



Parallel Corpora in EFL Writing Classrooms: Are They Effective?

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ABSTRACT

This study reveals the impact of using parallel corpora on EFL students' writing, and how students perceive it. Female undergraduates (n=46) in an EFL writing course in Saudi Arabia were divided randomly into experimental and control groups taught by the same instructor, using the same materials. Students in the experimental group were introduced to three parallel corpora and encouraged to use them in their writing. Tests at the beginning of the semester showed no difference in English proficiency or writing ability between groups. Over the semester, students in both groups also wrote 5 writing assignments and took three writing exams. To examine students' perceptions of parallel corpora, students in the experimental group were asked to write a self-evaluation report and answer an evaluation questionnaire. Quantitative and qualitative analysis showed significant improvement in their writing but no significant difference between groups. However, students' perception of parallel corpora was generally positive.

KEYWORDS

Arab EFL Learners, Bilingual Concordancers, Data-Driven Learning, EFL Writing, Parallel Corpora

INTRODUCTION

The use of corpora in second language (L2) teaching and learning started in the 1980s and early '90s with the increasing interest in corpus linguistics in general as a new research area. Several early studies investigated the use of corpora in language teaching and learning, such as Johns (1986) and Stevens (1991), and since then it has been receiving increasing attention (see Bennett, 2010; Bernardini, 2016; Boulton, 2011; Cobb & Boulton, 2015; Tribble, 2015; Jeaco, 2017; Wu et al., 2018; Bridle, 2019; Dolgova & Mueller, 2019). However, few studies have examined the effect of parallel corpora on students' EFL skills in general and on EFL writing in particular. According to McEnery and Xiao (2007, p. 12) "a parallel corpus is composed of source texts and their translations in one

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or more additional languages.” Although parallel corpora have been widely and successfully used in linguistics and translation studies, their implications for L2 teaching and learning have not yet been fully explored (McEnery & Xiao, 2007). The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the use of parallel corpora on EFL students’ writing, and students’ perceptions of the use of parallel corpora tools in their writing. First, the literature review on corpora use in L2 teaching and learning is presented followed by a description of the study design and procedures. The final sections present a discussion of the study’s findings and implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Data-Driven Learning (DDL)

The early integration of corpora in L2 teaching and learning began in the late 1980s at the University of Birmingham. Johns (1986) encouraged his students to explore corpora in an approach he called “data-driven learning” (DDL). In DDL, students are exposed to data and encouraged to explore and investigate linguistic patterns and rules using concordance lines. Johns (1991, p. 2) argued that “the language learner is also, essentially, a research worker whose learning needs to be driven by access to linguistic data.”

Since then, corpora have become a valuable resource in the field of second language pedagogy. Römer (2006) suggests two approaches to using corpora in L2 teaching and learning: direct and indirect approaches. Gabrielatos (2005) referred to these approaches as the “soft” and “hard” uses of corpora, respectively, whereas Boulton (2010) used the terms “hands-off” and “hands-on.”

The direct or hands-on approach involves learners directly consulting corpora in order to explore and investigate the language themselves. This “corpus-aided discovery learning” is beneficial to students’ language abilities (Bernardini, 2002; Römer, 2006; Boulton & Tyne, 2013; Cheng, 2016; Ying, 2018; Quinn, 2018; Liou, 2019), especially in that it enhances learners’ autonomy and provides them with opportunities to take charge of their own learning. The direct DDL approach allows students to test various hypotheses by exploring the concordance lines. Lee et al. (2015) suggest that corpus use can create an inductive learning environment where students are able to improve their learning strategies, correctly predict the meaning of new vocabulary, and examine syntactic patterns in an authentic context. They can consult corpora to learn about collocates, fixed expressions, syntactic and semantic restriction, prosody etc.

Many researchers believe that corpora are a valuable resource for language learners and can be used as an alternative or supplement to conventional dictionaries (Quinn, 2018). However, as noted by several studies, direct approaches to using corpora also involve several challenges (Dellar, 2003; Gabrielatos, 2005; Boulton, 2009; Boulton, 2010; Boulton & Tyne, 2013; Frankenberg-Garcia 2014; Godwin-Jones, 2017). These studies point out that some students may find it difficult to learn how to use corpora tools, working with corpus data, or knowing how to interpret these data. This is especially the case for low-level learners; therefore, many argue that DDL should be used only with high-level advanced students, and that learners should be trained extensively beforehand to ensure effective integration of direct DDL.

Indirect, hands-off approaches, in contrast to direct ones, integrate corpora in syllabus and course design to help educators make decisions about what to teach and when. As suggested by Frankenberg-Garcia (2014, p. 3), after some training in corpus linguistics, instructors can complement their teaching with material derived from corpora, meaning that students will come into contact with corpora indirectly, “by means of corpus-based materials and activities prepared by their teacher.” In the indirect approach, students do not need to learn how to use concordancing tools, which, as mentioned, can be challenging especially for lower-level learners.

Both DDL approaches have their benefits and drawbacks. In an attempt to compare the effectiveness of the two approaches, Yoon and Jo (2014) looked at their impact on L2 learners’

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