

# Discussion of the Use of Concordance Programs in the EFL Classroom

Ying Wu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Southwest Forestry University, Kunming, Yunnan 650000, China

Correspondence: Ying Wu, Southwest Forestry University, Kunming, Yunnan 650000, China.

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## Abstract

Classroom concordance programs involve the analysis of concordances of language features. The use of concordancers can provide learners analytic skills to manipulate comprehensive databases for the sake of coping with real-language problems. Due to its practicability, the approach has been developed for language teaching in the ELT classroom. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the use of concordance programs in the EFL classroom. A great number of studies regarding the use of corpora and the concordancer as a resource in language teaching and learning demonstrate that concordancing as a teaching tool can be effectively used in classroom to meet some specific teaching purposes, and concordance analysis can help students discover and differentiate meanings of words and phrases, identify useful phrases and unfamiliar collocations, explore word order, and distinguish words with similar meanings. Consequently, in the EFL context, a series of concordance exercises can be carried out to assist students to investigate language data and derive patterns of language use. Furthermore, an active pedagogical approach should be oriented to the acquisition of valuable knowledge, to the solution to sophisticated problems and to the development of learning abilities. Based on this, teachers should select the right pedagogical approach to increase students' motivation, promote their initiative, and guide them into the procedure of knowledge exploration.

**Keywords:** classroom concordance programs, the EFL classroom, concordance exercises, pedagogical approach

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## 1. Introduction

In the last twenty years, corpus linguistics has been used in the language classroom using such techniques as concordancing (Johns, 1986). Classroom concordance programs involve the analysis of concordances of language features. According to Stevens (1993), the use of concordancers can provide learners analytic skills to manipulate comprehensive databases for the sake of dealing with real-language problems. Tim Johns (1991) proposes

data-driven learning (DDL), the kind of discovery learning (DL) which is carried out by using concordancing. This approach changes language learners into language researchers, providing them autonomous study, and thus promoting student's motivation in language learning (Adolphs, 2006). Due to its practicability, the approach has been developed for language teaching in the ELT classroom. Today many language teachers and researchers believe that the use of concordance programs in

the classroom can not only bridge the gap between English acquisition in the classroom and authentic English but also promote students to shorten the process of language acquisition.

Though the interest of the application of concordance programs in the EFL classroom is dramatically increasing, a great number of English language teachers still have no idea whether concordancing as a teaching tool can be effectively employed in the EFL classroom, since most of them neither have any ideas about what concordance programs can offer nor they know how they can effectively apply concordance programs to classroom teaching.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the use of concordance programs in the EFL classroom. First of all, a brief description of the EFL context and needs of the learners will be given. A review of the literature on corpus-analysis for ELT will then be presented. After that, resources involved in using concordance programs in the classroom will be explored and two exercises based on concordance searches will be presented. Finally, the pedagogical approach in the classroom will be discussed. Nevertheless, the resources involved in using concordance programs in the classroom, such as the time that teachers spend in designing texts and that students need to analyze texts and the knowledge of software, should be taken into account.

## 2. Teaching Context

In the EFL situation, the purpose of the course is to develop students' communicative competence in English, including the ability of listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Normally, EFL students share the same language and culture. They have very limited exposure to English-speaking culture and have very few opportunities to use the foreign language outside the classroom. For some, learning English may not have any obvious practical benefit. For example, some students will need skills for reading books and articles in English for they are going to continue their postgraduate study after graduation, while others may need to develop their abilities in listening and speaking since they might go to work after their undergraduate study.

The problem which most English language teachers and students face in the EFL teaching context is the lack of authentic English language resources, such as magazines, newspapers, academic books and journals and audio

materials in English. In addition, it is quite difficult to find more the latest materials for them to use or to cite examples for classroom reference. Consequently, the current shortage results in the fact that students are not adequately motivated and teachers' efforts cannot achieve the desired effects.

