

An Investigation of Iraqi EFL University Learners' Attitudes towards Concordance

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Abstract

Using high-speed computers, it is now possible to use concordancers, which are recognized by educators as a potentially useful tool, as a means to develop vocabulary and understand language structures in real language context. In this study, three concordancers as well as two concordancing related tasks were introduced to high proficient EFL students. Using a 20-item survey questionnaire, students' perceptions of and attitudes toward the use of concordancers and the concordancing related tasks (e.g., vocabulary diary and gap-fill tasks) were determined. In addition, implications of the findings for teaching and learning in EFL contexts were discussed.

Keywords: Concordance, Concordancer, Concordancing, Vocabulary Learning, Grammar, Technology.

1. Introduction

I have been a firm believer in the power of information technology to make teaching and learning successful. That is why a few years ago, I decided to utilize WebCT to develop course materials for my doctorate dissertation. I designed the interactive on-line materials and used them to find out if these could develop ESL students' proficiency in verb tenses and discourse competence. Results revealed that the interactive on-line materials were effective in developing students' proficiency in verb tenses and discourse competence. Currently I am utilizing concordancer in my EFL classroom.

Concordancing is a technique in which a large body of text (called a corpus) is analyzed by a computer program to discover the regular patterns and lexical sets that are associated with a specific word or phrase (Hadley, 2001). Language corpora can be either collection of written or spoken texts; for example, collections of written texts can be extracting from newspapers, business letters, popular fictions, books, or magazines, published or unpublished school essays and etc. (Hasselgård, 2001). If planned carefully, the use of corpora can bring many benefits to students and teachers. One benefit is that it provides high-speed searching tool (Chen, 2004). Unlike relying heavily on dictionaries as the main source to look up word definitions and examples which is often too laborious and time-consuming, by using the concordance tool of corpora to search for word contexts, learners are involved in a more speedy and efficient language learning experience (Cobb, 2003). Another advantage of using corpora is that it accelerates lexical growth while promoting the noticing of 'word grammar' as an integral part of vocabulary study (Cambrensis & Gillway, 2006). The rationale is based on the premise that students learn to use words best by encountering multiple examples of a word used in novel contexts and being guided to notice how that word is used. Willis and Willis (1996) refer to "notice how that word is used" as consciousness-raising. By providing

learners with consciousness-raising activities, they are encouraged to think about samples of language and to draw their own conclusions about how the language works.

Speaking of vocabulary, Freebody and Anderson (1981) emphasize that word knowledge is the key ingredient in successful reading in both the L1 and L2 (Cooper, 1984) contributing more to L2 academic reading success than other kinds of linguistic knowledge including syntax (Saville-Troike, 1984). As Wilkins stated as far back as 1972, “Without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.”

Lexical knowledge is important to a language, but lexical items also have grammar. As Lewis (1993) stated, ‘Language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar.’ KWIC or concordance output helps to reveal not only the collocations (words that co-occur regularly), but also the colligations (grammatical patterns that co-occur regularly) of a lexical item. As Lewis recommended in TESOL Arabia Conference in 2003, we should teach words with the useful grammar included, not take things apart, presenting words out of their grammatical context.

In the present study, I introduced to students the on-line concordance websites which they utilized to unlock the lexical items from the academic listening passages. Although the main skill focus of the course was listening, I integrated into the course the vocabulary that students have learned from their academic reading course. This provided students the opportunity to put into meaningful practice what they have acquired.

Although there have been a number of studies showing the benefits of using concordance in vocabulary learning mentioned in the above studies, there is a limited research on examining students’ perceptions of and attitude toward the use of concordancer, especially in EFL contexts like Japan. Marzano (1992) points out one important dimension of learning that is positive attitudes and perceptions about learning. Furthermore, he emphasizes that without positive attitudes and perceptions, students have little chance of learning proficiently, if at all. The goal of the present study was to determine how college students perceived the use of concordancer in the classroom and how they felt about it after using it. The specific questions this study sought to answer are:

What are students’ perceptions of the use of concordancer in the classroom?

