Theoretical and Practical Orientations in Language and Literature Studies

Editors
Tan Bee Hoon
Washima Che Dan
Mardziah Hayati Abdullah
Noritah Omar
Faiz Sathi Abdullah
Rolsi Talif
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Rosl Talif

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1.7 Corpora Analysis: Benefits towards ESL Learners’ Vocabulary Competence

Roshi Talif, Wong Bee Eng, Ain Na’azimah Abdullah and Sabariah Nasir Rashid
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Jariah Mohd. Jan
Universiti Malaya

Abstract

This paper reports a study that compiled and examined the commonly occurring vocabulary in lower secondary Malaysian ESL in order to come up with a list for each measured level. The methodology adopted in this study is corpus-based, employing quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis. Two sets of corpora comprising 87,576 and 40,086 tokens (the number of words in the text) were collected. For the purpose of analysis, a subset of the frequent words from each corpus was selected for investigation. Appropriate comparisons were made between these two text corpora. The major patterns that emerged from the frequency and collocation were discussed. In particular, attention is given to the frequency distribution of lexical items for each level and determining categories of word occurrences. The data indicate that the two most frequently occurring syntactic lexical categories are nouns and verbs. With regard to grammatical classes, pronouns, auxiliaries, determiners and prepositions are the most common categories. The results are also able to inform instructors of the collocations formed by these words. These lists are used to aid instructors in the ESL classroom.

Keywords: corpora, vocabulary learning, ESL, language acquisition, collocation
Introduction

Many researchers (see, for example, Zimmerman, 2000; Lewis, 2001; Laufer, 2002) claim that the lexicon is central to language acquisition and learning. Further, Lewis (1993) argues that vocabulary should be at the centre of language teaching because language comprises grammaticalised lexis, not just lexicalised grammar. Research has also suggested that our mental lexicon is highly organised and efficient, and that semantically related items are stored together.

In fact, it is generally believed that there is a direct association between knowledge of word meanings and understanding of what is to be read and learned (see, for example, Misulis, 1999; Wong and Mardziah, 2003). In other words, vocabulary teaching is necessary in order to improve students' comprehension of a text. Many experts of literacy are of the opinion that vocabulary knowledge and the ability to comprehend text are linked. A student's vocabulary repertoire is a key predictor of his or her ability to understand a wide range of texts (Anderson and Freebody, 1981; Thorndike, 1973). This is true for both native speakers (L1) of English and second language (L2) learners (Coady, 1993; Stoller and Grabe, 1993).

Many researchers have advocated different strategies for word meaning acquisition by young students. For words to be truly learned, that is, to be used and committed to long-term memory, they must be reinforced in meaningful ways. As such, teachers should assist their students to comprehend the content that they teach. In fact, Milligan and Ruff (1990) argue that a learner's general vocabulary knowledge seems to be the best single predictor of reading comprehension. They advocate a linguistic approach in teaching the meaning of a word. Their approach involves instruction in morphemic analysis, that is, the study of prefixes, suffixes and roots. Ediger (1999) believes that developing students' vocabulary should be a major goal in each academic discipline. Further, he considers that developing a rich listening, speaking, reading, and writing vocabulary is
important in all curriculum areas. Vocabulary development emphasises that
learners seek purpose in learning.

Much research on vocabulary acquisition has been with first language (L1)
learners in the classroom. It has been claimed that the learning of vocabulary
has been undervalued in second language (L2) acquisition (Zimmerman,
2000). In view of the central role that the mental lexicon plays in the
acquisition of language, both L1 and L2, there is therefore a need for second
language teachers and instructors to view vocabulary development as an
important aspect of language acquisition seriously and to investigate such
phenomenon in order to come up with methods and strategies that would aid
the process.

Hill (1999) explains that most learners with ‘good vocabulary’ have problems
with fluency because their ‘collocational competence’ is very limited, and that
intermediate level learners should especially aim to increase their
collocational competence with the vocabulary they have already acquired.
For advanced learners, Hill also suggests building on what they already
know, using better strategies and increasing the number of items they meet
outside the classroom. The idea of what it is to ‘know’ a word is also enriched
with the collocational component. According to Lewis (1993), being able to
use a word involves acquiring its collocational range and restrictions on that
range. An effective way to do this is to integrate language corpora analysis
into vocabulary classrooms and provide instructors and learners with a faster
searching tool and better quality of contexts that traditional dictionaries are
not likely to offer.

One way in which ESL instructors can aid learners in learning vocabulary is
through analysing the corpora of prescribed texts. In fact, Qiao (1995) states
that language corpora can be used by anyone who is engaged in language
learning, teaching, or research. Qiao adds that language learners may find
corpora useful in assisting academic writing and enhancing lexical
knowledge. Further, instructors can utilise the corpora as classroom materia
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This book addresses three thematic enquiries—Language Learning and Use, Literature and Culture, and Discourse Studies. The papers in the first section focus on various issues such as ICT in language learning and communication, materials and assessment, writing and vocabulary, learning strategies, and critical thinking. The section on literature and culture discusses issues found in literary works as well as the politics of language and literature. The final section on discourse studies covers topics that include effects of media discourse on society, discourse and cultural identity, and developments in media communication. This collection will interest academicians, researchers, practitioners and students exploring the complementary relationship between theory and practice, and the transdisciplinary role of language, literature and culture in social life.