

PRIORITY GRANT FINAL EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REPORT

Project title: Examining the use of a corpus-assisted and contextualized lexicogrammatical approach to grammar instruction in EFL and ESL contexts

Priority addressed: Grammar instruction

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Countries in which research was conducted: U.S. and China

In the past decade, the field of TESOL and L2 education in general has witnessed a revived interest in grammar instruction with many scholars proposing new teaching theories, including teaching grammar in discourse contexts, approaching grammar from a lexicogrammatical perspective, and using corpus-based or data-driven learning. Yet so far there has been little empirical research on the effectiveness of these new theories and practices, especially when the theories integrated as one unified approach. Motivated by the need for such research and supported by a TIRF priority grant on grammar instruction in adult ESL and EFL curricula, this study examines the impact of using a corpus-based and contextualized lexicogrammatical approach on, among other things, students' language awareness and grasp of lexicogrammar in both EFL and ESL contexts. The study responds directly to TIRF's call to investigate and assess the effectiveness of "principled" approaches to grammar instruction that makes "use of new technologies for contextualized grammar instruction."

This one-semester-long study was conducted at a university in southeast China and two universities in the U.S. (one in south-central and one in southeast U.S.). The reason for including both EFL and ESL sites was to allow a comparative study of the effectiveness of the new teaching approach in the two settings that differ in target language environment and learning goals. The participants at the Chinese university were five sections of the Essentials of English course for second year English majors and four instructors (all Chinese). The participants at the two U.S. universities were ESL students in five classes, two composition classes, one MA TESOL grammar class, and two high level intensive English program reading and structure classes. The participants' English proficiency level ranged from intermediate to upper intermediate. No low-level students were included because research had shown that corpus-based learning is too difficult for them. The classes at the U.S. universities did not quite match, in content, those at the Chinese university but they were included because they were the only ESL classes with a comparable English proficiency available at the two universities at the time of the study. Despite some difference in content among the classes, efforts were made to align their contents as closely as possible by making corpus-based lexicogrammar a focus of all the classes. In all the classes, the students spent time doing corpus searches and analyses regarding lexicogrammatical usage patterns and rules. The data collected for the study included 1) students' work such as their corpus search assignments, grammar exercises, written reports about their corpus data analyses and findings, and reflections about their corpus studies on lexicogrammar, 2) instructors' teaching logs, lesson plans, sample teaching activities, reflection journals, notes from instructor discussion meetings, and the authors' discussions with the instructors, and 3) students and instructors' post-study questionnaires that contained an open-

ended question section and a Likert question section. The various sources of data were used to help enhance the validity and reliability of the results of the study.

The data analysis shows that the new approach yielded some beneficial effects for the students in their language learning as well as some challenges in using the approach. The analysis also identifies some useful strategies for corpus-based lexical grammar teaching and factors that may influence learners' experience in corpus-based lexicogrammar learning. The positive effects of the use of the corpus-based lexicogrammatical approach consist of 1) students' enhanced language awareness and better command of lexicogrammatical rules/patterns, 2) greater appreciation of the importance of context in lexicogrammatical choices, and 3) increased critical understanding of grammar. The approach also promoted discovery learning and made learning more interesting and effective for some of the students. As far as the challenges are concerned, both the students and instructors experienced great difficulty in analyzing concordance data and identifying lexicogrammatical usage rules and patterns, a problem often exacerbated when many of their corpus-search generated examples were irrelevant to their study question. Another challenge is that many students lack the language skills, especially vocabulary, for conducting successful corpus data analysis. Other challenges include limited search functions and capabilities in the existing corpus search engines and a want of more user-friendly search features, as well as lack of easy access to corpora by some of the students, especially those in the EFL setting.

The study has also showed some useful practices and strategies for helping students succeed in corpus-based lexicogrammar learning or corpus-based language learning in general. They are 1) adequate modeling by instructors about corpus searches and data analysis, 2) having students conduct deductive learning type of search activities before engaging them in inductive ones, 3) giving students group corpus research assignments in addition to or in lieu of individual ones because group work makes corpus research easier and more effective, and 4) focusing corpus-based work on lexicogrammatical items that have multi-meanings or multi-functions with high use frequency rather than on items with a single meaning and low use frequency. Finally, the study has identified the following as factors that can affect the results of the approach: 1) learning setting (EFL vs. ESL), 2) language content and skills being learned (e.g. overall skills, reading, writing, and grammar), and 3) instructors' and students' attitude and interest. Students in the ESL setting seem to have had a more positive learning experience due to their better access to corpora and smaller classes; students in the grammar and reading classes appear to feel to have benefitted more in their learning; and students in the classes whose instructor had a more positive attitude to the approach reported a better assessment of the approach and their learning.

In conclusion, the research findings indicate clearly that incorporating corpus use, contextualization of grammar, and lexicogrammar in grammar instruction is feasible and, if implemented properly, can help EFL and ESL students effectively increase their language awareness, enhance their grasp of lexicogrammar, and promote their discovery learning ability, hence resulting in better language acquisition. Of course, language educators need to be fully aware of the challenges and variables in using corpora for lexicogrammar teaching and learning. They should strive to lessen their students' difficulty in corpus use by modeling, conducting well-designed training, and using group learning activities. Work should also be done to make corpus search engines more capable and user-friendly with more search features.

Attachments: (p. 3) Appendix "List of presentations and publications resulting from the study"
(p. 4) "Disclosure of expenditures of the grant funds"

Appendix

List of Presentations and Publications

Presentations:

1. “Experimenting with corpus-assisted instruction in teaching Essentials of English” (2006). Presented at the 7th International Symposium on Applied Linguistics and Language, Beijing, China, August 7-11.
2. “Using a corpus-based lexicogrammatical approach to grammar instruction in EFL and ESL contexts.” (2007). Presented at the 41st TESOL Annual Convention, Seattle, March 21-24.
3. “Corpora and lexico-grammar in grammar teaching in teacher education.” (2007). Presented at the AAAL Annual Conference, Costa Mesa, CA, April 21-24

Publications

“Using a corpus-based lexicogrammatical approach to grammar instruction in EFL and ESL contexts.” Accepted for publication by the *Modern Language Journal* with a projected publication date at the end of 2008 or the first issue of 2009.

Note: The course at Nanchang University used for the study has been named by the Higher Education Department of Jiangxi Province as one of the Outstanding College Courses for its quality and innovation.