What are students’ attitudes toward the use of concordancer in the classroom?

What are the implications of the results for teaching and learning?

2. Research Methodology

Participants

Participants involved in this study were ten second year college students at a private university in Hyogo, Japan. These students, who major in English language education, belonged to the high level group based on their TOEFL ITP scores. Based on the proficiency identified by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (1985), the speaking ability of this group is advanced which is characterized by the speaker's ability to converse in a clearly participatory fashion. These students could initiate, sustain, and bring to closure a wide variety of communicative tasks, including those that require an increased ability to convey meaning with diverse language strategies due to a complication or an unforeseen turn of events. They also could satisfy the requirements of school and work situations, and narrate and describe with paragraph-length connected discourse.

Instrument

The instrument utilized in this study is a 20-item survey questionnaire. The questionnaire is divided into two parts. Part 1 has 10 items about students’ perceptions of the use of concordancer. The variables reflected in the statements in the questionnaire were adopted

from the results of previous studies on the effects of concordancing: on vocabulary building and determining collocations (Barlow, 1996a; Cobb, 1999; Lin, 2003); on identifying useful phrases and grammatical patterns, and making generalizations about the meaning and grammatical patterns of a word (St. John, 2001; Todd, 2001; Wang, 2001); and on providing students with high speed vocabulary searching tool (Chen, 2004). The other two statements, one is about the usefulness of the worksheet or vocabulary diary for learning the general and academic vocabulary, and the other is about the usefulness of the gap-filling task for learning collocations, were adopted from Chen's (2004) study.

Statements 1 and 7 are about the perception of concordancer for learning vocabulary in general. Statements 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8 pertain to the perception of the use of concordancer for identifying useful phrases; determining collocations; identifying grammatical patterns; making generalizations about the meaning of a word; making generalizations about the grammatical patterns of a word; and providing students with high speed vocabulary searching tool, respectively. While statement 9 pertains to the perception of the use of worksheet or vocabulary diary as being useful for learning the general and academic vocabulary, statement 10 relates to the perception of the use of gap-filling task as being useful for learning collocations.

Part 2 also has 10 statements about students' attitudes toward the use of concordancer. The focus of each statement in this part is the same as the one in Part 1. For example, statements 1 and 7 relate to the students' attitude toward the use of concordance for learning vocabulary in general.

The use of the term "like" to measure students' attitude was adopted from the questionnaire utilized by Savignon and Wang (2003) in their study of students' perceptions of and attitudes toward communicative language teaching. Responses were scored on a 5-point scale from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

Accuracy of each statement was checked by an independent group of professors of English language. The questionnaire was piloted with a different group of similar participants to determine if there were any ambiguous or confusing items.

Procedure

This study was part of my Academic Listening I course which I taught for one semester for 15 weeks. The main goal of this course was to develop students' ability to understand spoken English from North America and other English-speaking countries. To function successfully in academic environments, students need to acquire the listening skills, especially listening to lectures and conversations (www.ets.org/toefl). Specifically, students should have the ability to listen for basic comprehension and pragmatic understanding, and they should be able to connect and synthesize information. In order to achieve these goals, students should have enough vocabulary. As mentioned earlier in this study, lexical items have grammar and lexical knowledge is important to a language (Lewis, 1993). As far as teaching is concerned, Lewis recommended that we should teach words with the useful grammar included, not take things apart, presenting words out of their grammatical context. Concordancer is useful for this purpose because it reveals not only the collocations (words that co-occur regularly), but also the colligations (grammatical patterns that co-occur regularly) of a lexical item.

Taking into account Lewis' recommendation, I utilized the vocabulary from the listening and reading passages in the TOEFL iBT textbook. I introduced to students three concordance websites, and concordancing related tasks such as the vocabulary diary and gap-fill tasks. It took about six class meetings (1 class was 90 minutes and held twice a week) to train students

how to use the concordance websites, what and how to write in the vocabulary diary, and how to construct the gap-fill tasks.