## 3. Literature Review

At the beginning of the 1990s, some researchers noticed that corpus could be used in the classroom teaching. According to Gavioli (2005), the foremost productive study in the field is the Cobuild project sponsored by John Sinclair. Although its initial purpose is to improve English language teaching and produce more 'real' materials for the language classroom, the impact of the study appears to regard language theory more than language teaching. The Cobuild research group use corpus analysis to improve old and produce new theories and descriptions of the English language, and they are embodied in a dictionary (Sinclair et al, cited in Gavioli, 2005) and a grammar book (Sinclair et al, cited in Gavioli, 2005). Although the materials they produced influence the knowledge available to the language teaching and learning, it is not clear whether they also affect the way teachers and students apply the new information to classroom teaching and learning (Gavioli, 2005).

Over the past twenty years, the importance of the use of concordancing to language pedagogy for ELT has been emphasized in many studies. Flowerdew and Partington deal with the use of concordancing as a teaching tool (ibid). Flowerdew (cited in Gavioli, 2005) indicates that the lists of the most frequent words and their concordances in a specialized corpus can be applied to select and grade items in the ESP syllabus. The corpus he investigates is a collection of biology texts, including transcriptions of lectures and some reading materials in the area (Gavioli, 2005). In his study, he states that using data, such as type/token ratio, concordances of words, lists of frequent words from specialized and general corpus, can provide useful and interesting ideas for syllabus design (ibid). For instance, concordances of lexical items can show how they are used in authentic contexts, and concordances of frequent words in a corpus might illustrate the ways in which these words are used and also indicate their frequent collocations (ibid). This study shows that concordancing can be of great help in

supporting syllabus design for particular teaching needs.

Another study conducted by Partington shows that a number of language teaching problems can be solved in classroom by using concordancing as a teaching tool (ibid). The research provides examples of semantic problems, such as synonymy or word translation equivalence, textual features, lexico-syntactic constructions and creative uses of language such as the application of metaphors and a variety of pre-constructed phrases for rhetorical effect (ibid). Gavioli (2005) suggests that Partington's research is very significant for two reasons: Firstly, it exams a number of features of language use which can be beneficial for language teaching. Secondly, Partington's analyses cover many common language teaching problems, bring very important scientific implications, and indicate some areas where grammatical descriptions can be improved.

As concordance programs have been used in the EFL classroom, a series of tests and surveys have been carried out to explore the considerable differences between the invented language in textbooks and the authentic language in text corpora (Gilmore, 2004). According to Fox (1998), invented dialogues and conversations in textbooks are very unnatural and some common features of authentic interaction, such as ellipsis, false starts and repetition, turn overlaps, as well as vague language disappear from textbooks. Adolphs (2006) also argues that authentic samples of language should be adopted in the EFL context either to promote awareness of language in use or to demonstrate language features. In contrast, Widdowson (1998) disagrees by arguing that once texts are taken out of their original contexts, inputted in electronic databases, and reproduced for language teaching, the texts in the classroom context may not reflect his or her initial communicative goals.

#### **4. Resources in Using Concordance Programs**

A number of studies regarding the use of corpora and the concordancer as a resource in language teaching and learning indicate that concordancing as a teaching tool can be effectively used in classroom to meet some specific teaching purposes, and concordance analysis can help students discover and differentiate meanings of words and phrases,

identify useful phrases and unfamiliar collocations, explore word order, and distinguish words with similar meanings (Tribble & Jones, 1990; Johns & King, 1991).

Nevertheless, the resources involved in using concordance programs in the classroom, such as the time that teachers spend in designing texts and that students need to analyze texts and the knowledge of software, should be taken into account.

