How do learners actually use language corpora? Using computer tracking techniques to explore corpus consultation.

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Over the last two decades, the use of authentic language in the foreign language classroom has attracted a great deal of attention. Language corpora, i.e. large collections of texts which are representative of a language or language variety, serve as the perfect source of real language and can thus be used in very diverse ways. Indirect approaches involve the use of materials such as dictionaries, course books or grammars which are based on corpus evidence while direct approaches bring the corpus closer to the classroom, as either teachers or students engage in direct corpus consultation. A *softer* adoption of a direct approach involves teachers exploiting corpora to select relevant instances or concordance lines for their students, thus acting as mediators between the learners and the corpus. By contrast, in "the hard version" [1] of data-driven learning (DDL) it is students themselves who engage in direct corpus consultation. The latter approach turns the learner into a language detective [2] or language researcher [3] and therefore favours learner-centred teaching and the development of learner autonomy.

The findings reported in the literature in the field of DDL are most often derived from research tools such as questionnaires, interviews or self-reports but only a few studies have shifted the focus to the importance of capturing the actual interaction between the student and the corpus or corpus-based resources. There is, therefore, a perceived lack of factual evidence of how students approach the use concordancers and other corpus-based tools in the classroom; evidence that could assist practitioners in detecting sources of difficulty or the needs of language learners while they engage in corpus consultation. This poster presents the use of computer tracking techniques to research student-computer interaction during corpus consultation and discusses the advantages of this methodology as well as the challenges that it poses to the researchers.

Our approach to data collection involves the use of a sniffer or packet analyser that captures the traffic between the student's computer and the Internet, which allows us to gather information on the words typed in or the resources consulted, among other aspects. We also present a study in which computer-tracking was used to analyse the behaviour of a group of students while solving focus on form activities with the help of corpus-based resources. Our study offers a taxonomy of learner searches and also sheds light on the initial stages of corpus consultation and identifies typical search patterns.

References

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