One concordance website utilized in this study is the one conceptualized by Chris Greaves of Hong Kong Polytechnic and coded in PERL by Tom Cobb of UQAM Montreal, Canada (<http://vlc.polyu.edu.hk/>). This concordance is one of the language projects presented by the Virtual Language Centre in Hong Kong. Users can search for language samples from various corpora such as students' academic writings, Time Magazines, the Bible, business and economy, etc. The other concordance website is the British National Corpus (BNC) (<http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>). It is one of the most famous corpora consisting of 100 million collections of written and spoken language samples. Finally is the Corpus of Contemporary American English (<http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>) which contains 425 million words from various sources such as magazines, newspapers, fiction, television shows, etc.

The concordance diary (see Appendix B), which is referred to as concordance sheet by Chen (2004), is where students kept at least two examples of the vocabulary contexts from the concordance websites. Students chose several examples that were meaningful and comprehensible to them and kept those examples in their vocabulary diary.

Regarding the gap-fill task (see Appendix C), which was also conceptualized by Chen (2004), students used the authentic contexts searched from corpora to compose a gap-fill sheet for them to work on. For example, the target word from the listening or reading passage was 'passing'. Students in pairs searched using the concordancer several collocations such as pass on, pass to, pass by, pass away, pass along, etc. Based on the contexts, they discussed the meaning of the collocations. Student volunteers wrote the collocations on the board. Then I asked them to clarify the collocations they did not understand. To maximize student participation, I asked those who understood the meaning to give situations using that collocation which other students found difficult. As homework, students had to individually construct a multiple choice gap-fill task for each collocation (see Appendix C) using the concordance websites. In the next class, they exchanged with each other and answered the gap-fill task. To make sure students understood all the collocations in the homework, I had to conduct whole class processing for those collocations students missed to answer correctly.

Students used their laptop computer to write their vocabulary diary and construct the gap-fill tasks. They saved them in the on-line share folder on the university website.

Results

Table 1. Perceptions of and Attitudes Toward Concordance Tool for Vocabulary Learning

	n	mean SD	t	p
Perception	10	3.50		
		.22	1.23	0.25
Attitude	10	3.42		p<0.05

The mean (3.50) for perceptions shows that students had positive perceptions of the use of concordancer in the listening course. This means that students thought that concordancer was useful for vocabulary learning, identifying useful phrases, identifying collocations, identifying grammatical patterns, and for challenging them to actively make generalizations about the meaning of a word and the grammatical patterns of a word. Students also perceived that concordancer provided them with high speed vocabulary searching tool. As far as vocabulary diary and gap-fill tasks were concerned, students thought they were useful for learning the general and academic vocabulary, and for learning collocations, respectively.

As for students' attitudes, the mean (3.42) reveals that students also had positive attitudes toward the use of concordancer in the listening course. Specifically, students had positive attitudes toward the use of concordancer for vocabulary learning, identifying useful phrases, identifying collocations, identifying grammatical patterns, and for challenging them to actively make generalizations about the meaning of a word and the grammatical patterns of a word. Students also had positive attitudes toward the use of concordancer in providing them with high speed vocabulary searching tool. As far as vocabulary diary and gap-fill tasks were concerned, students had positive attitudes toward their usefulness for learning the general and academic vocabulary, and for learning collocations, respectively.

The t-test ($t=1.23$) shows that there is no significant difference between perceptions and attitudes. This means that students who had positive perceptions of the use of concordancer also had positive attitudes toward the use of concordancer. Pearson correlation ($p=+0.25$) reveals no significant correlation between perceptions and attitudes because of the small sample size ($n = 10$).

3. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the study show that high level EFL college students had positive perceptions of and attitudes toward the use of concordancer and concordancing related tasks (e.g., vocabulary diary and gap-fill tasks) in the classroom particularly in vocabulary learning, identifying useful phrases, identifying collocations, identifying grammatical patterns, and for challenging them to actively make generalizations about the meaning of a word and the grammatical patterns of a word. The findings of this study support the results of the study of Chujo, Miura and Uchiyama (2006) whose goal was to use the corpus and CALL listening material and vocabulary learning material to improve students' communicative proficiency. The findings of this study also find support in the study of Cambrensis and Gillway (2006) which found concordancer to accelerate lexical growth while promoting the noticing of 'word grammar' as an integral part of vocabulary study. Concordancer was also efficient in that it presented multiple examples of a word at one time, and effective in drawing multiple examples of a word together in one place that highlighted certain patterns.

