Using Concordances for Grammar Consciousness-Raising

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1. The Incoming Student Body

"Strategies on how to deal with differing aptitudes and academic levels of students" (in Japanese, 「学生の能力・適性の多様化への対策」) is becoming a major topic in Japanese colleges and universities these days. The increased interest in incoming students' aptitudes reflects the reality of falling enrollments which threaten the allowable intake granted by the Ministry of Education to these institutions a number of years ago. At that time the growing population and the limited number of acceptances made university entrance very competitive. Now that the numbers are falling, the formerly rigorous entrance tests and the strict qualifications for recommendations have given way to a variety of options for high school graduates. An increasing number are entering 2- and 4-year establishments without ever having had to prove their academic ability.

If Japanese institutions showed more flexibility in their approach to education, the problem of differing aptitudes and levels might not be a major problem. Smaller classes would allow the teachers to provide students with more individual care. Classes could be divided up according to level of ability, allowing for a more thorough treatment of the teaching materials. Another possibility is that students with more experience and greater abilities could be exempted from taking required courses that bore them and go on to more suitable higher-level courses. Unfortunately, none of the above measures have been meaningfully adopted. What this means for the classroom teacher is that the "average" student of yesteryear with a predictable "average" ability can no longer be counted on when planning next year's syllabus. Instead the teacher must look to ways of dealing with large variation in student ability.

2. Grammar in the EFL Composition Classroom

In this paper I'd like to focus on the area of grammatical knowledge as it concerns EFL writers in the composition classroom. Let me begin by answering the question, "What should be taught?" To a certain degree, materials will be determined by the teacher's goals, and, as I have indicated above, they will also be determined by the learners' aptitudes. In my composition class, I have three goals for my students, the first two of which are unaffected by the present variations in student levels. My first goal is to develop the students' writing fluency through weekly journal writing. My second goal is to increase their awareness of generic and cultural factors that can help them to

express themselves more comprehensibly to their readers. My third goal, and the one I will be talking about in this paper, is to increase student awareness of the grammatical system of English.

Incoming students show great variation in their knowledge of the two kinds of grammar that Johnson describes, "knowledge about" grammar and "knowledge how to use" grammar (1995:121). In the composition classroom, the students' grammar (or their errors) in their writing would come under the rubric of "knowledge how to use" grammar. It is the "knowledge about" grammar that I want to examine now, because, as Johnson indicates, rule-based knowledge has an important part to play in the generation of language, especially the written language. The incoming students' weakness in this kind of grammar is a problem for the composition teacher who often employs grammatical metalanguage to explain more complex sentence grammar or to correct student errors. Yet the composition classroom is not the place for a remedial course where the teacher carefully reviews one grammar point after another. Student variation has reached such proportions that what one student needs to know, another student will know already. Any approach that lumps students together is bound to cause either boredom or incomprehension depending on whether the teacher takes the high road or the low road. How then can the teacher make sure of the students' understanding of "knowledge about" grammar while maintaining a balance with the other two goals mentioned above?

3. Student Diversity Leads to a New Approach

Student diversity causes us to rethink the teacher-centered classroom. One teacher as the focal point in the classroom cannot respond effectively to the wide variety of needs that students have, so the focus has to shift from the teacher to the learner. An important organizational aid to the teacher is the reordering of students into groups so as to give the teacher fewer "units" to deal with, especially in a large class. More attention can then be paid to individual needs within each unit, and this in itelf encourages a certain amount of learner autonomy. Such a rethinking will also lead teachers away from "rule" presentation, a very teacher-centered approach, but the question becomes with what to replace rules. This is where we should consider a more data-based approach. We could begin by looking at the place of data in learning:

> "There is at least one characteristic that is common to every successful language-learning experience we have ever known, and that is that the learner is exposed one way or another to an adequate amount of the data of the language to be learned."
>
> (Rutherford, 1987:18)

An "adequate amount of data", then, is one fundamental characteristic of successful learning. In a learner-centered approach, the teacher will act as provider of this data, and instead of the teacher analyzing the data, the data is prepared in a form that spurs the learner on to analyze it. One method of data presentation in line with this approach is what Johns (1991) has called "Data-Driven Learning" (DDL) or the use of concordances. Students are presented with a sheet of Keywords in Context (KWIC) from which they are asked to study to see if they can discern patterns and formulate the "rules" for themselves.

Tribble and Jones attribute to a concordance approach the following advantages:

> "Two generalizations can be made about applications of concordance output, in spite of their diversity. Firstly, most of them favour discovery learning. That is, they present language in a way that enables learners to discover new knowledge for themselves, rather than being spoon-fed. Secondly, they do this by providing examples of authentic language. The fact that the source material for exercises is drawn from real life rather than concocted by teachers increases motivation, as it gives learners immediate contact with the target language in use."
>
> (Tribble and Jones, 1990:35-36)

DDL allows us then to tie together two important areas: learner autonomy, or what Tribble and Jones call "discovery learning"; and motivation from the use of "authentic" materials.

4. Research and Corpora

While much of the research on DDL is based on exercises for upper-intermediate and advanced learners, success with low-level learners has been reported by Hadley in his teaching at a technical college. While he is not specific on how he goes about it, he does mention controlling his data: ". . . because the students are high beginners, I try to limit the amount of data they receive so as not to overload them." (Hadley, 1998:12)

It is important to recognize this characteristic of concordancing: that the output, and hence the usefulness of the concordances, is completely dependent on the corpus on which it is based. The COBUILD Word Bank of 5 million words is a carefully selected corpus with examples from a number of different sources: newspapers, magazines, books and miscellaneous sources known as ephemera. As such, it would appear to be a useful tool for using concordances in the classroom. Looking at some of the samples, however, we soon realize that much of it is lexically very dense. If we compare data for "while" and "during", two words that my students often confuse in their free-writing journal activities, we begin to see the limitations of such a corpus for low-level students. The following examples have been taken at random from the approximately 3000 available for each word.

