ESL Teachers’ Questions
and Corpus Evidence*

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In the last ten years, more and more attention has been paid to the importance of raising the language awareness of language teachers. This is an area in which corpus linguistics has a unique contribution to make. With the help of a concordancer, linguistic features that may be overlooked can be made salient and intertextual information that is implicit in a single text can be made explicit. This paper reports on a study of how corpus evidence was used to address questions sent by English language teachers in Hong Kong to a dedicated website. More than one thousand grammar questions sent to the website over a period of eight years were examined. Three types of most frequently asked questions were identified. The paper discusses how corpus evidence was used to help teachers to notice features and patterns which have escaped their attention and to question long-standing assumptions and misconceptions. It shows how subsequent interrogation of corpus data stimulated by teachers’ question often led to new insights into linguistic patterns and language use.

Keywords: teachers’ language awareness, synonyms, collocation, semantic prosody

1. Corpus studies in applied linguistics

In the last ten years or so, interest in corpus linguistics has grown exponentially in the field of applied linguistics. One major application of corpus studies is the use of corpus evidence as a basis for making decisions about the goals and the curriculum of ESL and EFL teaching. A number of comparative studies have been conducted on the frequency of occurrence and the semantic scope of lexical and grammatical items in textbooks and in corpora. These studies show
that many linguistic items which have a high frequency of occurrence in corpora are often given little pedagogical attention in ESL and EFL curricula and textbooks (see for example Biber, Conrad & Reppen 1994; Grabowski & Mindt 1995; Holmes 1988; Kennedy 1998; Ljung 1991). They suggest that by focusing on the usual rather than the exceptional, ESL and EFL teachers can help learners acquire the target language more efficiently, especially at elementary and intermediate levels.

Another major application is the use of corpora in classroom learning. Corpus data have been integrated into curriculum materials (see for example Carter & McCarthy 1997), and corpus frequency data have been used to automatically generate cloze tests (see for example Coniam 1997). More and more corpora of various sizes are now available for access by learners on the web. To help learners see the relevance of corpus data to their learning, grammar exercises and tests are often included on these sites so that learners can consult corpus data while completing them (see for example Tim Johns’ Data-driving Learning Page at http://web.bham.ac.uk/johnstf/ for a list of websites of a similar nature.) As Johns (1991) points out, this kind of data-driven learning approach encourages learners to discover language for themselves and to formulate rules that can account for the patterns that they have observed (see also Tognini-Bonelli 2001).

One area that has not received much attention is the relevance of corpus linguistics to teacher education, particularly in the area of teachers’ language awareness (see also Allan 1999; Berry 1994; Hunston 1995). In the last ten years, more and more attention has been paid to the importance of raising teachers’ language awareness (see for example the collection of papers in Language Awareness 12 (2) (2003); Bygate, Tonkyn, & Williams 1994 and in James & Garrett 1991; Hawkins 1999). This is an area in which corpus linguistics has a unique contribution to make. With the help of a concordancer, linguistic features which have been overlooked can be made salient and intertextual information which is implicit in a single text can be made explicit (see Hunston 1995). Corpus-based investigations can help teachers to reflect on their knowledge of the language and to make their tacit knowledge explicit (see also Barlow 1996). Very often the impetus for teachers to reflect on the language comes from students’ questions, particularly when the teachers do not have ready answers to these questions.

This paper reports on a study of lexico-grammatical questions sent by ESL teachers to a website, TeleNex. Over one thousand questions sent over a period of eight years were examined. The questions were categorized according
to lexico-grammatical areas. Three areas about which questions were mostly frequently asked were selected for detailed examination. The paper shows how corpus evidence was used by language specialists supporting the website to help teachers to answer students’ questions that are often not addressed in reference grammars, to question long-standing assumptions, to gain a better understanding of neglected aspects of language structures and use, and to make explicit their tacit knowledge about the target language. It also shows how further interrogation of corpus data stimulated by teachers’ questions led to new insights into linguistic patterns and language use.

To contextualize the discussion in the rest of this paper, I shall provide some brief background information about the TeleNex website.

