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STUDENT CORPORA AS SOURCES FOR RESEARCH AND TEACHING: A CASE STUDY¹

This article elaborates the importance of research-based course design and innovation using an example of the analysis of native and non-native student corpora compiled for the purpose of improving a course in academic writing. This particular analysis focuses on the students' authorial self-mention in abstracts written for their MA thesis. The parallel native and non-native corpora have shown that native writers opt much more often for overt presence in the text by using first person singular pronouns, while non-native writers choose to hide their presence by using nouns like 'author' or 'writer'.

КОРПУС АКАДЕМИЧЕСКОГО ПИСЬМА КАК ИСТОЧНИК ДЛЯ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ И ПРЕПОДАВАНИЯ

В статье раскрывается важность разработки и внедрения курсов, основанных на исследованиях, проведенных на материале письменных работ коренного и некоренного студенческого сообщества, составленного с целью улучшения курса академического письма. Основное внимание обращается на авторское самоупоминание студентов в рефератах, написанных для их магистерских диссертаций. Параллельные корпуса носителей и неносителей показали, что писатели-носители гораздо чаще выбирают явное присутствие в тексте, используя местоимения первого лица единственного числа, в то время как писатели-неносители предпочитают скрывать свое присутствие, используя такие существительные, как «автор» или «писатель».

Tertiary education, more than other educational levels, requires constant improvement which both triggers and is triggered by advancements in science. This, in turn, means that courses which students take during their studies have to be occasionally redesigned and innovated so that these improvements reflect scientific breakthroughs and

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new knowledge. This is valid for all fields of education including foreign language education.

In case of the studies of foreign languages, the introduction of any kind of change in the syllabus or the design of a new course requires a set of informed decisions that are based on different types of preliminary research. In some cases educators rely, as already said, on innovations in science, while in others their focus is on job market requirements, especially with practical, professional courses. Finally, another factor that may play a crucial role are the needs of students of that particular branch of science. In any case, the choice of the research procedure will depend on the course that is being “re-designed” and what the course teacher wants to achieve with the course.

In foreign language studies, besides all other equally important subjects taught, various courses in academic skills play a very important role because they equip students with skills necessary throughout their studies, such as reading academic texts, writing various types of genres, presenting on different topics, etc. In other words, regardless of whether students opt to specialize in linguistics, literature, culture studies, language teaching or anything else, they will need to possess skills that help them tackle academic material from a number of different perspectives. For that reason courses in academic skills are considered to be both essential and fundamental for any kind of success during the studies and later in the career.

There are many coursebooks useful for teaching these courses, but very often a particular cultural setting requires more preparation, research and details that cannot be found in general coursebooks. For example, Serbian students of English language and literature often rely on academic traditions from Serbian (Blagojević 2007), which makes their academic writing *non-English* and may cause problems for them if they choose to pursue an academic career after their BA studies. In order to find ways to help Serbian students write their essays and papers more in accordance with the Anglophone academic tradition, teachers first have to determine the problem areas where Serbian students’ academic writing differs from native speakers’ academic writing and then they have to work on fixing that. Referring back to coursebooks mentioned earlier, they usually do not contain these kinds of instructions because they are usually made for an international audience and do not contain culture-specific issues.

A possible way of determining these problem areas is building a corpus of students’ writing and conducting analyses of various segments (metadiscourse, lexis, structure, argumentation, etc.). Furthermore, in order to establish with more accuracy where problems lie, teachers and researchers can opt for building a parallel native and non-native corpus

for comparison in order to determine with great precision in what ways native and non-native writing differ. Both corpora should come from approximately similar sources (e.g. college students' work like seminar papers or MA thesis) and should cover similar academic fields (e.g. linguistics or literature) (for more information on corpus metadata see Varga et al. 2020).

