

‘Online WordBanking’ and AntConc Pay Dividends to English for Academic Purposes Students`

Branka Visnjic

School of Languages and Social Sciences, Aston University (United Kingdom)

visnjicb@aston.ac.uk

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the benefits of the use of WordBanks Online (Collins Cobuild) and AntConc programme in teaching and learning English for Academic Purposes. It challenges the sole use of ready-made teaching materials for ESP modules and encourages the exploration of students own mini corpora, the idea grounded on learning outcomes based, student-directed learning. The data for this research were collected during three action research projects on pre-sessional summer programmes 2011-2013 at Aston University, Birmingham UK. The projects involved work with students preparing for their Master's studies in Business, TESOL and Translation as well as Life and Health Sciences programmes. The research showed that pre-sessional students were willing to use the AntConc tool and WordBanks Online in preparation for their in-class sessions, especially in preparation for student-led seminars, and project reports; however, they were not keen on attending after-class workshops. Students gradually learnt how to analyse discourse features of their selected, subject specific materials in order to enhance the knowledge of their target academic discipline discourse. It was surprising how students of non-linguistic fields of study readily and independently designed their own corpora, and used the free AntConc tool for language analysis. Students also compared their findings to the WordBanks Online concordances and collocations.

As a result, students were empowered to present their language-related results in focused presentations and group discussions; more importantly, they improved their writing in terms of the use of subject-specific lexis and grammar, as well as paraphrasing skills. Moreover, students deepened their subject-related knowledge whilst analysing their materials for different purposes. The improved results of the students' written academic work have been sustained over time on their master's programmes. Furthermore, students' motivation increasingly developed as they applied their newly-acquired transferrable skills outside the lessons, for their homework, independent work on project reports and in preparation for student-led seminars. Finally, students reflected on their own learning styles and showed their appreciation of studying English for Specific Purposes.

To conclude, due to the obvious benefits, if possible, students should be taught how to analyse their own materials using the AntConc tool and WordBanks Online in their ESP classes and further encouraged to apply these transferrable skills in their independent academic work.

1. Introduction

Numerous studies have reported that corpus-based analysis can contribute to the development of writing skills due to ease of the academic genre text exploration [1, 2, 3 and 4]. Accordingly, new EAP textbooks have been published exploring the materials of specific academic fields, such as English for Business, English for Law or English for Medicine. Still, there are no ESP course books which require students to do their own research on subject specific corpora or creating their own corpus to analyse it following the instructions provided. Although there is some criticism of the use of corpus analysis [5 and 6], one of its many strengths is "in its empirical nature, which pools together the intuitions of a great number of speakers and makes linguistic analysis more objective" [7]. As for the use of corpora for the analysis in EAP programmes, it mainly focuses on improving writing skills of international students across academic disciplines, in particular word usage (both general and subject-specific lexis) and collocations across academic disciplines, grammar and sentence patterns. Interestingly enough, this method has been referred to more as an aid to teaching of writing for specific purposes [8], rather than learning for specific purposes, which still does not put in focus students as the centre of their studies, but the teacher as a facilitator. Nevertheless, there is a range of free online tools and programmes which can facilitate the acquisition of subject specific vocabulary. One such tool is AntConc.

2. Purpose and Rationale

The aim of this article is to challenge the sole use of EAP text books and course packs with articles pre-selected by teachers or affiliated researches. Its purpose is to promote semi-structured materials which will require students to actively participate in material selection and activity design, as well as research and task completion. Its purpose is not to teach the use of AntConc tool and concordances or WordBanks Online as this would require more time and different conditions. This paper is based on the principle of active, motivated learning, which will be a reflection of enjoyable activities [9]. It is also tailored around individual students' needs and learning styles, and is, therefore, very much appropriate for personalised learning, especially in mixed groups of students (a small number of students progressing onto various academic disciplines grouped in one class). According to Cottrell's CREAM Strategy for learning - creative, reflective, effective, active and motivated learning [9], this kind of student-led tasks built around semi-structured learning materials, scaffold students' academic progression in the most productive and effective manner. They involve research, note-taking, reflective and critical thinking skills, personalised e-learning, creativity, autonomous as well as group work, coping with unpredictable information, evidence of achievement, portfolio development, organisational and time management skills, prolonged attention span, exercising long-term memory (due to frequent links between the existing and new knowledge). Overall, students take charge of own learning and confidently manage the learning cycle as an interesting project.

3. Methods

The research used to obtain the findings for the extended project on the use of corpora in learning English for specific academic purposes was conducted in three phases with three groups of students. In the first phase students were explained the aims of the study and asked to volunteer in post-class workshops, twice a week for a month and a half. Based on the results of this phase, in the following year students were asked to do similar activities in class as part of their ESP module. In this group, students were progressing onto different subject programmes, namely TESOL and Translation, Engineering and Life and Health Sciences and they were in a mixed group because of low number. By contrast, students on the pre-sessional business programme were grouped in 'bespoke classes'. The advantage of the use of AntConc in a mixed class was that students could use their own materials, in particular for the research project, and design and analyse their own corpora. In the third phase, the same method was used in a bespoke group of Life and Health Sciences Students, the advantage of which was that students more readily participated in pair activities, group discussions and peer reviews.

