Using Corpora Concordancing to Assist

Low-Achievement EFL Students

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INTRODUCTION

As the importance of English in communication is increasingly acknowledged, a lot of attention has been devoted to improving students’ English proficiency in Taiwan. For the students, English is no longer just a subject studied in school but an integral part in their daily activities and an indispensable skill for their future career development. Therefore, in English teaching, more and more emphasis has been placed on arousing students’ interest in English and cultivating independent learners with skills to learn from new materials in new contexts. In other words, learning skills and learner autonomy have become the ultimate goals of teaching.

An approach that has been highly acclaimed in recent decades for its potential in facilitating development of learning skills and fostering learner autonomy is corpora concordancing. Benefits of this approach have been well documented in literature, including converting the learner’s role from a passive receiver to an active researcher, encouraging learners to take responsibility in what they learn and how they learn it, shifting the focus of learning/instruction from product to process, and providing learners with abundant examples of authentic language use (Johns, 1991; Tribble, 1997; Kettemann, 1995; Stevens, 1995; Aston, 1998; Dyck, 1999; Hadley, 2000; Lee & Liou, 2003). Although some concerns have been raised regarding the use of corpora concordancing in the classroom, such as the linguistic difficulty of authentic materials and the underlying assumption that an inductive approach works well with all kinds of learners (Tribble, 1997; Richards & Lockhart, 1994), it is generally accepted as a valuable instructional approach.

Among the frequently mentioned merits of corpora concordancing, helping students learn how to learn and motivating students by taking on the role of researchers are especially pertinent in teaching low-achievement students, since these students usually lack motivation and self-confidence, and are in dire need of opportunities to develop good learning skills and learning habits. Given the benefits of concordancing, it seems promising to apply this approach to low-achievement students. Gross (1991) indicates that with sufficient examples, even unmotivated students can engage in inductive reasoning and learn from the process. Although some disagreement exists on the effect of inductive teaching on students with
different proficiency levels, it has been found that inductive approach seems to favor students with lower proficiency (Wang, 2002). Therefore, in this study, an inductive approach with an on-line learning tool was applied in assisting low-achievement students to see if the students can be motivated in their learning of English and, at the same time, learn some important skills that would make learning English less intimidating and keep them in regular contact with English. A deductive approach with a textbook was also applied to facilitate students’ reflection and contrasting of learning experiences.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Participants of the study were six of the author’s former students in a university in northern Taiwan. All first-year students in the university were assigned to English classes of various levels according to their English scores on the entrance exam. The 6 students were all placed into an elementary level class. Four of the students came to the author hoping to improve their English by learning to read English news, since they were aware that the author offered classes in news media English. After obtaining the author’s consent, the students found two more students from their English class to join the study group.

**Procedure**

The 6 students studied with the author for five weeks using an on-line English news resource system and a textbook of media English. The study consisted mainly of reading the textbook and using the on-line system to complete tasks given by the author. Worksheets were distributed for students to fill in results of on-line research. The students worked in pairs when using the on-line system due to the number of computers available at the time of the study. After five weeks with 2-3 hours of study each week, the students were interviewed about their learning experience with the textbook and the on-line system.

**The On-Line System**

The on-line system was first developed following the call to construct smaller and more specialized corpora for specific instructional objectives and to introduce data-driven learning into language classrooms\(^1\). The system provides resources for reading English news stories. It consisted mainly of a web-based concordancer, word statistics generator, and dictionaries. The concordancer used on-line English news headlines and news leads as corpus data. Both types of data were sorted by

\(^1\) Special thanks to Dr. Limin Liu at Chung Yuan Christian University for technical assistance
news categories. Two modes of search output presentation were provided—the traditional KWIC (keyword in context) and SBS (sentence by sentence). In addition to the news concordancer, additional resources were provided, including on-line dictionaries and word frequency statistics by category and time period.

The following briefly introduces major features of the system and their potential in English learning.