First of all, in the procedure of designing texts and exercises based on concordance searches for the EFL classroom teaching, teachers have to spend too much time looking for suitable authentic examples and designing the texts and exercises for the class, especially if one has to search for some complex tasks for advanced learners (Granger, 2002). Similarly, plenty of time can be spent in data input, research procedure and negotiating with other students in the classroom activities (ibid). Moreover, when concordance programs are introduced in the classroom teaching, language learners are required to use concordance software programs, such as WordSmith tool, WMatrix, and AntConc, to run concordance searches and exam concordances for the purpose of finding out features of a set of lexical or grammatical items. However, the application of the software can be highly complicated for the level of the learners (ibid). Therefore, students need to achieve the knowledge of some types of essential software which are the most commonly used in concordance analysis to carry out data analysis with the help of their teachers. For instance, students should know how to use Concord to make a concordance and find out how to use a word or phrase, or to find out which other words belong with a word that they want to use such as grammatical collocation and lexical collocation, and students should be able to use Key-Words which can provide a useful way to characterize a text or a genre.

#### **5. Exercises Based on Concordance Searches**

In the EFL context, a series of concordance exercises can be carried out to assist students to investigate language data and derive patterns of language use. Here are two examples of possible exercises based on concordance searches.

The first exercise shows the use of parallel native and L2 learner concordances for the study of error-prone items. In the exercise, students are required to compare one or two words in native

and non-native speaker data. In the beginning, students are provided with a native corpus and a L2 learner corpus and then asked to type the target words into the query box of each corpus. Then, students are instructed to compare and contrast the concordances of several pages from the two corpuses and have a discussion with other students about what they have discovered. Finally, students are expected to answer the following three questions based on their research. 1). What grammatical structures appear to follow the words? 2). Do any grammatical forms only appear in the non native-speaker examples? 3). What forms do native speaking writers use in the native speaker data set? And what are the most frequent forms in the native speaker data set?

This exercise is based on comparisons of learner and native speaker corpus. As Hunston (2002) illustrates that through comparing the corpus of Non-Native speakers (NNS) with Native speakers (NS), it is easier for learners to discriminate the differences between their own and the target language forms, and learners are able to efficiently improve and accelerate their acquisition in the language. As an effective exercise used in the EFL classroom, it has many advantages. Firstly, students can become researchers and explore the differences between the language use of native speakers and non-native speakers. Secondly, students can encounter authentic errors from the concordances of a L2 learner corpus and also acquire what is correct and valid in language use from a native corpus. Thirdly, this exercise can promote interactivity and interaction between students and students and students and teachers. Fourthly, a large number of L2 students appreciate this type of exercise and find it very useful, and they also point out that the activity can facilitate them to deal with a great number of problematic areas which they encountered before or will meet in future. Despite the advantages, the exercise has some drawbacks as well: the activity can be very time-consuming in classroom because of the complex research process, negotiation and interaction between students and teachers. Besides, the inputs can be very difficult for intermediate or low intermediate learners.

The second exercise shows how a concordance search can be employed in the literature classroom. The exercise is carried out in a computer room where WordSmith tool has been

installed in all the computers. At first, students are required to use the software to save a single literary text as a selected file in WordSmith. Then, two questions are given to the students: 1). What are the verbs and adverbs which collocate with the characters in the text? 2). What are the differences between the portrayals of the characters in the text? After that, students are asked to make the concordances of the names of the characters required in the questions and answer the questions through analyzing the concordance lines.

Characters in literary texts are usually depicted by verbs, adjectives and adverbs (Adolphs, 2006). Concordance analysis provides an efficient way to explore literary text in the ELT context (ibid). A concordance search not only can offer a general 'picture' of how a character is presented in a certain context, or what the actions, feelings or other features are related to a particular character but also can be used to compare and contrast different characters or the portrayal of gender groups (ibid). In this exercise, students can use the software to make concordances of particular terms, such as names of characters or those items related to core themes in a literary text to answer the relevant questions. More importantly, students in this activity are not only learners but playing a role of researcher as they are encouraged to set selected files, make concordances of research terms, and explore the concordance lines independently. In this way, both the interest and research ability of the students can be promoted dramatically in the EFL literature classroom. Nevertheless, this type of analysis is more suitable for a single text rather than a text collection collected without any particular order.

