'Do-It-Yourself' English Courses for Higher Education

Vijayakumar Chintalapalli

ABSTRACT

Do-It-Yourself is an innovative practice in ELT, where the students have the autonomy to pursue their language interests. When combined with modern corpus tools such as concordances and genre pedagogy, the DIY courses can enable learners learn various aspects of language crucial for their success on specific academic programs. In this paper, I propose to introduce the concept of DIY in ESP courses in higher education context and show how they can truly promote learner-centredness in an ESP education.

Keywords: Concordances; corpora; lexical-grammatical items; DIY Courses; genre pedagogy; ESP; learner-centeredness.

Introduction

In India, most of the technological institutions offer two types of English language course: general or communicative English course and technical communication course. While the former stresses the importance of English communication skills in everyday contexts, the latter attempts to focus more on the "professional" contexts of language use such as technical report writing and presentation skills. The scope and nature of these English courses vary from institution to institution. The course content for both the courses is generally drawn from the core disciplines that both the teachers and learners can access; no content is taken from subject disciplines.

Recent Trends in English for Specific Purposes

The demand to satisfy the individual language needs of higher education students has motivated some ESP practitioners to reconceptualize the scope and nature of ESP courses. Some earlier attempts in this direction made an effort to identify the core linguistic aspects, such as genres and lexico-grammatical features, and conventions that were typically employed by the members of the discourse communities. Materials producers typically organized the content in terms of genres, lexical, and grammatical items for instructional purposes. In order to provide a heightened awareness of specific academic genres, some practitioners attempted to design consciousness-raising activities by binding linguistic realizations such as rhetorical moves and lexico-grammatical patterns with their social and communicative purposes (Sengupta, Forey, & Hamp-Lyons, 1999). Learners were encouraged to analyse language use from the points of view of social purpose and audience.

Some other experts found it convenient to use technological tools such as language corpora in the ESP classes. Data-driven

learning was introduced by Johns 30 years ago. Johns (1991), in his seminal article, demonstrated how teachers could use computer corpora directly in the language classroom to help learners "discover" patterns of language use. Although this bold move towards the use of a rather unconventional source of language and a radical methodology "learn how to learn" managed to attract some noteworthy applied linguists' attention (Thurstun & Candlin, 1998), its pedagogic potential was only realized much later.

Corpus-based language education and DIY courses

Understanding authentic language, according to corpus researchers, requires both syntagmatic and paradigmatic approaches to reading. In a syntagmatic, horizontal or linear analysis, we can observe and analyse authentic language as it flows. We can study different contextual properties, starting from rhetorical moves to lexical choices, to determine the texture of the texts. Similarly, the vertical paradigmatic analysis of a corpus can help us with the typical lexico-grammatical patterns. For example, studies on the frequently used lexical bundles in spoken and written academic registers have relied on paradigmatic analysis to identify functional bundles for pedagogic purposes (Biber & Barbieri, 2007). Corpus-based courses fundamentally rely on these two strategies to enable learners to understand real language use.

Several EAP and ESP projects have used computer corpora to produce frequency-based word lists for general and specific purposes (Nation, 2016). Paul Nation's

Range program and Oxford's *WordSmith Tools* are the popular tools used to identify technical and semi-technical vocabulary items. Although not much research is available as to how these lists have been put to use by ESP students in the classroom, several publications, including learner dictionaries, have successfully produced discipline-specific ESP materials with the help of these word lists (Smith, 2014).

However, the scope of corpus-based word lists in language education in the last ten years has spread beyond single-word lexical items to phrases and lexico-grammatical patterns in specific spoken and written registers (Simpson-Vlach & Ellis, 2010). Hyland (2008) and (Biber & Barbieri, 2007), for instance, classified bundle types based on their occurrence in different disciplines and registers. While a large number of bundles used in classroom discussions tend to organize the discourse in action, Hyland pointed out that many research-oriented bundles used in science and technology imparted 'a laboratory-focused sense to writing' (Hyland, 2008:14). Similarly, he showed how some bundles helped writers to express stance (*it is possible that; it may be due to*), while others signalled transition (*in contrast to; on the other hand*).

