Using Concordances as Supplementary Materials in Teaching Grammar
Huseyin Uysal, Talat Bulut, Youssef Al Hosein

Abstract. In many educational institutions in Turkey, including universities, state schools, and private schools, a common problem in grammar teaching is the lack of authenticity due to the wide use of rule-based teaching. Consequently, some teachers prefer to adopt a deductive teaching approach with more explanation for grammar structures and less use of examples from various contexts. This case may sometimes end up with a traditional English lesson with mechanical exercises, as students call it, “Ali goes to cinema” kind of exercises, and it is not uncommon for students to complain about the frequency of encountering the same examples given on certain grammar topics, examples that often fail to be attuned with current real life situations, which obviously limits their productive skills by its failure to stimulate their ability to think of similar simple sentences. In order to overcome this, we propose a technique based on Data-Driven Language Learning with particular regard to corpus linguistics, and we consider the learner as research workers constructing their language themselves, and learning with less language description, hence they are expected to succeed in integrating meaning and form more. In this respect, the purpose of this article is to provide some insight into modern practices of teaching English language, and specifically to show a model lesson for grammar teaching from a critical perspective towards currently used English grammar books and textbooks. It will provide a brief and practical introduction to easily accessible concordances which can be utilized to assign the learner a constructive role by supplying him/her with input from real-life contexts, while touching on the principle of awareness with a few suggestions by using our data in our classes. It will also provide a brief outline of how online and offline programs can be easily adapted for grammar teaching and to generate authentic in-class materials.

Key words: concordance, grammar teaching, DDL, CALL, corpus, real-life context, modern facilities.

Introduction

In our classes, we have always enjoyed it more when students are actively involved in the lesson, whatever the point of teaching is. Of course, as teachers our focus is not only enjoyment, but the fact that students generally seem better able to learn things that they are active participants in. For this reason and for many others, we will try to illustrate teaching in an environment where learners construct what they are learning themselves; analyzing, synthesizing, and researching, while at the same time shunning the naïveté of oversimplifying the actual context of the language classroom.

Out of the four skills, teaching grammar can be the easiest, or sometimes the hardest, but rarely in between. It is often easy to compute a rule just like a simple equation. But sometimes the existing schema of the learners is too fixed to even budge and integrate a hard-to-grasp rule, however hard one tries, and however reasonable the rule seems for the teacher. We think of grammar more as a fascinating system that underlies our competence for language. Leaving aside the debate whether it is hard-wired in the brain or not, in our case our university students, who are between 18-20 and studying at English Preparation School, are at upper-intermediate level and have little access to what may remain of universal grammar in their minds, so for them grammar acts like a unitary device helping a dazzled mind combine a plethora of jigsaw puzzle pieces hard-wired in the brain.
students are at a loss in the integration stage of meaning and form. Some have problems in acquiring a new rule, some in changing a previous misconception, and some simply need more time and examples to properly digest what they have just been taught. This is natural, but we have failed to notice the real reason as a teacher. We cannot know exactly what is going on in the minds of learners, but we can adjust our techniques to include some possible solutions which we will try to do in this article.

Literature Review

All approaches to language instruction have incorporated an idea of teaching grammar, either in an explicit or implicit manner. Some of these ideas of teaching grammar have crystallized into a systematic approach such as the most-commonly-known PPP model (Present-Practice-Produce) and Harmer’s (1998) ESA model (Engage-Study-Activate). Krashen’s Comprehensible Input Hypothesis affected ELT for good, providing a framework for shaping approaches to teaching grammar. Batstone and Ellis (2009) propose certain principles that should guide any teaching approaches to teaching grammar. Batstone and Ellis (2009) propose certain principles that should guide any teaching process organized in any approach. Those are the given-to-new principle, the principle of awareness, and the real-operating conditions principle. The first emphasizes the importance of linking the new meaning/function of a certain grammatical construct to already known meanings/functions. This principle refers to the idea of making connections between what is already known by the learner, and what is to be taught. The stress of this principle is primarily on introducing a point of grammar by first touching on the relevant knowledge of the learners. The second is the principle of awareness, which concerns the students’ awareness of the point of focus explicitly, so it involves the explicit teaching of grammar. Batstone and Ellis (2009) justify this principle by pointing out that people learn more about the things they attend to, and less about the things that they do not. The activities which are argued to foster learner attention include exercises, questions, etc. about the topics which turn the learners’ attention to form and meaning mappings. The last principle is the real-operating conditions principle. Unlike the two principles summarized above, the focus of this principle is on communicativeness in the process of teaching grammar. There are basically two ways to look at grammar; one as the object, and the other as a tool for facilitating the exchange of meaning. The first two principles take grammar as the object of lesson, focusing on its explicitness. The real-operating principle, on the other hand, emphasizes studying grammar as a tool for communication and conveying speaker meaning, which is the case in everyday authentic language use. By introducing activities which feature learners’ active use of the form in a communicative way, their attention to form is thought to increase along with the likelihood of monitoring their own language use, as well as being monitored by their peers and the teacher. Thus, by engaging in a communicative activity which incorporates the grammar point to be used, learners will develop an explicit conscious representation of the form.

