

The Use of Concordance Programs in English Lexical Teaching in High School

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Abstract

Many Linguists and foreign language instructors are increasingly concerned about the importance of corpus linguistics in language learning and teaching. And corpus approach is being employed more and more widely in language research since the application of advanced computer and the emergence of enormous text corpus and well-designed concordance programs. According to the review of the researches, the corpus approach is more often used in the university level, but seldom in the high schools. However the high school students nowadays have had a good command of computer and multimedia, which prepare them to use corpus approach to accomplish some English learning tasks. This thesis discusses the use of Concordance programs in English lexical teaching in high school and explores the feasibility and suitability of this approach in the real Chinese EFL classroom.

Key words: Concordance programs; Corpus; English lexical teaching

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INTRODUCTION

Both in high schools and in universities, second language learners and their teachers generally believe that the acquisition of large amount of vocabulary is one of the

most challenging as well as necessary tasks. Now Chinese students, who are well trained in the grammar, may face the problem that the limited vocabulary constitutes an obstacle for them to achieve a dependable competence. This situation calls for specifically-targeted and well-informed researches into vocabulary acquisition of second language in the Chinese learning context to benefit our pedagogical practice.

The advent of powerful microcomputers, the creation of machine-readable corpora and the availability of text-handling concordance programs constructs a new language pedagogical environment and therefore calls for new ways of language learning and teaching.

Language teachers and researchers from various countries have conducted research projects and experiments in their classrooms to practically testify the feasibility of corpus-informed teaching. The experimental results are generally encouraging. It has been convinced that the corpus and the concordance programs can strengthen the quality of teaching and learning in many aspects and can be applied into the language class.

Nonetheless, little research has been done on the actual use of concordance programs in language classrooms in China. In order to ensure the possibility and feasibility of the application of concordance programs in the classroom teaching in high school, the thesis did literature review of corpus- and concordance programs-based pedagogy, designed some exercises in an attempt to test the effectiveness of concordance-based method in lexical teaching in Chinese classroom settings.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 The Introduction of Concordance

Sinclair (1991, p.32) claims that "A concordance is a collection of the occurrences of a word-form, each in its own textual environment. In its simplest form, it is

an index. Each word-form is indexed, and a reference is given to the place of each occurrence in a text.”

A concordance is a list of occurrences of a particular word, part of a word or combination of words, in its contexts drawn from a text corpus. The most common way of displaying a concordance on screen or as print-out is by a series of lines with the keyword in context (KWIC-format). (Botley, Julia, Tony, & Andrew, 1996)

According to the Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (Sinclair, 1996, p.63), a concordance is:

An alphabetical list of the words in a text or a corpus of texts which also says where each word can be found and often how it is used. In its simplest form, it is an alphabetical listing of the words in text, given together with the contexts in when they appear.

1.2 The Development of Concordance

Ball and Taylor (1995) claimed that manual concordance can be traced back to the middle age when hundreds of monks tediously made full concordance for the Holy Bible. But the computational concordance dates only around 1980's when computer hardware was made accessible for publics. Computational concordance is now widely used in literary and linguistic analysis. It can be used as

the study of collocations, thematic analysis, the collection of citations (e.g. for lexicography), phonological analysis (using phonetic transcriptions as the data), morphology, lexical semantics, and to some extent, syntax and discourse analysis. The vast amounts of electronic text currently available make it possible to undertake comparative studies by author, gender, dialect, genre, period, and so on (Ball & Taylor, 1995, p.34).

The concordances retrieved from the corpus can be developed into fresh teaching materials or exercises.

1.3 Application of Concordance Programs in Language Teaching

Since the results of corpus linguistics have spread from dictionaries to the grammatical description of English, corpus-based language teaching has been put into use for about two decades. Jennifer (1998) finds that the corpus-based learning can familiarize learners with the use and meaning of the key words, helping them to develop insights into the collocations and grammatical structures with which the key words are associated. In China, although corpus is still dominantly used in theoretical studies, there are still several researchers having attempted to integrate corpus to language teaching, especially in the circle of vocabulary teaching. Yang (2006) has integrated corpus to English teaching for a semester. At the end of that semester, he used questionnaire to evaluate the effectiveness of the new model. After processing the data, it was shown that students were satisfied with the corpus-based lexical teaching. And most of the students accepted the concordance programs. As a result, the corpus-based

lexical learning approach is “favorably rated and proves to be an effective aid.” (Yang, 2006, p.52)

The real value of the concordance lies in the question of visibility. The concordance programs create possibility for users to discover linguistic patterns existing in natural language by grouping texts in such a way that they are clearly visible. Nowadays, the concordance is not only the province of researchers in large institutions but valuable tools of both language teachers and learners.