(a) They are specifically designed to support the weight of the body while undertaking many different physical activities. - (ephemera)

(b) When Taylor suffered a reported heart attack and was convalescing at home, Clough brought in Pycroft to help him on the managerial side while his old playing colleague at Middlesborough recharged his batteries. - (book)

(c) Her quest for knowledge was hard-won: she was amassing qualifications while struggling with a new language. - (magazine)

(d) On 6 December 1990, Nos 60 002/022 were stabled in the platform during the evening, <u>while</u> involved in driver training. - (magazine)

(e) In Europe <u>during</u> the last six weeks, Curren and Potter engaged in an intriguing duel in the Atlantic swell, with the American emerging on top in the Sud Ouest Trophy for the most successful surfer in the three French contests. - (newspaper)

(f) Murray had been married once, but it hadn't worked out, and <u>during</u> the Christmas holidays he'd boken off his long-standing affair with a sociologist who had a husband and children and no intention of leaving them. - (book)

(COBUILD ON CD-ROM, 1995)

The "while" examples quoted here are lexically very dense and would frighten even the hardiest of students. Examples (a) and (c) contain lexis such as "support", "undertaking", "amassing", "qualifications", "managerial" and "recharged" while example (b) appears to be a metaphorical use that would create even greater confusion in the students' minds. Interestingly, the "during" examples are relatively uncomplicated in spite of their context. This can be explained by the fact that "during" is followed by a noun indicating duration of time, no matter what its context, whereas "while", because it is a clause connector, has a more fundamental attachment to the meaning of each passage.

　　It is becoming clear that some of the COBUILD data is not suitable for low-level learners and that there needs to be a corpus made up of less-demanding lexis that will encourage rather than ovewhelm them.

5．Using DDL in the Classroom

　　In order construct a corpus that would be more suitable for my learners, I turned to English readers, in particular the abridged book series from Oxford called "Bookworms", and using a scanner I put several into electronic form so that they could be manipulated by my computer software. I also chose several magazine articles from American publications. All were imported into CONC so that they could be drawn from. Unlike the examples above from COBUILD, I have constructed these in the KWIC format and set the number of words before and after the keyword to approximately 6 though the actual number varies depending on the length of the individual words. Centering the keywords, a characteristic of KWIC, allows for easier recognition of patterns. Each line comes from a different section of the text or from a different text, so the numbers on the left indicate which line of the particular text is in use. They also serve as a point of reference when discussing the concordances in class.

EXERCISE ONE: WHILE vs. DURING

260	pit stops back home	during the day to play with her
909	he had so many times	during these frantic days, and into

512	I think it was."	During this casting process, it didn't
552	... tertainment Tonight.	During the past year, with the
812	basement apartment.	During a jail stint for another felony

1104	two, three children	while my father was a struggling
1147	would get snatched	while I chased my son. Money, of
204	a happening career.	While Sawyer did Geena Davis's stark
217	the directors can be.	While shooting Sliver, the director
645	someone's direction.	While Sofia sat outside, her

EXERCISE TWO: FILL IN THE GAP

569	... many people around	_____ the day. And every minute is
116	the horse to one side,	_____ the second policeman pulled
194	bed and held his hand	_____ he listened. He didn't say a. ..
635	outside to study	_____ that late-summer afternoon
674	... sorry he didn't die,	_____ he was so happy. Silence.
779	... before the bombing,	_____ the coach was at the factory
1047	open the front door."	_____ the last several months, a

In Exercise One, the students' introduction to concordancing, I guide the students' attention to what I want them to see, but any detail is worthy of note. Capitalization of the keyword will indicate the beginning of a sentence, something that students do not always understand or notice. The main focus, as the title indicates, is the comparison of the two words. I first ask the students to underline the noun that follows "during" and the verb that follows "while". The students' initial response is to gawk at the paper and grumble to their neighbor, but when they begin to start to see the differences, their grumbling dies out. Before asking for a particular "rule", I ask them to go on to Exercise Two and fill in the blanks either with "while" or "during". Finally I ask them to write down the rule for using these two words. Most of them get it right.

6. Is DDL a Success in the Classroom?

It is still too early to tell whether DDL will turn out to be a successful consciousness-raising tool in the classroom, although it will definitely serve the purpose of reinforcing the students' grammatical metalanguage by guiding them towards rule formulation. Of even more interest may be whether this will instill in them a more autonomous attitude towards grammatical analysis. Japanese students who enter college and university have already spent six years being told what English is and what is correct. In what may be their last couple of years of formal study we have a chance to convince them that it is their turn to make sense of English by guessing from contextual clues and learning how to learn by themselves.

One criticism that my study is open to is whether my sources for the corpus are appropriate. At

the moment the corpus is based largely on readers which have the advantage of controlled vocabulary. How "authentic" these texts are will definitely be an issue for further study.

Another criticism may arise from my concern with simple lexis. Even the vocabulary found in Exercise One, it can be argued, is difficult, especially the examples for "during" which in a comparison appear more difficult that those from the COBUILD corpus. These criticisms will also have to remain unanswered for the moment.

DDL, despite its flaws, for the moment appears to offer a learner-centered approach in line with the demands on higher education imposed by growing student diversity at Japanese colleges and universities.

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