2. Teachers of English Language Education Nexus (TeleNex)

TeleNex is a website set up in 1993 to provide professional support to English language teachers in Hong Kong schools. It is supported by a team of language specialists at the Teachers of English Language Education Centre (TELEC) of the Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong. (For a detailed discussion of the design and theoretical motivation of this website, see Tsui 1996; Tsui & Ki 2002). The website includes a conference area in which a number of discussion corners have been set up. It is open for access by the general public. However, in order to provide an anxiety-free environment in which teachers feel free to ask questions in relation to their teaching and exchange ideas, the conference area is open only to school teachers in Hong Kong who have registered as users. One of the corners is the Language Corner (formerly called the Grammar Corner) in which questions about English language are discussed. Teachers send questions to this corner to seek help and advice. The questions are responded to by both school teachers and language specialists in TELEC, some of whom are full-time staff specifically recruited to support the website and some are academic staff in the Faculty of Education. When answering teachers’ questions, TELEC staff will refer to corpus data for evidence of language structure and use. Initially, the corpus used for reference consisted of a five-million word native speaker collection, referred to as Modern English Corpus (MEC) in this paper, which consists of one million words of spoken texts from radio phone-ins, panel discussions, casual conversations and lecture and two million words of literary and academic texts and two million words from feature articles in the South China Morning Post, a major English news-
paper in Hong Kong. These feature articles were written or edited by native speakers of English in Hong Kong. Though the native speaker awareness of the writers or editors may be tempered slightly by local words and wordings, the writers were definitely “expert users” of English (Carter & McCarthy 2001). On-line corpora, such as CoBuild Direct and British National Corpus (BNC), were also used.

Subsequently, in addition to using commercially available corpora, TELEC built its own corpora, referred to as TeleCorpora, to include a much bigger corpus of feature articles from the South China Morning Post (20 million words, referred to as SCMP Corpus) and a learner corpus. The learner corpus is still being constructed and is around 2.2 million words at present. It consists of a sub-corpus of primary school students’ writing and a sub-corpus of secondary school students’ written and spoken English. TeleCorpora is now available for on-line access by registered users of the TeleNex website (http://www.telenex.hku.hk).

3. Teachers’ questions and corpus evidence

The questions sent by teachers to TeleNex are either students’ questions that teachers have difficulty answering or teachers’ own queries about lexico-grammatical rules when they come across conflicting linguistic evidence in textbooks or in other published materials. Over one thousand questions sent by teachers to the website during a period of eight years were examined and categorized according to lexico-grammatical areas. Altogether 16 categories were identified (see Table 1).

As shown in Table 1, the most frequently asked questions (225 in total) are questions about lexical items that teachers take to be synonyms or near-synonyms and have problems explaining to students their difference in meaning or usage. The second type relates to linguistic evidence which seems to contradict the grammar rules that teachers were taught as learners. Questions relating to countable and uncountable nouns are among the most frequently asked questions in this type (129 in total). The third type pertains to prescriptive stylistic rules which seem to have been passed on from generation to generation. These questions relate mostly to sentence structures and the use of connectives (147 in total). (For a discussion of other types of questions, see Tsui 2004a). In the ensuing discussion, I shall cite sample messages that teachers sent and discuss how corpus data was used to address teachers’ questions. In
Table 1. Categorization of teachers’ questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lexico-grammar</th>
<th>No. of Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Commonly confused expressions / words which are semantically close / meanings of words</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Sentence structure / connectives</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Countable and uncountable nouns</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Prepositions</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Agreement (singular and plural)</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Adverbs</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Adjectives</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Tenses</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Active / passive voice</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Determiners</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Collocation</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Phrasal Verbs</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Statements and Questions</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Modals</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Pronouns</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Conditionals</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1294</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to preserve the flavour of the messages, the messages are cited verbatim with no editing. The teachers and TELEC staff cited shall remain anonymous.

3.1 Type I: Synonyms

The question of how synonymous synonyms are has plagued many language teachers. They are often asked by students if there is any difference in the meanings and the usage of lexical items which are considered synonymous. Partington (1998) observes that new vocabulary items are often introduced to learners by building on items that they have already learnt. A strategy commonly used by teachers to explain a new word is to provide students with a synonym for the word. In fact, “definition through synonym” is one of the distinctive features of dictionaries (Partington 1998: 29). However, items that are completely synonymous in all their meanings and contexts of occurrence, which Lyons (1981: 149) refers to as “absolute synonyms”, are very rare. This is because it would be very inefficient for a language to have words that have identical meaning and can be used interchangeably in all contexts (see also Cruse 1986; Partington 1998). Yet synonyms are often presented in dictionaries and thesauruses as though they are absolute synonyms and important contextual information is often not
included. This is one of the major sources of confusion not only for second language learners but also for teachers.

The following are two questions teachers asked about the synonyms “big” versus “large”, and “finally” versus “lastly”.

3.1.1 “Big” versus “large”
Teacher A sent a message asking if there is any rule governing the use of “big” and “large”.

