

# LIGHTNINGS OF INTUITION: A PROTOCOL FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ORAL DISCOURSE APPRECIATION

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As a spin-off to the process of compilation of the Spanish component of the The Louvain International Database of Spoken Language Interlanguage (LINDSEI) corpus, advanced learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the University of Murcia have been given the chance to explore their own speaking output through a corpus-aided methodology. This paper presents a glimpse of the materials which have guided our students through the process of self-discovery of their own spoken discourse. Similarly, special attention is devoted to the leaning principles underlying our form-focused approach whose addressees are students of Lengua Inglesa III. Preliminary evidence in the form of face-to-face feedback about the reception of the protocol among the students who completed it suggests that form-focused attention facilitates *noticing of often-unnoticed* features of learner oral discourse.

His thinking was a dusk of doubt and self-mistrust lit up at moments by the lightnings of intuition, but lightnings of so clear a splendour that in those moments the world perished about his feet as if it had been fireconsumed...  
(From *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Part 5, Section 1)

It is timely now to welcome the emergence of the computer corpus as a linguistic learning resource. ... Our task is to make the best use of it, and to exchange ideas on how the computer corpus can be exploited to the best advantage in the future. (Leech 1997: 5).

## 1. Introduction

As a spin-off to the process of compilation of the Spanish component of the The Louvain International Database of Spoken Language Interlanguage (LINDSEI) corpus<sup>1</sup>, advanced learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the University of Murcia, Spain, have been given the chance to explore their own speaking output through a corpus-aided methodology.

The type of work we propose here falls under the *browsing* category outlined by Aston (1997) and expanded by Bernardini (1998, 2000), where the corpus becomes a source of activity in itself and progressive discovery occurs on a negotiable step-by-step basis. This paper presents a glimpse of the materials which have guided our students through the process of self-discovery of their own spoken discourse but special attention is devoted to the leaning principles underlying our form-focused approach. The materials as well as the rationale for the students' work can be accessed by the students on the web at

<http://www.um.es/engphil/profesorado/pperez/reglada/curso2001-2002/lengua3>

The addressees of our proposal are students of Lengua Inglesa III at the University of Murcia, Spain. Those taking the course are advanced learners of English in their third year of the Degree in Filología Inglesa (<http://www.um.es/engphil>). The activities herein are carried out in the modern languages laboratory facility during the regular lessons schedule. Further details of this environment can be obtained on the Internet at <http://www.um.es/engphil/lab>. The teacher is in the facility and directs students' work, indicating the very essentials about the protocol completion and offering afterwards help and assistance on demand.

Confronting learners to linguistic evidence, we aim at developing a critical attitude in our students towards the patterns of L2 use in their own discourse. The protocol is, for the most part, a collection of HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) files with exploit the Intranet and Internet resources available at the lab facility and which are aimed at facilitating the students' explorations of their own pre-recorded oral output both as digitized audio files and text files.

In the following pages, a general framework for the uptake of our procedures will be developed that includes an overview of the role of corpora in language education (section II), the linguistic rationale that support most corpus linguistics procedures and outcomes (section III) and the psychological and pedagogical bases for the classroom-based work students are to engage in (section IV).

## **2. Language Corpora, Learner Corpora And Language Teaching**

While the use of language corpora in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) has a well-established tradition (Mparutsa et al. 1991; Flowerdew 1993; Ma 1993; Fries et al. 1994; Hunston et al. 1997; Burnard & McEnery 2000; Ghadessy et al. 2001), very little attention has been drawn on the Data Driven Learning (DDL) potential of learner corpora (Pérez-Paredes 2001). Some exceptions deserve our attention, though. Apart from the tremendous inspiration from the original work by Tim Johns (1986, 1988, 1990, 1993, 1997a, 1997b) on L1 DDL, the efforts pursued by Sylviane Granger's research team at the Université Catholique de Louvain English Corpus Linguistics Centre (UCL-ECLC) have been a driving force behind the ever-increasing interest in learner corpora these days. As a token of this work, Granger (1998) is a consistently interesting collection of papers with some glimpses of students' actual behaviour<sup>2</sup> in writing taken from the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE). The range of interests comprise phenomena at word and sentence levels such as high-frequency words, intensification in adjective phrases and recurrent word combinations as well as phenomena at discourse level such as connectors, questions and features of reader and writer visibility. We would very especially like to underpin here the enormous impact that the publication of the ICLE CD-ROM (forthcoming) is bound to have on both the EFL profession and the applied linguistics field, as most of the excitement that Corpus Linguistics methods have aroused in the Linguistics community will be for the first time shared by the EFL profession as a *hands-on* approach to the study of learner language will be available to anyone familiar with very basic corpus analysis skills<sup>3</sup>.