1. **Learning of vocabulary**
   (1) Word frequency statistics
   The system allows users to specify news categories in a given period of time (month, quarter, or year) and will return a list of words in order of frequency of appearance. The system administrator can command the system to leave out certain groups of words (function words and basic vocabulary items) to make the results better fit the level of students. The function of word frequency statistics serves two purposes.
   - (1.1) An index to high-frequency words
   - (1.2) A quick overview of major news events

   (2) Longer contexts and on-line dictionaries
   The system facilitates learning of vocabulary meaning by exposing learners to large amounts of authentic contexts found in real news. To compensate for the complexity of authentic language and difficulty in meaning construction caused by truncated sentences in the KWIC output mode, the system provides on-line dictionaries and the option of complete sentence concordance output to facilitate reading and meaning guessing from longer and more complete contexts.

   (3) Associated word search
   The associated word search function facilitates the following aspects in learning.
   - (3.1) Word collocations and colligations
   - (3.2) Hypothesis testing
   - (3.3) Relationship between news events

2. **Skills of reading English news**
   (1) Headlines, leads, and hyperlinks to full-length texts
   - (1.1) The language of news headlines
     Fredrickson & Wedel (1984) referred to the unique syntactic structure of news headlines as having “a language of their own” (p. 58) because it might not be intuitively understandable to inexperienced EFL learners. The system provides headlines and leads that can be searched separately but linked in the display of search
result, which facilitates studying of headline conventions.

(1.2) The inverted pyramid

Another feature of news stories is the inclusion of the most essential information in the lead, or the initial paragraph. By providing hyperlinks to full-length reports on the website of the source media, the system helps instructors to train students to skim the news by quickly locating the most essential information (the Ws) in the lead sentence.

(2) Sort-by-date search results

A common problem encountered by EFL learners in reading English news is comprehension difficulty caused by a non-linguistic factor—lack of necessary background knowledge. For EFL learners who don’t follow English news closely, the information provided in a given news story might not always be sufficient to bridge the gap between what happened previously and what happens now. To solve this problem, the system sorts news leads with the searched keyword by date so that the users can have quick access to past reports on the event to gain the required background knowledge to understand new reports.

(3) Multiple source media

An important skill for more advanced students is critical reading of news stories by judging the reliability of the source. To read a news story critically, learners need to take into consideration factors such as motive of the source and past reliability of the source (Fredrickson & Wedel, 1984). The system facilitates learning of this skill by providing reports from different source media. With careful selection, instructors can find reports of the same event from different media to illustrate how news reports can be influenced by different points of view and how readers can assess the reliability of the story by examining the factors above.

To better illustrate the functions and potential of the system, comparisons are made with some similar on-line resources with a database of English news.

Table 1 Comparison of ENeR Sym with other on-line news resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News Resource</th>
<th>ENeR Sym</th>
<th>GlossaNet</th>
<th>Google News</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News categories</td>
<td>Currently only world and business news</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>Various</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of corpus</td>
<td>Small (extendable)</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>Large (can be overwhelming)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News sources</td>
<td>Currently from 4 major on-line news sites</td>
<td>Over 100 newspapers (in 11 languages)</td>
<td>Over 4,500 news sources (in at least 5 languages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Database updating</td>
<td>Updated manually</td>
<td>Updated daily</td>
<td>Updated automatically</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and continuously

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Searching method</th>
<th>Keyword search by news category and corpus type (headlines or leads)</th>
<th>Search by specifying word form/syntax and newspapers</th>
<th>Keyword search by date and news category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading/learning aids</td>
<td>Dictionaries, word frequency statistics</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Presentation of search result | • Displayed on-line  
• KWIC and SBS  
• News headlines and leads displayed separately (but linked) | • Transmitted through e-mail. The new *GlossaNet Instant* displays search results on-line.  
• Often incomplete contexts  
• Cannot separate news headlines and leads  
• Duplications | • Displayed on-line  
• No alignment.  
• Often incomplete contexts.  
• Cannot separate news headlines and leads |
| Nature | Learning English by reading English news and concordancing; providing resources for instructors | Providing corpora for linguists; learning English by concordancing | Reading English news to keep up with the world |

**RESULTS**

**Sample Tasks and Responses**

The following section will demonstrate ways to use the system by reporting responses made by participants of the study. The tasks are presented with reference to Tribble’s (1997) provisional framework for using smaller and more specialized corpora in language teaching. Table 2 summarizes Tribble’s framework.

