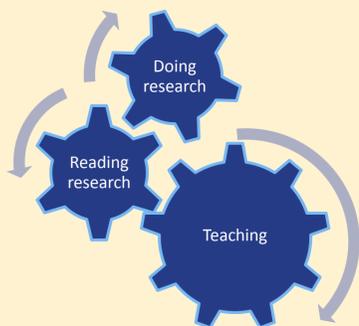# ENHANCING TEACHERS' RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT THROUGH LEARNER CORPORA ANALYSIS

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Research-engaged Professional Practice

Engagement:

- *with* research – by reading
- *in* research – by doing

- Teacher-led
- Classroom-based
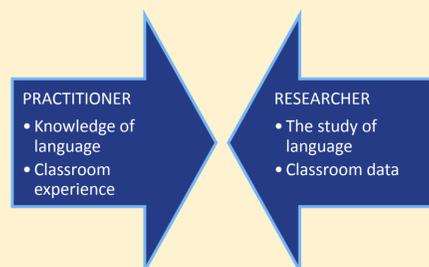- Practical
- Relevant

(Borg, 2013)

Context

In Malta, few ELT teachers engage in research. The obstacles inhibiting them from positioning themselves as researchers include:

- time constraints
- varying learner proficiency levels
- fear of collaboration
- minimal support from school administration
- lack of theoretical background
- misconceptions about research
- lack of adequate research training

We discovered that by offering teachers the opportunity to work with data from learner corpora, their sensitivity to the learners' linguistic competence increased and their research engagement was enhanced.

Corpora as a Point of Intersection

PRACTITIONER
- Knowledge of language
- Classroom experience

RESEARCHER
- The study of language
- Classroom data

How do you make practice and research intersect through corpus in a context where both the concepts of teacher research and learner corpus are new?

In an attempt to resolve this problem, we conducted a case study with two teachers who were willing to undertake a rigorous analysis task using an existing learner corpus containing data from Maltese learners of English.

Research Question

Does L2 learner corpus analysis equip the ELT teacher with the necessary tools to identify learners' proficiency levels and design teaching materials specific to their findings?

Methodology

Participants: Two teachers who are currently reading for a MA in English Language while teaching in an EFL school were asked to apply the knowledge acquired in their readings of Second Language Acquisition and Pragmatics to corpus analysis.

Material: The material provided was collected from the same source of data set, but the analyses followed a two-layered approach: (1) a close error analysis of 40 learner texts, and (2) an investigation of an error type using the learner corpus.

Rationale: The aim was to identify patterns of strengths and weaknesses of learners of English and be able to develop teaching materials specific to the patterns identified. This allows teachers to focus on the learners' interlanguage in a more direct and effective manner.

Corpus analysis: Following a training session on the use of a concordance tool, the teachers were asked to draw up a taxonomy of errors based on a sample of 40 texts. Their error analysis was based on (1) practical knowledge of the L2 language structure, and (2) readings from two MA modules. Each teacher was asked to select a dominant error type and proceed to the second level of analysis. They used the learner corpus to run a concordance-based query for 'perfect forms' and 'collocates'; these errors were described and later evaluated.

Interviews: Feedback from the teachers was collected by means of an unstructured and informal interview based on the following general questions:

- What is your impression of the exercise?
- What classroom activities did you consider?

Moreover, both teachers recorded their findings in two separate papers based on the work developed over one month.
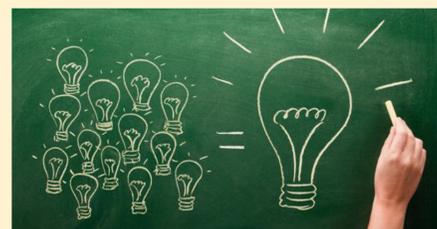
Findings

Knowledge integration: The close investigation conducted using the learner corpus equipped them with the appropriate tools to identify learners' proficiency levels. They concluded that corpus analysis made materials design easier and more effective.

