Learner Autonomy and Concordancers

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Abstract

Learner autonomy, referring to 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (Holec,1981), puts an extra burden on teachers to foster learner autonomy and trace whether the students are autonomous enough to manage to govern their own learning process. At this standpoint, web concordancers might be of value in different educational domains. In dealing with written discourse, the extent to which the students may copy the words and phrases from the texts in writing is always the concern of language teachers. To serve this end, this study explores the frequency of the verbatim expressions in students essays as compared to an authentic prompt given before writing. The verbatim expressions in the prompt and the essays were compared with a concordancer on the web. It is seen that web concordancers may be used to trace verbatim utterances in writing courses in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The use of such utterances in writing indicates text loyalty that may be connected with learner autonomy problems in addition to low linguistic proficiency and inadequate vocabulary stock of the learners. Learners might be guided to use reworded, synonymous, redressed expressions instead. The use of a concordancer can help both learners and language teachers to provide control over writing.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, concordancers, writing in ELT.

1. Introduction

The fact that recent approaches to learning are centered on the learner highlighted the importance of learner autonomy and independence. However, it is an extra burden on teachers to foster learner autonomy in and outside the classroom and trace whether the students are autonomous enough to manage to govern their own learning process. With the advent of digital revolution, the process of learning has been reshaped and has turned out to be sensitive to the developments in the computer world such as internet use, softwares, operating systems, mobile phones, data storage facilities, servers, intranet, data centers and the like. At this stand point, web concordancers might be of value in different educational domains. This study primarily aims to draw attention to their possible uses in English Language Teaching (ELT). Secondly, it exemplifies the use of concordancers in learner corpus at the intersection between Corpus Linguistics and CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) so as to see learners' independence in writing essays. All in all, it attempts to indicate the association between learner autonomy and innovative use of computers by highlighting the use of concordancers as one of the educational software applications.

1.1.Corpus linguistics and concordancers

Corpus linguistics is defined as the study of language through the use of large collections of machine-readable texts referred to by the term 'corpus or corpora in plural', which is generally a collection of natural texts, gathered either from writing and/or from a transcription of recorded speech.

Corpus linguistics is not a branch of linguistics and does not adopt a linguistic theory, but rather, a methodology or an approach of describing and interpreting linguistic data, which applies to all the aspects of

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language such as syntax, semantics, pragmatics, speech, and recently in lexicographic studies (Krieger, 2003, Al-Sulaiti, 2004, Gries, 2009). The main focus of corpus linguistics is to find patterns of authentic language use through analysis of actual usage, it does aim to generate theories of what is possible in the language (Krieger, 2003).

A concordance is the list of words that frequently appear in a spoken or written text   and it also shows the contexts in which they appear. A concordancer is a sofware program which analyzes corpora and supplies these listings (see Figure 1-2). Even the most basic concordancers can provide statistical lists for all the words in the text/corpus object of study, statistics which can appear in alphabetical order or with regard to the frequency of occurrence of each word (Rodriguez, 1999).

Concordancers might be used with two types of corpora: readily available corpora and newly-built corpora. The majority of corpora are based on authentic language use.   Some corpora may be collected from more restricted sources and some that are even collected from non-native / student use of language, as in the case of learner corpora. An example of one such concordancer is at: http://www.edict.com.hk/concordance Some online concordancers such as http://www.spaceless.com may search only selected web pages. Others like http://papyr.com/applets/concordancer/ allow you to upload and search your own choice of text. (Peachey, 2005)

1.2. Concordancers in ELT

Recently, corpus based analyses have been appealing to foreign language teachers, learners and researchers. Indeed, to investigate a corpus of authentic language is helpful for foreign language learners because they can check or reconfirm how language is used in certain contexts, which might repair their errors as shown in many studies including Todd's, (2001) and Mull's, (2013) and Gaskell & Cobb's (2004) researches. Additionally, within the framework of teaching English for specific purposes (ESP), domain-specific jargon and structure can be taught with the applications of concordancers (Mparutsa et al., 1991). Again, searching literary texts can enhance awareness regarding the use of literary language indicated by Rodriguez, (1999).

