language for basic employment. The 'O' level certificate thus becomes a valid representation of one's proficiency in the English language. It also becomes a route to all opportunities- be it employment or tertiary education. Recent statistics

This background gives any English language student the motivation to pass English at 'O' level. Exams are therefore not taken lightly in a Zimbabwean situation (Allen 1988:157). But despite this, alarming failure rates are the order of the day. Many high school graduates fail to pass English at ordinary level, that is, getting a grade 'C' or better. Scholars and academics, in a bid to account for such failure rates, have given a lot of reasons. One of the reasons, which is the focus of this research, is the failure by the education system to provide enough tuition for the successful acquisition of English language. Despite English being the medium of instruction, high failure rates continue to haunt most high schools. The failure to acquire the English language is not reflected by the 'O' level grades alone, but by the failure by students to communicate using the language either orally or in the written form in the classroom.

This chapter has been prompted by the prospect of more high schools introducing computers to keep abreast with the age of ICTs. Computers here have been used for studying for the basic

computer literacy skills needed in contemporary society. But instead of confining computers to the learning of basic literacy skills, students and teachers alike can benefit by using those same computers to augment the learning and teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL). In other words computers can help in a lot more ways in the classroom as well as outside. In a nutshell Celic (2011:273) says, "Computer assisted language learning aims to enhance the learning environment, meet individual learning requirements, enrich learning experiences, and diminish the conventional role of the teacher by overcoming the restrictions of traditional instruction."

Statement of the Problem

Although in Zimbabwe English is the medium of instruction from the fourth grade (Education Act [Chapter 25:04 Section 62]), a large number of 'O' level candidates are failing to reach the expected standards of communicative competence. This means that classroom instruction as it is, is not enough. Failure to attain English at ordinary level can mainly be attributed to several factors. Apart from the teaching methods which do not offer language in its natural forms, it can be argued that inadequate exposure of students to the necessary linguistic data, lack of practice as well as inadequate time, have contributed to the predicament of the Zimbabwean student. Indigenous languages, mainly Shona and Ndebele, dominate Zimbabwe's socio-linguistic context. Only a small number of the students are from a middle class or elitist urban background. It is therefore our argument that a poor background can also contribute to a student's failure to attain English at 'O' level. A student from a wealthy background tends to get exposure to the language through the television, radio and even social circles. This kind of student tends have better grasp of the language than one who does not have that kind of exposure to the target language i.e. English.

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