Concordancing in Language Learning

Concordancing is a means of accessing a corpus of text to show how any given word or phrase in the text is used in the immediate contexts in which it appears

- example p. 99
  - concordancers can provide a greater amount of context if required
  - lines can be sorted according to different criteria
    - the key words are sorted in the order in which they appear in the text
    - alphabetically (from the right or from the left according to the first letter of the word which follows or precedes the key word)

early applications:

- i.e. lexicography and dictionary making
  - Collins Cobuild dictionary (entries make use of authentic concordanced examples)

Over the past years concordancing has been applied to language learning

- experimental studies are building up a literature indicating how concordancing can be used in teaching
- the software has become more user-friendly
- large publishers (i.e. Oxford University Press) are creating corpora of data which are being made available for use with concordancing software

Pennington, M. C. Chapter 6
Concordancing in Language Learning CONT.

Corpus

• Oxford University is making available million word corpora made up of text from the different language media and subject area
  • i.e. books, periodicals
  • applied science, arts, commerce, etc
• as well as using published corpora, users can create their own corpora

Corpus Size

• the bigger the better
  • there is a large imbalance of word frequency in text
    • function words are the most frequent (i.e. the definite article occurs approximately every 10 words, followed by of and and, which will both occur approximately half as frequently as the definite article)
    • content words have a much lower frequency (about half the words in a text will occur only once)
• for the study of grammar, a relatively small corpus can be used
• for the study of lexis and collocation, a larger corpus is required
  • however, it depends what kind of texts are part of the corpus (i.e. dedicated corpus for ESP)
Applications

There are basically two characteristic objectives for classroom concordancing

• using searches for function words as a way of helping learners discover grammatical rules (p. 102)
  • a concordancer will reveal a variety of meanings and patterns attached to the function word
• searching for pairs of near synonyms in order to give learners some of the evidence needed for
distinguishing their use (p.103)
  • i.e. near synonyms for concordancing in a biology corpus

For the Teacher

• as a linguistics informant, a resource tool
  • i.e. teaching the use of sentence connectors
• positive attributes of corpus-based data are
  • information on frequency, objectivity, large amounts of data, accessibility for non-natives,
    information on style, the possibility of diachronic information, data is authentic
For the Teacher

- as a source of input for teaching
  - teachers can generate authentic instances of usage to present to students when teaching a particular language point
    - i.e. teaching the contrasting uses of the present progressive and the present perfect tenses
    - if the concordancer is kept in the classroom, then the teacher can run a concordance when a problem of usage arises during teaching
  - as input for material development

One problem with using concordances directly as described above is that

- not all of the examples might be appropriate for teaching purposes, or
- some may illustrate a certain usage more clearly than others, or
- there may be not enough or too many examples based on the test sample used, or
- the language of the examples may be beyond the proficiency of the target learners.

In preparing concordance-based teaching materials in advance allows the teacher to edit the samples chosen.
Creating Concordance-based Teaching Material

There are a number of exercises based on concordance material which can be implemented in the foreign language classroom

• filling blanks in concordance material
• completing, or guessing the wider context of, concordance material
• using concordance materials as a reference tool for various exercises focusing on grammar, usage, vocabulary, etc.
• discourse-oriented exercises involving the use of concordance material, i.e. the use of discourse markers
• comparing the meanings of uses of expressions in different types or samples of writing
• exploring emotional tone or style, i.e., comparing the tone of certain concordanced items between different genres
• freely using a concordancing program to assist writing, correction, or comprehension
For the Learner

Error Analysis

• a guided use of the concordancer by the learner is in error analysis and correction
  • the teacher indicates errors in student writing which can be investigated and corrected with
    the help of the concordancer

Serendipity Learning

• the most autonomous learner application of concordancing is to allow learners to use the
  concordancer as and when they wish for whatever purposes they wish (generally referred to as
  "serendipity learning")
  • a student might look at the use of the present progressive; by doing a search for *ing, the
    concordance reveals that the -ing form can also be used as a noun modifier and as a non-
    finite verb
• serendipity learning has at least three benefits
  • learners are truly autonomous and responsible for their own learning
  • because searches are learner-initiated it can be guaranteed that the learning corresponds to
    learner needs and/or wants
  • by researching into language use this way learners develop what James and Garret [1991]
    refer to as "language awareness"
For the Learner CONT.

Inductive vs Deductive Learning

- concordance material can be applied to both inductive and deductive reasoning
  - deductive: concordance is used as rule illustration
  - inductive: the learner works out the rule using concordance printouts

Where learners use the concordancer themselves, as opposed to being exposed to pre-edited printouts, it can be argued that concordancing is inherently inductive. Preferably, a concordancer is available with a word processor in the same way that it is possible to access a spell-checker, dictionary, thesaurus, and maybe grammar checker.

- the student might ask a question of the dictionary or thesaurus and then supplement the limited examples provided in these sources with authentic examples from the concordancer

Levy [1990] proposes that the learner might use the concordancer in the following ways:

- checking meaning
- checking general syntax
- checking usage
- exploring special lexis, i.e. ESP vocabulary
- checking derived forms
- checking collocates of words

However, the learner (and possibly the instructor) needs to be trained in using a concordancer effectively.
Other Curriculum Applications

Concordancers can be applied to testing

- cloze tests based on complete texts
  - each question in such a test would consist of a number of concordance lines with the same word deleted (it is claimed that such tests meet the sort of contextual and discourse criteria for what Oller [1979] calls "pragmatic" tests)

Concordancers can be applied to error analysis or interlanguage studies

- these are concordances based on corpora of learner data which reveal the typical features of learner language for those of different language backgrounds and at different stages of linguistic development
  - the results from such data can be used to inform curriculum design

Some Caveats

- problems with the corpus
  - size (too small, specificity)

- usefulness of the data
  - might be beyond the proficiency level of the learners
  - single-line concordances might not provide enough context
  - depending on the size of the corpus, there might be too many or too few concordances
  - some usages might be better represented in the concordance than others
  - learners need training in the search techniques

Pennington, M. C. Chapter 6