Teacher A:
Hi there,

A student asked my colleague when to use “big” and when to use “large”. I couldn’t give her a definite answer. Is there some kind of rule that we should follow?

In response, Teacher B wrote as follows.

Teacher B:

*Longman Language Activator* writes: ‘big - of greater than average size (slightly more informal than large)’ and ‘large - of greater than average size (slightly more formal than big)’.

The stylistic differentiation in the usage and the mutually defining explanations of these two words provided by the *Longman Language Activator* were probably not very helpful. Subsequently, Teacher C asked Teacher B for further explanations. Instead of providing an explanation, Teacher B told her to look it up in Michael Swan’s *Practical English Usage* (1995) and said that she might be able to find some helpful examples.

The differences between “big” and “large” have been discussed by Biber et al. (1998) on the basis of corpus evidence. Using the *Longman-Lancaster Corpus*, they found that “big” has a much higher frequency of occurrence in fiction (1,235 counts) than in academic texts (84 counts) whereas “large” occurs much more frequently in academic texts (2,342 counts) than in fiction (701 counts). In both fiction and academic prose, “big” is most commonly used to describe physical size. “Large”, on the other hand, is most commonly used in academic prose to describe quantity or amount. In fiction, however, “large” is commonly used to describe physical size. Since there is a much higher frequency of occurrence of “large” in academic texts in which it is used to refer to quantity or amount, one could say that the evidence provided by Biber et al. seems to suggest that the major difference between “big” and “large is that
the former is used most frequently to describe physical size whereas the latter is most frequently used to describe amount and quantity.

To respond to Teacher A’s question, TELEC staff searched the MEC and found that there are several ways in which “large” and “big” are different, some of which accord with Biber et al.’s observation.

Firstly, as Biber et al. observed, there is a strikingly high number of instances of “large” collocating with measurement words. For example,

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this on a large scale. the the material requirements are so stringent
were large in size and low in cost in relation to their size?
to a very large extent. <§ 2> a subjective thing, people who can be
quite a large degree. the time when they prepare their new lecture
sing for large increase in the public sector (all talking)... now he
```

As pointed out by one of the TELEC staff in his response to the teachers, neither the dictionary nor the book by Swan mentions that there is a high frequency of “measurement” words collocating with “large” but not with “big”.

Secondly, “large” can be followed by a wide range of expressions of quantity whereas “big” cannot.

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to pay large sums of money to jump the queue in congested
sometimes large number of successive steps. For example
a very large amount of time for many complicated elementary
burning large quantities of fossil fuels. The build up of carbon
such a large volume of replies at such short notice. It may well
to my large collection of ties and braces; and will pay for them
cover a large range of things like the patients age, the patient
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A subsequent search on a much bigger corpus, BNC, confirmed this finding. There is only one instance of “big” collocating with “range” as an expression of quantity in “a big range of sites both in size and location”, and one instance of “big” in “a big collection of jazz records.”

Thirdly, there seems to be a high frequency of the occurrence of “large” in the context of discussing part-whole relationships. For example,

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to donate such a large part of the collection to the academy
represent a large percentage of industrial production."
represented a large portion of research and development.
building a large proportion of the teaching profession would
using a large sections of sea wall in Kowloon and Hong
, since a large share of the environmental budget for
, of a large slice of its healthy surplus came from
, of large tracts of forest, even as much as 1 mil
```
Table 2. Frequency of occurrence of large and big as descriptions of part-whole relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part-whole</th>
<th>large</th>
<th>big</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part in / of</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portion(s) of</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion(s) of</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section(s) of</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slice of</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares of</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the concordance lines given immediately above, we can see that “large” is used to indicate the size of a part of the whole. The context in which each of the above lines occurs will make this clear. For example, the following is the context in which the first line occurs.

The decision to donate such a large part of the collection to the academy was taken because the band will amalgamate with the Scottish Highland and Lowland bands, which already have much of the music.

By contrast, “big” is used much less frequently to describe the size of a part of the whole. Table 2 shows the frequency of occurrence of “big” and “large” in the context of part-whole relationship in the MEC.

As we can see from Table 2, there are 62 instances of “large” compared to four instances of “big” used to indicate part-whole relationships.

The above three differences between “big” and “large”, supported by concordance lines given above, were presented to teachers. Subsequently, stimulated by teachers’ questions, further interrogation was conducted on the SCMP Corpus and BNC. The corpus evidence suggests that there are further differences between “large” and “big” which throw into question whether the major difference between “big” and “large” is indeed one of physical size versus amount or quantity.