In this article, we focus on the second one of these principles, the principle of awareness, which we consider to be inadequately developed. We believe in teaching grammar inductively, so that the learner constructs the rules or structures for himself/herself, but we also believe this should be done systematically and that the learner should be aware of the process of learning, thus there should be some components of deduction present.

A recent and efficient technique to foster the learners’ awareness, as well as encourage them to construct their own rules, is proposed under the framework of data-driven learning (DDL). DDL is an approach in which the language learners are also research workers whose learning is driven by access to linguistic data (Johns, 1991). Originally, this framework proposes that the language learner will discover and analyze rules and patterns from authentic data, rather than being given language descriptions by the teacher (Gavioli, 1997, 2001; Johns, 1988). However, rather than taking this approach and extending it to all teaching experiences, it can be applied as a supplementary technique, which we believe would take into better account the limitations of time and the structure of syllabi. Johns supports the idea of using concordances in the classroom which provide authentic examples of language use as regards any teaching point that the teacher wants to focus on (Johns, 1986, 1988, 1991). He devised a concordance program CONTEXTS (Johns, 1997) which teachers, as well as students, can use to access concordances. Nowadays, there are many websites as well as programs that allow access to a large number of corpuses such as BNC and Brown.

The Scope of the Issue

As we have illustrated in the introduction, we have noticed that learners need more than just explanations of rules and some exercises to cope with the process of integrating a meaning, function, and form trio. They need structured input tailored to their needs from which they can induce and construct the rules for themselves and create meaning, function, and form mappings. This can be done through concordances. We will attempt to illustrate how.

Provided Suggestions in the Literature

Data-driven language learning (DDL) is an extension of what came to be known as Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). In the latter, the language classroom tries to make the best benefit of computer technology. In DDL, the language learner is like a researcher trying to investigate the pattern behind the uses of certain structures or words, just as Cobb (1999) places the theoretical philosophy of such an approach under the rubric “learner as linguist”. In DDL, the techniques of corpus linguistics are utilized. A concordance program, or a website designed as such a program, enables the teacher/learner to access different usage instances of various items of interest. Basically, the program is downloaded via Internet and installed on a computer. A text sample is loaded into the program and everything is ready to be used. Alternatively, there are websites which provide access to large corpuses and one can search for any keyword on these sites by entering certain parameters. The target item, which can be a word, prefix, suffix or phrase, is entered into the search box and the search key is hit. Magically, all instances of the key words are listed with the key item highlighted in
between, allowing the user to see the contexts in which the key expression was used. The point is to illustrate the context of use, which is invaluable in language learning in order to convey the meaning, collocation and other relationships between the structures that are intended to be learned. Concordances are an excellent tool for providing such context. However, the question is how to implement this strategy in the language classroom. We will outline a few proposals that have already been made.

First, we want to offer an example of how we used concordances by searching for key expressions in a text that we loaded into a program installed on our laptops.

For instance, if the target item is a preposition, in this case on, the concordance user produces an output as in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Concordance Showing Instances of on

As we can see, the use of the preposition “on” is displayed in context, with some words to the left and some to the right. When this information is properly utilized from a teaching perspective, it is possible to extract the rule and rationale behind the use of “on”. The possibility of coming up with the rules inductively is not only restricted to teachers, but is equally available for students. Of course, the raw material of such a corpus should be worked on before bringing it into class, which we will focus on in the limitations section below.

