

Corpus delicti 2

Chris Payne atones for his crime and converts to corpora.

In Issue 70 of *ETp*, I confessed to not having taken advantage of corpora as a teaching resource. A corpus provides useful language learning opportunities for students. It is a tool that is accessible to all teachers, and its use does not involve the possession of arcane computer skills.

Word counts give us frequency information about words, but the best way to see how words are actually *used* and what their *meanings* are is with a concordance. Concordances arrange a text so that examples of the key word, or *node*, appear under each other as in the example below – for *watch*. They show us what words typically come before the key word (known as ‘left-sorting’) or after it (‘right-sorting’).

In this second article I will look at how we can exploit concordances, and suggest some activities to use with students without the need for a computer in the classroom.

Concordances in the classroom

Students can be trained in how to use corpora and concordance lines directly.

This is known as Data-Driven Learning (DDL). DDL is learner-centred in that it is a discovery-based or inductive approach to learning. The student becomes a kind of language detective who investigates and finds clues and evidence about patterns of language and what they mean.

One criticism levelled at DDL is that the language of concordances is beyond lower-level learners. This is a fair comment, so we must underscore how important it is to select only appropriate examples for use in the classroom. We can also use graded readers, and even texts from coursebooks to create our own concordances, provided that they offer natural-sounding examples of language. Rachel Allan’s corpus of Penguin Graded Readers illustrates how graded-reader concordances show students language patterns in a manageable way (www.nottingham.ac.uk/english/IVACS/allan.ppt).

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In some cases, teachers and students do not have access to a computer in the classroom, but this does not preclude the use of concordances. Teachers can prepare and enlarge printouts of concordance lines before class or get students to compile their own concordances using a good corpus-based dictionary, such as the Macmillan learner dictionaries. Class-made concordances are more eye-catching than those on a computer printout. They can be fun to design, appeal to visual learners and, most importantly,

If I notice the banker fidget and look at his **watch**, I may well conjecture that the game is about to
Dogs often enjoy a run along the beach but **watch** out for any traces of tar which could adhere to their feet or
From which place we could safely **watch** the bombing of the city by the Germans. I don't
I wanted only to go down to the summer-house and **watch** the leaves falling until night fell with them it is on
tomorrow night on BBC 1 and you must **watch** it at nine thirty in the studio and he
Of er blockages all time. The AA Road **watch** say it's particularly bad Strathclyde and
Although the match might be colourful to **watch**, it would hardly be good football.

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▶▶▶ help learners really notice a language item in context.

Let us now look at some activities with concordance lines that can be done without having a computer in the classroom.

1 Find the context

Aim

To understand meanings of words in context

The students are given a concordance with the key word and the words *after* it, but not the words *before* the key word. The teacher dictates a line from before the key word (not in order), and the students must decide where to write it in the concordance.

This activity can also be done vice-versa – the teacher dictates lines from *after* the key word and the students have the key word and the words *before* it.

2 Multiple meanings

Aim

To make out the meaning of a word when it is used in different ways

Activity A

As an example, we can take the key word *hand*, meaning ‘a part of the body’ and ‘to give someone something’. The students are given the concordance lines and are asked to work out how many different meanings the key word has, and what they are.

Here I have suggested a word with just two meanings, but you can, of course, use key words which have more than two.

Activity B

This is the opposite of Activity A, in that the students are given the meanings of the key word, in this example, *way*.

The students are given numbered concordance lines in which the key word has four different meanings. Below the concordances, you write the four different meanings, and the students have to write the line number next to the meaning it corresponds to. For example:

1	The movie is doomed to run way over budget
2	She was kidnapped as she was on her way to an interview with
3	He'll do it while he's on his way back to Berlin
4	in a fun and humorous way . In addition to the book
5	Excuse me, is this the way to the Eiffel Tower?
6	It's still way too early to talk about
7	and what it's actually going to mean about the way you organise training courses
8	She was lost and didn't know the way home

Meanings of *way* in this concordance:

A journey = 2, 3

Right direction or road = 5, 8

Style or manner = 4, 7

Much, to a great degree = 1, 6

Activity C

This activity gives lower-level learners practice in identifying word classes. We can give students a concordance sheet for *like*. They have to decide in which lines *like* is a verb and in which it is a preposition. For example:

I **like** chocolate.

