Exploring Culture-related Content in the COCA with Task-based Activities in the EFL Classroom

António Lopes[1]

Abstract. The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) at the Brigham Young University website has been used in the English as a Foreign language (EFL) classroom to help learners better understand how language works at different levels of analysis and also to develop their writing skills. However, it also allows learners to explore culture-related content by giving them access to invaluable information about the social, ideological, political and historical contexts. Moreover, it provides the means to examine the ways in which such aspects intersect with language and condition its use. The understanding of this cultural and discursive dimension of language is pivotal in the training of undergraduate students in the areas of humanities and social sciences. To determine how far the COCA can contribute to increase this awareness, a series of task-based activities involving writing was drawn up and carried out in an EFL class of undergraduate students. They were first introduced to this corpus analysis tool and encouraged to explore it further. Later on, in order to complete a writing task, they were prompted to resort to a series of strategies to collect information about relevant events, personalities and social or cultural phenomena, to analyse and interpret data, and to draw conclusions about the modes in which culture and language can interact. This paper provides (a) the rationale and a brief literature review on this topic, (b) a description of the task-based activities, the implementation process, the students' strategies and the evaluation procedures, and (c) a critical reflection on this study that may open the path for further developments in this area.

Keywords: corpus analysis tools, culture-related content, discourse, EFL, higher education.

1. University of the Algarve, Campus da Penha, Faro, Portugal; alopes@ualg.pt

CETAPS – Centre for English, Translation and Anglo-Portuguese Studies, Avenida de Berna, Lisboa, Portugal

1. Introduction

There is a whole range of online corpus analysis tools (Compleat Lexical Tutor, Sketch Engine, Wmatrix, etc.) which provide interfaces to corpus linguistic methodologies. The COCA[2] has been used in the EFL classroom to help learners better understand how language works at different levels of analysis (Bennett, 2010; Boulton, 2011; Callies, 2013; Orenha-Ottaiano, 2012). It has also been used to enhance their text production and develop their writing skills (Kim, 2009; Nurmukhamedov & Olinger, 2013) by helping them to fine-tune grammatical points and by putting them in contact with different genres and styles. However, it also offers the opportunity to explore culture-related content by shedding light on a huge variety of social, ideological, cultural and historical issues, and on the ways in which these issues intersect with language. Culture-related approaches based on corpus analysis can increase our awareness of the discursive practices within institutions, groups and society at large.

The cultural and discursive dimension of language is pivotal in foreign language learning (Andersen, Lund, & Risager, 2006; Byram & Grundy, 2003; Corbett, 2010; Elsness, 2013; Kramsch, 1998; Lange & Paige, 2003). In order to determine how far the COCA can contribute to heighten not only their linguistic and metalinguistic awareness in the writing process, but also their comprehension of the linguistic treatment accorded to cultural referents, a series of task-based activities involving writing was drawn up and carried out in an EFL class of undergraduate students attending a media and communication studies programme.

2. Objectives and pedagogical goals

The objectives of this study were:

- to determine whether the use of the COCA can improve learners' writing skills;

- to test the learners' ability to use its functionalities;

- to ascertain whether the learners could interpret data displayed by the COCA concerning cultural referents and integrate them in the composition of a text.

On the other hand, the pedagogical goals were:

---

2. Corpus of Contemporary American English was created by Mark Davies.

- to encourage learners to use relevant cultural information in their writing;

- to make them acquainted with tools that help them understand how language works;

- to improve their writing skills in the genres they are expected to produce as professionals.

3.   Implementation

Mostly composed by students within the 18-21 age bracket, a group of 18 learners had been required to take a placement test at the beginning of the school year. It showed that the majority was at B2 level of the CEFR[3], a classification further corroborated by a series of written assignments prior to this study. Besides the linguistic limitations typical of this level, those assignments revealed inability to incorporate cultural references, overgeneralisations, poor organisation of ideas, lack of focus and inability to quote or paraphrase adequately.

Firstly, students were introduced to this corpus analysis tool and encouraged to explore it. Emphasis was laid on the explanation of the modes of display and the search string. They were given examples and homework was assigned to make them more familiar with the system and the procedures (drills that compelled them to go through each mode of search). Afterwards, they were taught a series of strategies to help them to extract information about cultural referents including individuals, social movements, political events, social and cultural phenomena, etc. They were also taught the basics of how to analyse the linguistic context of the tokens, and to draw conclusions about the modes in which culture and language can interact. Attention was paid to the way in which perceptions and judgments of the political events find expression, for example, through lexical choices, subjective descriptive modifiers, or the ways in which one single cultural referent may be worded differently in sources and genres.

The taxonomy of strategies and modes recommended was as follows:

- **Strategy A**: Finding out how an influential individual, social group, country or organisation was judged/evaluated in a particular type of publication/ spoken language resorting to collocates. Modes advised: KWIC[4] and LIST.

---

3. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment.

4. Key Word in Context.

- **Strategy B**: Comparing two public figures. Mode of display advised: COMPARE.

- **Strategy C**: Following and collecting as much information as possible about individuals, events or movements. Different modes of display advised.

- **Strategy D**: Frequency data analysis to determine how influential/significant was an individual or cultural phenomenon through the years or in what type of publication. Mode of display advised: CHART.

The above strategies had to be applied in the completion of the following tasks:

- writing a news story (providing objective information);

- writing an editorial (expressing an opinion);

- preparing an interview (eliciting information);

- setting up a quiz (producing closed-ended questions).