DIY corpus-based courses

DIY corpus-based courses, unlike traditional ESP courses, are intrinsically structured to promote autonomy. Besides, the scope of these courses could go beyond word lists. In fact, modern DIY courses take into consideration register or field variations, audience variations, and genre variations. In a recent study by Dong & Lu (2020), both

the instructor and students compiled a specialized corpus of engineering research articles (RAs) to study the rhetorical moves and their associative linguistic aspects. At the genre level, they tagged the rhetorical moves of RAs using specific functional labels— *making topic generalizations, indicating to gaps, presenting the present work*— that John Swales (Swales, 2004) has produced with the help of modern corpus analysis tools. Once they tagged the moves, they then extracted move specific concordances (for example, *claiming centrality*) to study how the writers relaized the moves in terms of linguistic expressions (*plays an important role; however, little knowledge*). In other words, they studied the typical and frequent paradigmatic patterns that marked the moves/steps to understand how writers delpoyed their language resources to organize their ideas in a logical order.

Similarly, Charles from the Oxford University Language Centre designed a DIY (Do-It-Yourself) academic writing course for a group of advanced learners from different disciplines (Charles, 2012). Unlike Dong & Lu's (2020) study where every student contributed a text to the specialized corpus, Charles' study attmepted to make a group of 41 students from 12 different disciplines to compile their own corpus of texts, which could be accessed later without the Internet:

a. to learn the grammatical forms appropriate to their contexts of academic writing, and

b. to extend and refine their vocabulary knowledge (which includes collocations).

She even allowed them to add and delete texts from their corpus, because her major aim here was to help students correct and improve their writing independently. The students were encouraged to study, among other things, grammatical aspects (countables and uncountables: whether the word *literature* in *review of literature* takes/does not take the definite article), self-referencing practices of writers (using *I, we, our, my* in research writing), and the use of appropriate linking adverbials (*however, nevertheless, hence,* and *therefore*) in presenting arguments and counter arguments.

Why DIY courses?

Charles's DIY course was an interesting one in many ways:

a. It addressed the language needs of 41 students from 12 different academic disciplines in the same course.

b. The materials used by students represented the conventions of their academic disciplines.

c. It promoted learner autonomy in text selection and text exploration.

d. The course was dynamic so that the students could change their writing goals any time during the course by adding or deleting texts from the corpus.

e. The corpora and the tools that analyse the corpora could be retained for a long time.

f. In the long run, it reduces the reliance of students on external support such as proofreading agencies and supervisors.

What this DIY course aimed to achieve is what we generally plan to achieve for our courses: to enable our learners become

independent learners. To achieve this goal, we organize our tasks and activities around coherent independent texts, and attempt to unpack the logical relations by carefully reading every sentence in the text. This DIY course, on the contrary, allows learners to study language syntagmatically while at the same time showing patterns paradigmatically. Since the corpus contains individual texts of students' choice, the students can go through them whenever they want to unpack logical relations. The benefit of accessing paradigmatically the patterns, however, is that it exposes students to possible permutaions and combinations at each level. If the corpus is too big like the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the number of permutations (collocations) one can find could be even greater. You may visit the website: https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/ and search, for example, for the contexts and the ways in which the node (the search word *significant*) could be used in writing.

However, when a student compiles a specialized corpus, which has a representative sample of texts from a specific discipline and genre, he/she will be able to identify the typical patterns used in that genre and discipline. DIY courses, instead of teaching students directly the rules, as Johns (1991) demonstrated, they ask the students the right questions to establish a purpose for learning and thereby for exploring concordances.

Earlier attempts in data-driven learning used large databases and provided students with instances that were not within the contextual and linguistic range required for them. This was messy and chaotic, often resulting in confusion and exhaustion. However, DIY courses designed these days attempt to encourage students to choose their own texts for the corpus. This autonomy in text selection supported by teacher modelling will not only motivate students to do these courses, but also expose them to authentic language, which is textually and contextually appropriate. It will also enable us to offer truly learner-centred courses in contexts where each individual learner has specific langauge needs.

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Dr Vijayakumar Chintalapalli, Assistant Professor, BITS Pilani, Pilani Campus. Email: vijayakumar.chintalapalli@gmail.com

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