One possible procedure to build a corpus, developed during a bilateral project between the University of Novi Sad, Serbia, and the University of Osijek, Croatia (2019–2022) will be described in the continuation of the paper along with one possible example of its use and usefulness. The procedure was developed as a joint effort of all researchers from both national teams and stems from many years of experience in teaching various academic skills and mentoring students in the process of writing their MA thesis. However, this does not mean that this procedure is the only one possible; it is just an idea that was tried in practice and that proved to be useful in many ways for the two teams involved.

In any case, the first step in building a student corpus is actually to decide on the aim of the research and expected outcome, which provides a framework within which future activities will take place. Then researchers should collect adequate students' work and digitalize it, taking care to choose the types of texts which will allow for meaningful comparison (summaries, essays, MA theses, etc.). In the case of the aforementioned project, the team opted for entire MA theses because they contain several different sections that could and should be analyzed separately: abstracts, introductions, theoretical frameworks, results, discussions, and conclusions. What follows is adding the necessary metadata (genre, register, discipline, topic, rhetorical structure of the text, writer, level of proficiency, L1 background, institutional background) as Varga et al. (2020) describe in detail in their paper. Finally, what is left for researchers to do is to select particular topics they wish to investigate further and search the corpus/corpora with one of the available tools (SketchEngine or AntConc). By looking at the concordances that tools for corpus analysis yield researchers can get a good idea of what a certain linguistic phenomenon looks like in native and non-native students' writing and then use these findings to advance their classes and instruct students how to improve their writing.

One such example is a research study by Radić-Bojanić and Molnar (2022), which investigates authorial self-mention of native and non-native students of English. Hyland and Tse (2004) and Hyland (2005) subsume self-mentions under the concept of metadiscourse, which broadly refers to the linguistic devices used by writers to organize ideas

in the articulate text. Hyland (2001: 221) defines them as ways in which authors of research articles opt to present their persona in a text by choosing one of the personal pronouns. They can deliberately choose to minimize their presence in the text, which enables the author to impart objectivity to the text, or to emphasize it, which gives credit to the author.

In the case study described here, the authorial self-mention in the first person singular (*I, me, my, mine*) vastly differs between native and non-native writers, since native writers use it 20 times more often than non-native writers. Furthermore, the authorial self-mention in the first person plural (*we, us, our, ours*) is used twice more often by native writers than by non-native ones. Finally, the first person noun as the third type of authorial self-mention was found eight times more often in the non-native material in comparison to the native corpus.

This great disparity can be explained by the following: native novice writers come from an academic writing tradition that encourages self-promotion, individual contribution and competitiveness (see Vassileva 1998 for similar results in previous research studies) and, therefore, these authors most frequently opt for the use of *I, me, my, mine* to express their own contribution in the research. On the other hand, non-native novice writers apparently come from cultures which do not encourage self-promotion and were most likely taught in their academic writing classes to use *the author* or *the writer* to refer to their own contribution in their research.

These and similar kinds of findings based on corpus research can clearly indicate problem areas that need to be addressed in the classroom. Such results have “implications for the study of intercultural rhetoric and composition studies, literacy, discourse analysis, research article writing as well as for the teaching of English for Academic Purposes to non-native speakers of English” (Radić-Bojanić and Molnar 2022: 346).

This particular case presented in this paper is an example of how teachers arrive at research-informed syllabus changes regarding the development of the student-writer’s discursive competence. Being familiar with different L1 and L2 tendencies provides instructors with additional background knowledge of their learners and can help guide instruction, which means that corpus-based research can yield useful results that can feed instruction.

Pedagogical implications of this case study stipulate that instruction (informed by research results) should help L2 writers to establish a framework for analyzing and adhering to context-specific expectations in academic writing and craft an authorial stance marked by precision. Using one case study as an example, this paper has illustrated how

student corpora can be useful in the process of diagnosing problem areas in students' knowledge, skills and competences. Once the material is compiled, it can be constantly addressed in the process of re-designing a course and preparing course material because it will pinpoint precise problem areas that currently present problems to students. This will help teachers make informed decisions and target the very issues that might otherwise be overlooked in the classroom.

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