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Enhancing Learners' Vocabulary Acquisition With Corpus Linguistics

Corpus linguistics, in the form of concordances and collocations, can enhance learners' understanding of real-world word usage. Learners of English need to learn to distinguish between words that have similar meanings but that are used in different contexts, like "see" and "watch" or "say", "tell", and "teach". Advanced learners need to choose the best word from among several possibilities as well as develop a feeling for ways that words are used pragmatically. Why, for example, "happiness set in" is not acceptable even though "despair set in" is acceptable (Conrad, 2005, p. 397). With corpus linguistics, teachers can provide authentic and appropriate language samples that enhance learner understanding and acquisition of the second language.

Teachers of any level can use corpus linguistics themselves to research answers to student questions or to prepare materials to address student difficulties. With appropriate training, advanced students-high school or university level-can use concordancing software directly to control their own learning.

References

Corpus Concordance English. Retrieved May 14, 2009, from

http://www.lextutor.ca/concordancers/concord_e.html

Concordancing web site. User can choose from several corpuses, keyword options,

length of returned context, among other options. Longer context is provided when entries

are clicked. Generates simple concordances or concordances with blanks for classroom

use.

Conrad, S. (2005). Corpus linguistics and L2 teaching. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research*

in second language teaching and learning (pp. 393-409). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence

Erlbaum Associates.

An overview of the research on corpus linguistics in L2 environments. Includes a section

on the analysis of learner language and ways that computer-assisted linguistic

comparisons of learner and native language use can be applied to classroom teaching.

Kennedy, C. & Miceli, T. (2001). An evaluation of intermediate students' approaches to corpus

investigation [Electronic edition]. *Language Learning & Technology, 5,* 77-90.

Examined the use of a web-based corpora by Australian students of intermediate-level

Italian and the difficulties those students faced interpreting the results of their

exploration. Based on student difficulties, the researchers developed several tips to help

the students more accurately find and interpret information from the corpus.

Ma, K. C., (1993). Small-corpora concordancing in ESL teaching and learning [Electronic

edition]. *Hongkong Papers in Linguistics and Language Learning, 16,* 11-30.

A great explanation of concordancing and its use in the classroom. Includes sample

classroom activities and information on various applications of concordancing in

specific contexts.

Ma, K. C., (1994). Learning strategies in ESP classroom concordancing: An initial investigation into data-driven learning [Electronic version]. In J. Flowerdew & A. Tong (Eds.), *Entering texts* (pp. 197-214). Hong Kong: Language Centre, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

A research paper on strategies that students developed for using corpora in writing tasks. Recommends explicit discussion with the students of the corpus and its uses and limitations in order to maximize effectiveness and minimize frustration.

O'Keeffe, A. & Farr, F. (2003). Using language corpora in initial teacher education: Pedagogic issues and practical applications. *TESOL Quarterly, 37,* 389-418.

The authors argue that new teachers should receive more training in corpus linguistics and using corpora in their teaching. Includes easy to understand explanations of language corpora, why they are important for language teachers, and how they can be used in the classroom. There is also an appendix of corpora-related software and web sites.

Sample Classroom Activities

The below activity is intended for use with university level ESP or IEP students. It uses concordances from textbooks to help students acquire academic and scientific language. The word list was not included in this example.

Appendix B Example of concordance-based classroom exercise

Below, you find the result of a "concordance" made on some of these words. In this concordance, a computer looked at all the readings in the first-year biology workbook. Then the computer printed each line containing those words. (The computer doesn't know where words or sentences begin or end; it just prints the line.)

DIRECTIONS: Replace each **BLOCK** of blank spaces below with **ONE WORD** from the word list above.

```
1a      make  up  the taxonomic    ┌──────────┐   , the number of organis
 b      one progresses down the    │          │    the differences within
 c       At the  bottom of the     └──────────┘


2a      s a longitudinal  layer    ┌──────────┐   ing the length of each segme
 b      to form one cord, which    │          │   s along  the length  of  the
 c       single  large  taproot    │          │   deep into the soil with oth
 d      which  the  root  hairs    └──────────┘   .   Inside  the epidermis is


3a      Numerous  granules  are    ┌──────────┐   to  the  matrix  side of the
 b      ividual  cells,  firmly    │          │   to  each  other,  rest  on a
 c      , by which muscles are     └──────────┘   to   bones,   are composed


4a      to capture prey  or  to    ┌──────────┐   the organism  in place.
 b      airs  of chaetae.  They    │          │   each segment in the soil.
 c      ecause  roots  are   the   └──────────┘   ing and absorbing organs of t


5a      tractile vacuole removes   ┌──────────┐   water  from the cytoplasm of
 b       The  epidermis prevents   │          │   ive water  loss  and  yet al
 c      ncreases the  chances of   └──────────┘   ive water-loss but this is pr


6a                         In      ┌──────────┐    parts of the cell the ER i
 b      ng  to  the  cells.  In    │          │   animals,  cilia covering th
 c         Organisms which have    │          │   basic features in common ar
 d      e, the mouse  develops     └──────────┘   symptoms  and  dies.   Howe


7a      ilia sweep food into an    ┌──────────┐   groove on the side of the cel
 b       side of the cell.  The    └──────────┘   groove leads to the cytophar


8a      he science of biological   ┌──────────┐   is  known  as  taxono
 b      is the largest unit  of    │          │   .   It is split into
 c         The  various units of   └──────────┘   - kingdom,  phylum,
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From Ma (1993, p. 28) taken from V. Stevens (1991) Classroom concordancing : Vocabulary materials derived from relevant, authentic text. English for Special Purposes Journal. 10, 35-46.

Here is a similar activity in cloze form. It is for university-level students in IEP courses and is intended for practice choosing the best word given several authentic sentences. The entire activity consists of 13 questions.

Appendix C Example of concordance-based cloze test

Each of the sentences below has the same word missing.
Fill in the blank with the correct word.

A.
1. Fortunately we ......have large amounts of exploitable potential on which to capitalize.
2. There is no question, however, that food production will have to be raised ....higher to help feed the world's growing population.
3. This ....does not solve the problem.
4. Here's hoping you're ....in your old flat by the time this letter reaches you.

B.
1. Such an approach is usually the ....of choice for buying the best car.
2. I had to live with this ....for nearly two years.
3. This is not the ideal ....for a student to check his or her progress.
4. This is a common ....even though many people fail to appreciate that such analysis represents an integral part of the process.

C.
1. It is a list of ....connected with everyday work in an English Secondary School.
2. One of the first ....that I did was to settle back into the leather armchair of my study.
3. As you may imagine, I had rather different ideas on how ....should be done.
4. This would have the advantage of making ....much simpler in terms of presentation.

From Ma (1993, p. 29), taken from J. Butler (1991) Cloze procedures and concordances: The advantages of discourse level authenticity in testing expectancy grammar. *System*, 19, 29-38.