An examination of the contexts in which both “big” and “large” can be used interchangeably shows that both items can be used when they co-occur with concrete noun used literally, as opposed to figuratively. For example,
have the manpower to patrol the big area, he said. (para) Mr Yan If true, this suggests that the big firms will step in themselves to
two, and, and, I’d make it into a big pool, I’d like one of those -
of developing tourism on quite a big scale, as they were beginning to

Israeli troops were flattening a large area of ground less than four
the lack of a limit would mean so easily, Mr Fung said. The
counselling and interview rooms, a large room serving as a drop-in

However, there seems to be a high frequency of abstract nouns collocating with
“big” but not with “large”. For example,

- big advantage of a transformer is when
ceremony is a very, very
class all-dancing miner whose
which could just be the
his legacy, have become a
the land - (8) I have a
since Colombia began its
I believe are the two really
And this is one of the
Bull’s absence would be a
which, of course, was a very
they want to get a
still had a lot of other
nuclear war are really the

In addition, when “big” is used in a figurative sense, it is not interchangeable with “large”. For example,

- big queue growing up behind us. He let
dignified reserve and gave me a
lately (unless you’re a
Section 78 could be a

A “big hand” is a loud applause, a “big hug” refers to an effusive hug, a “big fan” of somebody refers to having a strong liking and admiration for him or her, and a “big headache” means a severe headache. In other words, the word “big” is used figuratively and its meaning changes when it occurs in a different environment. It is not possible to replace “big” with “large” when the former is used figuratively.

The following instances of “big” are similar to the preceding examples in that it is used non-literally.
In the above concordance lines, the words that collocate with “big” seem to form an extended unit of meaning (see Sinclair 1996 cited in Tognini-Bonelli 2001: 19) which cannot be decomposed. For example, “big brother” in the context of the concordance line above refers to the ring-leader in a triad society. It is also used in a wider context to refer to an authoritarian person who is in power. The term “big brother” therefore carries a single meaning and cannot be decomposed as “big” and “brother”. Similarly, “big boys”, usually preceded by the definite article “the”, carries a single meaning to refer to a group of people who are at a higher level of skill, violence and usually carries a negative prosody implying menace (Sinclair 1991). “Big fish” cannot be decomposed as “big” and “fish” because a “fish” in a small pool (or pond) carries a fairly different meaning from a “big fish in a small pond”.

The above examples show that “big” has an idiomatic usage (in the sense of collocational restrictions) which “large” does not seem to have. It seems that the “big” is much more “malleable” in the sense that it can be used in a much wider range of contexts than “large”, apart from contexts in which physical sizes are referred to.

The subsequent investigation reveals further insights into the usage of these two lexical items and the pragmatic functions they serve. It has helped us to make explicit our tacit knowledge of the differences between “big” and “large”.  

3.1.2 “Finally” versus “Lastly”  
Another example of a frequently asked question is whether “finally” and “lastly”, which are often taken to be synonymous by both students and teachers, can be used interchangeably. The following is an extract from the exchanges between teachers.

Teacher D:
A student asks a teacher, “What is the difference between lastly and finally, can they replace each other?” How should the teacher answer the student?

Teacher E felt that there was no difference and that they could be used interchangeably. She wrote,
Teacher E: I have been asked such a question too. My first impression is
that they are more or less the same, so students can use either one when
they want to mention the last element in writing or oral. However, I won-
der whether “at last” is a common expression when talking about the
last element.

Teacher E’s impression is correct as far as the commonality between “finally”
and “lastly” is concerned. However, it does not cover the difference in usage
between the two. Moreover, her question reveals that she was thinking about
the semantic scope of listing and that, like the students, she confused “at last”
with “lastly”.

Teacher F, who is a native speaker of English, responded to Teacher E by
citing the following from Michael Swan’s Practical English Usage.

1. FINALLY and LASTLY have the same meaning when they introduce the
last element in a series i.e. Firstly . . . Secondly . . . Finally/Lastly

2. FINALLY (but not LASTLY) can suggest that someone has been waiting a
long time for something e.g. He finally passed his driving test (after taking
it several times).

Teacher F pointed out that the problem students had was to use “at last” when
they meant “finally” or “lastly” in the sense of (1) above. He observed that “at
last” meant more or less the same as “finally” in (2) above except that it could
occur at the beginning or the end of a sentence. For example, “At last, he passed
his driving test”, or “He passed his driving test at last”.

