Guidelines for Papers or Articles

- **Title**
  Concordancing in the ESL Classroom

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- **Abstract**
  The use of corpus-based materials and techniques, such as concordancing, has entered into mainstream ESL classrooms to identify actual language use. According to Johns (1988), the use of concordancing in the classroom is important for various reasons, most importantly those concerned with the roles of teachers and students. This paper presents a theoretical overview for the potential uses for concordancing in an ESL curriculum: 1) syllabus design, 2) materials development and evaluation, and 3) classroom activities. The paper is intended for those ESL teachers who are interested in incorporating useful activities that reflect descriptive, rather than prescriptive, language use.

- **Manuscript**

  **Introduction**

  The emergence of computer technology in the classroom has created opportunities for learning that were never possible three to four decades ago. Even more recently has been the integration of computer technology in second language classrooms. Computers offer easy Internet access to worldwide English learning materials, various English language software, and valuable word processor programs. Furthermore, second language studies have benefited from fairly recent digital corpus research. Computerized corpus linguistics is focused on discovering patterns of authentic language use through analysis of actual usage, as well as what these patterns reveal about language behavior, but through the use of computer driven data (Krieger, 2003).
One particular area of current corpus linguistics research has the potential to make a significant impact on language learning: concordancing. “Concordancing is an alphabetical list of words in a book or a specific register which also says where each word can be found and often how it is used” (Ma, 1993, p. 11). Computer concordancing offers masses and masses of authentic language, presented in an organized fashion, and available at the touch of several keystrokes. Related [concordance] software helps students to organize huge amounts of language data, enabling them to work with patterns of the target language (Stevens, 1995). Concordancing allows both researchers and learners to feasibly access language data research that was once avoided because of the labor and time involved.

Inside the ESL/EFL classroom, concordancing offers a wide range of uses, and appears quite effective in assisting language learning. According to Johns (1988), the use of concordancing in the classroom is important for various reasons, most importantly those concerned with the roles of teachers and students. More specifically, classroom concordancing can provide language learners with authentic evidence for inquiring into their own language learning questions, and can enable teachers to help them get there. This would help enable second language learners to become more involved in solving their real-language problems. However, concordance use should not be looked upon as the ultimate solution to solving second language learning problems, but its various classroom applications make it an integral part of restructuring second language teaching (Ma, 1993).

New discoveries in concordance use have begun to challenge the traditional thoughts about the roles of second language teachers and the second language learners. Furthermore, proponents of concordancing in the second language classroom have faced challenges in figuring out how to apply its use to those areas of second language learning
that are most notable and influential. Research indicates that a large number of researchers (Ma, 1993; Tribble, 1990; Johns, 1997; Lewondowska-Tomaszczuk & Melia, 1997) agree that classroom concordancing and the use of corpora can impact the ESL/EFL classroom in three main areas: 1) syllabus design; 2) materials development and evaluation; and 3) classroom activities.

Based on a review of corpus research, this paper will review the connections between concordancing in the ESL/EFL classroom and those people involved in the second language learning process, primarily teachers and learners. Several classroom topics will be covered, including how the use of concordancing can influence syllabus design, materials development and evaluation, as well as classroom activities. Lastly, some of the problems associated with ESL/EFL classroom concordancing found in corpus research will be examined briefly, and there the author will provide some of his own comments on research topics discussed in this paper.

What can concordancing do?

Traditionally, concordancing in the ESL/EFL classroom has been largely considered an effective method for analyzing various texts. Despite this fact, some researchers contend that its uses go beyond simple text analysis. According to Ma (1993), concordancing in the ESL classroom should be seen more as an approach to teaching and learning. This is because concordanced language data can be used to take on a primary role in language learning. It can provide a balance between the idealized and highly organized nature of traditional coursebooks and the richer and more revealing authentic communication (Johns, 1986). Ultimately, this enables both teachers and students to become more effective, and they can work side-by-side to solve real-language issues, while
avoiding the potentially faulty intuitions of everyone involved. Next, the ways in which concordancing can be applied to ESL/EFL teaching will be discussed.

*Teachers*

The concordancer can be used to introduce teachers to linguistic information that they might have otherwise not known. Flowerdew (1996) implies that the concordancer is effective as a resource tool to help inform teachers’ appreciation of linguistic usage. Linguistic information can become reinforced through the use of a concordancer, and teachers can use it to either corroborate or refute their intuitions and usage judgments, rather than relying on them. Also, instead of teaching a specific grammatical or vocabulary point by trusting teacher intuition and making up examples to illustrate these points, teachers can contrast uses and provide authentic examples of contextualized materials. Therefore, teachers can avoid the traditional ways of instruction, and they can work on retooling the effectiveness of their current teaching methods (Perez-Paredes, 2001).

