USING NEW WEB-BASED CORPUS TOOLS IN L2 WRITING: PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES WITH NETSPEAK

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ABSTRACT

It has been decades since corpora and corpus interfaces have emerged and become accessible to various users. As computers have been advancing in terms of speed and quality, so have corpus software providing faster and more advanced language investigations for language teachers and learners. In addition, corpus interface developers have constantly aimed to make language investigation easier and the queries more user-friendly to the user. In the recent times, some new web-corpus tools have emerged that specifically have teachers and students in mind. These include, for instance, SKELL, Netspeak, Just-the-word, among others. While there has been extensive research in the use of standard corpora and corpus interfaces, there has been little research in the use of these new web-based corpus tools in classroom settings. This paper reports on a small-scale study on the use of Netspeak in L2 writing and error correction conducted with a group of pre-service English language teachers. The results indicate that the participants have positive perceptions of the online corpus tool when used as a reference tool to improve writing. The paper also reports on some limitations identified throughout the study.

Keywords: Netspeak, web-based corpus tool, pre-service English teachers, L2 writing,error correction

1. INTRODUCTION

Since corpora and corpus tools were made available to English language teachers and since Tim Johns (1991) coined the term Data-driven learning or DDLand claiming that "every learner is Sherlock Holmes" (Johns, 1997, p. 101) to refer to language learners who could use corpus data to investigate language based on data from the corpus, an extensive body of research has been conducted to explore the benefits and the limitations of DDL in language classroom. Studies in DDL range from teachers' experiences in applying the technique in language teaching to students' experiences and attitudes towards using corpus in language learning.

One of the areas where DDL has been proven to benefit the learner is in L2 writing and error correction. According to Gilquin and Granger (2022), DDL has a significant correcting role. The technique can assist learners in improving their L2 writing by comparing their work with the corpus data which represents language produced by native speakers. For Flowerdew (2022), corpora are a great resource for assisting learners in mastering language patterns and phraseologies in writing lessons, considering that they are not readilyavailable in grammar books or dictionaries. Research, on the other hand, also suggest DDL to be a useful technique in L2 writing. For instance, in his case study in an EAP writing course, Yoon (2008) found that, in addition to improving students' immediate writing issues, the use of corpus "promoted their perceptions of lexicogrammar and language awareness" (p. 31). Luo and Liao (2015) carried out an experimental study in using corpora to correct and revise essays with a group of undergraduate level EFL

students. Their research indicate that the participants found corpus consultation more useful than referring to an online dictionary for error correction and that corpus approach minimized writing mistakes in free production.

Besides these findings on benefits in writing, research hasalso been able to identify various cognitive benefits that studentsgain from corpus consultation in L2 writing (Yoon & Jo,2014). According to O'Sullivan (2007), learners use numerous valuable cognitive processes while engaged in DDL, which include: "predicting, observing, noticing, thinking, reasoning, analysing, interpreting, reflecting, exploring, making inferences (inductively or deductively), focusing, guessing, comparing, differentiating, theorising, hypothesising, and verifying" (p. 277).

However, literature and research in DDL and corpus consultation have also identified issues that could undermine the effective use as well as the way DDL is perceived. One of the main issues is that effective use of DDL necessitates a significant amount of training in corpus use (Boulton & Cobb 2017). One aspect of training has to do with the learners' ability to use a corpus interface or have the necessary digital skills. On the other hand, learners are also required to undergo a sufficient training in corpus or data interpretation. Corpora typically provide large amount of concordance lines, and it is the learner who needs to interpret them. Gilquin and Granger (2010) point out that insufficient training could lead to learners failing to search appropriately or interpret corpus data correctly. In addition, untrained users or users with insufficient training may regard concordancers as toolsthat show no effectivenessin second or foreign language learning (Quan, 2016) or perceive corpus consultation as a hard task (Gaskell and Cobb, 2004).

