Concordancing in ESP classrooms

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ABSTRACT

The use of concordancing as a teaching tool has been widely used in the last decade. It proved to have a considerable potential in EFL classrooms. However, little research has been carried out in relation to ESP. The present paper is an attempt at implementing this technique in ESP classrooms at the Faculty of Sciences in Tunis. Concordances of key grammar points (tense system, adjectives, compound nouns, etc.) taken from the Brown corpus served as material for the teacher to teach structures or vocabulary she wants to focus on. Learners were not limited to just one example or two in order to study a particular structure, they were given a whole list of examples in context. Pre and post questionnaires were presented to students to see their reaction to this new teaching method. Students, also, sat for a pre and post-test to see if they achieved any improvement. At the end of the semester a noticeable improvement was recorded.

Indexing terms/Keywords

Concordancers; ESP classrooms; teaching grammar and vocabulary.

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INTRODUCTION

Data-driven learning is very much a "research-then-theory" method of studying. Language learners start with a question, and then come to their conclusions after analyzing the corpora with a concordancer program. "What the concordancer does," according to Tribble (1990:11), "is make the invisible visible." Concordancers isolate frequent patterns in the target language. Using a format called keyword-in-context (KWIC), language learners can easily focus on the main item of study, which will be situated in the center of the page. Often during the process of study, learners will become aware of other language items that collocate with the item they are researching.

The Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (1987) defines a concordance as "an alphabetical list of the words in a book or a set of books which also says where each word can be found and often how it is used". Key Words in Context or KWIC concordance are useful tools for teachers to give learners examples of authentic material to teach new vocabulary, collocations, a point of grammar, etc.

Concordances can be useful both in inductive methods or deductive methods of teaching. In inductive methods the teacher can present the concordances as examples for previously taught language structures. In deductive methods, the teacher can use concordances as data to be analysed by the student in order to come up with rules or find collocations. Sometimes the key word can be present while it is possible also for the teacher to omit it to urge the student to work out the missing word using his/her own knowledge in grammar and vocabulary. Concordances with missing nodes can be a useful teaching material as well as a test material to see if students have fully understood a certain structure or word.

The importance of concordances is that they provide students with a large amount of authentic examples which is not the case with traditional method where the learner is given just a few invented examples that do not reflect the reality of language that keeps on changing.

Although concordancers proved to be a useful teaching method abroad, this method is still underused in Tunisia. There is no research done in Tunisia using this technique in teaching. If we want to cope with new technology and rapid change in the globalization era, we have to improve our teaching methods and keep up with the latest trends.

This article is inspired by the Data Driven approach to language learning (DDL) introduced by Johns in 1993. According to Johns the use of concordances to teach grammar and vocabulary is an effective method of teaching language. Thanks to this method, the teacher is no longer the initiator in the learning process, students can discover rules, principles and patterns of usage in a given language. Hence, concordances help teachers and students find examples of authentic usage of language to study features of vocabulary, typical collocations, a point of grammar, etc. (Lamy, Klarskov Mortensen and Davis, 2013). In addition, McEnery et al, (1997, p. 15) stress the importance of using corpora in teaching grammar and vocabulary. They conclude that "corpus data present a means by which grammar teaching may be more effective – and more importantly may be rated more positively by learners".

That is why we decided in this article to use concordances to teach some grammar points and new vocabulary to ESP students. Before presenting our experiment, here are a few examples of previous studies which were carried out to test the value of teaching grammar and vocabulary through the use of the DDL approach.

Previous studies teaching grammar and vocabulary

Whistle (1999) based his lessons of grammar on the use of concordances. He taught French to post A-level students. He found out that only students who had a good level at French could find out rules of grammar. In addition, students contended that they would benefit better from concordances if they were pre-prepared hand outs because they thought they waste too much time to make the concordances by themselves.

 Hadley (1997) taught grammar based on the DDL technique to first year Japanese students from the Economics department. He found out that most students found the approach interesting especially the fact that they handle authentic examples, many find it even enjoyable although they were confused at the beginning because they were not familiar with this approach to learning grammar.

Cobb (1997) claims that when students are presented with new words from several contexts, computer concordances would help students simulate and rationalise off-line vocabulary acquisition. In order to test this idea, Cobb did the experience of teaching new words to first year Arabic-speaking university students who take a year of intensive English in preparation for the Preliminary English Test PET. He found out that there is a small but consistent gain of words introduced through concordances.

Cobb (1997) maintains that there is a unanimity in the literature of vocabulary acquisition on the importance of learning words through different contexts, either in a first language (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986) or a second (Krashen, 1989; Nation, 1990). Cobb (1997) reports Mezynski (1983) who believes that the traditional way of teaching vocabulary through providing a short definition of a word or an invented example would yield an inert lexical knowledge that would make it difficult for the learner to understand that word in a new context, while teaching new vocabulary through several contexts would produce rich, transferable knowledge.

Following these experiments, the present paper is an attempt at testing the value of teaching grammar and vocabulary to ESP students in Tunisia.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

The participants who took part in the research were 33 Tunisian 4th year university ESP students (24 girls and 9 boys) studying analytical chemistry. Their age varies between 21 and 25. They are supposed to become engineers (Ingénieurs en Chimie Analytique et Instrumentation) (ICAI).