Figure 2 shows another example for suitable usage of concordances in the classroom as proposed by Cobb (2010).

Figure 2. An Example Concordance Illustrating the Uses of able

In the concordance window, sentences with “able” are shown in their contexts. Here the input is more orderly than the one shown in Figure 1, as the “noise”, such as unrelated sentence pieces, and some unnecessary shorthand, are left out and a complete sentence with the keyword is given. So how can this set of information help learners to integrate meaning, function, and form? The answer to this question is simple according to Cobb (2010), who says that “a corpus gives learners access to pattern information that they cannot get in any other way.” As suggested by N. Ellis (2002), the “power law” of accumulation necessitates that the learner incrementally access input that builds up to form a glacier of competence, which can be best provided by concordances within the best available time frame. The diverse contexts in which a certain structure, word, phrase, or affix is used are illustrated quite effectively via a concordance.

There are many techniques described in literature and websites that try to achieve the best result in using concordances in language teaching. Websites such as www.lextutor.ca provide activities, worksheets as well as online material to make the best use of this technique. However, we do not aspire to implement all aspects of DDL because of time and technology limitations, but rather adopt a partial perspective in that matter. We believe that using concordances to create activity worksheets, concurrent with the explicit teaching of rules in our classes, may help our students build more robust links between function, meaning and form, and that these activities will give them sufficient opportunities to search for, find out, and in the process, construct, the target structure efficiently and in a relatively short time.

Possible Implementations in the Classroom

In Appendix I, there is a sample activity worksheet we prepared that can be used as a supplementary activity while teaching “anything” and “nothing”. In Unit 8A of the NEF Pre-Intermediate Course book, the grammar point is the uses of something, anything, and nothing. As usual, the course book introduces the topic through a context that provides a link between function and form. The context is weekends and people who like or dislike weekends talking about the things they do on weekends by using some-, any- and no- expressions with -body and -thing, and -where endings. After being introduced to the meaning and function, learners are referred to the back of the book to explicitly study the point of focus. Again as usual, the rules are given with a few examples and learners are then directly instructed to proceed with exercises. Normally, in this phase we explain the rules in more depth on the board by giving more examples and then go to the exercise part. But as we mentioned before, the integration process presents some difficulties; that is, learners generally have problems digesting the structure, possibly because they have questions in their minds and it may take time and more exercises to answer those questions, time which is usually not there when needed, especially in crowded classes such as ours. Consequently, we believe that including some concordance activities at this stage would be extremely beneficial. We have already done this in our own classrooms by accessing the webpage www.lextutor.ca, opening the concordance page, entering some parameters such as the keywords, anything and nothing, and the corpus we wished to use (written BNC). The website then listed all the instances of these expressions, out of which we selected a handful and copied them to a Word document. Next, we prepared two sets of activities; one finding the rule about the topic, another for practicing with the target items by filling in gaps as can be seen in Appendix I.

The beauty of the whole thing is the naturalness and richness of the data. It is natural because it is not drawn from a grammar book based on the intuitions of a single person, but
rather from the collective data of native speaker language production. It is rich because one can see many uses of the target items in many different contexts and pick out the ones that one wishes to focus on. Usually some tailoring of the data is required such as cutting out some portions of sentences, and selecting only grammatically correct sentences because native speaker production does not always mean pure grammar. After trimming the data in these respects, it is possible to provide a systematic and comprehensible set of input from which the learners may derive the rule through induction and self-exploration, hence the constructivist nature of the technique.

The second implementation we propose is about the uses of neither/so + auxiliary in sentences expressing parallelism between events or states. The point is handled in Unit 8D of the same book. The activity we prepared is given demonstrated in Appendix II. Similar to the first implementation, a concordance list is prepared to give a comparison of the uses. One rule completion activity and one structure analysis activity are added to the concordance worksheet.

The last implementation aims to familiarize learners with different uses of to + infinitive. This is illustrated in Appendix III. In the same course book, Unit 5A focuses on the use of to with certain verbs and adjectives, and on its use to express purpose. Similar to the points we made above, we think the course book does not provide a sufficient set of examples for students to construct the rules and functions of the target item. Once again we designed a concordance activity by taking the same steps as explained above. This time, we ask learners to study the sentences and work out the functions of to, used with some adjectives, verbs, or as a purpose marker.