Scholarly work on the classroom applications of L1 language corpora has begun to be mainstream in FLT (Carter 2001). Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) and Lewis (1997) have advocated the implementation of a lexical approach to language teaching and learning where the notion of lexicogrammatical patterning is central. Higgins's (1991) has contended that valuable contributions can be made to language learning by the

use of computers in supplying, on demand and in an organised fashion, masses and masses of authentic language, pointing out at the concordancer as the most interesting tool at the time of writing. Stevens (1993:11) claims that

with concordance software and a corpus of natural English, language learners can short-cut the process of acquiring competence in the target language, because the computer is able to help students organize huge amounts of language data so that patterns are more easily discerned.

Tribble (1990:11) draws on the same idea when he maintains that what the concordancer does is make the invisible visible. I would add here that the use of concordances and the type of work which stems from DDL and Corpus Linguistics methods will resolutely set the agenda for a truly inductive approach to FLT as well as bring in a sense of authenticity and student responsibility for the learning task.

Along with this general favourable assessment of concordancing tools, some of the benefits which are usually derived from language learners' work on L1 corpora are very much concerned with activating students' learning mechanisms and with getting their critical, conscious learning flow of work to full gear. Those benefits include (1) students' language patterning-discovery procedures (Bernardini 1998), (2) collaborative teachers' work along with students in their *research*, and, finally, (3) a reevaluation of the role of grammar and communicative competence in Foreign Language Learning (FLL) (Partington 1998; Leech 2000). Stevens (1990:8) puts the above in an educational perspective:

Predisposition to text manipulation requires acceptance of the notion that language learners can benefit from teaching materials promoting inductivity, authenticity, and learner responsibility for learning. Whereas these ideas underpin current language methodologies, teachers may tend toward traditional ways of instruction, especially when change involves massive retooling and when students seem most comfortable with traditional roles.

Besides FLT-oriented implications, Leech (2000) has also noted that the use of spoken corpora has sparked off a renowned interest in grammar study and analysis as it is becoming increasingly more natural for grammarians to incorporate insights into spoken discourse and reconsider the notion of written language as *the* canon. In the very context of foreign language learning authors such as Bernardini (1998) have put forward the idea that a different, more learner-centered approach to large corpora concordancing requires a shift of perspective from corpora as reference tools to corpora as sources of language learning activities. A selection of very down-to-earth concrete activities for advanced learners of English is offered below:

- Analysis of a lexico-grammatical point to serve as the basis for a learning/research project, for example the exploration of the contexts where the verb *cause* (or any other lexical item of relevance) appears.
- Which nouns can be modified by the suffix *-esque*? What can you say about those contexts? What other, more neutral synonyms do you know to express those meanings?
- Are women or men more often defined as *spoilt/spoiled*?
- The production of a corpus-based dictionary entry for any given word or language chunk.

Figure 1: Some activities for advanced students of English. Based on Bernardini (1998)

The potential benefits of such activities are in line with recent emphasis on both consciousness in second language learning and form-focused instruction. Schmidt (1990) distinguishes different levels of consciousness, or awareness for those more in the EFL tradition: (1) perception, (2) noticing, also in the literature known as focal awareness, episodic awareness and apperceived input, and (3) understanding. For him, for input to become intake conscious noticing is a requirement which rests upon the existence of triggers (1990: 149) that may set parameters which may facilitate changes. Incidental learning is possible and effective if the demands of a task bring students' attention to what is to be learned. Schmidt's work certainly opened up new ways for researchers and language teachers to consider new possibilities of looking at the way language learning could actually be deployed in a more satisfactory balance between, what we see as non-opposites but rather as complementary realities, such as language as communication and language as a function of meaning through lexicogrammatical patterning. Taking a different perspective, earlier cognitive accounts of language learning (Anderson 1993) had already set the mood in the SLA field for more receptive attitudes towards stage-based models of skill learning processes. Anderson's declarative-procedural-automatized stage description has been incorporated to recent research (cf. Skehan 2001 or DeKeyser 1998).

Doughty and Williams (2002), *inter alia*, have questioned the effectiveness of the experiential approach (Savignon 1993) model which underlies the communicative methodology (Allen 1983). The fact is that exclusively meaning-oriented classroom work has been, in a very ample way, brought to question by DeKeyser (1998), Robinson (1996), Lightbown (1991) and Lightbown and Spada (1990). Besides, declarative knowledge is seen by many as a facilitator for learning even if it is based on language-based activities, which, we believe, are necessary in situations of learning where high *general communicative proficiency* has been reached but, by all means, input has stopped turning into intake as the very principle of meaningful interaction probably satisfies immediate needs.

In the next section we aim at providing the linguistic basis for the understanding of those aspects of language that can potentially best learned through form-focused, awareness-oriented instruction.