Students in this study also had positive perceptions of and attitudes toward concordancer's capability to provide them with high speed vocabulary searching tool. By using the concordance tool of corpora to search for word contexts, learners were involved in a more speedy and efficient language learning experience (Cobb, 2003).

As far as vocabulary diary and gap-fill tasks were concerned, students thought that the vocabulary diary was useful for learning the general and academic vocabulary, and gap-fill tasks were useful for learning collocations. Students also had positive attitudes toward the use of vocabulary diary and gap-fill tasks for the above purposes. By utilizing vocabulary diary and gap-fill tasks, this study has demonstrated how to create more traditional vocabulary activities (e.g., fill-in-the-blank or matching exercises) that have the added advantage of being based on authentic texts and also exposing learners to multiple, novel contexts at one time (Stevens, 1991; Thurstun & Candlin, 1998). For example, Stevens (1991) found that concordance-based vocabulary exercises can be more easily solved by learners than traditional gap-filler exercises like the gap-fill tasks in this study, suggesting they should be used "if the purpose of the exercise is to reinforce the vocabulary, as opposed to testing, and if the proclivity of the teacher is to engender a sense of confidence and well-being in the students" (p. 55).

Although students had positive perceptions of and attitudes toward the use of concordance, vocabulary diary and gap-fill tasks, the ratings were not highly positive. It took about six 90

minutes to train students to use the concordance websites as well as the vocabulary diary and gap-fill tasks. This low rating might be due to the fact that students found using the concordance websites difficult. While checking students doing the concordance activities, I received feedback from many saying that finding easy-to-comprehend contexts where the vocabulary was used was difficult and time consuming. The results of this study corroborate the findings of studies on DDL activities which low proficient students found them complicated or difficult to complete (Hadley, 2002). The findings are also consistent with the results of the studies of Tono (2003) and Umesaki (2004) which found English concordance examples retrieved to be difficult for beginning level learners to understand.

To conclude, the results of the study reveal that, despite the difficulty of using concordancer in finding comprehensible word contexts, the students had positive perceptions and attitudes toward the use of concordancer, vocabulary diary and gap-fill tasks for vocabulary building, determining collocations, identifying useful phrases and grammatical patterns, making generalizations about the meaning and grammatical patterns of a word, and providing students with high speed vocabulary searching tool. An understanding of learner attitudes and their perceptions of the pedagogical benefits of concordancer and the tasks related to it will enable teachers to best utilize concordancer in the classroom in order to achieve those pedagogical benefits.

Limitations

The ten respondents utilized in this study were all students registered in the academic listening course. Due to the small sample size, the positive perceptions and attitudes expressed for the use of concordancer and the concordancing related tasks (e.g., vocabulary diary and gap-fill tasks) in order to achieve benefits (e.g. identifying collocations) cannot represent the views of students in the department in the university where the study was conducted. In addition, the respondents were high proficient and they cannot represent the views of low and average proficient students.

Implications

Despite the difficulty students encountered, the findings suggest that the use of concordancer and the performance of the tasks such as the vocabulary diary and gap-fill tasks are useful for vocabulary building, determining collocations, identifying useful phrases and grammatical patterns, making generalizations about the meaning and grammatical patterns of a word, and providing students with high speed vocabulary searching tool. Learners have to fully comprehend that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. The results also tell us that there is a need to provide students with enough practice how to use the concordance websites and do the concordance related tasks until they become familiar with and successful using them. As far as language proficiency is concerned, the findings suggest that the contexts or corpora in the concordancers might be too difficult for low proficient or beginning level students which may demotivate them to accomplish the concordancing related tasks.

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