The role of corpora in language teaching and learning

Toshpulatova.M.Q
TerSu teacher

The corpus-based approach to linguistics and language education has gained prominence over the past four decades, particularly since the mid-1980s. This is because corpus analysis can be illuminating 'in virtually all branches of linguistics or language learning' (Leech 1997: 9; cf. also Biber, Conrad and Reppen 1998: 11). One of the strengths of corpus data lies in its empirical nature, which pools together the intuitions of a great number of speakers and makes linguistic analysis more objective . Unsurprisingly, corpora have been used extensively in nearly all branches of linguistics including, for example, lexicographic and lexical studies, grammatical studies, language variation studies, contrastive and translation studies, diachronic studies, semantics, pragmatics, stylistics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, forensic linguistics, and language pedagogy. Corpora have passed into general usage in linguistics in spite of the fact that they still occasionally attract hostile criticism (e.g. Widdowson 1990, 2000)

Indirect use of corpora The use of corpora in language teaching and learning has been more indirect than direct. This is perhaps because the direct use of corpora in language pedagogy is restricted by a number of factors including, for example, the level and experience of learners, time constraints, curricular requirements, knowledge and skills required of teachers for corpus analysis and pedagogical mediation, and the access to resources such as computers, and appropriate software tools and corpora, or a combination of these (see the concluding section for further discussion). This section explores how corpora have impacted on language pedagogy indirectly.

Direct use of corpora While indirect uses such as syllabus design and materials development are closely associated with what to teach, corpora have also provided valuable insights into how to teach. Of three focuses, direct uses of corpora include 'teaching about', 'teaching to exploit', and 'exploiting to teach', with the latter two relating to how to use. Given a number of restricting factors as noted in the previous section, direct uses have so far been confined largely to learning at more advanced levels, for example, in tertiary education, whereas in general English language teaching .'Teaching about' means teaching corpus linguistics as an academic subject like other sub-disciplines of linguistics such as syntax and pragmatics. Corpus linguistics has now found its way into the curricula for linguistics and language related degree programmes at both postgraduate and undergraduate levels in many universities around the world. 'Teaching to exploit' means providing students with 'hands-on' know-how, as emphasized in McEnery, Xiao and Tono (2006), so that they can exploit corpora for their own purposes. 'Exploiting to teach' means using a corpus-based approach to teaching language and linguistics courses discourse analysis which would otherwise be taught using non-corpus-based methods. **Teaching oriented corpora:**Teaching-oriented corpora are particularly useful in teaching languages for specific purposes (LSP corpora) and in research on L1 (developmental corpora) and L2 (learner corpora) language acquisition. Such corpora can be used directly or indirectly in language pedagogy as discussed in the previous sections.

To conclude we close the discussion of using corpora in language pedagogy, it is appropriate to address some objections to the use of corpora in language learning and teaching. While frequency and authenticity are often considered two of the most important advantages of using corpora, they are also the locus of criticism from language pedagogy researchers.

In conclusion, if these two tasks are accomplished, it is our view that corpora will not only revolutionize the teaching of subjects such as grammar in the 21st century as Conrad (2000) has

predicated, they will also fundamentally change the ways we approach language education, including both what is taught and how it is taught.

References

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2. Aston , G., Bernardini, S. and Stewart, D. (eds.) (2004) *Corpora and Language Learners*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.