My brother eats **like** a horse.

3 Find the key word

Aim

To raise awareness about common collocates and meanings of words

Prepare a sheet of concordance lines with four or five examples of different key words you want to focus on. Put the students into pairs. One student is given the lines *before* the key word and the other is given the lines *after* the key word.

Each student now has a different part of several sentences with the key words missing. An example is shown below, where the missing words are *way* and *bill*.

The students read each other their lines and together try to guess the key words. This activity can be made easier by writing up the missing key words on the board, along with some distractors.

4 Concordance race

Aim

To draw attention to near synonyms and to show that words are rarely synonymous and interchangeable in all contexts

This activity is for four teams of students. Write eight enlarged concordance lines on four sheets of card, choosing a mix of lines from the near synonyms that you are going to use, but with the key words missing. Some examples are *big/large* and *fast/quick* – you can have a *big* or *large* garden, but rarely a *large* problem.

Display the four sheets of card around the classroom, on the board, the walls or the door.

Now write each key word on eight separate pieces of card and stick them in one place in the classroom.

Each team of students is assigned one of the concordance sheets. They have to stand up, go to their sheet and read the lines in order to work out the correct key word.

Student A

We believe that the best _____
 And yet my electricity _____
 This was the best _____
 Football tops the _____
 She was on her _____
 Are you on your _____
 I don't mind a big heating _____
 Take the money to pay this _____
 If you don't want your _____
 We're very happy with the _____

Student B

to explore and experience a country
 is larger than the gas one.
 to govern the church
 in this edition
 to an interview with one of
 out to market? Me too.
 but I don't want a big phone
 out of my account
 itemised. Remember
 the album's selling.

I had a	quick	word with Mickey.
He is going to miss a	big	game. In the 1990 replay
It's a	big	mistake to get intellectual about
Exciting car, it's a very	fast	car but it's a very safe car.
Which is the	fast	lane.
Her banker arranged for	large	sums of money to be
Let's have a	quick	look at these types of media.
People go off politics. A	large	majority of people, Labour and Tory.

Then they run to the key words and stick them in the node position on their sheet. The winner is the first team to complete all their concordance lines successfully.

The example above shows how the concordance sheets might look at the end.

Although this activity involves a certain amount of preparation, it can easily be reused. It is fun and it generates a lot of discussion among students.

They would benefit from having their own individual photocopies of this activity to keep and do on their own as revision.

5 Collocation and colligation

Aim

To notice frequent collocates of words and common patterns of grammar words

Activity A

The students look at a concordance printout and have to identify four or five of the most common collocates of the key word. They can also focus on specific word classes before and after the key word, such as common adjectives before nouns, nouns after verbs, etc.

Activity B

Concordances can raise awareness of how prepositions and other grammar words behave. The students can study concordance examples in order to see what prepositions are used after particular adjectives or verbs.

I recommend tailoring this activity so that you can focus on words whose prepositions in the students' L1 are unexpected when compared with English, or are completely absent. For example, the word *depend* will show examples followed by *on* or *upon*,

whereas in Spanish the preferred preposition is *of* ('*de*') which makes for endless mistakes, even at advanced levels.

6 Do-it-yourself concordances

Aim

To encourage the students to become experts on their key words

This activity is suitable for all levels. It combines the use of an authentic text with texts in the students' coursebook.

After choosing an authentic text, select the grammatical or lexical items you want your students to learn. Give one word to each student, or two words to each pair of students.

Ask them to find their word in the text and write one concordance line for it. The key word should be lined up in the middle of the page and written in a different colour, or highlighted in some way.

Once the text and its salient language have been studied, ask the students to find other example sentences with their given words in the texts included in their coursebooks. They then line up their example sentences on their concordance sheet.

Follow-up: The finished concordance sheets could be written on card and displayed in the classroom. Alternatively, the students can blank out the key word and the rest of the class has to guess the missing word. 



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