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Review of Using Corpora in the Language Classroom

by Randi Reppen

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In a not so distant past, a teacher of English as a foreign or second language would often start a lesson by getting the students to look at a picture and read a text along the following lines:

This is a man. He is John Brown; he is Mr Brown. He is sitting in a chair. This is a woman. She is Mary Brown; she is Mrs Brown. She is standing by a table. Mr Brown has a book. The book is in his hand; he has a book in his hand. Mrs Brown has a bag ... (Widdowson 2003: 120)

For many years EFL / ESL teachers were provided by writers of classroom materials with invented texts which served only to demonstrate a range of grammatical structures. That is, as Widdowson (2003: 120) says, teachers and their students dealt with language which was very different from that used in real life: real life language has a pragmatic purpose and is not created to be a 'display of encodings'. One may wonder how learners were supposed to become effective communicators if such texts constituted their only linguistic diet.

Since the 1980s a number of applied linguists have argued that what learners needed in the classroom to prepare them for real life language use were authentic rather than contrived materials. With the development of (online) corpora, such naturally occurring texts became much more readily accessible to the general public. *Using Corpora in the Language Classroom* has been written for those teachers who would like to take the first few steps to exploit corpora by either preparing materials for learners or by getting them to search corpora themselves, pretty much regardless of the level or context of instruction. In the series editor's words (p. ix), it offers "a masterly survey of the nature of language corpora" and "provides numerous examples of how corpus-informed teaching materials can be developed and used in teaching at many different levels and with students in many different contexts."

The main parts of the book are five short chapters (71 pages in all), two appendices and a selected bibliography of corpus linguistics and language teaching. There is also a companion Web site with further instructions for using online corpora and further materials for classroom use. Throughout the book, the reader is encouraged to interact with the text through the so-called 'Your turn' boxes.

In Chapter 1, Reppen first explains the basic notions involved in defining a corpus: that is, what exactly linguists mean when they say that a corpus is "a large, principled collection of naturally occurring texts (written or spoken) stored electronically". Then she points out that using corpora and the tools that accompany them can support the instruction process by involving learners in meaningful, hands-on activities based on authentic materials. For example, by examining concordance lines learners can obtain information about the linguistic contexts in which particular words or phrases are used. Alternatively, teachers can draw on corpora to prepare traditional-looking teaching materials.

Chapter 2 introduces examples of available corpus-based materials (for example, dictionaries, textbooks, Web sites) and provides the reader with guidelines for using such resources to develop one's own teaching activities. More specifically, it is shown how data derived from corpus research into university language can enhance teaching lexical items and their combinations to students interested in English for Academic Purposes.

In Chapter 3, the focus shifts to online corpus resources. Reppen provides advice on how to evaluate them, looks at several sites which offer ready-made materials for teachers and students, briefly describes three well-established corpora and their interfaces, and finally shows how each of the three can be used to prepare classroom activities which have to do with spoken language, register awareness and writing. As in the previous chapter, the activities are designed with an academic context in mind.

Chapter 4 caters for the needs of those teachers who would like to construct their own corpora for classroom use, for example a corpus of academic articles, a corpus of students' papers or of class readings, all of which can serve teachers as "a springboard for a wide range of tasks" (p. 59). Reppen carefully takes the reader through each stage of the process: defining the type of language one wants to include, deciding on the size of the corpus, collecting texts and storing them in files. The challenges involved in creating a corpus of spoken language are also discussed.

Chapter 5 is meant to "put it all together" through ten examples of various corpus-informed classroom activities. The examples are divided into two sets: in the first five, learners are supposed to work with corpus tools and produce frequency lists or concordance lines; in the

others, they are mainly engaged with materials the content of which has been determined by corpus research.

Using Corpora in the Language Classroom does indeed provide a very accessible introduction to the nature of corpora: Reppen certainly knows how to present complex issues in a way that novice teachers will find fully comprehensible. As for the applications of corpora in language teaching, this is an excellent book for teachers working with advanced (university) students. Such students, particularly those with an interest in linguistics, are likely to find corpus-based lessons and investigations engaging. If they want then to go deeper into the field, the resources and tools described in the Appendices will enable them to do so.

Most of the activities in Chapters 1 to 4 concern language used by university students. Those in Chapter 5 are assumed to cover a wide range of student levels – from beginner to advanced. However, it seems doubtful whether this is indeed the case. Let us take a look at two specific examples. In the first activity in Chapter 5, described as a “vocabulary activity for prereading”, beginner students are asked to produce a frequency list based on two or three newspaper texts and then scan it for unknown words. This is meant to help the teacher assess the difficulty level of the texts. In the second, aimed at increasing register awareness through vocabulary, low-intermediate as well as advanced students are supposed to compare frequent content words in academic and conversation texts. They are also asked to consider (p. 63) how conversations they have with friends are “similar or different from the language in academic books” they read. Now, I do not know anything about Reppen’s teaching experience, but my own tells me that beginner students do not normally read authentic newspaper texts and low-intermediate students have little to do with academic books and articles.

There are two other problems with some of the activities Reppen recommends, one specific and one general. On the specific side, an assessment of the difficulty level of a text made on the basis of a frequency list may sometimes be inaccurate. Frequency lists do not provide any information about the linguistic context of words, which in some cases is necessary for a learner to be able to say whether he or she knows a word or not. Can you say you know what 'set' means unless you see it in a context? On a more general level, I am not sure how many regular EFL / ESL learners will find studying frequency lists or concordance lines interesting. In the former, all they get are isolated words and numbers, in the latter, sentence fragments deprived of their situational context. Also, analysing such data requires quite a lot of training (cf. Richards and Rodgers 2001: 136), and in Swan's (2007: 295) view, it is "the job of a descriptive grammarian, not an intermediate language student."

It seems to me that for many students reading a story will be much more exciting than reading 50 concordance lines. If the story has not been written as pedagogic material, then it will have to be mediated for lower level students so that they can reconstruct its original context and make it real for themselves (cf. Widdowson 2003: 93-106; O'Keefe, McCarthy and Carter 2007: 25-27). Reppen (p. 53) talks about the need to modify corpus examples to meet students' needs, but she should have devoted some more space to this issue.

The view that authentic rather than contrived texts should be used in language teaching is not accepted universally. In Widdowson's (2003) opinion, a text that best serves the purpose of learning will normally be one that is designed for the classroom. And as he also shows, it is not very difficult to write texts for students which "explain and exemplify" and yet which,

having a pragmatic purpose, also stand a good chance of engaging learners' attention and interest:

This is a man. He is John Brown; he is Mr Brown. He is sitting in a chair. This is a woman. She is not Mrs Brown. She is standing by a table. She has a look in her eye. Mr Brown has an idea in his head. He has a book in his hand ...

(Widdowson 2003: 120)

References

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