### **3. Insights From The Exploration Of Lexicogrammatical Patterns**

The use of language corpora has challenged (Stubbs 1996) not only Chomskyan linguistics but also both traditional and existing approaches to the description of language, especially the relationship between lexis and grammar (Hunston et al. 1997). Owen (1993) has discussed these implications in the light of the potential benefits for learners of a foreign language in terms of language exploration that such use may bring about in the field of externalised language and grammar analysis. However, it is in the light of pattern grammar approaches (Hunston & Francis 2000) and lexical syllabus development (Lewis 1997) that we can better focus on the extent of work on learner corpora that might prove extremely beneficial.

Firth's contextual theory of meaning has exerted a major influence on the British linguistic tradition since the 60's (Stubbs 1996) and has facilitated an important rise in the interest in the analysis of naturally occurring language as the basis for the study of communication. Firth tried to confine meaning within the context of texts themselves and to keep his grounding away from more pure social process such as the one put forward by Malinowskian theories<sup>4</sup>. Although, Firth stressed that collocational meaning<sup>5</sup>

was not the same as contextual meaning, he also argued that context of situation was necessary for the statement for meaning by collocation to be completed. This position was later developed by Sinclair (1991) who established a dichotomy between the idiom principle and the open choice principle.

In general, Firth's context of situation is taken as referring to the pragmatic aspects of meaning and is defined as comprising factors of meaning such as the features of the participants, the verbal action of the participants, their nonverbal action, the relevant objects as well as the effect of the verbal action: "As a general principle, and as far as possible, the meaning of linguistic forms at the grammatical levels should be determined with reference to the system of the language and identified by linguistic context (Firth 1969:222)". This conceptualization of context pursues a syntagmatic approach when considering the meaning of a linguistic sign to be a function of its relation to other linguistic signs in its context, and following a pragmatic approach when it defines meaning as a function of its situational context. In a way, the contextual theory of meaning reconciles the traditional syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes through a two-way process of lexicalization of grammar and grammaticalization of lexis. Firth's concept of meaning then goes beyond traditional semantics, covering other levels of linguistic description. In his approach, meaning is the whole complex of functions which a linguistic form may have and contextual relations at all levels, phonology, grammar, or lexicography, are manifestations of meaning.

Based on the tradition above, the study of patterns through corpora (Hunston & Francis 2000), that is, the study of the behaviour or behaviours of a lexical item, whatever it is and its internal constituency, appears as a very feasible way for advanced students to gain familiarity with otherwise unexplored features of language, L1 or L2, such as the different phraseology of phrases, recurrent or sporadic complementation patterns and the like. In the next section we will explore the potential for learner corpora utilization as an awareness-raising tool.

#### **4. Learner Autonomy, Self-Discovery And Corpus-Based Work: The Protocol For Oral Discourse Appreciation**

So far we have looked at the rationale that underlies our interest in corpora (section II) and the linguistic interplay that can be revealed through the analysis of collection of texts (section III). Now we aim at approaching an integration of those principles to classroom-based awareness-raising activities with a focus on *noticing* acquisition through autonomous work on L2 production. In Appendix 1, the text version of the protocol is offered. Note that all this raw information is hypertextualized and maximized in the web rendering.

For operational purposes, we will draw on Nunan's 1995 conceptualisation of learner autonomy in terms of a continuum where students of a foreign language are gradually introduced into ways of expanding their capacity to exercise control over their own learning. In very constructive terms, autonomous learners are able to self-determine the overall direction of their learning, become actively involved in the management of the learning process and exercise freedom of choice in relation to learning resources and activities (Nunan 2000). An exclusive, all-or-nothing concept of student autonomy is not even considered in our discussion as it fails to reflect the context of learning where the experience reported in this paper actually took place. Besides, a great deal of *self-direction* is imposed in the rationale we present here.

Based on evidence from the Applied Linguistics field, different authors claim that explicit attention to form can facilitate second language learning (DeKeyser 1998; Norris & Ortega 2000). Within a cognitive perspective on language learning, it has been pointed out that *noticing*, that is noting, observing or paying special attention to a particular language item whatever it is, generally is a prerequisite for learning (Schmidt 1990, 1993, Robinson 1995, Skehan 2001). In a similar way, it has been argued that acquisition of the *noticed form* is more likely to take place in higher proficiency learners than in lower proficiency ones. Williams's study shows that proficiency "seems to provide increasing returns: not only do the more advanced learners generate more language-related episodes (LREs), they also use this information more effectively" (2000: 336). It seems that lower proficiency, in this context, prevents learners from a more thorough integration of the new input generated during the LREs mentioned above. Williams's study points out to the need for (1) the integration in a variety of ways of attention to form procedures, (2) the important role that teachers play in providing negative and positive linguistic evidence and in calling students' attention to it and, finally, (3) a learner-centred approach broadly understood in terms of *responding to the needs of the learner* (2000: 338).