1.4 Invented Data or Authentic Data

Concordance programs provide users as a tool to figure out all the manners of language phenomena, such as whether the word usually or frequently comes at the beginning of sentence or whether it is followed by certain words in actual contexts and provides them with a rich resource of authentic texts stored in the computer. Authentic data are defined by Little, Devitt and Singleton (1989, p.25) as “created to fulfill some social purposes in the language community in which it was produced”. And it is believed that learners will be better motivated and better prepared for the coming communication with the target language's native speakers. However, many traditional grammar books, textbooks and dictionaries tend to use lots of only invented data, which embedded a long traditional belief that by using those simplified languages, learners will only need to focus on very limited linguistic tasks at a time, thus make the learning easier and more effective. But more and more research supports that authentic language should be properly used in EFL. Just as Little, Devitt and Singleton (1989, p.35) put it: “authentic language is acquisition- promoting content; it can provide a rich source of natural language for the learner to acquire language form”.

Corpus thus provides a very powerful authentic data for the language teachers. In effect, corpus approach can provide such a space in which natural language is the dominant component. Actually, authenticity of language data is a key yardstick of corpus authority and accordingly, importance must be attached to the selection of authentic materials in corpus compilation. The fact that the corpus can offer authentic materials conveniently makes it valuable in foreign language pedagogy.

2. THE USE OF CONCORDANCE PROGRAMS IN ENGLISH LEXICAL TEACHING IN HIGH SCHOOL

2.1 The Background Information

In traditional teaching, students are spoon feed by teachers. Even there are a lot of class activities nowadays specifically designed for student-centered teaching. New language points are still mainly presented by the teacher very directly to the students. Once students are

getting used to the way of learning, they are losing the ability to discover and explore new things by themselves. Compared with the traditional way of teaching, teaching with the help of concordance programs is more student-centered. It gives a chance for the students to discover what they are going to learn by themselves and it helps to arouse their curiosity and then the learning interests. The most important thing is that self-learning ability can also be cultivated during the whole process.

2.2 The Design of Possible Exercises

In vocabulary teaching, providing suitable examples is a useful way to explain a new word's meaning and use. Without corpus, the only way for teachers to find examples is to seek in dictionaries. Examples found by this way are of limited number and if the students have the same dictionaries they are losing a chance to be exposed to more useful examples. Thus when the teacher is preparing a new lesson, the corpus can be fully adopted to get more information about the new words and expressions appearing in the new lesson. And through the tagging, the information has already been kept in order and makes the teaching coherent.

The following is detailed exercises of how to use the concordance programs to teach the vocabulary.

2.2.1 Teaching Tool

WordSmith Tools and MonoConc Pro are two of the most popular concordance programs used in this area. But in this exercise, the author chooses AntConc as the only software tool for the following three reasons. First, AntConc is free of charge and can be downloaded from website at any time easily. Although it is free software, it still includes an easy-to-use, intuitive graphical user interface and offers a powerful concordance, word and keyword frequency generator, tools for clustering and lexical bundle analysis, and a word distribution plot. Second, few concordance programs are designed especially for learners in a classroom context. Concordance programs like WordSmith Tools target mainly at researchers, and thus include a wide range of features rarely needed by most beginners. Compared with other concordance programs, AntConc has a more friendly interface and it is designed specifically for use in the

classroom. Last but not least, it is practical for teachers to stick to only one concordance program since time for a teacher to study various concordance programs is very limited. Using different concordance programs at the same time might lead to distraction and makes the application in the teaching process more time-consuming and less coherent.

2.2.2 Procedure

In the course of teaching the word 'avoid' and its use by using the corpus approach, in the stage of lesson planning, the teacher opens the concordance program AntConc and chooses "Open File(s)" to upload the related files. The concordance program has a wide range of features that make it an extremely effective tool not only for teachers, but also for students. Teachers can use this tool to collect 30 index rows to 'avoid' as the key word from the files 'Text' which includes all texts from text books and 'Exam' which is made up of all test papers. The 30 concordance lines (see Table 1) should be chosen manually to exclude some improper sentences. These 30 items could be printed on paper and distributed to every student or just presented on PPT. The former one is the preference choice since by this way students are getting closer to the material and it helps to focus on the material and enhance their searching for the key points. After giving students' the material, teachers can put forward four progressive questions for students to think about while observing:

- a) What is the meaning of the word "avoid"?
- b) What is the basic grammar structure when the word "avoid" is used?
- c) Are there any other words having the similar usages as the word "avoid"?
- d) What other conclusions can you get from the material?

