Using Corpora in the Classroom

Cristina Morgado

2nd International Conference on Teaching English as a Foreign Language
CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION IN ELT
FCSH – UNL
November 2009
A Corpus is

- A corpus is a collection of texts, written or spoken, usually stored in a computer database.
- Written texts in corpora might be drawn from books, newspapers, or magazines that have been scanned or downloaded electronically.

Michael McCarthy (2004)
A Corpus is

A corpus, then, is simply a large collection of texts that we can analyze using computer software, just as we can access the millions of texts on the Internet. It is not a theory of language learning or a teaching methodology, but it does influence our way of thinking about language and the kinds of texts and examples we use in language teaching.

Michael McCarthy (2004)
Using Corpora in the Classroom

1. Teaching Context
2. Teacher’s Aims
3. Teacher’s Choice
4. Examples of Teacher’s Choice
Teaching Context

- Young learners (10 and 11 years old)
- At a beginner level – 5th and 6th Grades
- English is a compulsory national curriculum subject
- They have English classes twice a week (two 90 minute sessions)
- This schedule must be enough to teach the whole syllabus
- Reasonably good computer users
- ICT room available, but not always
Teacher’s Aims

In particular
• To consolidate new lexis and grammar
• To help students getting over their difficulties
• To avoid/correct several lexis mistakes
• To avoid fossilized errors

In general
• To expose students to authentic language not sheltered from unknown lexis/grammar structures
• To expand students language knowledge
Teacher’s Aims

• Because their coursebook doesn’t tell the whole truth … Take this example:

**Kids’ Grammar**

**Use**
- We use **must** to express an obligation.
- We use **mustn’t** to express a prohibition.

**Form**
- Affirmative: must + verb in the infinitive (without “to”)
  - e.g. They must write.
- Negative: must + not + verb
  - e.g. They mustn’t make noise.
- Interrogative: must + subject + verb
  - e.g. Must they go to school?

**Examples**
- e.g. They must pay attention.
- e.g. They mustn’t run in the corridor.

Hey you!
- must doesn’t take “s” or “es” in the Present Simple, 3rd person singular.
- must doesn’t need an auxiliary verb to make the negative or interrogative.
Teacher’s Choice

• To use corpora directly to prepare worksheets for the students
• Not to teach them how to use corpora

Why?

Because…
Teacher’s Choice

• It would take a long time to teach them what are corpora about and how to use them:
  ✓ Different corpora
  ✓ Different uses
  ✓ Different ways to search for information
    (principles of queries)

• It would demand lots of teacher supervising:
  ✓ Students are too young: 11 years old
  ✓ They are computer literate but not autonomous enough to learn how to use corpora
Teacher’s Choice

• ICT room wouldn’t be available for the English lesson

• It wouldn’t fit their timetable or the syllabus

• It isn’t what these students really need
Examples of Teacher's Choice

The teacher can select the most suitable passages from the most suitable corpora:

✓ Avoiding/adapting passages difficult to understand:

Billions of pounds held by town halls must be freed to provide housing, said Labour.

in BYU-BNC

✓ Filtering language mistakes
Examples of Teacher's Choice

✓ Avoiding offensive or sensitive language:

Sex and drug trafficking are listed as serious sins. The catechism says homosexuals must abstain from sex, but should be treated with respect and compassion.

in BYU-BNC
Examples of Teacher’s Choice
In language reception

• To highlight the different meanings of confusing words:
  ✓ library/bookshop
  ✓ young/new

• To highlight differences between English and Portuguese:
  ✓ False friends
  ✓ Different word, same translation
  ✓ Different concept, same translation
  ✓ Different rules for plurals

Parallel corpus COMPARA
Examples of Teacher’s Choice
In language production

• To make tailor-made exercises, included in worksheets

✓ To consolidate vocabulary and grammar: choose the sentence where must means the same as have to.

It must have been a great game to watch. He must report to police again on May 5.
Examples of Teacher’s Choice
In language production

✓ To clarify confusing items: library or bookshop?
  You will probably be able to buy it in your local ______.

✓ To correct mistakes: new or young?
  She was rather _______ when she married.
  That is a _______ word to me.

Monolingual corpora
BYU – BNC and BNC simple search
Examples of Teacher’s Choice

Exposure to authentic language

Unknown lexis and grammar structures

Expands language knowledge
Examples of Teacher’s Choice
These are some examples which prove it!

1. He went that way! - said the younger *child* a *heavily-freckled* girl who looked about twelve years old.

2. The *men* are very strong *rowers*.

3. Philip *blinks* up at the young *woman* who has stopped in the *aisle*.

4. Two *women* were *embroidering* the fabrics.

5. Under the Dangerous Dogs Act, all pit bulls *must* be registered, *neutered*, and have an identification number *tattooed* on their *inner rear*.

6. They were *queuing* for gallery seats at the Globe theatre to see Graham Greene's *new* play.

In COMPARA, BYU –BNC and BNC simple search
Conclusion

- Teachers can be creative and innovate, building up their materials with the aid of corpora
- Students will be exposed to authentic language
- When teachers use language utterances from corpora, they are providing learning opportunities, which will allow students to expand their language knowledge in a different and motivating way.
Conclusion

Corpora can provide opportunities for language learning in many areas, and can do so in ways which are motivating, and which complement and integrate other sources.

If the two necessary conditions for language learning are motivation and opportunity for language use, then corpora would appear to be tools which many teachers and learners should consider adding to their range of pedagogic options, particularly as more corpora and more user-friendly software become available in an overall context of increasing computer literacy.

Guy Aston (2001)
References


cris.morgado@netcabo.pt