

Student Corpus Use: Giving Up or Keeping On?

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There have been a number of recent reports on the use of corpora in the teaching of academic writing (e.g. Cresswell, 2007; Gilmore, 2009; Lee and Swales, 2006). However attention has focused primarily on assessing the impact of courses immediately after they have been completed. There is little or no data on whether students who have been introduced to corpus work carry on using corpora once their course has finished. If corpora are to take their place as a third reference resource in addition to dictionaries and reference grammars, then it is important to assess whether student take-up persists in the longer term.

This paper reports on a follow-up study of 40 graduate writers who completed an email questionnaire on their use of corpora approximately 12 months after completing their corpus course. The students in question had taken a 6 week/12 hour course in academic writing during which they built their own corpora of research articles and examined it for selected rhetorical functions. Evaluation questionnaires completed immediately after the course suggested very favourable reactions to the use of their corpora (Charles, 2012). However one of the stated aims of the course was to foster student autonomy by providing a resource for future independent use. The purpose of the present study was to ascertain the extent to which students had incorporated use of their corpus into their regular practice as academic writers.

The data show that 28 students (70%) still use their own corpus, while 12 (30%) do not. It should be noted, however, that 5 of the non-users intend to use their corpus in the future when they are at the writing stage of their work. A further 2 students prefer to use the British National Corpus, as they consider that their own corpus is too small and not reliable enough. Thus non-use does not necessarily imply a rejection of corpus consultation itself. Indeed out of the 40 respondents, 35 (88%) use some form of corpora now or intend to do so when appropriate for their needs.

Of the 28 students who still use their own corpus, 15 (38%) are frequent users who perform searches once per week or more, while 13 (33%) are infrequent users, searching their corpus once per month or seldom. Although corpus use varies substantially according to whether students are actively writing or not, these figures do provide a rough estimate of its extent. The majority of those who use their own corpus (26 students or 83%) agreed that its use had definitely or probably improved their academic writing. Only two students (7%), both of whom seldom use the corpus, considered that it had probably not contributed to any improvement.

This paper presents further data on respondents' long term use of their corpora and discusses the implications for advanced EAP writing courses.

References

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