Via concondancers, it is possible to list and study the most frequent up to date and correct uses and collocations of words, phrases and structures, which can help language teachers to prepare authentic language teaching materials (Peachey, 2005).

Looking in depth, many different uses of corpus and concordancers with authentic corpora are reported in language teaching. Among them, Barlow (1992, 2002) suggests that a corpus and concordancer can be used to:

- compare language use--student/native speaker, standard English/scientific English, written/spoken
- analyze the language in books, readers, and course books
- generate exercises and student activities
- analyze usage-appropriateness of some words like "obtain" rather than "get"
- examine word order
- compare similar words--ask vs. request

The use of concordancers with authentic corpora/texts is reported to be of value in ELT by Peachey (2005) who proposes the following activities to benefit from the concordancers:

(1) Collocations can be found with the use of the concordancers. When you get students to learn new words they might enter those words into the concordancer and find and keep record of other commonly used accompanying words.

(2) A concordancer might be used to look at the errors of the students. If the students frequently make collocation errors or grammatical errors, instead of correcting them, the teacher can ask the students to put the root word into the concordancer and see if they can discover what the error is for themselves.

(3) Different uses and the meanings of the words and the expressions might be observed. When your students are learning words which have multiple meanings, you can collect example sentences from a corpus and get the students to group the sentences according to their meaning.

(4) Genuine examples might be detected in the authentic texts. Once you have taught your students some new words or phrases, you can get them to use the concordancer to find and record their own examples of the words being used. If you teach a specific use of a word or phrase you could get them to make sure the example they find matches the use you have taught.

(5) Teachers, even the students might develop their own teaching and learning materials. For instance, they might produce gapfill activities that have a group of words they want to teach or revise, and a number of sentences that the students must put the correct words into.

On the other hand, "learner corpora" as defined by Leech (1998) as "a computerized textual database of the language produced by foreign language learners" are also valuable although they are not used for correct authentic language use. Instead, due to their capability to store and process language, learner language is easily investigated. Leech (1998) points out that

> …a database of learners' language that is large and that has been carefully assembled should prove to be a very useful resource to anyone who wants to find out how languages are learned and how to help make the learning process even better. For a corpus to be most useful, however, various types of annotation, such as part-of-speech tagging (POS), error tagging, semantic tagging, discoursal tagging, or parsing, can be added so that meaningful linguistic patterns can be extracted (in Pravec, 2002, p.1).

1.3. Learner autonomy and Concordancers

Learner autonomy is briefly defined as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' by Holec (1981). To Holec (1981), autonomous learners take responsibility for the totality of his learning situation. He does this by determining his own objectives, defining the contents to be learned and the progression of the course, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring this procedure, and evaluating what he has acquired.

With a broader perspective, the term autonomy is used for
- situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
- a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
- an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;
- the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;
- the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning (see Benson & Voller, 1997: 1)

Regarding the reciprocal relationship between learner autonomy and concordancers, Mills (1994) pinpoints three areas of consideration for evaluating the pedagogical value of the concordancers: The first relates to the capability of a concordancer to scan the text, make comparisons, sort to find all occurences of a linguistic item, isolate collocations, sort occurences alphabetically, compile word lists,and count word occurences. Secondly, concordancers are the sources of electronic texts, their preparation for the analysis, and selection of the software. The third is related to the activities the student might accomplish with a concordancer to take control of their own learning with on purpose interaction with the concordancers. However, several possible activities are the comparison of student's errors in written work with examples from authentic text, analysis of collocations, differences in register, support for composition exercises, investigation of an author's vocabulary usage patterns.

