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Introducing data-driven learning to PhD students for research writing purposes: A territory-wide project in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a project aimed at disseminating the data-driven learning (DDL) approach to research writing among PhD students in Hong Kong universities. A 3.5-h workshop was offered for over 20 sessions across six universities addressing 473 post-graduate research students, accounting for 6.7% of the whole research graduate student population in Hong Kong. Students were first introduced to the free online corpus, BNCweb, which can help to solve lexico-grammatical problems encountered during research writing. They were then given access to teacher-built discipline-specific corpora with the concordancing tool AntConc. Through hands-on activities and interactive discussion students were able to compare discourse strategies employed across different disciplines and identify their linguistic realisations. Participants were finally guided through the process of building a corpus of their own, thereby catering for their personal needs. The self-selected participants' evaluation of the workshop was highly positive and they showed evident enthusiasm for this new approach. Their suggestions for improvement are also discussed. The description of the workshop programme and feedback from learners may provide useful insights for DDL practitioners who wish to spread this approach in their own institutions.

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1. Introduction

Academics around the world are facing increasing pressure to publish internationally. As prospective members of the academic community, PhD students now find themselves facing the same pressure of publish or perish (Cargill, O'Connor, & Li, 2012). Such a burden can be even more challenging for students whose L1 is not English, given the linguistic challenges they face when striving to publish in international journals (Belcher, 2007; Curry & Lillis, 2004; J. Flowerdew, 1999, 2000, 2001). However, support for future academics in research writing is inadequate (Flowerdew & Forest, 2009; Kwan, 2010).

In line with the rapid advances in computer technology, the past two decades have witnessed a steady growth in the literature on direct machine-readable corpus applications, or data-driven learning (DDL), (Johns, 1991a, 1991b), to EAP writing pedagogy (e.g. Charles, 2011, 2012, 2014; Cotos, 2014; Diani, 2012; Eriksson, 2012; L.; Flowerdew, 2008, 2015a, 2015b; Lee & Swales, 2006; Tono, Satake, & Miura, 2014; Yoon & Hirvela, 2004). Although Boulton and Cobb's (2017) extensive meta-analysis of DDL empirical studies in the language classroom has shown that the DDL approach is profitable, the process of research findings being carried over to actual teaching practice is still rather slow (Boulton et al., 2012; Leńko-Szymańska &

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Boulton, 2015; Tribble, 2013). This is indeed the case in university English writing classrooms in Hong Kong, especially at the PhD level, which is the context of the present study.

This paper describes an attempt to address this gap by means of a series of DDL workshops on research writing for PhD students in Hong Kong. Funded by the University Grants Committee (UGC) of the Hong Kong SAR government as part of their language enhancement programme, the project involved 24 3.5-h workshops delivered to around 500 participants in six Hong Kong public universities from November 2015 to May 2016. The following section briefly reviews the (limited) literature on corpus applications in EAP writing pedagogy for PhD students to date. Section 3 provides a detailed account of the corpora and tools used, the workshop design, and how activities were implemented during teaching. Sections 4 and 5 summarise participants' feedback collected from the post-workshop survey and interviews, while the conclusions are presented in Section 6.

2. Corpus-based EAP writing for PhD students

As already stated, the literature on corpus applications for PhD writing is limited. Lee and Swales (2006) are among the pioneers who introduced corpus-based EAP writing to PhD students. During a 13-week course, Lee and Swales first introduced students to free online general corpora, such as the British National Corpus (BNC), and then an expert corpus of research articles (RAs) with the *WordSmith* tools software package. They considered that the PhD students in their course would already be familiar with generic features of research writing and would be more interested in working with specialist corpora to fine-tune their language. The final part of the course required students to compile their own corpora and conduct comparative analyses independently. The small number of students ($n = 4$) who regularly attended the course found corpora empowering, giving them greater autonomy. While the students believed that general and specialised corpora complement each other, they were more engaged with discipline-specific texts. The authors concluded with the caveat that they were teaching an exceptional group of highly motivated students who were highly acculturated into research genres and had excellent computer skills.

PhD students in L. Flowerdew's (2015a) writing workshop focusing on the discussion section of the PhD thesis also showed excellent take-up of corpus tools. During the 5-h session, paper-printed concordance lines were first presented to the students as input and a basis for discussion about the different rhetorical functions involved in discussion sections of PhD theses. Later they had hands-on activities using *ConcGram* and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University Corpus of RAs to explore the lexico-grammatical patterns typically used to fulfil certain rhetorical functions. Example sentences taken from student writing were also used as prompts for discussion. Students were asked to judge the appropriateness of such sentences and then check the words/patterns in question in the corpora to verify their judgement. During some activities, students noticed that they were familiar with certain words/patterns from the corpora but never used them in their own writing. Corpus activities, therefore, could be useful in helping students to transfer receptive language competence to productive performance. In other activities, students' inaccurate or partial knowledge regarding certain grammatical items was improved through discovery learning with corpora. In general, students highly rated the workshop. They had no problem adjusting to the new tool and even commented that paper-printed concordance lines were boring.

Graduate students in Cortes's (2014) 14-week corpus-assisted academic writing course also learned to use concordance tools (in this case AntConc) with great ease. Taking a dual genre- and corpus-based approach, Cortes introduced an experimental group of learners (in parallel with a control group without corpus assistance) to the moves in different sections of the RA and asked them to explore more examples through consulting their self-compiled discipline-specific RA corpora. The course was greatly appreciated by both groups, with a slightly higher evaluation given by the experimental group. They appreciated the use of large corpora in exploring linguistic features of the discourse moves and stated that they would continue using corpora to facilitate their writing. The control group enjoyed the genre-based activities, but found that analysing only four RAs was not enough, indicating the advantage of corpora in revealing linguistic features that are not easily identified by manual analysis.

A researcher who has conducted a number of studies involving corpus-based academic writing with research students is Charles (2007, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015). Her studies report on her implementation of the genre- and corpus-based dual approach in her teaching at Oxford University (Charles, 2007) and successful attempts to train students to build their personal discipline-specific corpora (Charles, 2012, 2015). Her teaching was particularly successful in terms of students' uptake of the corpus approach over time after training (Charles, 2014), although common problems were identified such as the time and difficulty involved in the acquisition of corpus skills such as searching and analysing results.

The above-mentioned studies in general have highly positive findings regarding students' perception of the new approach. The success of these interventions might be at least partly attributable, however, to the fact that 1) the teachers are very experienced corpus linguists and English educators; and 2), as Lee and Swales (2006) and L. Flowerdew (2015a) pointed out, PhD students are generally highly motivated, with great self-learning capabilities. Furthermore, these studies might not be applicable in other teaching contexts due to a lack of institutional support, manpower, and other resources. Lee and Swales (2006) admitted that their course would not be repeated in the future because there was no teacher to take over after them. Cortes ran her course for several years. However, she concluded that "new teaching methodologies [could not be] massively spread out in a short period of time: it takes time and more studies that analyse them to convince administrators and instructors who might not be too inclined towards new methods or technologies of the advantages of this type of classes" (Cortes, 2014, p.78).

This paper adds to the limited literature on corpus applications for PhD students by describing the design, implementation and evaluation of a series of corpus-based research writing workshops run across Hong Kong universities. While, as in the previous studies, the self-selected students in this study were highly motivated, the project was on a much larger scale, across

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