Students filled in a pre and post questionnaire, and took a pre-test and post-test to see the change. All of the respondents were speakers of Arabic, French and English. They studied English as a foreign language (FL) for seven years at the secondary school level (three hours per week) and two hours at the tertiary level at the preparatory school (l'école préparatoire) and one year at the faculty of sciences (one hour and a half per week devoted to the course and one hour devoted to listening at the English laboratory). However, these subjects' levels in English vary; some have an advanced level, some of them have an intermediate level and others have a low level.

These students studied ESP English for one year with an average of two hours per week (for three terms) in the third year and one hour and a half in the fourth year. The focus on ESP English is intended to help them with their future career as experts in analytical chemistry since they are being trained to work in both the public and private sectors as highly qualified engineers.

During this training at the university, these students have to use English to perform the following tasks: read specialized literature, translate specialized literature from English into French, attend some lectures in English, do oral presentations, read and write scientific instructions and laboratory reports, formal letters and CVs in English. The tasks that these students will have to perform after graduation will involve the following uses of English: Read journals and magazines in English, read about the state of the art technology, communicate with foreign experts in the field, travel abroad to follow in-service training courses, attend English medium seminars In Tunisia and abroad, read and answer messages in English (letters, faxes, e-mails, etc.), read and write job advertisements, letters of application, and CVs in English.

Procedure

Students had to answer a pre-questionnaire and a post-questionnaire to collect information about how they qualify their English, how they find the new approach and if this new technique had any effect on their achievement in general (you can see the questionnaires in appendix A)

Students had also to sit for a pre-test to evaluate their level before the training and a post-test to see any improvement in their level (you can see the tests in appendix B).

During the training students had to learn grammar points and new vocabulary through pre-prepared hand outs. In the literature, linguists claim that concordances can be either in the form of hand outs pre-prepared by teachers or online concordances produced by students themselves while interactively working with the software. In this article we opted for paper-based concordances because there were not any laboratories available to carry such a research. In addition, it was judged that for beginners the use of paper-based concordances would be more effective as students will not be lost in the flood of data they would have. Students have to be familiarised with the idea of inductive learning, then they can cope with the burden of manipulating a software. Besides, in the early stages of classroom work with concordances, it is necessary to use paper handouts so that students get used to them and would cope with the more sophisticated interactive use of concordances (Lamy, Klarskov Mortensen and Davis, 2013).

The texts studied and the grammar points emphasised

In the first text Democritus and Atoms, the following words were studied using a concordance from the Brown corpus; proclaimed, work, cut, compressed, confirmed, fortunate, convince, consist (of), sane, invisible, rust, suspicious, suspected, ratios, made (up), peculiar, eventually, and cure.

In the second text What Chemistry has to do with Genetic Modifications, light was shed on the following words; tolerance, compounds, crucial, approved, harvest, yield, potentially, release, widespread, sharply, coverage, and exempt.

In the third text Plastics, stress was put on the following words; shaped, catalyst, dissolved, rigid, soften, vacuum, switches, plug, flexible, inclined, foam, tensile, and bristles.

In the fourth text A Useful System for Microscale and Semi-microscale Fractional Distillation of Air-Sensitive Substances with High Boiling Points, the following words were emphasised; impurities, apparatus, grease, manifold, inert, rubber, mantle, strip, molding, and flushed.

In the fifth text the History of Chemistry, the following words were studied; refined, postulated, primeval, seeds, and infinite.

As for the grammar points revised using concordances are; the comparative and superlative, all the tenses (present, past, present perfect, future, etc.), the use of articles (definite and indefinite), and the use of relative pronouns, and word forms (nouns, adjectives, adverbs, etc.).

FINDINGS

Analysis of the questionnaire

87% of the students consider themselves as intermediate, however, many have an elementary level. Most of the students 81% consider that they have an average writing. Most of them 51.51% consider that they have an average reading. Most of the students 45% consider that they have an average speaking. Most of them 51% consider that they have an average listening and understanding.

All of the students see a difference in the presentation of the lessons and most of them 90% consider it as a change for the better. However, 48% of the students find the new exercises difficult to understand, 45% find the experience interesting, 33% find the exercises difficult to manage, 30% find them helpful, 27% find them misleading, 24% find them efficient and 24% find them attractive, 15% find them boring, and 6% find them inefficient.

90% of the students assure that they feel an improvement in their ability to understand grammar and vocabulary. 30% say that this improvement is due to the new method while 66% say no. Only 33% prefer this method of teaching while 66% prefer the old traditional way.

Many students (14 students) say that this new method is difficult 69% of the students got the average in the pre-test and 87% of the students got the average in the post-test. Although only 33% of the students acknowledge that the improvement is due to this method, further research should be carried out and further studies should be replicated to confirm these findings because improvement may be due in part also simply to the maturation of the students.

We notice that good students tend to prefer this new method to the older one and want to carry on using this technique.

In addition, we notice that females tend to prefer this method to males and find the experience as interesting and attractive. This is perhaps because women are by nature more open and try to fit to any situation.

and the examples themselves are difficult to understand.

Analysis of the test

Implication

Preparing teaching materials and textbooks may be informed by the authentic data driven from concordances and corpora, or the results of this research to improve ESP teaching in higher education. The value of this technique is that it encourages students to develop a critical thinking and autonomy.

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