The purpose of the first question is to cultivate students' comprehensive analysis ability in vocabulary learning. Guessing the new word's meaning is a very useful skill since it is very often for students to run into strange words when they are taking exams. To an English learner, being able to guess the word's meaning from the context correctly is an exemplification of having a good sense of language.

Table 1
Concordance Lines

1. They may describe the work, they	Avoid	Describing their own responses to
2. Safe piloting is learn to	Avoid	The initial error whenever possible
3. The one thing people want to	Avoid	Doing
4. Over had an open front to	Avoid	Overhearing
5. Vincent explained to Theo, he could	Avoid	The expense of models and us
6. Although he seemed to	Avoid	Personal conversation with her now, one
7. Track of his own echoes, and	Avoid	Being misled by the echoes of

To be continued

Continued

8. And Martina Navratilova's wish to	Avoid	Steffi Graf until the final was
9. Problem is that, in attempting to	Avoid	Noticeable mistakes, they ignore the
10. Trying to find new ways to	Avoid	Paying for my release
11. But maximum effort is needed to	Avoid	Paying for my release
12. Filters if they are dirty, but	Avoid	Flushing out too many of the
13. Heals, why is it vital to	Avoid	it?
14. George would do anything to	Avoid	A sence
15. The way behind the grill to	Avoid	Dirt traps
16. Companies do the latter not to	Avoid	Losses but spread the impact
17. To them the best way to	Avoid	A resuscitation of "big Bulgaria"
18. And do this time is to	Avoid	If you can mounthing words
19. Qusted to right and left to	Avoid	Her gaze
20. Been saying that they must, to	Avoid	Being defined by all the "isms"
21. Encouraged to be very careful	Avoid	Slurry leakage
22. To overtake and was unable to	Avoid	The crash
23. Salutations as a "facade" designed to	Avoid	Legal difficulties
24. Abroad—so how can the company	Avoid	Slumping into personal of a dull
25. An applicant might be able to	Avoid	The restrictive features of AJR
26. Take on "Jaihouse Rock" could	Avoid	The final horror---me doing Can't
27. But they could not	Avoid	Difficult situations
28. Of imperfection, and I prefer to	Avoid	Following a strict design
29. Careful to	Avoid	Being declared a fugitive, Coleman had
30. The organizational imperative to	Avoid	Appeal means modifying demands in

The second question is designed to develop students' inductive learning ability. In traditional ways of teaching, it is the teachers' job to tell students what they are going to learn. In corpus-based teaching, teachers' responsibility shifts to facilitate the students when they are learning things by themselves. After observing the above 30 concordance lines, it is not very difficult for the students to infer out that "avoid" is used in the grammar structure "avoid + doing something" and "avoid + noun". In the structure of the latter one, the noun usually carries a negative meaning, for examples from the 30 concordances lines, "error", "mistakes", "conflict", "difficulties", "crash", "leakage", "losses" and so on. The sixth example "although he seemed to avoid personal conversation with her" shows even when the noun 'conversation' has a neutral meaning; it might still leads to some uncomfortable feeling for the person mentioned in the text.

When students are thinking about the third question, they are actively using their intuition, creativity and imagination and they are carefully looking back on what

they have learnt before and make a connection of the new things with the old mastered things in their minds.

The fourth question is an open question. It doesn't have a standard answer and the purpose for this question is to lift the restraint on the students in order to let them discover more things, which in fact maybe out of the teachers' reach. Through careful observing, students might find 'to avoid' is used very often in these 30 concordance lines, thus they might put forward the hypothesis that 'avoid' is often used in adverbial to elaborate more information about the predicate word. They might also find the nouns following "avoid" can be summarized as five major categories:

a) Bad situation in economy or financial state, like "loss" in Line 16 and "expense" in Line 5.

b) Nouns about disaster or accident, like "crash" in Line 22.

c) Nouns about situation which might lead to problems, like "leakage" in Line 21.

d) Things that will cause bad mood or feeling toward the people mentioned in the sentence, like "scene" in Line 14, "gaze" in Line 19 and "horror" in Line 26.

e) General negative words, like ‘error’ in Line 2, “mistake” in Line 9 and “difficulty” in Line 23.