Confidence: Initially, both teachers claimed to have been apprehensive about the 'massive task' with which they were entrusted; however, following the first attempt at developing a taxonomy based on the errors identified, they gained the necessary confidence to embark on the more challenging task – using the concordance tool to query the errors.

Analytical skills: By combing through nearly 1,000 results highlighted through the Keyword in Context (KWIC), the teachers became more efficient investigators. They became accustomed to identifying the patterns of strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, the KWIC allowed them to note the pragmatic context of the use of the perfect or collocate. Lastly, they became adept at gauging the overall proficiency level of the cohort of learners represented by the corpus.

Attitudes: By the end of the research exercise, the teachers came to value the practical applications of such teacher-led corpus analysis. They highlighted the advantage of collaboration and the reassurance that their readings of the relevant literature and training had given them the confidence necessary to complete the task with a heightened sense of achievement.
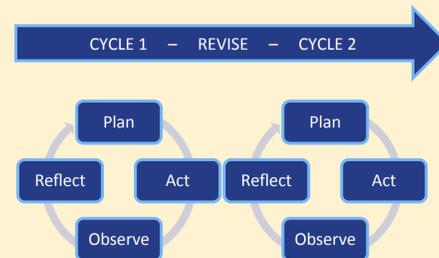

Reflections

Way forward: Our study gave us a clear indication that through corpus analysis teachers can, in the right conditions, position themselves as research-engaged practitioners. The next task for us is to encourage a group of teachers to embark on a new adventure and join us in developing a learner corpus relevant to their context. The learner corpus used in this study is not representative of the learners all teachers may encounter in their classroom context; therefore, it is important to make the corpus data more relevant to ELT teachers.

Concordancer: One possible way to address the above need is to identify a software tool that allows the teacher to construct a corpus of learners' work, analyse it and list the results. An example of this is the concordance tool developed by Prof. Anthony Laurence:

- Free
- Works with all languages
- Does word lists and Keyword in Context (KWIK)
- Other interesting features available
- www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/software.html

Framework: The following plan is mapped onto the action research cycle and capitalizes on its features.
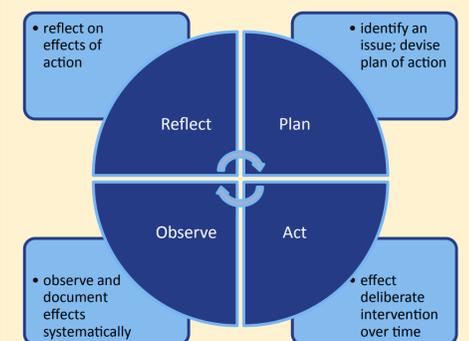

CYCLE 1 – REVISE – CYCLE 2

(Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988)

Action Research features

- Reflection for change in practice
- Small-scale and contextualised
- Participatory and inclusive
- Systematic
- Empowering

(Burns, 2010)

Plan

- Investigate language use in the classroom
- Act on intuition derived from monitoring of learners' work
- For example, decide to focus on the use of the verbs 'do' and 'make' – commonly confused by L2 learners

Act

- Build a small learner corpus based on learners' written work (O'Keefe, McCarthy, & Carter, 2007)
- Design a simple task that would highlight learners' choice for either 'make' or 'do'
- Ask learners to submit their work electronically
- Save the texts in plain text format
- Organise texts in files and export them to a concordancer

Observe & Reflect

- Result: a corpus of learner English (a principled collection) based on very specific variables, e.g. age, gender, nationality, level descriptor, text type, etc.
- Start analysing the use of the verb 'to do' using the concordance tool (do, does, doing, did, done)
- Take action

Cycle 2

The research-engaged practitioner may choose to:

- Repeat search using a native speaker based corpus (e.g. BNC) to conduct a comparative analysis;
- Follow learners' progress (snapshots of their work);
- Record classroom discussions, transcribe and analyse the discourse, etc.

References

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