Getting Help from Corpus Examples

Ana FRANKENBERG-GARCIA

ISLA Campus Lisboa

Universidade Nova de Lisboa

Centre for English, Translation and Anglo-Portuguese Studies

Lisbon, Portugal

ana.frankenberg@gmail.com

One of the distinguishing characteristics of corpus-based dictionaries is that most entries contain example sentences or phrases that have been copied or adapted from corpora. Although examples are generally regarded as positive (for example, see Béjoint, 1981 and Fox, 1987), the body of evidence about their actual benefits is limited, inconclusive and contradictory (c.f. Summers, 1988; Laufer, 1993, Nesi, 1996; Humblé 2001; Bogaards & van der Kloot; 2002 and Al-Ajmi, 2008). Part of the problem is methodological. As Summers (1988: 122) herself points out, in her experimental work the "students were asked to do production tests for words which they also needed to look up for comprehension". Indeed, as Laufer (1993:138) observes, "people rarely use words which are entirely new to them [when writing]", so it would not be natural to test language production using words that people are not familiar with in the first place. Another problem is that, as noted by Humblé (2001:passim), there is a difference between the kind of example learners need for encoding and the ones they need for decoding purposes, and this difference tends not to be adequately dealt with in dictionaries.

My aim in the present study is thus to revisit the idea of testing the usefulness of corpus examples, but this time keeping language comprehension and language production well apart, and differentiating between examples to help comprehension and examples to help production. My starting point is the assumption that, one the one hand, a well-formulated dictionary definition summarizing a wealth of information extracted from corpora by trained lexicographers will aid comprehension more effectively than raw corpus examples. On the other hand, when learners already know the meaning of a word and simply need to check how to use it in context, I believe judiciously selected corpus examples can be more helpful. However, as any experienced corpus user will know, a single example is often not enough to help people understand what a word means or how it is used. Therefore, I would also like to test the value of presenting learners with multiple corpus examples.

An experiment was carried out where twenty different words were tested for comprehension and production. The ten words tested for comprehension were the customary, less frequent words likely to be unfamiliar to students. However, unlike the studies by Summers (1988), Laufer (1993) and Nesi (1996), special care was taken to make sure that the ten words tested for production did not pose any problems of comprehension: they were straightforward enough for the participants to understand, but at the same time tricky enough for them to have problems using them in context. Forty-eight students learning English as a foreign language divided into four groups of twelve took part in the study. The control group did the test without any references at all. The first experimental group did the test with the help of definitions from the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE). The

second group was given a reference sheet with a single corpus example per test item, and the last group referred to three corpus examples per test item. Unlike in Al-Ajmi (2008), the examples used were not the ones already present in the dictionary, which were not sufficient, homogeneous or informative enough to meet the experimental conditions, but rather, carefully selected full-sentence concordances from the British National Corpus, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies 2008) and UKWaC (Kilgariff *et al.,* 2008). The results of this experiment indicate that definitions helped language comprehension but not production, and that a single corpus example helped production but not comprehension. Multiple examples, in turn, helped both comprehension and production, and helped significantly more than a single example.

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