In response to Teacher F’s reply, Teacher G sent a message asking for further
clarification. She wrote:

If “finally” can mean something has been waited for a long time and finally
got done, what about “lastly”? Are there other ways to use “lastly” other
than introducing the last element?

In response to Teacher G’s question, Teacher F pointed out that “lastly” could
only be used to indicate the last item in a series; it could never be used in the
same way as “finally” in the context of “He finally returned the money to me.”
(i.e., after a long period of time) and “She finally agreed to marry me.” (i.e.,
after I’d asked her a lot of times.)

Teacher F’s native speaker intuition, supported by citation from Swan, is
correct, and his explanation of the difference between “finally” and “lastly” is
helpful. There are, however, aspects of the linguistic context in which these two
words are found which have not been noted in textbooks or reference grammars and which could not have been detected without going through a corpus. TELEC staff searched the MEC and found that there were far fewer instances of "lastly" (15 instances) than "finally" (441 instances). "Lastly", and its variant "And lastly", which is used to introduce the last item in a series, were found to occur only at the beginning of a sentence. For example,

> Lastly, what was the name of that non-renewable source. And child's school perhaps. (I) At this late stage, yes. rules of intestacy. <p> with a moving observer. And flavour of the honey. (I) And spending money in the store. followers not O.Best. (O) And police for their attention.

"Finally" is found more often in the middle of a sentence than at the beginning and the meaning changes depending on its position. When it is found in the middle, it carries a very different meaning (a long duration) from when it is found at the beginning (the last in the series). For example,

> be conquered and this war ended
> lessons* to the point where he less of the people inside, why the allied operation Overlord of cells, then the wrist, and leave the hospital, and he structures in the wrist, and best known and most accepted. ...udly replied "Four" == and Georgie Fame.(para) And, finally, in Germany a favour. finally, complained to M. Aumont. finally, boasted quite "claimed". finally, commenced, there was a finally, the hand with its digits finally, asked, and he realized finally, the digits. Overall, it finally, there have been numerous. Finally, Father McKenna said he had finally, we hear an amusing story

It was also found that most instances of "lastly" found in MEC occurred in spoken texts whereas most instances of "finally" occurred in written texts.

Subsequently, a search was conducted on a 54 million word corpus, *Corpus Universal Examiner* (CUE), a corpus compiled at the Tuscan Word Centre (TWC), a corpus linguistics research centre directed by John Sinclair, which consists of a 33-million-word corpus of written texts and a 21-million-word corpus of spoken English. The results are provided in Table 3.

The above findings converged with the search on the MEC. They show that "lastly" was used much less frequently than "finally" and that "lastly" was typically sentence initial whereas "finally" was more commonly non-sentence initial.
Table 3. Frequency of occurrence of finally and lastly in CUE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Written Corpora (33m)</th>
<th>Spoken Corpora (21m)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lastly</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Sentence initial</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Non-sentence initial</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>197</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finally</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Sentence initial</td>
<td>1031</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Non-sentence initial</td>
<td>2331</td>
<td>606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>3362</td>
<td>660</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In answering the teachers’ questions given above, TELEC staff provided the above sample concordance lines so that they could see the patterns for themselves. Teachers’ attention was also drawn to the features identified in corpora analysis mentioned above, namely that the frequency of occurrence, the position of the two words in a sentence, and whether they were commonly found in written or spoken texts.

To see whether the usage of “finally” and “lastly” is a common problem for students, a search was conducted on the 2.2-million-word Learner Corpus in TeleCorpora, and it was found that there were 155 instances of “lastly”. This is a much higher frequency than that found in the MEC (15 instances). A more detailed examination of these instances showed that students used “lastly” when they should have used “finally”, and that they tended to use “lastly” in narratives when they were recounting a sequence of events. For example:

That day, when I was walking on Mei La Road. Since I wanted to go home. I saw a man who carried a big bag. He went out from the Bank lastly. After that, I heard the police bell was ringing. And someone cried ‘Help’. I started to think if the man is a robber. Lastly, I thought he is a robber, so I write this letter to you.

One possible reason for this misuse is that the distinction between “finally” and “lastly” is not found in their first language. These subtle differences are often a source of difficulty for learners. Another possible reason is that while explanations such as those provided by Swan have highlighted the essential differences between “finally” and “lastly” and are pedagogically defensible, they may not be able to draw teachers’ or learners’ attention to more subtle differences which are nevertheless important. The use of “lastly” in students’ writing above to indicate the last event in a series of events is a case in point.
3.2 Type II: Grammar rules and conflicting evidence – countable and uncountable nouns

Teachers often come across linguistic evidence which seem to contradict the grammar rules they have been following. An example is given below of how a teacher tried to apply the rules governing the use of the quantifiers “less” for uncountable nouns and “few” for countable nouns to “no less than” and “no fewer than”.

