Languages, Cultures and Virtual Communities
Les Langues, les Cultures et les Communautés Virtuelles

Writer visibility and agreement / disagreement strategies in online asynchronous interaction: A learner corpus study

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Abstract

This paper investigates the language used by a group of Italian advanced EFL learners participating in a private online discussion forum with a group of American university students: using corpus analysis tools, all the contributions to the online debate were investigated to explore which linguistic patterns and pragmatic strategies were used by both groups to express personal visibility in the discussion, as well as to show agreement and disagreement. The Italian learners’ misused interlanguage patterns were then further analysed against the reference model to explore whether mother-tongue habits had influenced their production. The results of corpus observation were finally used to design corpus-based exercises to be used with L2 students to bring their output closer to idiomatic use.

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Keywords: learner corpora; online discussion forums; agreement and disagreement; writer visibility

1. Introduction

In the last decades, the greater availability of computing facilities has favoured the expansion of computer-based forms of communication both at interpersonal and educational levels. Chatgroups, discussion forums, social networking environments and video-sharing websites are increasingly becoming an integral part of many people’s everyday life, thus influencing their forms of expression: as Davis and Brewer suggest (1997: 19), electronic writing allows for a wide range of stylistic expressiveness since people can “adopt conventions of oral and written discourse to their own, individual communicative needs.”

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Even though in recent years the linguistic features of web-based communication have been investigated by several discourse analysis scholars (Baron, 2000; Crystal, 2006, among others), the language specifically used by learners of English in the genre of online discussion forums is still quite an unexplored field of study: as noted by Montero et al. (2007: 566), “very little has been published on the active participation of students of English as a foreign language in discussion forums to emphasise grammar points of special difficulty” and possibly design effective educational materials. This paper will attempt to analyse the linguistic features of online asynchronous communication with the specific aim of identifying problematic areas of language use in the production of Italian learners of English, thus contributing to this expanding field of research.

2. Method

The study outlined in this paper analyses the linguistic production of a group of Italian university EFL learners and compares it with that of some American students, in order to find differences and similarities in language use and to design pedagogical interventions so as to improve English teaching and acquisition.

In particular, the study aimed at investigating language use through the compilation of two comparable corpora, a native corpus (NC) and a learner corpus (LC), of web-based communication and consisting of the contributions to a common online discussion forum composed respectively of 14 undergraduate American students of Italian from Dickinson College (PA), and 21 Italian university EFL learners attending an advanced English course in the final year of their Master’s degree in Foreign Languages at the University of Padova. Both groups of students participated in a bilingual, web-based intercultural exchange in 2008, in which they also had the possibility to engage in a group discussion forum so as to explore their own and the others’ cultures and lifestyles. Like all the other activities of the exchange, the forum actually consisted of both an Italian and an English section: for the purposes of this study, however, only the English section was taken into account for the analysis.

The exploration and comparison of the two corpora focused on the linguistic strategies used by both groups of writers to:

1. convey personal opinions on the topics under discussion (writer visibility);
2. express agreement with previous contributions to the debate;
3. express disagreement.

The analysis focused on whether the L2 learners had adopted the same linguistic and pragmatic strategies as native speakers to fulfill their communicative aims, and investigated misused patterns of language use. The final aim of the study was to design corpus-based teaching activities which might encourage learners to explore concordance lines and collocates, formulate hypotheses on language use and possibly become more aware of native speakers’ authentic choices. This “data-driven learning” process (Johns & King, 1991: iii) may also facilitate a balance between focus on form and meaning within a highly communicative setting (Levy & Kennedy, 2004: 58), thus also satisfying learners’ desire for feedback on the accuracy of their language.

The investigation of the two corpora was conducted using AntConc 3.2.1w (Anthony, 2007) and took the form of both quantitative and qualitative analysis: the former showed that both NC and LC were very small in size (6,048 and 4,526 tokens respectively) and might therefore be a valuable resource for the investigation of specific aspects of language use for educational purposes. After the application of a stop list including the 50 most frequent grammatical words, the calculation of frequency lists for the two corpora revealed the spoken-like feel of the online forum, as the first-person pronoun was by far the most
frequent item in both corpora – a similar result to the BNC spoken section, where *I* ranks second in the frequency list (Leech *et al.* 2001: 144). The analysis of both frequency and keyword lists for the LC seemed to suggest the strong conversational feel of the Italian students’ texts, where *you, said* and *agree* ranked very high compared to the NC. In the native corpus, on the other hand, the high frequency of the word *believe* seems to indicate that the American students actually used a wider range of expressions to convey their opinions, as in the LC the only verb frequently used with this function was *think*.