Limitations of Concordances

As we hinted above, as much as this technique has merits that make it worth taking pains to implement the technique, concordances have some drawbacks of their own. First, a concordance can be hard to prepare on the part of the teacher, and even harder for the learner. For that reason we did not extend the use of concordances outside of the classroom in this article, as their usage may become complicated within a wider context. To use concordances, a teacher should be able to use a computer program or a website and be able to set the parameters suited to his/her teaching group. In actuality we have found this to be a rather simple process, especially once one has become acclimated to using it. However, the job is not finished when the teacher simply accesses the data. The data needs to be processed before it is brought into the class. It needs to be copied from the program or website onto a Word document and the corresponding exercises have to be written. Another setback concerns the nature of concordances. They may not be suitable for certain grammar points. For example, it would be hard to provide a concordance worksheet to compare the uses of the future tense in going to and will. It may also be hard to find instances in which the spontaneity of will, and the planned nature of going to, are highlighted. In such cases it may be more efficient and less time-consuming to come up with contrived examples.

Conclusions

In this article, we tried to address the issue of grammar teaching and integration of function, meaning, and form by the learner. In our course book, as in many others, a context is provided before each grammar point to familiarize the learner with the target item before explicitly focusing on it. Afterwards, the point is covered quickly with generally inadequate examples which are neither quantitatively, nor qualitatively, sufficient for learners to internalize the rules. Here we emphasize the time that the learner takes to analyze the instances of the target structure and construct the point himself/herself. Concordances are probably best suited for this end, as they have the potential to show the pattern of a certain structure. When prepared appropriately by the teacher, concordances can serve as good supplementary material in teaching grammar due to their natural and rich quality. They are natural as they provide authentic examples of language use by native speakers, and they are rich as they illustrate various uses of a certain structure or item.

Regardless of the weaknesses, in terms of hardships involved in preparation and limited extent of use, concordances are proving to be a constructive tool to make use of in the language teaching classroom.

The abstract of this study was presented at the 5th International FELT Conference in Istanbul in 2012.

References

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Konkordancijų kaip papildomos medžiagos naudojimas mokant gramatikos

Santrauka

Daugelyje Turkijos mokymo įstaigų, įskaitant universitetus, valstybinės ir privačios bendrojo lavinimo mokyklas, mokant gramatikos susiduria su autentiškumo trūkumo problema, nes dažniausiai mokoma tik taisyklių. Kai kurie mokymo teorės ir -mokymai mielai taiko dedukcinį mokymo metodą, aiškin-
dami gramatikos struktūras, mažiau pasitelkdamai įvairių kontekstų pavyzdžių. Taip pamoka tampa tradicinė anglų kalbos pamoka, kuriuoje gausu mecha-
niškai atliekamų pratimų, studentų vadinamų „Aš einu į kiną” tipo pratimais. Dažniausiai gali būti, kad studentai, kurie mokosi kalbos patys ją konstruodami, nesėkmingai naudoja tokius pavyzdžius, nes užtikrina tikslų ir formų, galima tikėtis didesnės sėkmės. Šio straipsnio tikslas – pateikti tam tikrų šiuolaikinių kalbos mokymo praktikos išvadų, parodant pavyzdžinės gramatikos mo-

Siekdami įveikti šią problemą, siūlome Data-Driven Language Learning metodą akcentuodami tekstynų lingvistiką (corpus linguistics). Mes laikome, kad studentai yra mokymosi proceso dalyviai, kurie mokosi kalbos patys ją konstruodami, o ne kalbėdami apie ją. Integruojant reikšmę ir formą, galima tikėtis didesnės sėkmės. Šio straipsnio tikslas – pateikti tam tikrų šiuolaikinių kalbos mokymo praktikos išvadų, parodant pavyzdžinės gramatikos mo-

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APPENDIX 1

Part I. Read the sentences below, and fill in the blanks in the rules with *nothing or anything*:

a. We use _____ with negative sentences and the meaning is negative.

b. We use _____ with positive sentences, but the meaning is negative.

c. _____ also means "everything" in positive sentences.