Table 2 Tribble’s framework for using smaller and more specialized corpora

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corpus Type</th>
<th>Instructional Focus/Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Single theme micro-corpus | • High frequency lexis in specific content domains  
• Collocation/colligation, semantic prosody  
• Grammar and discourse |
| Multiple theme micro-corpus | • Grammar and discourse  
• Contrasts in lexical use |
| Single text type micro-corpus | • Grammar and discourse |
Here are some examples of the tasks and responses given by the students.

1. **Single theme micro-corpus**
   
   1.1 **High frequency lexis in a specific content domain:**
   
   (1) For vocabulary enhancement, tasks focusing on a specific news domain were given to the students.

   **Sample task:** Please find at least five verbs often used in business news to refer to the upward and downward movement of stock prices.

   **Sample response:** The following represents part of a bigger word list compiled by the students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Sentence/Headline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>rise</td>
<td>Stocks rise as US forces near Baghdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>climb</td>
<td>Baghdad stocks climb on optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>gain</td>
<td>Taiwan stocks gain on optimism over rising exports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>rally</td>
<td>US stocks rallied, sending the Dow Jones Industrial Average to its biggest weekly gain …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>surge</td>
<td>Bayer stock surges on court win</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>advance</td>
<td>Asian stocks advanced this week, with Japan’s …</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   (2) A problem that students often face when trying to read English news is the frequent use of acronyms/abbreviations. As new acronyms/abbreviations are created with the appearance of new events, students often find it hard to decipher their meanings or to keep up with the creation of acronyms/abbreviations. One of the advantages of searching a news corpus is that students get multiple contexts of the acronyms/abbreviations, and some of them would make the definitions more apparent to the students (see Figure 1).

   **Sample task:** Please find out what the following acronyms stand for.

   **Sample response:**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
<td>世界衛生組織</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POW</td>
<td>Prisoner of war</td>
<td>戰俘</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SARS</td>
<td>Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome</td>
<td>嚴重急性呼吸道症候群</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WMD</td>
<td>Weapons of mass destruction</td>
<td>大規模毀滅性武器</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 Search result for **WMD**

1.2 collocation/colligation:

**Sample task:** Please search for news about anti-war protests around the world and (1) identify words often used to describe a protesting event, and (2) find out how to express the idea that a protest takes place.

**Sample responses:** For (1), the students identified *protest* as a verb and a noun, *march* as a verb, *rally* as a verb and a noun, and *demonstrate* as a verb.

For (2), the students recognized from the search results that protesting activities such as a *rally, march, or demonstration* are often *staged* or *held* as described in the news, and that the phrase *take to the street* could be used to refer to a similar action.

Figure 2 Search result for **protest**

Figure 3 Search result for **anti-war**
2. **Multiple theme micro-corpus**
   Contrasts in lexical use:
   **Sample task:** Look for the word *rally* in world news and business news and see if the word has different meanings in the two news categories.

   **Sample response:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Meaning/part of speech</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
   | World news   | It usually means “getting together” or “a group of people get together” to do something. (Verb, noun) | • Anti-war protesters staged rallies Saturday in hundreds of ….  
   |              |                         | • Sydney rallies against war on Iraq  
   |              |                         | • Khasavyurt has hosted the largest anti-war rally since ….  
   | Business news| It’s usually used with stocks. It means that the stock price has gone up. (Verb, noun) | • U.S. stocks rallied, sending the Dow Jones Industrial Average to its biggest weekly gain….  
   |              |                         | • The Nasdaq injected fresh hope that a sharp rally is under way.  
   |              |                         | • Investors locked in some gains after a big rally on Thursday. |

3. **Single and multiple theme micro-corpus**
   **Grammar:**
   **Sample task 1:** Choose one appropriate word to fill in each of the following blanks and find similar sentences in the system.
   (1) Ms. Chin accused her opponent _________(with/of/for/about) _________ (accept/accepted/accepting) bribes.
   (2) Saddam Hussein was suspected _________(with/of/for/about) secretly _________ (develop/developed/developing) weapons of mass destruction.
Sample response 1:

(1) Ms. Chin accused her opponent of accepting bribes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>rule</th>
<th>support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>accuse someone of Ving</td>
<td>• North Korea accuses U.S. of planning nuclear war…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The head of UN’s food agency has accused western countries of ignoring Africa….</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(2) Saddam Hussein was suspected of secretly developing weapons of mass destruction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>rule</th>
<th>support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>someone is suspected of Ving</td>
<td>• More than 100 people in Canada are now suspected of having contracted the new form of pneumonia….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A third UK patient is suspected of having contracted the severe pneumonia-like condition ….</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample task 2: Fill in the blank with an appropriate word and find similar sentences to support your answer.

