

# Corpus Linguistics in pre-service teaching in Bahia communities of practice: challenges, innovation and autonomous learning

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## **Abstract**

The impact of corpora is easily observable in Linguistics: it has changed the way we understand language use. However, despite their potential for impact in society, the use of corpora inside and outside the university settings in Northeast Brazil is still restricted. Rather than compiling another research corpus, the present project aims at engaging several educational communities in the use of freely available corpora. The use of CL in teacher education opens exciting prospects in the teaching of English to speakers of other languages (ESOL): it can be seen as “a new pedagogical perspective to foreign language acquisition” (Granger, 2002). This Project presents the *práxis* of CL in pre service teaching in Northeastern Public Universities in Bahia, Brazil. It also presents results of the expanding use of pedagogical applications of CL in small rural public secondary schools as well.

## **1. Corpus Linguistics & English language teaching: a view on Northeast Brazilian Communities of Practice**

Corpus Linguistics (CL) has revolutionized the way we describe, theorize and research languages. As Leech (1992) explains it, CL is a “methodological basis for pursuing linguistic

research, a new research enterprise, a new way of thinking about language” (p. 106). Research centres in the UK have taken the lead in CL research, and several researchers have collected huge amounts of textual data in a principled way. Some of these collections, known as corpora, are available online in an open access form (e.g. British National Corpus). Among its advantages in ESOL, CL helps teachers and students to identify which words/structures are more (or less) frequently used in a given genre/register and to investigate their linguistic patterning.

Several reasons account for the pedagogical impact of Corpus Linguistics (CL) research in second/foreign language learning. Granger (2009) believes that regarding ELT, there are very promising teaching and learning resources once the teacher is familiar with the area. One rather fundamental reason is that CL approach makes it possible for the teacher to design needs-based and learner centered applications, as this is mostly evident in making direct use of corpora by encouraging learners to look at corpus data and intuitively getting information about language. One way of encouraging learners to use corpora is to enhance the pedagogical relevance (Braun, 2005) of corpus use. It seems reasonable to address the influence of the pedagogical functions of DDL, which can be best described as “the attempt to cut out the middle man as far as possible and give the learner direct access to data” (Johns, 1991). In its broadest sense, DDL has both direct and indirect uses and applications. Paredes et al (2011) discuss such uses of corpora and explain that by indirect

use writers or researchers access a corpus “to inform foreign language syllabus design or materials development such as dictionaries, course books, grammars etc.” whilst “direct use entails an eminently hands-on exploitation of the corpus by the students and their teachers for language learning purposes”, as suggested by Römer (2008). In addition to that, there are two distinctive effects of DDL approach to inductive language teaching, identified by Johns (1991), which must be taken into account when considering the pedagogical relevance of working on DDL. Firstly, there is the main effect of DDL on the role of the teacher, “who has to learn to become a director and coordinator of student-initiated research” and secondly, the “main effect of DDL, which is a reevaluation of the place of the grammar in language-learning and language-teaching”. According to Boulton (2009, p. 11) from teacher’s point of view, if DDL has yet to “make real inroads to mainstream teaching practices and environments, the problem could lie at any these stages: they might not about DDL, might be unwilling or unable to put it into practice or even reject it.” Nevertheless, Cheng et al. (2003) report that over 80 per cent of their undergraduate students found the corpus-driven and data-driven projects useful. Moreover DDL researchers are increasingly working in high school environments (e.g. Braun 2007; Sun & Wang, 2003; Ciezielska-Ciupek 2001) and findings show that their students seem to be enthusiastic with DDL. As Römer (2006, p. 128) suggests when learners are introduced to CL studies they not only “acquire language but also ICTs skills and life skills at the same time.”

## **2. This Project**

The project herein presented aims at introducing Brazilian ESOL undergraduates to the principles of data-driven learning (DDL). In a broad sense, DDL allows learners to become language researchers and to discover language patterns by themselves (Johns, 1991). As Johns (1991) has pointed out, regular use of concordance line and DDL investigations with English learners have already brought about important outcomes, such as: provoking stimulating enquiry in learning process through speculation on the part of the learner,

helping the learner develop the ability to see patterning in the target language and therefore form generalizations to account for that patterning-what could also contribute to learner’s awareness of conventionality and idiomaticity “levels” of the language, besides others. To sum up, DDL activities are varied, being “limited only by the imagination of the user” as Breyer (2006) brilliantly defines.

The literature has been reporting a number of advantages in the use of DDL in language teaching/learning: it may raise the authenticity of the language used in classrooms, it may make students and teachers more aware of language patterns, it may develop their autonomy and it may foster their critical skills.

Contrary to this development and increasing research field very little research has been conducted in public schools in Brazil to check whether there is any empirical support for these claims. This is especially true in most educational settings where English is taught in Brazil. Unfortunately, according to research, CL has not yet been included in most curricula in our country. It is certainly the case in the city where the proposed project is being conducted. Conceição do Coité, a small rural city in the Northeast of Brazil where the local education requires considerable improvement. It is a rural town of approximately 68,000 inhabitants in Bahia northeast Brazil. It has as its main economic and social development system the extraction of “sisal” cord, a plant typical of that region. From this exotic plant different kinds of products are created and exported to many countries around the world. As far as cultural aspects are concerned, in this rural town there is just one public university and two distant learning poles of private faculties. However, there are no cultural facilities in the town, such as cinemas, theatres or museums and unfortunately most communities members have never been to any of such cultural environments. The only public university holds three undergraduate courses: the Language Course with Bachelors’ degree in English Language, the History Course and the Radio, Television and Communications Course. In the English Language course there are eight modules distributed into four academic years. The English Course mainly focuses on the English language structure as well as on Teaching Education curriculum having as

main modules: grammar, syntax, semantics, morphology, phonology, teaching methodologies, technologies applied to education, linguistics, applied linguistics, speaking, reading, writing, psychology applied to education; literary studies, interdisciplinary studies, monographic preparatory modules and pre-service teaching. In their last two years, the undergraduates have to conduct an ethnographic study of a state school and its community in the following pre-service regulatory program: 5th semester observe classes, 6th semester co-participate in classes, 7th semester and 8th semester teach classes. Throughout their academic life in each semester undergraduates have to take about five to seven different subjects and for each subject three assessment units/tests are to be taken. The participants in this project are undergraduates currently enrolled in the 5th, 6th and 7th semesters of the Bachelor's Degree in English Language. Furthermore, as part of their undergraduate course in English language, students at the State University of Bahia have to undertake a number of pedagogical modules so that they may teach in primary/secondary schools. Since the vast majority of Brazilian undergraduate students do not have CL in their curriculum, the author of this project has, since May 2015, been teaching the research participants workshops and Study Sessions on CL, in order to introduce the participants to CL basic principles and tools as well as to its pedagogical applications. The participants were asked to design one corpus activity themselves, which are being trialed out in public schools of their rural communities. In order to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of DDL in such public school settings in northeast Brazil, we will conduct interviews with (i) undergraduate preservice teachers before and after they implement the activities and (ii) school students. Therefore, when analyzing the final steps, data triangulation will provide us with a grounded understanding of the potential of DDL in ESOL teaching/learning in our communities of practice. With a view to maximizing the impact of the project, the objectives and results of the research will be made available in a blog. This blog will also host the pedagogical activities developed by the students (pending their due consent).

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