Chapter 9
Corpora as Tools for Self-Driven Learning:
A Corpus-Based ESP Course

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ABSTRACT

Can EFL students be profitably introduced to compilation of DIY corpora for various ESP domains even at the undergraduate level? How can they benefit from self-directed exploitation of language corpora at such an early stage? What language skills can a corpus-based ESP course enhance? This chapter discusses the advantages and limitations of a structured approach to pedagogical corpus consultation and corpora as self-directed learning tools as applied in an innovative corpus-based ESP course. A multifaceted enquiry of students' assessment and perception of the course - initial feedback, question-naire, and focus group – was conducted. Results indicate that although students perceived corpus use as a complex activity, their attitude to the corpus approach was positive and they recognised the benefits of corpora as self-directed tools. Suggestions for further improvements of such practices are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The last few decades have seen a growing interest in the use of corpora in language learning and teaching. Römer (2011) in her overview of pedagogical corpus applications distinguishes between two main approaches of corpora in language teaching: indirect applications and direct applications of corpora. In the case of indirect applications, it is the researchers and materials writers who access corpora directly and make pedagogical decisions regarding the contents and sequencing of language teaching syllabi and materials based on the results of corpus analysis. In the case of direct applications, however, teachers and language learners access corpora directly in or outside of class.

Several studies proposed ways to apply corpora in language teaching and there is also a growing body of literature analysing the effectiveness of such a direct approach of corpus applications in language teaching (Boulton, 2010a; Römer, 2009). These studies found that corpus use enhanced learners' language awareness, it complemented existing reference works for learners, provided native speaker insights for teachers of languages other than their L1 (Römer, 2009), and was applied successfully for error correction in L2 writing (Gaskell & Cobb, 2004). Boulton (2010a) in his review of studies examining the effectiveness of direct corpus use in language teaching noted that there seemed to be evidence that this approach was effective, but most results were promising rather than conclusive regarding the higher efficiency of this approach compared to other language teaching approaches. A number of studies concluded that corpus use, especially in writing instruction, resulted in more autonomous learners who "assumed more responsibility for their writing and became more independent writers" (Yoon, 2008, p. 31). Nevertheless, not many studies investigated how corpora can be used as a tool of self-directed learning (Charles, 2012; 2014; Lee & Swales, 2006).

In general, research results showed that if learners were provided with appropriate introduction to corpus use, they found consulting corpora useful and took the opportunity to use corpora for self-directed learning. Lee and Swales (2006), for example, provided an account of a corpus-based EAP course given for doctoral students, where learners were asked to compile and analyse their DIY corpora, and observed that the participants "found the use of corpora confidence-building and empowering" (p. 71). Charles (2012; 2014) reported on her studies in which she investigated learners' independent use of their own DIY corpora after a six-week corpus-based course in EAP. She concluded that most learners were enthusiastic about their own DIY corpora and a vast majority perceived it as a useful tool to assist their writing (2012). In her study reporting on learners' long-term use of their DIY corpora she found that 70% still used their corpus after 12 months. Most respondents used their corpora for checking grammar and vocabulary when writing. Charles (2014) also hypothesised that students' degree level and disciplinary areas are factors influencing the self-directed use of DIY corpora. Her findings revealed, however, no connection between students' disciplinary areas and self-directed corpus use, but suggested that there is a relation between degree level and the use of DIY corpora for self-directed learning as a higher proportion of doctoral students were users of DIY corpora than Master's students.

This chapter deliberates on a study of corpora *as self-directed learning tools* in language learning. The readers will be introduced to DIY Corpora and how it relates to learner autonomy in particular.

CORPORA, ESP, AND LEARNER AUTONOMY

Two features of exploitation of language corpora in the language learning classroom are central to this research, namely, the compilation of small DIY corpora and a hands-on analysis of data retrievable from such corpora in order to enhance linguistic insights into various ESP domains.

The approach promoting students' direct engagement with the corpus data has frequently been used for vocabulary learning (e.g. Cobb, 1999), and occasionally for queries of wider lexico-grammatical patterns (Johns, 1991, 2002; Flowerdew, 2002, Tribble, 2002; Chambers, 2005; Biber, Conrad & Reppen, 1998). Furthermore, it has often been claimed that the hands-on corpus approach is particularly suited for learning English for various specialisms (ESP) so as to derive specific patterns of language use within various specialized disciplines (Ghadessy, Henry, & Rosenberry, 2001; Gavioli, 2005; Flowerdew, 2013),

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