The teacher demands that we ______ (help/to help/ helping) the new student.

Sample response 2: The teacher demands that we help the new student.

Similar sentences:

• MSF demands that Putin help release volunteers….
• New California law demands that security become….

More tasks directing the students to search for similar words such as suggest, insist, and recommend, can be given to derive a general rule for use of subjunctive verbs.

4. Single text type micro-corpus

Discourse:

The discourse features of news stories that most instructor would introduce in their lessons include the structure of inverted pyramid and the headline format. Most instructors would introduce the special syntax of the headlines to help students quickly decipher the meanings of the headlines. Mostly likely they would also train the students to scan the news by quickly locating the most important information in news leads.

Sample task 1: Look for the following headlines and read their leads to find
out what the underlined parts stand for in headlines.

**Sample response 1:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headline</th>
<th>Lead</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Syria, Iran warned by Bush</td>
<td>President Bush on Monday issued a stern warning to Syria and Iran….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Abbas, Sharon to meet on ‘road map’</td>
<td>Shrouded in secrecy and possibly competing agendas, Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon were scheduled….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Canada, Taiwan wrestle with SARS</td>
<td>Canada and Taiwan struggle to contain the SARS virus, which….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 China, Russia: War can be avoided</td>
<td>China and Russia have repeated calls for a &quot;political solution” to the Iraq crisis….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 CDC: Southerners, blacks more likely to die of stroke</td>
<td>The first county-by-county atlas of U.S. stroke deaths confirmed in graphic detail Thursday that Southerners and blacks are….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Rumsfeld: France, Germany are ‘problems’ in Iraqi conflict</td>
<td>“Germany has been a problem, and France has been a problem,” said U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on Wednesday, a former NATO ambassador….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Boeing to add up to 500 jobs</td>
<td>The Boeing Co. will increase its Puget Sound-area military business by up to 500 jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 SBC to sell satellite TV with EchoStar brand</td>
<td>SBC Communications will combine satellite television with its bundle phone services….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 State to study rates of cancer, birth defects</td>
<td>State health officials, responding to residents’ concerns about industrial solvents polluting some 470 homes or business, will study birth outcomes and cancer rates….</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Air safety boss to quit</td>
<td>The head of the aviation safety watchdog will leave within weeks as ….</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) “,” stands for ______ and ______
(2) “:” stands for ______ say, call for*
(3) “to V” stands for ______ will V ______

**Sample task 2:** Quickly find at least five news stories about protests against the US war in Iraq and locate the Ws in the leads.

**Sample response 2:**
Thousands march against war

WHO thousands of anti-war activists
WHAT set off their own barrage of street protests
WHEN
WHERE around the world,
HOW chaining themselves together, blocking workers and traffic, walking out of classes and parading in mock chemical suits
WHY Galvanized by the American attack on Iraq.

An instructional focus outside of Tribble’s framework which is appropriate for the course of news media English is understanding of news beyond word level. With the “associated word” function of the system, the relationship between news events was made apparent to the students.

Sample task: Oil price has fluctuated before, during, and after the war in Iraq. Please search for related news to find out how oil price has been affected by the war in Iraq. (possible keywords: war/crude, Iraq/crude)