3.2.1 “Less than” versus “fewer than”

The following is a question from Teacher H on “not less than”.

Teacher H:
In reading instructions for compositions, it is quite often that we will read:
Write not less than 300 words. As ‘word’ is a countable noun, why not ‘fewer than’ but ‘less than’?

According to Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985), “few” only co-occurs with plural count nouns. They point out that there is a tendency to use “less” (instead of “fewer”) with count nouns. For example, “You’ve made less mistakes than last time.” This usage however, as Quirk et al. (1985) point out, is often “condemned”. One of the TELEC staff responded to Teacher H as follows...

The distinction between “less” and “fewer” becomes even more blurred when negative forms, “no/not less than”, were interrogated. In the following concordance lines, the use of “no/not fewer than” would seem to be more logical than “no/not less than”.

on the word ‘bank’ to give it no less than three meanings;
hot meal with two vegetables... no less than two, sometimes
memorandum requirement that no less than $25 billion should be
legislators, it should contain no less than 400 members from the
passports and equipment for no less than 5,000 others. (para) A
memorandum requirement that no less than 78% altogether. Only
in banking jargon _ is worth no less than £400m annually. For
forests, in areas receiving no less than 100 mm of precipitation
in areas receiving not less than 100 mm of precipitation
in service for a period of not less than 1 year. An agency
for a continuous period of not less than seven years and have
Collins Cobuild English Grammar (1990: 126) points out that “less than” is also used “to indicate that a number is a maximum figure and that the actual figure is or may be smaller”. Indeed, the above concordance lines suggest that “no/not less than” is used in contexts where the specified quantity is taken as a total amount, in this case, a minimum quantity.

In response to the teacher’s question, TELEC staff presented the above concordance lines and pointed out that the distinction between “less” and “fewer” is increasingly blurred, particularly in the negative forms “no/not less than”. However, they remarked that “fewer than” is still the typical quantifier for countable nouns.

Subsequently, further interrogation was conducted on “no/not fewer than”. The evidence suggests that in fact “no/not fewer than” also give a sense of total amount rather than a countable quantity, again indicating a minimum quantity.

What is interesting is that in BNC, “no less than” is twice as frequent (6.03 instances per million words) as opposed to “no fewer than” (2.97 instances per million words) and there are only three instances of “not fewer than” in the entire corpus. This suggests that “less” may be becoming the default quantifier in such contexts.4

3.3 Type III: Prescriptive stylistic rules

Teachers often wonder whether some of the rules that they were taught as a student are right or whether they are too rigid. One question that was repeatedly asked by teachers in the Language Corner is whether or not conjunctions, such as “because”, “and” and “but”, can be used to start a sentence.
3.3.1 Sentence initial conjunctions

The following is a question sent by Teacher I.

I have been wondering, every now and then, whether I can use ‘because’ to start a sentence. I was taught that it’s a must to start with ‘It is / was because . . .’, but then the concept was shattered.

This question generated a series of messages in which teachers shared their own learning experiences. Some said that they were taught the same rule by their primary or secondary teachers. Some were taught that starting a sentence with conjunctions like “Because” and “And” was poor style. Others insisted that their students start a sentence with “As” or “Since” when answering questions requiring a reason and avoid “Because” or “It is because”. Still others said that they were taught by their university tutors not to start a sentence with “It is because” but to use “This is because” instead.

The following are some of the exchanges between the teachers.

Teacher J wrote:
I never start a sentence with Because. This is a remark given by my teacher when I was in the primary school. She said to start a sentence with Because is poor style. Is this really the reason?

Teacher K responded as follows:
With regard to your question whether we can start a sentence with “because”, I have learned this issue from one of my lecturers. He said that sentences start with “because” or “it is/was because” are not good style: “it is/was” only refers to the noun in the previous sentence. Therefore, he suggested that we should use “this is because” in order to give the full picture of the explanation as “this” refers to the whole sentence.

Teacher L disagreed with these prescriptive rules. However, she could notarticulate her intuition apart from citing a remark from one of her students that starting a sentence with “because” sounded “boring” and “old”.

I was taught not to start sentence with ’Because’ when I was in primary school too. But now I don’t find it necessary to do so. One of my bright students even said to me that the sentence would become so boring and ‘old’ with that structure. I kind of agree.