In the first stage, two groups of volunteers (8 students in each) were comparing the use of Aston University corpus ACORN which was still in a relatively early developmental phase and the use of online dictionaries, such as Macmillan English Dictionary and Cambridge Dictionary Online. The students were explained how to use these tools, but they used different ones for the same tasks. In the first year the majority of students preferred to use online dictionaries as "correct" definitions with some exemplars saved their time. Because they did not find ACORN as informative as they had expected, in the second year a new group of students (12) was asked to use AntConc and WordBanks Online in order to first, design their corpora, and compare their findings with the WordBanks Online. In addition, the second year activities were part of the students' regular classes in a mixed group, whereas in the third year of the project all the students were continuing their postgraduate studies in the School of Life and Health Sciences.

4. Findings and Discussion

This project supports the idea that teaching language syllabuses yields better results when it is based on empirical evidence, in particular teaching EAP and ESP to postgraduate students, rather than intuition; it also argues that frequency of usage, both in lexis and grammar and simulation of the working materials, such as specialised journal articles, should be the main guide alongside the other academic learning outcomes, and therefore priority for teaching [10]. The findings in the three main groups of future post-graduate students on pre-sessional EAP courses have shown that students are most motivated when allowed to work on the materials of their specific academic interest, mainly peer-reviewed e-articles. To challenge themselves, students include more difficult articles in their corpus. Students who keep notes of their own reflections on linguistic patterns, checking their findings using different tools, such as AntConc, WordBanks Online and online dictionaries, as well as presenting their findings and exchanging their views with peers, are more likely to retain their knowledge than the ones without similar activities. This is a type of problem-based learning, which is



now popular in many UK medical, business and engineering curricula[11]. The main benefits of using corpus in specialised fields of study are that students explore language in individually selected contexts, they hypothesise possible reasons for usage of language patterns and definitions, identifying the most frequently used specialised vocabulary; moreover, students can learn how to paraphrase and avoid plagiarism; another benefit is that students become confident when discussing language-related issues with their peers, comparing and contrasting different learning strategies and keeping records. Finally, learners apply their knowledge in purposeful tasks, such as reports, essays and presentations.

The 'game' becomes even more interesting when students further apply their critical thinking skills, using WordBanks Online to compare their findings, in particular in relation to grammar patterns. It is very motivating to discuss further in seminars, the procedure they applied individually and additional tools, such as online dictionaries and thesauruses that they have used. The results have shown that students enjoy self-tailored learning, as opposed to searching general corpora and/or online dictionaries alone. As for the assessment of their work, students did not have to wait for their assessment feedback to find out how much they learnt. They were involved in self-assessment, peer assessment in addition to regular tutor's feedback on homework. It is important to say that knowledge retention is much longer and deeper as the selection of the context and content, the problem and task itself drive the learning. The assessment only identifies the depth of knowledge; asking the right questions and answering them in purposeful and meaningful search, using own reasoning and applying such knowledge, students learn beyond the definitions and textbook and grammar explanations. In this kind of self-directed learning, students own their learning processes, learn to make decisions about what they will research; additionally, they communicate in different ways with a non-didactic facilitator (teacher) and they discuss their findings. This was best exemplified in the last group scenario where students were all preparing for the Life and Health Sciences programmes.

Post pre-sessional contacts with the second group of students proved that students did continue to use the AntCons tool and WordBanks Online even on their main master's programmes and that their results were better than the average home students' results, not only due to their high level of motivation, but also the fact that they adopted the habit to study the language from the latest academic journal articles of their choice. None of the students complained about difficulties in writing their assignments; quite the contrary they reported their Lecturers' feedback was very positive. This also answers the questions that may be raised about the issues of plagiarism which can happen while using the original vocabulary found in subject-specific academic articles. It is important to say that students who participated in the second year of this action research had to submit their work electronically, via Turnitin, and had their work checked for plagiarism. They actually improved their paraphrasing skills by using their vocabulary books and identifying the true synonyms and relevant collocations. It is certain that corpus-led paraphrasing activities are more meaningful and efficient than exercises from EAP textbooks, even the ones pertaining to be related to the particular discipline of student's interest as they offer a variety of examples students can analyse and chose from. The follow-up interviews with the third group of students have not been conducted yet, as they have just completed their pre-sessional programme, although the results are expected to be even more positive as their marks are generally higher than other students who have not had the same practice.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Empowering post-graduate international students to independently analyse selected subject-specific articles appears to be an excellent learning tool leading towards greater student autonomy and self-directed learning. Moreover, it opens new doors to learning through language-related presentations, discussions and pair work. Overall, students have improved all aspects of language skills, in particular writing and grammar, which have, to their surprise, become a topic of discussion (speaking and listening). Students benefited mostly in the area of subject-specific vocabulary and grammar, and they improved their paraphrasing skills which have been sustained over time; a possible reason is that their learning was not mainly motivated by assessment. In addition, students have learnt how to apply their newly-acquired transferrable skills outside the lessons and to reflect on their own and their peers' learning styles. Based on the conclusion the paper recommends that, where possible, students should be taught how to analyse their own materials using AntConc and similar tools, as well as WordBanks Online in their ESP classes. They should be further encouraged to apply these transferrable skills in their independent academic work.

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