In a very recent experience, Nassaji (2000) adopted a form-focused approach in an integrative approach to L2 learning where, through design and process, communicative activities are given a form-focused *plus*. In a way, Nassaji's approach pursues every 5-step process of autonomy (Nunan 1995)<sup>6</sup>, only that in a microscope, encapsulated way. Curiously enough, our protocol, although clearly language-oriented and, accordingly, not communicative in the interactive paradigm (Savignon 1983) fashion, aims at Nunan's stage 5 where learners become researchers, at least during the protocol completion.

Work is based on multimedia digital files of the type proposed by Pérez-Paredes (2001). For the protocol to be implemented, first students' oral productions will need to have been recorded, transcribed and both types of information given digital format, .wav, .ram or similar for the audio and .txt for the text. Obviously, this is not the place to discuss technicalities as the different options available to you in terms of digitisation will be largely dependent on your lab or computer facility. In case of difficulty, let your lab or network administrator offer a word from the wise.

Leech (1997) has stated that it is unwise to use corpora as a bandwagon. The analogy goes like this: "Teaching bandwagons, if driven too far and too fast, can do much harm to those on the receiving end". Although the use of our protocol is a demanding proposal in terms of the infrastructure needed for its implementation and the skills required from teachers and students operating potentially complex software, we find that this is a bastioned way to stimulate an exploratory attitude in the students. This intuition, however induced, aims at encouraging learners completing the protocol to observe language phenomena on different levels and to undertake independent learning journeys and serendipitous scrutiny (Bernardini 1998) of their own discourse as a starting point for noticing behaviour that is not present in most teaching situations, especially the self-exploration of one's own oral output.

Preliminary evidence in the form of face-to-face feedback about the reception of the protocol among the students who completed it suggests that form-focused attention facilitates noticing of usually unnoticed features of learner oral discourse, including lexical density, level of constituency especially in Noun Phrases, prosodic features, cohesion features as well as general perception of segmental and suprasegmental characteristics of L2 output.

Limitations to our work are also to be considered. On research level, a longitudinal study of repeated applications of this protocol should be necessary in order to assess the validity of the claims presented above. On a pedagogical level, we will quote Stevens (1990:8) as a final word:

Although text manipulation is conveniently implemented and consistent with current language learning pedagogy, its benefits are difficult to intuit; hence the genre is easily misunderstood.

## Appendix 1. Protocol

1. Listen to your interview.
2. Read the transcription of your interview.
3. Run a frequency list of the words you used during the interview. This time, use this other file (tag-free).
4. How many words did you use during the interview? How many *different* words did you use during the interview?
5. Are there words which are often repeated? Which ones? Are they lexical or grammatical words? What is your *favourite* oft-repeated word or expression according to the transcription? Could you run a list of the ten most often repeated words or expressions? It is essential that you do this with utmost attention as you will use them as the basis for further work.
6. Collocational profiles. Explore the N minus 2, N minus 1, N plus 1 and N plus 2 collocational profile of your top 10 list above in this other corpus (MICASE). To do that [click here](#) and then follow instructions.
7. In which ways are your collocational profiles and the ones you've just found in the corpus similar? In which ways are they different?
8. Coalligational patterns. What type of words are usually associated to those nodes you've just been working with? This time consider a bigger span of N minus 5 to N plus 5.
9. Semantic preference. Could you describe the semantic field they are ascribed?
10. Semantic prosody. What can you say about their pragmatic relations? Do they carry some sort of negative or positive load?

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<sup>1</sup> For further details visit the project website on the Internet at <http://www.fltr.ucl.ac.be/fltr/germ/etan/cecl/Cecl-Projects/Lindsei/lindsei.htm>

<sup>2</sup> The International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) contains at the time of writing over 2 million words of argumentative essay writing from university students of English from 14 different language backgrounds and is being used as a research tool for analysing features of written interlanguage grammar, lexis and discourse. Further information on the web at <http://www.fltr.ucl.ac.be/fltr/germ/etan/cecl/Cecl-Projects/Icle/icle.htm>

<sup>3</sup> A good starting point might be our website for Ph.D. students <http://www.um.es/engphil/profesorado/pperez/reglada/doctorado/>

<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, the term contextual theory of meaning has a social origin in Malianowski's stands.

<sup>5</sup> For a quick, very practical hands-on experience of collocations try the Cobuild Collocation Sampler on the web at <http://titania.cobuild.collins.co.uk/form.html>

<sup>6</sup> See previous discussion.