To address questions relating to prescriptive statements about style, corpus evidence is very powerful because it shows how language is actually used rather than how it is perceived to be used (see also Kennedy 1998). The following
Concordance lines from the written and spoken texts of MEC were presented to teachers. They show that sentence initial “because” is in fact very common in both written and spoken English.

(Written texts)
Because of too many patients we cannot achieve the internationally e
Because the HKPA doesn’t have any polo ponies yet or even players for
Because we are interns we have to be responsible for patients admitted
Because it was produced entirely with donated services, all proceeds
Because of Mr Patten’s changing travel plan, the programme originally
Because now they will definitely think twice, balancing the pros and

(Spoken texts)
enthusiasm for these sanctions. Because I’d always like to see that
gonna be too happy. CF Mmm, no. RB Because they’ll have to convert all
Er yes. RB be sufficient. CF Mm. RB Because, what they’ve actually got,
sions for that purpose. (JM) No. Because the majority of people who
numbers. (BR) Cheap... (MTS) Because even smaller numbers of
t’s the word - what do I mean? (I) Because they get tenure under the
beat because he can do it himself? Because he can play a guitar, or, or

TELEC staff also pointed out that it is important to analyse the contexts in which “Because” is sentence initial. For example, the first five lines of the concordance data in the written texts actually show that the sentence initial “Because” is used to indicate a cause-effect relationship rather than to provide a reason. In the spoken texts, the sentence-initial “Because” is used in the context of answering a question which asks for reasons.

TeleCorpora which, like most other corpora, allow the user to view the linguistic context in which a given word or expression is found, is very useful for teachers who have questions like the following.

Teacher M:
When we are answering questions, can we start with Because?
a: Why didn’t you tell me?
b: Because I didn’t see you at that time.
Can some native speakers tell me if the answer acceptable?
Or you would probably say, ‘I didn’t see you at that time.? Or ‘It’s because
I didn’t see you at that time.?'

In response to Teacher M, TELEC staff pointed out that the use of “Because” seems to be much more natural than “It is because” and “This is because” which tend to be used for emphasis. Further corpus data was provided to show teachers that when “It is because” does occur, it is often followed by a that-clause. For example,
3.4 Reframing the question

From the above discussion, we can see that the questions posed by teachers are often in the form of "Is it grammatical?" or "Is it acceptable?". In addressing teachers’ questions, TELEC staff helped teachers to reframe the question as "Is it appropriate?", "Do people say that?" or "Is it commonly used?" by providing corpus evidence. This kind of reframing reflects a paradigm shift in the approach to linguistic description that has been taking place in the last few decades. This shift is very much facilitated by the accessibility of technology that provides huge bodies of naturally occurring texts. The robustness of linguistic descriptions based on introspection can be easily put to the test by analysing corpus data. The above discussion shows that this kind of linguistic enquiry should not just be the preoccupation of linguistic researchers but should also become an integral part of the work of language teachers. The interrogation of corpus data will raise teachers’ awareness of how the language works and enable them to explore the language collaboratively with students.

3.5 Linguistic forms and meaning

In the past few decades, there has been an unhealthy dichotomization of form-focused instruction and meaning-focused instruction. Corpus studies have shown that linguistic forms, contexts and meanings are inextricably linked. The corpus evidence presented in the previous discussion demonstrates that the co-occurrence of lexical items in different contexts is crucial to the meanings that they take on and the pragmatic functions that they perform. The engagement of teachers in corpus enquiry will help them to gain a better understanding of the relationship between form and meaning, which can in turn redress the balance between form and meaning in the language curriculum.

3.6 Discovering language

Finally, the most exciting dimension of corpus enquiry is the constant discovery of new linguistic facts that have escaped the attention of dictionary and reference grammar writers. Indeed, one of the most rewarding dimensions of
engaging in discussions with teachers on grammar questions in TeleNex is precisely this process of discovery. To illustrate this point, I shall cite just one of the many examples. A teacher asked a question about the difference between “based on” and “in view of”.

I know there is a difference between “In view of” and “Based on” ... but are there any examples which show its explicit differences?