The first impressions obtained by quantitative analysis were further confirmed by qualitative investigation: the analysis of concordances and collocates for all the patterns used to express writer visibility, for instance, revealed that both groups of students used some common patterns to convey their opinions, such as *I think*, *I believe* and *I find*. The latter two expressions, however, occurred in the NC much more often than in the LC (17 and 6 occurrences vs. 4 and 1 occurrences respectively). In addition to this, the analysis also highlighted that the American students had used a wider range of patterns which are not present in the Italian students’ texts at all, namely *I feel, I view, I don’t know, I don’t like, I’m sure, to me*. The Italian learners, instead, seemed to have preferred a more limited range of expressions (*I think, in my opinion, I would/cannot say*), some of which, however, they actually tended to overuse compared to their American peers: the analysis highlighted that L1 influence might have been the cause of this behaviour. All these results were then further taken into account to develop some teaching activities to be used in the classroom to raise L2 students’ awareness of authentic native-like forms, so as to encourage them to widen their range of expressions and become more effective language users.

The investigation of agreement strategies revealed that the Italian learners reported and agreed on previous contributions much more often than the American students, thus giving their texts a more conversational feel. This is particularly evident in the high frequency of the patterns *I agree with + X* and *As Y said/men tallyed/maintained*, which occur respectively 16 and 15 times in the LC but only 10 and 4 times in the NC. The analysis also pinpointed a quite problematic pattern for the group of Italian students: when using the expression *I agree with + proper name*, the students opted for four kinds of syntactic complementation, as illustrated below:

\[
\text{I agree with + proper name...}
\]

\[\text{a. ...when she says... (3 occurrences)}\]
\[
\text{Example: I agree with EB when she says every case should be analyzed.}
\]

\[\text{b. ... who said that... (2 occurrences)}\]
\[
\text{Example: I agree with A. who said that we shouldn’t discriminate people.}
\]

\[\text{c. (no patterns following) (2 occurrences)}\]
\[
\text{Example: I totally agree with M.}
\]

\[\text{d. …in saying... (1 occurrence)}\]
\[
\text{Example: I agree with S. in saying that Italy is far from reaching the melting pot.}
\]

All these patterns clearly reveal L1 influence, which is also supported by the fact that the same expressions are not present at all in the NC: in the American students’ texts, instead, the most used syntactic sequences were *I agree with X that / in that*. Based on these observations, some teaching activities were developed to raise L2 students’ awareness of real idiomatic language use and thus limit L1 influence on their output.

The analysis of disagreement strategies addressed the question of whether the Italian students actually used mitigation devices to minimize dissent and thus avoid face-threatening acts: the data obtained from

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\[\text{X = proper name, pronoun, relative clause, direct object.}\]

\[\text{Y = proper name, you, somebody.}\]
corpus investigation indicated that disagreement was generally conveyed more directly in the LC than in the NC, where overt dissent is not present at all. Despite using some undesirable expressions such as *I don’t agree*, however, the Italian students did also use some mitigation strategies in the form of connectives (*anyway, however, rather*) so as to smooth the strength of their statements. In order to encourage learners to avoid overt expressions of disagreement, data-based exercises were then designed to help them use mitigation strategies so as to be perceived as more polite.

3. Conclusions

This paper has attempted to demonstrate how the analysis of a learner corpus and its comparison with a native corpus can help teachers identify areas of language use which are problematic for EFL students. In particular, the investigation has focused on the strategies used by advanced L2 learners and native speakers to interact with one another by expressing agreement or disagreement with their peers’ contributions to an online forum, as well as on the devices adopted to express personal opinions on the topics under discussion. The investigation of misused interlanguage patterns has provided usable hints for the development of corpus-based teaching materials to raise L2 learners’ awareness of authentic native forms.

References