Sample response:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>War-related events</th>
<th>Oil price</th>
<th>Leads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Threat of coming war</td>
<td>Crude oil rose in London, adding to Thursday’s 6.1 percent gain, as war in Iraq and civil strife in Nigeria limits shipments from the two OPEC members that provided 15 percent of US oil imports in January.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Intensification of fighting</td>
<td>Stocks fell yesterday, led by petrochemical makers such as Formosa Plastics Corp, after crude prices gained on concern fighting in Iraq will intensify as allied forces get closer to Baghdad.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Short war expected</td>
<td>Crude oil fell as much as 10 percent, its biggest one-day drop since September 2001, on speculation a war in Iraq will end quickly and with limited disruption to Middle East oil supplies.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Possibility of peaceful resolution</td>
<td>Crude oil fell for a second day after Chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix said Iraq’s decision to destroy banned missiles was a “very significant” step that amounts to “real disarmament.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview Responses

After the lesson, the participants were interviewed by the author about their learning experience in the past five weeks. The interview questions were as follows.
1. How do you feel about the learning experience in the past five weeks?
2. Do you prefer studying with the textbook or with the on-line system? What do you think are the differences?
3. What do you like and dislike about the textbook and the on-line system?
4. How do you feel about learning English now?

Here the author would like to point out that the conversation did not take the form of a formal interview with a set sequence of key questions. Rather, it was more like a reflection session in which the student reflected on her learning experience and shared her ideas and feelings with the instructor. Therefore, the author sometimes just followed where the conversation led to enhance the natural flow of the conversation instead of sticking to a list of questions. The length of interview varied from 15-25 minutes.

A few themes emerged from the students’ interview responses.

1. Overall approach to learning

(1) Overall approach to learning English

All of the students talked about the different approaches to learning English as one of the major differences between the two types of learning experience. They considered learning with the textbook more top-down, stressful, and frustrating. Learning with the system seemed to be more constructive, relaxing, and motivating to the students.

As one of the students put it:

“In the past, when I thought of learning English, I thought about memorizing tons of rules and new words. I’m never good at that, and that’s why I’m kind of afraid of doing that. The textbook we used was pretty good. But when I saw those word lists and example sentences, I just thought ‘we’re going to memorize words again?’ And I felt a little stressed….I don’t think I’m lazy, but I don’t think I’ll do well on that….The system was a little more fun. I could manipulate it and get the results that I wanted. I like doing that kind of things.”

As mentioned above, the students’ frustration with English learning mainly comes from memorization of grammatical rules and vocabulary. They think studying English is mostly memorization work. For these students, a more active approach emphasizing discovering instead of memorizing can make learning more engaging and less intimidating. Another student reflected on her experience with the system:

“Like those questions you gave us. We had to find the answers ourselves, then we’d try very hard to understand what it said on the screen and fill in the answers, although the sentences were sometimes very complicated. We were
finding the answers and not just memorizing something because you gave us those [word lists or rules]….Not just memorize it because it’s correct….Of course I’d still want to memorize them, but at least it wouldn’t feel so difficult because I’d worked with them, found the answers already. I have deeper impressions of the words and sentences, I think. That’s a kind of sense of achievement, I guess.”

One student reported the motivating effects of working with the system:

“I kind of like guessing (figuring out) grammar rules from the sentences. I’ve never done that before. It makes grammar more…more exciting. Sometimes it’s easy. Sometimes it’s hard. And when I knew that I’d answered correctly, I felt I was kind of good. Not that my English was good, but that I knew how to look for answers.”

As discussed in the literature, an inductive approach to learning helps the learners take on the more active role of researchers. For these low-achievement students, this approach seemed more welcome than the top-down approach of rule memorization. More importantly, through the process of discovering, the students developed a sense of achievement and an impression that English is at least “learnable”.

(2) Learning of vocabulary

Regarding the learning of vocabulary, the students reported that the well-organized vocabulary lists in the textbook made learning vocabulary seem easier, but the out-dated examples created problems in understanding. As the students explained:

“The vocabulary lists in the textbook are more comprehensive. We often missed out some words just by using the system. Like the verbs used to describe stock [movements], we looked for the verbs and made a list. But in the textbook, there were so many verbs, and there were lists for small movements and big movements. We didn’t find out about those [differences] with the system.”

“But the problem is that a lot of the times, I really couldn’t understand the example sentences. There were a lot of unfamiliar names and places. I didn’t know what they were talking about. Sometimes I read the sentences and just didn’t understand what they were talking about….So the sentences didn’t really help me understand the meaning of the vocabulary or how to use the vocabulary. Then I’d feel that the words are so difficult and a little boring.”