As a matter of fact, while students are learning the word ‘avoid’, they are also learning the collocation along with the new word. So while the teacher is selecting concordance lines for using at class, the more typical the collocation is the better the choice will be. In this case, the five kinds of nouns mentioned above can be another teaching point: the teacher could list the five categories to the students and let them to put the nouns into correct categories. For extensive teaching,

the teacher could also select some mistaken sentences and collocations written by the students to impress the students about the word’s usage. The teacher can list the errors on PPT and let the students to observe and point out the mistakes and even try to fix the errors by themselves. This way of vocabulary teaching emphasizes more on the exploring and discovering process carried out by the students rather than teacher’s explanation. Teacher could also design exercises (see Table 2) according to the concordance lines to make full use of the source.

Table 2
Exercises

Match the following sentences together	
1. You don’t realize how drying soap is. So we do try to	a) Avoid the traffic.
2. That’s quite a lot of traffic going through there, so I think one of the things to be honest is to	b) Avoid repeated attacks.
3. Major’s decision to rely on a press resume written by others, and so	c) Avoid using soap.
4. This will help you to anticipate when and why you are at your most vulnerable and how to help yourself	d) Avoid inconvenience to other visitors.
5. We regret that we cannot allow photography of any kind inside our historic buildings to	e) Avoid any risk of running up an overdraft.
6. It is not possible to withdraw more than the amount in the account so you	f) Avoid personally confronting the welter of hostile headlines
7. Availability of four bedded rooms is, however, limited and we recommend you book early to	g) Avoid any risk of running up
8. It is not possible to withdraw more than the amount in the account so you	h) Avoid disappointment

3. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

When the students themselves participated in the process of discovery, their memories of the findings can last for a longer time than when the result is presented to them directly by the teacher. Furthermore this way of learning is more interesting than the traditional spoon-feeding way. In traditional reception model class, students are controlled by the teacher all the time. Their learning motivation and need are restricted by the teacher’s instruction. Even when the class activities are well-organized and the materials prepared for the class are interesting and attractive, students are still learning things passively and what they should do for the class is following the teacher’s instruction exactly. In this study, corpus provides such kind of environment where students can get contact with more native language and find some clues of how to learn vocabulary by themselves through teacher’s questions and their own questions instead of being told the principles and concepts they are expected to master.

problems that Chinese English learners are bothered with generation by generation. All these promote us to make certain adjustment on L2 teaching and learning, so as to optimize L2 learners’ efforts to achieve high language proficiency.

Although Svartvik (1996) states: “Corpora are becoming mainstreams”, but in the field of language teaching, it is still not a mainstream approach, especially in China. There are a lot of problems waiting to solve before the concordance programs can be made use of in a wider range. Although concordance program has been welcomed by a number of students, it is still a new thing. In researcher’s study the corpus-based teaching is used for only a term, the long effect and influence is still unknown. For the better development, the students are going to take the initiative in learning as the teacher expects. For the worse development, the students are going to be tired of using the concordance programs. Using corpora to cultivate the sense of language needs time to take effect, especially to those third grade students, who are facing the exams and having a lot of exercises to finish.

4. PROSPECT AND PROBLEMS

It is believed that the introduction of corpus and concordance programs into high schools will be helpful in teaching English, particular in lexical teaching. Its introduction into L2 acquisition may exert far-reaching and positive influence and be helpful to solve some crucial

CONCLUSION

Despite all the deficiencies, corpora can provide a large amount of material for foreign language teaching, and the concordance programs can assist students with many aspects. Therefore, the corpus and concordance programs

may accomplish the role of helping the teaching of many courses like Extensive Reading, English Grammar etc.. However, the activity of integrating the corpus-based approach into traditional teaching method relies on the diligence of the teachers as they have to select and sort out materials, and the creative excogitation of the material which can put into practice into the classroom exercises. The material must fulfill the students' requirements and be reasonable for their language proficiency, at the same time the corpus-based approach design must be significant.

This thesis is just a tentative step toward the application of concordance programs in the English lexical teaching in high school and some issues still remain to be further studied. More objective researches need to be carried out in more high schools on the study of the role of the concordance programs play in EFL learners' lexical competence.

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