

Effectiveness of on-line corpus research in L2 writing:

Investigation of proficiency in English writing through independent error correction

Proposal

Second language researchers and teachers have increasingly come to believe that using a computer-based corpus can be extremely helpful in the classroom. The purpose of this study is to examine the feasibility of on-line corpus research in English writing, specifically to examine whether computer-based corpora can be used outside of the classroom in order for students to study and write improved essays independently. Previous studies of the uses of computer-based corpora have been diverse; there are studies which have contrasted how grammar points are taught in textbooks versus the actual frequency of real forms (Barbieri & Eckhardt, 2007); studies which have examined differences between the frequency of various features of NS and NNS speech (Shirato & Stapleton, 2007); and studies which have used corpus output in class to improve the accuracy of conjunctions in writing (Tseng & Liou, 2006). Clearly, computer-based corpora can be used in many different ways, but no previous study has tried to examine whether it is feasible to teach learners how to use a corpus so that they may improve their writing independently. Yoon & Hirvela (2004) examined student attitudes toward using a corpus to improve their writing and found the approach was helpful, so this study extends that idea to examine the process of actually trying to teach learners to become independent writers while using a computer-based corpus.

Seven international students wrote 5 essays on specific topics and then self-corrected their errors through corpus research. The students were given group sessions on how to use the free BYU COCA corpus and later individual tutoring sessions. Two experiments were conducted: one where four of the students received information about their errors but corrected these by using the corpus, and one where the other three students chose their own errors to independently correct. I report both qualitative and quantitative results. I found that in both cases students were able to make productive corrections by using the corpus, but improvements were greater when errors were pointed out. Word choice comprised the largest number of corrected errors. Students attitudes toward the corpus were positive but drawbacks include large amounts of time needed to help students become proficient in using a corpus on their own.

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