1) … letter again and again. "That's wonderful news," he said. "NOTHING can stop us now!" The next day, when Edward came down.
2) … the cabin boy. "But nothing, Tom!" replied Pugwash sternly. "NOTHING to do with you that is. This is man's work. Run along…
3) … taken to be true. It's the currency of living. There may be NOTHING behind it, but it doesn't make any difference so long…
4) … would happen next. The overheard conversation had conveyed NOTHING useful to her. The princes had not been mentioned an…
5) … grace by the easy means of a self-chosen deprivation did NOTHING to mitigate the deeper shame; some original wrong…
6) … I saw it in the paper, and I've never been so pleased about ANYTHING in all my life.
7) … Elisabeth never craved to remove items; to take away ANYTHING from The Tamarisks would be, she felt, to disfigure…
8) … upset him, and that was innovation; if the Vicar discovered ANYTHING new, on either the theological or the social…
9) … "I will be arrested again. They can arrest me; they can do ANYTHING they want…
10) … service satellite for Europe. We won't actually make or do ANYTHING, but it will be really neat lying in the meadows…

Part II. Fill in the blanks with *nothing or anything*.

1. They asked me about my political views, but I don't know _____ about politics, at all.
2. There is ____ to worry about, said the doctor.
3. There was an accident yesterday, but fortunately ____ serious happened.
4. The teller said to the bank robber: "I'll do ____ you want. Just don't hurt me."
5. When the boss accused him, employee said that he didn't do ____ wrong.

APPENDIX 2

Part I. Look at the sentences and complete the rules with *so or neither*.

a. We use ____ to say that there is a negative thing in common between things or people.

b. We use ____ to say that there is a positive thing in common between things or people.

1) … Carnegie and Toni Besset dropped out of a rear door. **SO** did hostages Casey, Cleveland, and Mullen.
2) … the books of the school hold a memorial to her; and **SO** do the hearts of students and of teachers.
3) … the businessmen and racketeers also have a story. And **SO** do the prostitutes.
4) … physical exercise raises the appestat. **SO** does cold weather. In moderate doses, alcohol narcotizes.
5) … first communion. No more. My mother was deeply religious. **SO** was my brother. He knelt down at his bed as long as he…
6) … It goes all watery. Look I'm not amused at all. Well **NEITHER** am I. na na na na na He said he wants butter. Yeah.
7) … fun with their families. Camp meals are no great problem. **NEITHER** are beds, thanks to air mattresses and sleeping bags…
8) … I didn't know which animal to choose and **NEITHER** did the robot. Hee-Haw and Hoo-Woo didn't understand.
9) … 't like doing this. Pardon? And I don't like this weather. **NEITHER** do I. It's terrible, isn't it? Sometimes it's colder…
10) … he's about two pound weakling! I wouldn't go that far. No. **NEITHER** would I. I noticed! That's right! Would she never go…

Part II. Underline the verbs or auxiliaries that the auxiliaries with *so and neither* refer to.

1) … Carnegie and Toni Besset dropped out of a rear door. **SO** did hostages Casey, Cleveland, and Mullen.
2) … I wouldn't go that far. **NEITHER** would I. I noticed! That's right! Would she never go…

APPENDIX 3

Read the sentences, and match the uses of *to/not to* with the sentences.

a. purpose  b. after some adjectives  c. after some verbs

1) … help colleges build dormitories. The education bill appears **TO** be temporarily stalled in the Rules Committee.
2) … a title like that, but I knew you'd like it". "Yes", he lied **TO** shorten the conversation, "I still have it…
3) … homes in case of disaster", he said. "Nobody really expects **TO** evacuate. I think everybody is agreed that we need to…
4) … well he put the video on you see of erm Queen. So I went intihere **TO** watch it. And I said to him last night "Is that…
5) … up to them, and to consider what further developments are necessary **TO** achieve adequate performance.
6) … where he had left them. He smiled to himself, and decided **NOT TO** mention them till Dolores did. It was too easy…
7) "Tell me about Minerva, how she behaved, what she did **TO** please you", "I'll tell you nothing. I don't ask you who…
8) … cab with his money. The victim was beaten when he attempted **TO** stop the bandit. He said the assailant, who was…
9) … him with odd, coy looks. Clearly she had been instructed **NOT TO** say a word. For some reason this ellipsis in the…
10) … chapters to of had one to about chapter seven were very easy **TO** understand, once you understand what they say…
11) … and cookies because alcoholics require a lot of sweets **TO** replace the sugar in their system. Mrs. Marr also has a…

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