As these issues have persisted in the last few decades, new corpus tools have emerged which specifically seem to have attempted to address these difficulties as well as have tried to tailor corpus searches to the teachers and learners' needs. One of these tools is Netspeak. There are several aspects that differ Netspeak, or similar corpus tools, from standard corpus interfaces. One is simplicity. Netspeak resembles a simple search tool and provides filtered and simple results. For instance, if one doubts between what is more correct English between "fast glance" and "quick glance", Netspeak provides an instant a clear answer. As Figure 1 below suggests, quick glance is (ranked 4th on the list) is one of the most frequent collocates of "glance". Note that the corpus tool has a simple layout, provides frequency (i.e. from the most frequent collocates at the top to the less frequent ones at the bottom of the list), and there are no long lists of concordance lines appearing on the screen as they normally do in standard corpora. There are, however, concordance lines on Netspeak. They are available when, for instance, one of the collocates are selected, a drop-down list of concordance lines appears. The list can be expanded as much as the user prefers. Another difference is that Netspeak is very specific in searches and, at times, more practical in contrast to standard corpus interfaces. Netspeak uses symbols to find collocates, frequent phrases, missing words in phrases, word order, and so on. For instance, typing *"waiting? a response"* in the search box would show *"for"* as a typical word (i.e. missing word) in the position of the question mark. Another interesting feature is word order, which can hardly be found elsewhere. For instance, if you use the following words in curly brackets *{can be hardly found }*, Netspeak would give you the correct and most frequent word order, that is, *"can hardly be found"*, which appears in 95% of cases in the corpus. Put simply, Netspeak provides more straightforward and clearer query results in contrast to long concordance lines which require complex interpretation of data. However, it is also important to point out that Netspeak and similar corpus tools also have limitations. While these tools offer very practical searches, they are not as resourceful as well as cannot provide in depth exploration or analysis of language as standard corpora do.

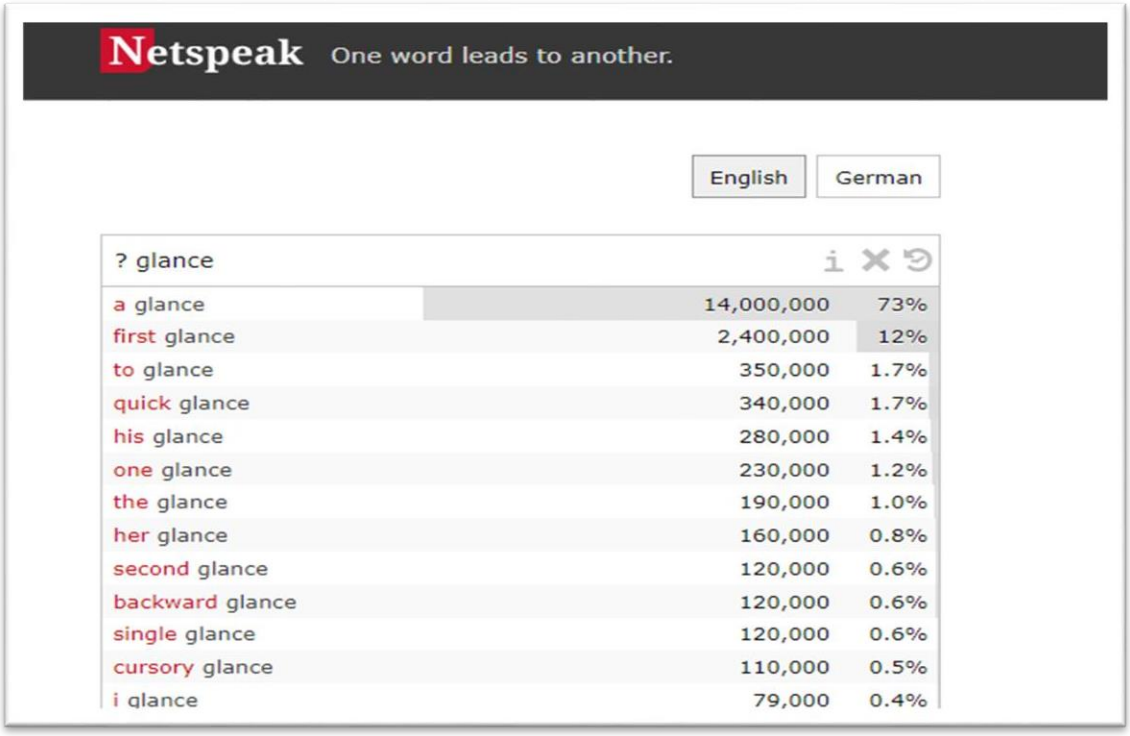


Fig. 1. Netspeak: frequent collocations before the word "glance"

Following the discussion on the common issues that have been reported with standard corpora, as well as considering the fact there is little research when it comes to using these new web-corpus tools, such as Netspeak, as reference tools in L2 writing, the objectives of the present study were:

- to incorporate Netspeak as a reference tool in L2 writing with some advanced learners and pre-service language teachers
- to explore the experiences and perceptions of pre-service teachers of Netspeak as a reference tool for error correction
- to identify possible issues when students engage with these kinds of online corpus tools in L2 writing.

The present study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the use of Netspeak in L2 writing and error correction?