Although it seems that computers and learners autonomy are two far different ends, there are many studies in the literature that prove and probe into the link between software programs and learner autonomy. Among those studies on the relation between learner autonomy and concordancers, Todd's (2001) study can be first mentioned. He investigates the use of internet as a large concordancer for self-correction in writing. At a Thai university, lexical items causing errors in writing were identified, the students found concordances of the words from the Internet, and they then induced patterns from the concordance to apply in self-correction of their errors, which can be regarded as a way for the students to undertake the responsibility of their learning. Secondly, Groß & Wolf (2001) report that they designed a multimedia tool to develop learner autonomy, which comprises four modules: learning to learn languages, learning to use reading strategies, exercises of reading strategies, and learning to use learning tools. With this, the learner can plan his own learning and reach a corpus of 200 L2 texts. Module 1. is specifically designed for the improvement of learner independence. The learner tries to learn by himself and set objectives, plan his own learning process, choose neccessary tools and techniques (dictionary, spell-checker, prefix/suffix help, a list of coherence markers etc.) and manage to use time.

With concordancers, learners may work with a specialised one or a general corpus (Tribble & Jones 1990 : 15). With a general corpus, the global behaviour of the items under investigation can be observed. A specialised corpus helps the learner to see how the language is used within a particular genre or register. A collection of academic papers are beneficial for the learners to monitor the use of vocabulary and grammar in that genre while literary works may be used as   the source of metaphors, imagery, similes etc.(Mparutsa et al. 1991, Rodriguez, 1999). On the other hand, Mull (2013) explores how learners can benefit from an

English corpus through the use of a concordancer in order to correct grammar errors in an essay. She indicates a potential value for learner exposure to concordancers for autonomous language investigation.

Our study among the others must be accepted as an effort to use concordancers as testing tools for learner autonomy in writing, as a part of testing foreign/second language (L2) writing. Instead of using natural authentic corpus, we formed a learner corpus consisting of student essays and checked concordances, not for the students, but for the teachers to see if the learner writes autonomously.

With a similar approach to ours, Gaskell & Cobb (2004) report a case in principle for concordance information as feedback to sentence- level written errors and describe a URL-link technology that allows teachers to create and place the concordances into learners' texts. Thus, they apply this approach to intermediate academic learners and presents preliminary results.

2. Methodology

Aiming to exemplify the use of concordancers to see learners' independence in writing in an attempt to test learner autonomy, we wanted to see verbatim expressions in the corpus by matching the prompt text.

3.1.Corpus

Corpus in the study is a collection of student essays (10 essays). All students are asked to read and write an essay on "the relation between ethnocentrism and peace on earth" on the basis of the argument in the text in the classroom environment. They are required to send their essays electronically, which later constructs mini learner corpus. To form the corpus, all the essays were recorded into a data file (as text files) on the computer and later uploaded to the concordancer.

3.2.Procedure

The following steps were taken in the procedure:
- Participants are required to write essays after the students read a 1200-word-long reading passage on "Ethnocentrism" (Wegman,& Knezevic, 2002) given to the group as a prompt. The text is related to ethnocentrism which is unfamiliar for the students. The participants (N=10) were sophomore students of an ELT department.
- All essays are sent electronically to the instructor.
- All are saved as text files (txt. extensions) on the computer.
- For selective concordancing, four words are purposively determined as the target words according to the degree of difficulty and necessity for the content of the essays:
    - Ethnocentrism (noun, requires definition),
    - Repugnant (a rare adj. means "not pleasing"),
    - Bias (a noun, "take our bias into account",
    - Inconcievable (adj.)
- In checking the matches, all occurrences and collocation of the words in both the corpus and in the authentic text are obtained through the Concordancer. With the advantage of storing all the essays in the concordancer, it is managed to screen all easily and fast.
- Selected words and their collocations both in the prompt text and in the student essays are highlighted and compared with the original text.

Verbatim collocations (words and expressions) from the prompt were evaluated as loyalty to the text. whereas mismatching collocations were taken as the indicator of their independence and autonomy in writing.

3.3. Instrument

Among many different types of concordancers for Windows to be used in ELT (like Concordance, MonoConc, Simple Concordance Program (SCP), PhraseContext, the ones which accept uploading files or texts were considered for this study. The software "Concordance 3.3 " on http://www.rjcw.freeserve.co.uk/ * which welcomes uploaded texts like student essays was used.

