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Introduction

A common problem when teaching English is the lack of systematicity when presenting vocabulary or evaluating the students' language use. In some cases, the language presented in the teachers' examples may not be representative of either authentic input or the language utilised by learners in assessment practices. Furthermore, most ready-made teaching materials follow pre-selected topics, which may diverge from the learners' individual language requirements, resulting in a lack of applicability and motivation (Gerigk, 2022).

In this article, we propose a corpus linguistics approach to language teaching and assessment. A corpus is a large, principled collection of texts, which can be used for linguistic analysis (McEnery & Hardie, 2012). Today, corpora are available that represent different domains of language use, such as spoken and written corpora (e.g. the British National Corpus 2014, Love et al., 2017), or different genres, such as newspaper articles from the web and academic lectures or student essays (e.g. British Academic Writing Corpus). These corpora offer insight into language-in-use in its respective context. Whilst most language teaching materials are still based on the intuitions of materials writers, corpora may provide teachers with 'actual evidence of [language] use' (O'Keeffe et al., 2007, p. 21). This may lead to more authentic language teaching and has the potential to increase learner and teacher autonomy (Charles, 2014).

This short article introduces three activities, operationalising corpus-based, data-driven learning, which may offer an opportunity to learners and teachers to discover language patterns (Timmis, 2015). The activities particularly aim at vocabulary acquisition and writing feedback.

Activity 1: Reported informal speech in conversational English

This activity makes use of BNClab (<http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/bnclab/>), an online, freeware corpus interface hosted by Lancaster University, which allows users to explore the British National Corpus to access a total of 200 million words of English.

We have two options when reporting on something someone mentioned: 1) direct speech (He said: *I am going home*), or 2) indirect speech (*He said he was going home*). However, in naturally occurring conversations, this is not always observed.

In the following task, the phrase (*s*)*he was like* is introduced through an exploratory approach as an informal way of reporting speech.

Exercise 1: Access BNClab and enter the phrases *he said* and *he was like* into the search bar and compare the frequencies for both spoken and written English.

Exercise 2: Repeat the above steps but tick the box AGE. What differences can you spot between the two phrases? Is there a preference for one phrase over another by age group?

Exercise 3: Search the phrase *he was like* and extend the context to 50 words. What observations can you make in terms of formality and back-shifting tenses?

Exercise 4: Return to the main menu and run a query for “she was like” and “she said”. For each of the phrases, navigate to CHANGE and find out about their frequency between the 1990s and 2010s. How does that relate to the findings regarding AGE in Exercise 2 above?

Activity 2: Semantic collocates of quasi-synonyms

This activity uses SketchEngine (<https://www.sketchengine.eu/>), which is a subscription-based web interface¹, as it offers access to more than 600 corpora from roughly 90 languages. The spoken British National Corpus 2014 can be accessed via SketchEngine, and has been used for the following task.

In language learning, we are often confronted with synonyms and collocations, as equivalent lexical items or words that often co-occur together, respectively (O’Keeffe et al., 2007, p. 59). However, violating their use may lead to the phrase sounding odd. Then, this activity looks at the two quasi-synonymous verbs ‘*to get*’ and ‘*to become*’ by investigating their contextual occurrences using the ‘Word Sketch’ function to create various visualisations.

Exercise 1: Think about sentences that can be formed with these two verbs (examples below). Reflect on when and why you use GET and BECOME. What factors, if any, influence your decision?

- a) *I want to get rich.*
- b) *I want to become a surgeon.*

Exercise 2: Look at the following graphic. What observations on the use of *get/become* + ADJECTIVES can you make when looking at a corpus of spoken English?

[insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 1. GET/BECOME + ADJECTIVE in spoken English.

Exercise 3: Now look at a graphic, showing collocations of *get/become* + NOUNS in a corpus of Web-English (written). What observations can you make here?

[insert Figure 2 here]

Figure 2. GET/BECOME + NOUN in written English.

Exercise 4: Before, you looked at *get/become* + ADJECTIVE in spoken English and *get/become* + NOUN in written English. Now consult Figures 3 and 4 below and investigate potential changes between written and spoken English.

[insert Figure 3 here]

Figure 3. GET/BECOME + ADJECTIVE in written English.

[insert Figure 4 here]

Figure 4. GET/BECOME + NOUN in spoken English.

¹ This is a low-cost corpus analysis software that includes a trial version as well.

Activity 3: Writing analysis using software

Vocabulary selection in class is sometimes based on unsystematic observations obtained from the teachers' experiences and the students' output. This can include bias and beliefs about what good language is, which can limit the efficacy of instructional practices (Arellano, 2022). Additionally, some teachers focus only on the problems rather than on the learners' progress as well. To tackle this issue, we suggest the following procedure to systematise the analysis from students' writing samples using corpus-based tools regarding teachers' feedback.

Download software to run a lexical analysis

There are various software tools you can use to analyse texts. In this article, we focus on AntConc (<http://laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/>). This is a free quantitative software tool that analyses the most frequent words in a collection of texts and how these words are combined with others.

Prepare the data

All the students' writing samples must be transformed into TXT format - without images - so that they can be read easily by the software. After uploading these texts, go to the 'Keyword list' tag and simply press 'Start'. You will immediately find a list of words ranked by their frequency, as seen below.

[insert Figure 5 here]

Figure 5. Keyword analysis in AntConc

Play with the data

You can explore the data in more detail by clicking any word to see examples of its usage in context, (Figure 6). For instance, below, the word *work* is normally accompanied by prepositions, so you can use these concordances to illustrate their use in AntConc.

[insert Figure 6 here]

Figure 6. Examples of the word *work* in AntConc

From here, we can explore the contexts and collocations of the keyword further. Whilst in 'KWIC', the list is already ordered according to the most frequent collocation to each side of the keyword, the 'Collocate' tab provides us with information on the strongest collocations as well as some statistical information. For more contextualised input, the tab 'File view' directs us to the actual document where the concordance line originates from, allowing the examination of keywords and collocations in their natural habitat.

Interpret the results

With access to these corpus-based tools, we can allow our students to autonomously investigate and explore language patterns. To start the analysis, students can consider the following range of questions:

- Which are the most frequent words?
- How are these words combined?
- Are the words taught in class used?
- Are there any words spelled incorrectly?

These questions are only one point of entry into student-led corpus analysis and we invite every practitioner to expand this list as they see fit for their context.

Conclusion

Corpus linguistics has revolutionised language analysis. In particular, frequency analysis has been used to do research in social sciences and humanities, but it can also be employed as a technique to raise awareness about language use and to systematise feedback practices (O’Keeffe et al., 2007). This article has explored some functions of software packages, but teachers can enrich the analysis with other useful functionalities. Furthermore, the traditional numerical examination can be complemented with qualitative approaches, especially regarding collocations in context. Moreover, the options for visualisation offered by most software packages may make the results more visually appealing for teacher and learners. In this way, students can study words in context, where corpus linguistics and the use of software can be quite handy.

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