2. What are some limitations of using Netspeak in L2 writing from the perspective of pre-service teachers?

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study is small-scale research aimed to investigate the experience and perceptions of a small group of pre-service English teachers on the use of Netspeak in L2 writing and error correction. It is qualitative research, while a survey research design was used to investigate the experiences and perspectives of the participants.

The participants included 13 undergraduate students and pre-service English language teachers from the Department of English Language Teaching at International Balkan University in Skopje, North Macedonia. The language program is designed to advance students' language skills in addition to equipping them with

knowledge and practical skills in language teaching methodology necessary to becoming English language teachers. Thus, the participants could be considered both as foreign language learners and pre-service English teachers, while the study aimed to explore the use of the corpus tool from both perspectives. The study took place as part of their course Education Technologies and Material Design.

The research instrument included a paper questionnaire that consisted of 9 open-ended items. The questions were designed to gather data on participants' views on the use of Netspeak as a reference tool in L2 writing and for error correction.The questionnaire used in this study can be found in the appendix provided at the end of this article.

The overall procedure was carried out in two parts. Firstly, the participants were provided a brief training and elaboration on how Netspeak can be used using various symbols to carry out queries, mainly exploring word collocation, word patterning, missing words in phrases, and word order. When the participants got familiar with using Netspeak, the second part was initiated. Namely, the participants were given an academic written text with deliberate errors. Their task was to improve the text by correcting the errors with the help of Netspeak using laptops. Based on the researcher's observation, the participants managed to improve the text, while only a few did not manage to correct all the errors in the text, and therefore, needed some assistance.

After the task completion, the students were handed the questionnaires and given sufficient time to provide their perspectives on the experience they had with the newly introduced online corpus tool. The qualitative data gathered from the research instrument was then finally analysed using qualitative methods.

3. RESULTS

In this section the results of the questionnaire are analysed and reported using qualitative methods. Each discussion in each paragraph represents an analysis of each item used in the questionnaire during the study.

Participants were initially asked to share their perceptions on Netspeak as a tool to investigate language. Responses suggest that all participants have positive perceptions of Netspeak, while the majority of them endorsed the tool by referring to Netspeak as “useful tool”, “perfect tool”, “helpful tool”, “great tool”, among others. Some of the responses provided reasons what makes the tool useful. For example, for several participants, Netspeak can be used for in-depth investigations or exploration of language; for another, the tool is useful for identifying common phrases in English; while for one of the respondents, it is:

> S13: a helpful tool to clear doubts about word usage.

The overall response to the second question was also very positive. Asked about what they felt about such a tool being available to any user online, most of the respondents provided positive remarks. For a few respondents, the existence of such tools is “an advantage” and “awesome”. According to one participant, the existence of corpus tools like Netspeak:

> S3: It is a relief for most of the students, as there is information (in the corpus) that you cannot find in dictionaries or elsewhere. I did not know that such tools had existed until we found out in this course.

On response to question 3 which asked the participants whether they found the tool user-friendly, most of the surveyed indicated that they found Netspeak a user-friendly tool. Nevertheless, not everyone supported the

idea. According to one participant, some learners may struggle with memorizing the symbols and spacing, referring to the symbols and the necessary spaces in between symbols and words that Netspeak guides the users to use in their queries. For another participant, the corpus tool may be hard for some users at the beginning but can become handy through practice and use. Similarly, one respondent mentioned the fact that the tool is hard to use at the beginning.

When the respondents were asked to share their perspectives on how useful they found the tool to improve their writing (in terms is improving patterning, collocation, phraseology, and word order), the majority commented that they consider Netspeak as a useful tool for writing. According to some respondents, the tool seems helpful in improving writing skills, especially when it comes to academic writing and writing for research and projects.

Participants were asked to evaluate Netspeak in contrast to online dictionaries. Students expressed their different views and beliefs on what makes the corpus tool different. For one respondent, Netspeak is a tool that can provide additional information on words and language that cannot be found in standard dictionaries. The same was mentioned by another respondent, adding that frequency of word use was a distinct feature. One respondent stated that the two reference tools should be viewed as complementary, and that using them together can greatly benefit students.

Respondents were asked whether they would continue to use the tool for personal use, such as language awareness and as a writing reference tool. The responses show that the majority of respondents claimed that they would be willing to use it. In the words of one respondent:

> S8: For me it is likely that I will use this platform. I found it very helpful, and I would show it to my students, so they can use it as a helping tool.

Other participants mentioned some reasons why they would continue to use the tool. For instance, one of the surveyed claimed that it would help in professional development, while for another, it would help in writing and language awareness. Besides these attitudes, however, a few participants showed uncertainty about whether they would be using the corpus tool in the future, while they did not give reasons why they thought so.