Essentially, classroom concordancing could have a significant impact on the process of learning and the role of the teacher, well before stepping into the second language classroom.

*Syllabus design.*

Even before classes are taught, teachers and administrators usually come together to establish a classroom syllabus. The syllabus is designed to provide the teacher with a general plan for focusing on the students’ needs, as well as how it should be done. With the help of a concordancer in an ESL/EFL classroom, a more effective syllabus can potentially be generated, benefiting both the teacher and the students. The concordancer does not have to necessarily replace all existing second language syllabi, but it can provide alternatives
for how language is taught within these classrooms, as well as how teachers can meet the needs and goals of their students. Flowerdew (1996) stressed that:

A concordancer should be effective in second language classrooms, because it is optimal for: identifying useful items to teach, revealing syntactic patterns, and locating functional and notional areas; All of which are likely to be included in a syllabus (p.97).

Sinclair and Renouf (1988) are credited with presenting the design of a general English syllabus based on a list of the most common uses of the most common words, using frequency lists from the COBUILD corpus. Such a syllabus seems plausible for this type of application, especially since learning this list might strongly coincide with their needs. Similarly, Louw (1991) mentions the development of the Lexical Syllabus (also established using COBUILD), which includes the systematic teaching of the top 2000 frequent English words. This syllabus seems to stress the grammatical and discourse details that second and foreign language learners are likely to need.

These are just several examples of how a concordancer can be implemented into the design of an ESL/EFL syllabus, without having to completely change the course plan.

**Materials development and evaluation.**

Already, corpus research has already exposed significant discrepancies between actual language usage and the materials that are being taught in coursebooks. For example, Flowerdew (1996) explains that many published materials maintain the connector *then* is found to appear in sentence-initial position, rather then between the subject and verb, as found in his corpus. Based on this and other similar findings, one might assume that the information provided in traditional ESL/EFL materials have been promoting incorrect, or slightly uncommon language usage.
To avoid this issue, a second language teacher can proactively assume a role in material writing and use concordances to produce more appropriate teaching materials. Instead of continuing to teach rather uncommon language patterns, teachers can prepare concordance-based teaching materials that illustrate appropriate usage of a word, or other language forms. With some preparation and proper planning, this idea is very realistic. Teachers can prepare materials that are equivalent to the proficiency level of the target learners, and they can do this by simply converting a concordance file to a word processing format (Flowerdew, 1996).

Likewise, some researchers feel that concordance use can also influence the development of evaluative materials, or vice versa. With concordancing, we can evaluate the kinds of errors that second language learners produce and design materials that test the progress in learning specific, problematic areas of language, or we can take exam scripts and design a relevant corpus, much like the Cambridge Learner Corpus does (O’Dell, 2005). In this case, teachers can look for testing materials that deal with specific points that are being covered within the ESL/EFL classroom.

Another area of materials development in which testing materials can be designed and implemented is through the use of cloze tests. In a cloze test, each question would consist of a number of concordance lines with the same word deleted (Flowerdew, 1996). These tests can quickly be copied directly from several concordance lines that are specifically aimed at testing some grammatical or vocabulary item.

With the help of corpus, students could have more opportunities for discovering features of language use, based on real examples developed by materials writers.

Classroom activities.

A concordance can influence the types of activities executed in the second language
classroom, and can help make existing activities more meaningful. In these cases language analysis is conducted by students and the corpus becomes a tool for making discoveries about language use. Based on concordance printouts, teachers can use concordancing programs to develop various gap-filling exercises, vocabulary and collocations exercises, etc. Flowerdew (1996) makes note that:

[Holyfield] developed a comprehensive list of possible activities for ESL/EFL classrooms based on concordance material: 1) Filling blanks in concordance material; 2) Completing, or guessing the wider context of concordance material; 3) Using concordance materials as a reference tool for various exercises focusing on grammar, usage, vocabulary, etc.; 4) Discourse-oriented exercises involving the use of concordance material (e.g., the use of discourse markers; 5) Comparing the meanings or uses of given expressions in different types or samples of writing; 6) Exploring emotional tone or style (e.g., comparing the tone of certain concordanced items between different genres); 7) Freely using a concordancing program to assist writing, correction, or comprehension (p.94).