The use of the exercises based on concordance searches in the classroom can provide a visual and effective way to help students discover the patterned nature of the language. Students in the classroom would play an active part, work on authentic data and participate in an exploratory process. In addition, once students master the knowledge of concordance programs, they can use them to study vocabulary and phrases and check specific constructions or grammar in their own writings. However, a number of issues such as time, availability of computer, the cost of corpus and software, English language proficiency levels of learners, etc. should be taken into account in using concordance programs in the classroom.



## 6. Discussion of the Pedagogical Approach

An active pedagogical approach should be oriented to the acquisition of valuable knowledge, to the solution to complex problems and to the development of learning abilities (Bruner, 1966). Based on the theory, teachers should select the right pedagogical approach to increase students' motivation, promote their initiative, and lead them into the procedure of knowledge exploration. In the EFL classroom where concordance programs are adopted, concordances are extracted from electronic corpora and applied as a source of learning materials for language learners, and the learners are given more autonomy to explore meanings and functions of words and phrases in the authentic contexts and achieve an awareness of some specific collocations as well (Gavioli, 2005). This approach is named "Date-Driven Learning" (DDL), and the approach has been employed in the two exercises mentioned above. The DDL approach can turn the language learner into the language researcher through fostering their autonomy in language learning (ibid). According to the level of the students, a variety of approaches can be used to promote the process of data-driven learning (Adolphs, 2006). These approaches range from some easy tasks, where the teachers might choose some specific concordance lines which suggest usage of a particular lexical item or a grammatical point, to some complicated tasks for those advanced students, and in these complex tasks the students are required to analyze raw corpus data for the sake of determining the use and related patterns of a group of lexical or grammatical items (ibid).

Nevertheless, a number of questions should be taken into account when applying the pedagogical approach to the EFL classroom. One of them concerns whether teachers should guide learners in the classroom? According to DDL approach, students can be given direct access to the data, and they should be encouraged to play a role of researcher to analyze concordance data, make hypotheses and test them. However, according to Gavioli (2005), some problems may rise if the class is carried out completely in that way. Firstly, the outputs from the computer in the form of concordance lines are not complete sentences which can be very problematic for students, especially for the non-native learners to dissect without instructions from teachers. Secondly, while authentic data provide much

information about the interaction between the uses of words and their meanings, researchers should at least know the meanings of the words, yet the students in the EFL classroom have difficulty with the meanings of the words. Therefore, EFL students cannot become real researchers to explore concordances completely autonomously. Thus, teachers should design appropriate pedagogical approaches and exercises to help the students identify different types of language problems and develop appropriate analytic methods. Another question is about the effectiveness of such a pedagogical approach. Although concordances can provide learners an opportunity to observe linguistic characteristics and issues which might be out of teachers' previous analyses, concordance lines cannot provide interpreted data, which are very vital for EFL learning, just as traditional textbooks and dictionaries do. In this situation, the students in the EFL classroom may feel very difficult to deal with the data and lose interest in the process of language analyses as well. In the EFL teaching, therefore, teachers should constantly adjust teaching approaches and give learners more guidance to make sure that working on concordances in the classroom can achieve a positive effect.

## 7. Conclusion

Classroom concordancing as a very unique teaching tool has been effectively used in the EFL classroom to meet its teaching purpose. Concordancing in the EFL context can provide authentic contexts where students can analyze language data and achieve an awareness of authentic patterns in the language use. This approach can turn the language learner into the language researcher through developing their independent research ability in language learning. However, a series of issues, such as time, availability of computers, the cost of corpus and software, and English language proficiency levels of learners, should be taken into account in using concordance programs in the EFL classroom.

In addition, the two possible exercises based on concordance searches can offer a possible route for how to efficiently employ concordance programs in the EFL classroom.

Moreover, to make sure the pedagogical approach can achieve the teaching purpose of EFL, some aspects such as the role of teacher and student in the classroom and the

effectiveness of such a pedagogical approach should be critically considered.

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