It was not difficult to address the teacher’s question because “in view of” and “based on” have fairly different meanings. The former means that you take into consideration facts that have just been mentioned or are about to be mentioned, and the latter means that the first thing develops from the second (see Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary). What is interesting is that after going through MEC of TeleCopora, it was found that there is a large number of instances of “in view of” where the collocates are unfavorable events, situations or conditions. For example,

for political development in view of China’s disapproval, another 36.7 line transmissions in view of growing evidence they may cause cancer
in view of how often overdoses result from relationship problems
was not sufficient in view of Mrs Ng’s persistent abdominal pain
Margaret Hospital said in view of Mrs Ng’s persistent abdominal pain
Zealand’s less than dynamic start to their tour, is one of the dangers trafficker. (para) In view of the quantity of drugs involved, 2
be as bright as it seems in view of the current unemployment rate of
over China’s response in view of the airport row is a factor in
as demand dropped. (para) In view of the shortages in beds for
the proposed amendments in view of the Government’s sweeping powers
please. (JW) John Watson. In view of the undignified scramble for
(RS) Richard Simpson. In view of the outburst in Liverpool Parish
Thank you Teresa Lee. In view of the relentless increase in violence
(BF) Barbara Fearon. In view of the recent sacking of the Editor

The above concordance lines show that “in view of” collocates with unpleasant events such as “China’s disapproval”, “relationship problems”, “less than dynamic start”, “airport row”, “undignified scramble”, “relentless increase in violence”, “recent sacking”, and so forth. To confirm that the high proportion of negative collocations is not the result of the fact that two-fifths of the MEC consists of newspaper articles which have a propensity for negative news reporting, a further search was conducted on BNC. The findings show a similar tendency for “in view of” to collocate with unfavorable events, such as “stringent financial requirements”, “economic crisis”, “depressed state”, “financial risk”, “atrocious transport situation”. The discovery of the negative semantic prosody of “in view of” would not have been possible without the help of the corpus.
4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have reported on a study of about one thousand grammar questions sent by teachers to the *TeleNex* website. I have focused on three major types of grammar questions which were identified amongst these questions and have demonstrated how corpus evidence was used by language specialists managing the website to address teachers’ questions. The discussion in this paper shows that presenting teachers with corpus data is a much more effective way of helping teachers understand the meanings and usages of the linguistic items(s) in question than simply providing them with dictionary definitions or statements about usage. Furthermore, in the course of going through corpus data, existing conceptions are often challenged and new insights are often gained. Sharing such evidence-based insights with teachers encourages them to formulate hypotheses about language and to look for answers by interrogating corpus data. This is a very important aspect of language awareness-raising. Since the website was set up some ten years ago, there have been an increasing number of teachers asking for access to *TeleCorpora* as well as other corpora such as the *Bank of English* (the Collins Cobuild Corpus). As teachers have been exposed to more and more corpus data, they have begun to refer to the corpora as the source of authority rather than TELEC staff. This is evidenced by the fact that increasingly teachers attached remarks like “What does the corpus say?” after putting their questions on the website. In response to requests from teachers to access *TeleCorpora*, a user-friendly concordancer called *PatternFinder* was designed and made available on the *TeleNex* website for teachers. In order to help novices make use of the corpora, a tutorial was built in to provide instructions and demonstrations on how to generate KWIC concordance lines, and how to make use of them to find answers to their questions. A glossary of key terms such as corpus, concordance, KWIC and citation is also provided. (Tsui 2004b discusses the design of *PatternFinder* in greater detail.)

Studies of the relevance of corpus linguistics to language teaching and learning emphasize the importance of actively involving students in formulating their own hypotheses, interrogating linguistic data and generating explicit grammatical statements about the patterns and regularities that they have observed. Johns (1991) proposed that in this kind of data-driven learning, the learner’s role is to discover the target language and the teacher’s role is to provide the context in which learners can develop strategies for discovery. The discussion in this paper shows that in fact teachers can benefit a great deal from being actively engaged in corpus enquiry, perhaps even more so than their students.
Notes

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1. Features articles are downloaded to TELEC two or three times each week by the South China Morning Post (SCMP). I wish to thank the SCMP for their generosity and assistance in providing the texts.

2. The other questions reported in Tsui (2004a) include (a) questions about lexical items that teachers are aware of the difference in usage but have problems explaining the difference to students, for example, “tall” and “high”, (b) questions about words and phrases which appear to be synonymous but are not “absolute synonyms” (Lyons 1981; Partington 1998), for example, “day by day” and “day after day”; and (c) collocations.

3. I wish to thank the teachers and the TELEC staff for allowing to cite the messages. I wish to thank especially Quentin Allan who has made a major contribution in compiling TeleCorpora and overseeing the construction of the PatternFinder in TeleNex.

4. I am grateful to my colleague Leo Hoye for sharing his observation with me and providing the figures for the BNC.

References


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