In this regard, the system had the advantage of providing lead sentences about recent news events for the students to make sense of the vocabulary. Reading about events closer to their daily lives made it easier to apply real-world knowledge to facilitate comprehension and therefore make the tasks less intimidating. As one student commented:

“The sentences in the system were difficult, too. Sometimes I had trouble understanding them. But at least I knew they were about things like SARS or Iraq. Even if you don’t read the newspapers you’d hear something about them
every day. Then it wouldn’t be so difficult to understand what the sentences were talking about. You could pretty much guess their meanings.”

2. Perceived effectiveness of the two approaches

When comparing the two approaches, the students repeatedly associated the textbook approach with learning of vocabulary but reported a broader range of benefits of the system. Since the textbook was compiled to highlight high-frequency vocabulary in different categories of news reports, it goes without saying that the perceived strength of the textbook was in learning of vocabulary. Despite the difficulty arising from outdated examples as mentioned previously, the students still considered the textbook well-organized, comprehensive, and helpful. When reporting the perceived effectiveness of the system, the students mentioned learning of acronyms/abbreviations, grammar and keywords, and tracking the development of news events. Deciphering acronyms/abbreviations in the news was emphasized in the students’ responses:

“…especially with the acronyms/abbreviations. We often didn’t know what those letters stood for when we read the news, but with the system, we could just key in the letters and then compare the headlines and the sentences. It was very fast this way. Sometimes we had to read more [than one] sentence, but it’s much easier and faster this way.”

The students also commented on learning of grammar with the system:

“It’s more fun to learn grammar this way. This way you felt like you understood it. And after a while you should be able to remember it.”

Some students mentioned how the system facilitated news reading by tracking development of news events. For example, as one student reported:

“I liked to look for reports on the same news event because I could know the background of the news and why the event happened. It’s quicker that way. In the past, I usually asked the people around me, but I didn’t always get the answers. With the system, I could just read the previous reports [on the same event] and find out more or less about what was going on.”

As mentioned by the students, the system enables the students to get a quick glimpse of the development of a particular news event to better comprehend the news.

3. Impact on learning

Some of the students talked about their changes in learning after the lesson. They expected themselves to have developed analytical ability or sensitivity to patterns imbedded in the language data they come across in the future. As one student put it:

“I guess I’ve become more sensitive [to the patterns in the sentences]. In the past, when I saw a lot of English sentences, I’d just feel very painful because they were usually very difficult. Now I might be able to tell myself ‘ok, there are patterns in them that you can detect. You just need to find the patterns and don’t have to understand every word. That would be enough.’”
Another student expressed a similar feeling:
“I feel I’m more able to analyze things now. Now when I read something, I’m more likely to pay attention to the rules or how the word is used. You don’t necessarily have to learn grammar by memorizing rules first. You can learn as you read.”

From the students’ responses, it can be seen that from inductive reasoning, observing and analyzing, the students, if not improved their English, at least walked away with a heightened awareness of the opportunities to learn simply by observing and testing hypothesis. For these students, knowing how to make good use of the language they encounter in the future is probably more valuable than learning some grammar rules successfully in a short lesson.

4. Further comments and expectations

(1) Collaboration in learning

Two students mentioned the benefits of working with a partner while working with the system. According to them, working with a partner opened a channel for positive interaction and made the learning experience more rewarding.

“I like having a partner. When I worked with a partner, I learned something from my partner, not just from working with the system. You feel more secure to have a partner, someone who can work with you and help you confirm something when you’re not sure.”

Indeed, small group work increases the possibility of peer learning and, more importantly, relieves the stress of having to take on a difficult task oneself, which is particularly significant to students who lack confidence in their own proficiency.

(2) Need for tasks

The students raised an important point about the efficacy of the system as a self-study tool.

“With the textbook, I know that I just have to read and memorize the stuff inside. But with the system, it seems that I need to have the tasks given out by the teacher; otherwise, I probably won’t know what to do with it, even though it was more fun. Or when I happen to know what words I want to look for or read about in the news. Only then will I know what to do with the system.”