While concordancing the essays, first all the essays as text files (with txt.extensions) are uploaded into the concordance. On a split screen, we had a wordlist on the left and the concordance on the right. Clicking on each word , one may get the concordances of the selected expressions and the context. Right-click anywhere

in the Wordlist View to bring up the pop-up menu, Collocations, properties and the frequency of the words can be obtained (Lamy & Klarskov Mortensen, 2010).

4. Findings

The evaluation of the results is based on the following considerations:

1- if the students selected and used the vocabulary in their essays, this is taken as a sign of their benefit from the text.
2- If they rejected the use of the vocabulary, this is the sign of their self-dependence/independence, meaning that they chose to paraphrase the expressions.
3- If they used the words with their collocations as they are given in the text, (that is, verbatim), this was a sign of text dependence.

The findings indicated that among all four words, one student used "bias" and one "repugnant". The adjective " inconcievable" is not used at all. The word "ethnocentrism" is used very frequently (many times by all the respondents) as it proves necessary to define it in the essays (Figure 1-2).

Regarding the two words "repugnant" and "inconcievable" that are not used, It can be said that the participants do not rely on the text and tried to use their own vocabulary stock and to create their own writing. This tendency might be disclosed in two ways: First they might ignore or avoid using unfamiliar words. Secondly, they might find a synonym for them or totally paraphrase the utterance. In a way, it can be asserted that learner autonomy in L2 writing seems to be much achieved. The word "bias" is not used in a same collocational environment as in the original text, which strengthens the above premise.

However, for the word "ethnocentrism" as the whole text is constructed on "ethnocentrism", all definitions of "ethnocentrism" were based mainly on the original text and the copies of the definition in the prompt. The students seem that they did not attempt to rewrite the definition which they had to involve in their essay. They could not ignore it or paraphrase it just because it is an unfamiliar word and concept, but a word that must be included in the essays. It is seen that the definition of "ethnocentrism" is copied verbatim mainly from the original text. Verbatim copying can not be regarded as a trait of the autonomous learners. The tendency to copy the definition may take us to the idea that other three vocabulary may not have been paraphrased, but ignored or disregarded by the the learners, which takes us the lack of autonomy.

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*When this study was conducted this web site was active. Now, a similar web concordancer can be used at http://papyr.com/applets/concordancer/ to upload students essays.

Figure 1. A screenshot from Concordance with the concordances of "ethnocentrism" in all essays.
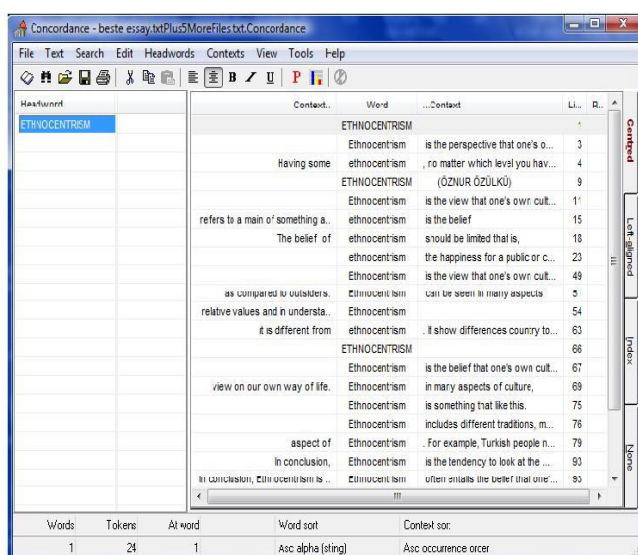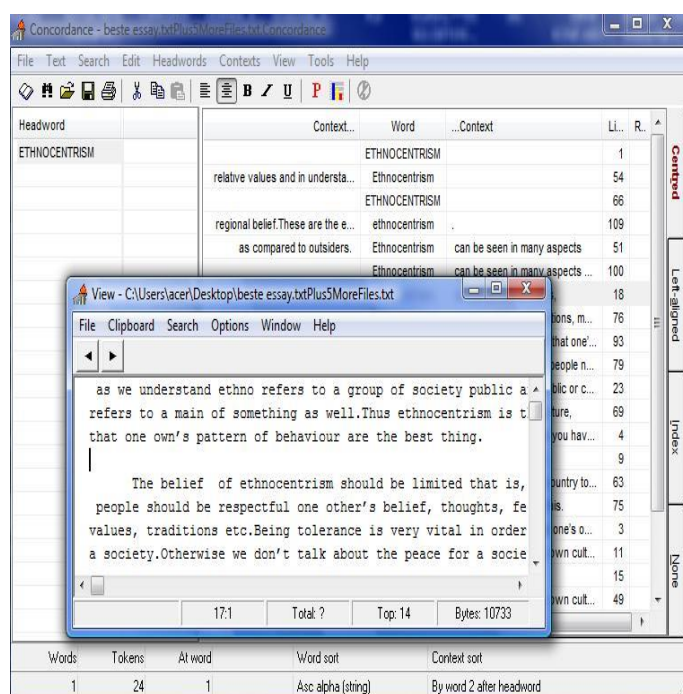
Figure 2. A screenshot from Concordance with the window for the context open