Students were asked to make reference to the source of information taken from the COCA through footnotes. The purpose was twofold: on the one hand, it served to quantify how much of the content of the text produced had its origin in the COCA; on the other, it was intended to make students understand the ways in which texts can be embedded inside other texts without committing plagiarism. The completion of the task was mandatory for the students' final evaluation.

Texts were then evaluated according to the IELTS[5] writing assessment criteria (GT version): task response, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, grammatical range, and accuracy.

In the end, students filled in a questionnaire comprising 19 questions to explain how they were able to cope with the tool, and, on the other hand, to express their views on the whole teaching and learning process. The questionnaire addressed the following topics: usefulness of the tool in the writing process, usefulness of the tool in the learning of English grammar, usefulness of the tool in providing relevant information about cultural referents, and usefulness of the activity in their learning.

---

5. International English Language Testing System.

4.   Results and discussion

In the texts produced by the students, no significant progression was detected at the level of grammatical range and accuracy in relation to their previous production. Students failed to use the COCA to avoid frequent errors, either because of a limited perception of their own linguistic difficulties, lack of commitment or habit, or inability to take the best advantage of the tool. These texts typically fall within the IELTS band 6: students resorted to a mix of simple and complex sentence forms, errors in grammar and punctuation not impeding communication. Concerning their lexical resources, students also scored 6, having revealed an adequate range of vocabulary for the task, despite some inaccuracy in less common vocabulary. Regarding coherence and cohesion, students progressed from band 5 to band 6, in that they sought to avoid repetitions and arrange their ideas more coherently. The same happened at the level of task response. Instead of an inappropriate format, unclear development of ideas or lack of detail, the texts showed that, despite some inadequately developed ideas, students were able to address all parts of the task, to focus more clearly on the main ideas, and to present a relevant position throughout the text.

Students' answers to the questionnaire indicate an overall positive response to the learning potential of the tool. Concerning the use of the COCA as an aid in the writing process, two thirds of the respondents ranked it as the third most useful aspect of the interface. When asked if they would continue to use the COCA as a writing tool of reference, 50% stated it was probable, whereas 19% said that it was almost certain. In relation to the learning of English grammar through the COCA, students ranked it as the least important aspect out of six. Paradoxically, in the same question they ranked the learning of the uses of a word/phrase in context as the second most important aspect. With regard to usefulness of the tool in providing relevant information about cultural referents, 43% stated that it was relevant and 31% that it was very relevant. Finally, in an overall appreciation, 93% agreed that the COCA met their needs as learners of EFL.

5.   Conclusions

For the first time, students explored a tool that gave them a clear view of the grammatical workings of real-life language. To use it efficiently, they were compelled to revisit grammatical concepts and adopt a more analytical perspective. Yet, despite preparatory work, students still offered substantial resistance to metalinguistic reflection and to the use of grammatical categories. They also revealed some difficulty in coping with some technical aspects of the tool.

They were shown the way in which language is used at an ideational level to prompt judgments, corroborate or challenge ways of thinking regarding specific cultural referents, since the tool allowed them to easily identify evaluative elements. As far as the tasks were concerned, both the deliverables and the questionnaire showed that the COCA was useful insofar as it provided ideas that were integrated in the compositions, in compliance with the conventions governing quotation and paraphrasing.

References

Andersen, H. L., Lund, K., & Risager, K. (2006). *Culture in language learning*. Aarhus University Press.

Bennett, G. R. (2010). *Using corpora in the language learning classroom: Corpus linguistics for teachers*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.

Boulton, A. (2011). Language awareness and medium-term benefits of corpus consultation. In A. Gimeno Sanz (Ed.), *New Trends in Computer-Assisted Language Learning : Working Together* (pp. 39-46). Madrid: Macmillan ELT.

Byram, M., & Grundy, P. (Eds.). (2003). *Context and Culture in Language Teaching and Learning*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Callies, M. (2013). Advancing the research agenda of interlanguage pragmatics: The role of learner corpora. In J. Romero-Trillo (Ed.), *Yearbook of Corpus Linguistics and Pragmatics 2013: New Domains and Methodologies* (pp. 9-36). New York: Springer.

Corbett, J. (2010). *Intercultural Language Activities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Elsness, J. (2013). Gender, culture and language: Evidence from language corpora about the development of cultural differences between English-speaking countries. In G. Andersen & K. Bech (Eds.), *English Corpus Linguistics: Variation in Time, Space and Genre. Selected papers from ICAME 32* (pp. 113-137). Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.

Kim, Y. J. (2009). *Effectiveness of on-line corpus research in L2 writing: Investigation of proficiency in English writing through independent error correction*. Master thesis. University of North Texas. Retrieved from http://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc12140/m1/1/

Kramsch, C. (1998). *Language and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lange, D. L., & Paige, R. M. (Eds.). (2003). *Culture As the Core: Perspectives on Culture in Second Language Education*. Information Age Publishing.

Nurmukhamedov, U., & Olinger, A. R. (2013). Computer-mediated collocation: Resources for exploring word choice in English academic writing. *Writing & Pedagogy, 5*(1), 121-150.

Orenha-Ottaiano, A. (2012). English collocations extracted from a corpus of university learners and its contribution to a language teaching pedagogy. *Acta Scientiarum Language and Culture, 34*(2), 241-251. Retrieved from http://www.periodicos.uem.br/ojs/index.php/ActaSciLangCult/article/view/17130/pdf