The major function of the system was to present multiple contexts of a given word or phrase to make patterns of language use more apparent or make it easier to track a particular event. It presupposes that the user has a particular question or keyword in mind. In other words, the system seems more geared towards use in
conjunction with an instructional program. To better equip the system as a tool that students can access on a daily basis to improve English while keeping in touch with world events, two possible solutions are envisioned. One is to provide the additional function of search by date to allow the convenience of regular on-line English news reading sites. The other is to expand the system into a teaching site that includes an updated bank of activities or questions as a guide for users.

(3) Outlook and expectations

As reported above, the students in the study acknowledged the benefits of the system and reported a rather positive outlook on learning English. The comment below reflects the positive attitude:

“I feel that reading English news seems less intimidating after the lesson, after we knew something about the format of headlines and how to quickly skim the news. But I think the more important thing is that I can read more English texts, not just the news. I can maybe try to take my old textbooks out and read them or even try to read some magazines for English learning. It seems a little less impossible now. Especially after we learned how to analyze [the language] to find out rules ourselves, it’s a little less terrifying.”

In addition to the positive responses, the students also expressed their expectations of the system; i.e., how the system could be friendlier and more motivating to them. A suggestion mentioned by all of the students was the possibility of developing a bilingual corpus to compensate for the difficulty to comprehend the corpus data.

“It’d be ideal if the news comes with Chinese translations. Because some of the sentences were really very difficult. Then I can just compare the English text with the Chinese text. I might read faster this way. It would be easier to handle the sentences.”

“If we had Chinese translations right next to the English texts, then I’d have more patience to read on and not be disturbed by difficult words or sentences. So, letting me develop more patience would be a good thing because then I’d read more and expose myself to English texts more often. Then I’d probably learn better.”

Despite the technical complexities involved in creating an up-to-date bilingual news corpus, parallel concordancing does have the potential of supporting a wider variety of instructional activities. To ease the burden of dealing with authentic language data, more thoughts can be devoted to making bilingual data available for specific instructional activities.

CONCLUSION
This study represents an attempt to facilitate English learning for low-achievement students by offering them a tool that fosters inductive reasoning and learner autonomy and opens up a channel to read English texts on a regular basis. Two approaches were used in a five-week lesson to teach reading of English news—the textbook approach and the approach of on-line concordancing. Afterward, the students reflected on their experiences with the two approaches and shared them with the author. From what the students reported, on-line concordancing helped them develop an awareness of a new possibility of learning and walked away with slightly restored confidence in learning English in the future.

Results of this study revealed two issues worth careful consideration by instructors. The first is the need to teach important learning skills to low-achievement students. When facing students who do not perform well on language tests, instructors would often be tempted to lower their standard for achievement with the hope of increasing students’ sense of achievement and therefore interest in learning English. This may work oftentimes; however, it might be equally important to focus our effort on important learning skills that would benefit the students in their future quest for knowledge. Since it is better to teach a person how to fish than to give a person fish, in addition to giving the students content knowledge, it is essential that these students be given an opportunity to develop learning skills such as spotting patterns and forming and testing hypotheses. From this study, it seems that with a data-driven learning tool, lowered anxiety from collaborative learning, and sufficient attention from the instructor, even the low-achievement students can be placed in a position to learn how to learn. From the perspective of an instructor, hearing the students say that they had developed sensitivity to future language input and come to realize that English was after all, learnable, is far more significant than hearing them say that they had learned a lot of English during the past few weeks.

The second issue is the need to help students develop the habit of reading English on a regular basis. To foster development of the habit of reading English in students’ free time, the following conditions need to be met: (1) the reading materials are tied to the students’ interest, (2) the materials are easily accessible, and (3) sufficient resources are available on demand to assist comprehension. Developers of the on-line system in the current study strived to meet these conditions by utilizing reports of news events, materials closely related to students’ daily lives, allowing them to choose news categories they were interested in, and providing resources intended to help them understand the content and reduce frustration. Nevertheless, based on the students’ responses, it is apparent that to sustain the beneficial effects of the learning tool, active attention needs to be devoted to expanding functions and
resources of the tool to encourage frequent visit. Only in this way can we construct a learning tool that both incorporates the merits of corpora concordancing and is friendly enough for students to stay in regular contact with English.
REFERENCES