5. Conclusion

This study by which we try to draw attention to the uses of the concordancers in ELT and exemplify one of its applications, is an attempt to test learner autonomy in general with a concordancer. While this is the case, with the advent of technology, considering the difficulty of evaluating and scoring writing in L2, concordancers which can upload electronically sent essays are shown valuable in testing and/or evaluating writing.

In this study, an authentic reading text and student essays are analysed via a concordancer (Concordance 3.3.). The authentic text served as a source text. With selective concordance, several pre-determined words and their collocations are detected to find whether they are repeated verbatim. Verbatim uses are thought to be the indicators of the allegiance to the prompt given.

Looking at the concordances of the selected vocabulary (checkpoints), it is seen that there were two matches in the essays ("ethnocentrism" and "bias"). In other words, the learners did not use the focus vocabulary except for these two words. The degree of familiarity possibly plays a role. Respective of the remaining two words, the participants are said to avoid using them and tried to create their own writing either by paraphrasing or by re-ordering, at this standpoint, it can be asserted that learner autonomy in L2 writing seems to be much achieved. This might be disclosed in two ways: First they might ignore or avoid using unfamiliar words. Secondly, they might find a synonym for them or totally paraphrase the utterance.

However when it comes to the word "ethnocentrism" as the whole text is constructed on it, they could not ignore it. As a result, the definition of "ethnocentrism" is copied verbatim mainly from the original text. The use of verbatim utterances in writing indicates loyalty to the original texts and therefore, text dependency. This dependency might be taken as benefit from the text as the text is used as a source of vocabulary and model structures, but it tends to indicate a lack of autonomy in addition to low linguistic proficiency and inadequate vocabulary stock to replace.

Regarding this, learners should be guided to use reworded, synonymous, redressed expressions instead. What is more crucial, this may take us to the point that we need to differentiate unintentional plagiarism associated with the lack of learner autonomy. The frequency of matching entries might also display the degree of benefit from the reading passage or the loyalty towards the original text. but the benefit should not be copying the words as such. As a last remark, especially, in the societies known as collectivist and as those

valuing harmony like Turkish society, such an awareness might be constructed via the concordancers in writing.

6. Limitations to the Study

The study has several limitations in the sense that more participants could be included in the study and more check points/words could be selected from the text. In any case, we believe that this preliminary study is valuable in that it points out a reciprocal relation between learner autonomy and concordancers as well as a possible use of concordancers in testing writing in a foreign language for language teachers. In essence, we wanted to compare and contrast all the corresponding utterances in both texts at the beginning and later switched to only word concordances, but the software program did not allow us to do this. In this aspect, our attempt should be interpreted as a need for a software program that helps to compare student essays with the original texts.

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Some free concordancers available on Internet

 ConcApp http://vlc.polyu.edu.hk/pub/concapp/concapp.htm),

- Wconcord http://www.pef.zcu.cz/andy/martinek/wconcord
- Concordance http://www.rjcw.freeserve.co.uk/
- MonoConc (commercial) http://www.athel.com/corpus_software.html

See the web site for a list of all concordancers
- http://www.bmanuel.org/clr/clr2_tt.html