Using Corpora in Language Teaching: Resources, Methods, and Evaluations

Sandra Götz

Abstract:
This volume offers a selection of 17 papers presented at the seventh "Teaching and Language Corpora" Conference, which was held in Paris in 2006. The volume is divided into four parts that deal with new methods, research, applications, and evaluation of corpora and tools used in foreign language teaching. Some articles also include interdisciplinary approaches to using corpora in other fields as well as theoretical, corpus-linguistic concepts. This highly diverse selection of state of the art papers is of great interest to researchers and teachers alike and covers a variety of topics across the field of applied corpus linguistics.

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Kübler, Natalie (ed.): Corpora, Language Teaching, and Resources: From Theory to Practice. Bern/Berlin/Brussels/Frankfurt/New York/Oxford/Vienna: Peter Lang, 2011. 340 pp., Paperback, €67.60. ISBN 978-3-0343-0054-4

The proceedings of the seventh "Teaching and Language Corpora" (TaLC) conference, edited by Natalie Kübler, follow the tradition of the TaLC community and present a selection of papers given in Paris in 2006, fortunately available in printed form now. The volume contains studies of a broad topical range relevant to this research area. The contributions are grouped into four sections. While the first section focuses on methodological innovations of corpora and language teaching, the second section concentrates on learner corpus research. The third section presents new resources and tools and the last section features evaluations of using corpora in foreign language teaching.

The first section, entitled "Bringing corpus use to effective practice", takes up the bulk of the present volume and offers a very diverse collection of papers concerned with the integration of corpora into language teaching. Alex Boulton's paper, for instance, deals with practical issues of integrating corpus-linguistic methods into the daily teaching routine. He critically discusses in detail the methodological and pragmatic challenges of using corpora in the classroom, but largely promotes corpus-based teaching and learning. He takes an interdisciplinary perspective and reports on a classroom-study of 30 students using existing and free resources and corpus-linguistic methods to answer questions about language as well as other areas. He shows how, even across disciplines, using corpus-linguistic methodology can have cross-fertilizing and highly beneficial learning effects. His hands-on and practical suggestions of how corpus-linguistic tools and methods can be introduced and integrated meaningfully into the classroom are highly relevant and valuable for teachers and researchers from various disciplines.

The second part of the book includes a comparatively small collection of two papers on learner corpus analyses and their relevance for English language teaching. Here, after Jimenez-Caycedo and Gebhard's genre- and corpus-based study of L2 writing development, Maria Belen Díez Bedmar and Antonio Vicente Casas Pedrosa report on a longitudinal study of advanced Spanish learners' use of prepositions. This high-frequency phenomenon is particularly error-prone even across advanced foreign language learners and thus a highly relevant research

KULT_online. Review Journal for the Study of Culture
32 / 2012
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topic. Using an error-tagged four-year learner corpus, their study shows both positive and negative developments with regard to the number of errors committed by the learners. The authors interpret L1-transfer for prepositions with negative evolution patterns (e.g. in) and "intensive listening input of prepositions" for prepositions with positive evolution patters (e.g. of, in, to, for, by). These interpretations seem logical, however, prepositions with negative evolution patterns seem to occur with a nearly similar frequency (e.g. on and with), and similar patterns evolve for learners with different L1s. Since their methodology and findings are highly innovative and allow for relevant insights, future studies on learners with different L1s may complement their findings in order to define universal processes of the use of prepositions in second-language-acquisition.

The third part of the volume tackles resources and tools, and all five papers deal with the creation of new materials for using corpora for language-pedagogical purposes. For example, Philippe Martin's contribution introduces a highly innovative application of WinPitch (http://www.winpitch.com), a software program specialized in speech analysis and dedicated to the teaching of spoken language features. The software allows for convenient transcriptions of sound files including bidirectional pointers between text and sound, which can be aligned with any kind of units ranging from phones to syllables, words, stress groups, syntactic units, sentences or whole turns. The value for language teaching is clearly pointed out and lies in the diversity of the program: Any part of the data can be accessed with its acoustic analysis (i.e. spectrogram, intensity and melodic curves). This allows for a variety of options for language-pedagogical purposes, e.g. teaching can focus on certain words or intonational patterns of complete phrases or even clauses, focus on the rate, rhythm, and melody of noun phrases, prosodic factors associated with a change of turn, characteristics of overlapping speech, etc. Learners can even record their own speech segments and the software provides learners with visual feedback that compares their speech samples to the output of native speakers. This paper shows impressively how using the presented software meaningfully can be an extremely fruitful and highly recommendable resource for the teaching and learning of spoken language features in and outside the classroom.

The final section of the volume consists of two papers that deal with evaluations of using corpora for language-pedagogical purposes. While Isabella Chiari reports on teaching variation in Italian by making use of corpora, Geoffrey Williams analyses current electronic dictionaries in comparison with language corpora with respect to their usefulness for users of English for specific purposes (ESP). He compares the entries of certain lexemes in three major learners' dictionaries with corpus-based lexical searches of the same lexemes in order to find out if the dictionaries represent these scientific uses sufficiently. Williams's results are very diverse, with certain words or word-forms being represented well in the dictionaries (e.g. chromosome), some only implicitly (e.g. activate), and others not at all (e.g. probe). Due to his convincing analysis, he stresses the necessity of including a variety of studies on specialized corpora that would enable making worthwhile adjustments to the dictionary entries. In ESP contexts, Williams makes a plea for a paradigm shift from learner to user dictionaries.

All in all, Corpora, Language, Teaching, and Resources provides a diverse overview of state of the art papers on methodology, research, application, and evaluation of corpora in language teaching on various levels. The overwhelming majority of papers provide the reader with very insightful innovations and research findings in the field. Especially due to its thematic diversity, this volume makes a very strong contribution that allows the reader to follow the vibrant and dynamic innovations in the field of applied corpus linguistics for language-pedagogical purposes.