The activities mentioned in this list represent a wide array of practical applications for concordances within the ESL/EFL classroom, and for nearly all proficiency levels. Concordance use has the potential to spark interest in various grammar studies and it is becoming increasingly more popular as a language reference tool, for all types of activities and exercises (Bernardini, 1998).

It becomes clear that the applications of concordancing for second language teachers are infinite. Next, the benefits for second language learners will be discussed.
Learners

Just as language teachers can benefit from concordance use, so too can second language learners. These learners can benefit from teaching materials promoting inductivity, authenticity, and self-responsibility (Johns, 1997). Furthermore, concordance use offers good measures for students to analyze their own errors, and to check their own language use with that of native English speakers. Students can learn language somewhat autonomously, or they can use a concordancer as a resource tool, to help them when the need arises (Ma, 1993). As a result, students might feel like they are more responsible for their own language learning, and it might motivate further English studies. For Johns (1988), this can be achieved by promoting two types of learner involvement, which will be discussed now.

The first, serendipity learning, allows learners to use the concordancer when and how they wish for whatever purposes they choose. James and Garrett (1991) promote serendipity learning because of the numerous benefits it offers, such as the fact that learners are truly autonomous and responsible for their own learning, and they can develop an overall language awareness. Hopefully, this acquired awareness will lead second language learners to make discoveries on their own, and make some language features more salient.

The second type, inductive learning, is concerned with language learners who analyze their language use and then diagnose how it differs from that of the concordancer. According to Johns (1988), this is preferred over deductive reasoning, because the data drives the learner to recognize language patterns, independent of being lead by the teacher. They might be able to distinguish the uses of common words, phrases, and collocations, or they might begin understanding language features that come directly from the texts. In
these situations, learners become true researchers and they are able to draw their own conclusions about language and its use.

Caveats

Although the use of second language classroom concordances appears without flaws, there are several challenges to the use of a corpus in language teaching. First, and most notably, is the selection of corpus and whether a large or small corpus will better serve classroom purposes. In some cases, a smaller corpus will be easier for students to work with the data, but too small of a corpus might not provide representative data (Flowerdew, 1996). Plus, both the students and the teachers could otherwise be overwhelmed by the extensive content of some corpora. I believe that it is the second language teacher’s responsibility to become familiar with the various corpora available, and they should then assess a corpora size that will best represent what they are trying to teach, as well as what their students’ needs are. This can be done through careful examination of the syllabus, student background information, and by considering the classroom setting.

The second concern is whether or not the corpus being used is representative of the particular teaching context in question. With all of the various registers available, teachers and students need to be extremely aware of their target register. It would unwise for a teacher/student to use an academic writing corpus to teach vocabulary and speech patterns in a conversation class. Again, if they are not aware of this fact, they will be analyzing data that does not entirely represent their needs.

The third concern is the fact that teachers who wish to implement the use of concordances into their classrooms need to be personally responsible for their use. In my opinion, they must assume responsibility for their own teacher training, as well as the
training of their students. Furthermore, teachers must familiarize themselves with concordance software and make sure they are using concordance information that is reflective of their students’ proficiency levels. This can be done by evaluative methods, or by gathering student feedback about the use of the concordancer.

There are certainly other problems when considering the use of concordancing in the ESL/EFL classroom, but these three appear to raise the greatest amount of concern. At any rate, if teachers and administrators fail to properly address these issues, they run the risk of compromising their classroom, and frustrating everyone involved in the learning process.

Conclusion

This paper has considered the various aspects of concordancing in ESL/EFL classrooms, based on the literature related to this topic. It has looked at how concordancing can influence the roles of teachers and students in second language learning, as well as potential applications for both. Also, this paper listed several caveats found in the related research, and briefly addressed why they are problematic. The use of concordancing has numerous possibilities and the continuing advances in modern technology will likely bring corpus linguistics well beyond its current state. However, ensured use of concordancing in second language classrooms depends heavily upon clearing up the problems mentioned earlier, and also upon teachers and administrators.

What is quickly becoming clear is that computers are making valuable contributions to language learning, and the most powerful of these is a concordancer (Higgins, 1991). It is my feeling that corpus linguistics will someday soon (if it hasn’t already begun to do so) change the face of second language teaching, and possibly many other facets of pedagogy. In order for this to happen, more longitudinal research needs to
be conducted, so that experts can properly identify just how corpora use and conventional language teaching can be integrated and optimized for everyone.

- **Bibliography**


Available: http://www.hltmag.co.uk/jan05/idea01.htm


*Previous Publication*

This paper has not previously been published.