In response to the question "How likely is it that you will use this tool with your (teenage or adult) language learners in the future?", similar responses were given. The responses suggest that almost all the pre-service teachers are willing to use or suggest Netspeak to their learners in the future. However, there is a discrepancy in the answers when it comes to what type of learners they are prepared to recommend the tool to. Some of them claimed that they would introduce it only to advanced learners while a few others preferred adult learners only.

Participants were also asked to share the disadvantages they found with using Netspeak. While almost half of respondents found nothing to share as a disadvantage, the rest shared important insight about how the tool is limited. The limitations reported include memorizing the symbols and being precise in queries; the tool is not always easy to use and it can be at times complicated. According to a participant, there was no limitation she could mention, and that she would need more time using the tool before she could be able to share possible cons.

The last item in the questionnaire asked all of those surveyed about any further remarks or thoughts they had regarding Netspeak. The questionnaire data shows that most of the participants did not add any additional comments under this item. The few remarks that were provided were only reiteration of previous statements that Netspeak is a great tool to improve and advance one's language use.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings in the present study indicate that the pre-service teachers have positive perceptions of Netspeak and its use in writing and error correction. In addition, the participants see the corpus tool as a useful means to investigate and explore language, find useful phrases, and a useful tool to refer to whenever one has doubts about language use. One more interesting finding worth mentioning is that some of the pre-service teachers see Netspeak only appropriate for adult and advanced learners. These respondents, however, did not provide any reasons behind such beliefs. It can be assumed that the participants' experience with Netspeak in theL2 writing and error correction task used in the study was viewed as too complex for teenage learners or lower-level learners. If the participants had engaged in simpler activities with Netspeak, they may have had a rather different perception.

Based on the classroom observation, the participants generally managed to use and complete the writing task successfully using Netspeak. They managed to do so with little training in corpus use. This, however, was not the case with every participant, as some needed some assistance during the process. This seems to be in line with the data from the questionnaire, namely, the responses generallyindicated that the participants found Netspeak user-friendly, except a few students who found it somewhat difficult, especially when the tool is used for the first time and when it comes to using the symbols and spacing. This study suggests that web-corpus tools such as Netspeakmay be used with language learners with little training in corpus use in contrast to standard corpus interfaces which typically need extensive training before effective use. This, however, is a generalization we can make considering that not every learner can find such tools user-friendly, as the findings of the present research suggest.

Most of the pre-service teachers that participated in this study claimed that they were willing to use Netspeak for personal use and with their learners in the future. However, some participants hesitated to claim so. This may be due to their short-term use and lack of mastery of skills to use Netspeak effectively. We can, therefore, argue that some participants may have found the tool difficult, and this resulted in uncertainties. Some students may simply need more time with Netspeak before they show willingness to use such tools with more confidence and greater enthusiasm. More longitudinal studies can investigate whether more usage time results in more willingness to use these kinds of corpus tools for lifelong learning.

5. CONCLUSION

This study shows that pre-service teachers have positive perceptions of Netspeak, not only as a reference tool which can be used in L2 writing and error correction, but also in language investigation and exploration in general. The study also suggests that, besides positive perceptions, some learners may still find the tool difficult and hesitate to use the tool beyond classroom settings. Based on the findings, it could be argued that some learners need more usage time and more tasks with Netspeak than others when it comes to their willingness to continue using the corpus tool independently.

Some limitations to this study need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the present study was small-scale and lacked depth, and it could not explore key issues in more detail. For instance, the study indicates that some students showed signs of difficulties and hesitation when it comes to the usage of Netspeak, while it could not investigate reasons in more depth due to the limitations of the questionnaire as a research instrument. Another major limitation was the number of participants. By including more participants, the study could have produced more reliable data.

Besides the limitations, it can nevertheless be argued that this study represents a step forward in researching these new web-corpus tools designed to specifically serve language teachers and learners. As this was small-scalequalitative study, further qualitative and quantitative research could usefully explore these new web corpus tools in other settings and formats. For instance, future studies investigating students' learning from using these kinds of tools would be very interesting.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire

1. What do you think about Netspeak as a corpus tool to investigate/explore language?

2. How do you feel about such tools existing and being available to every user?

3. Did you find the tool user-friendly?

4. How useful did you find Netspeak as a reference tool to improve writing (in terms of improving patterning, collocation, phraseology, word order, etc.)?

5. How do you evaluate Netspeak in contrast to dictionaries online (e.g. how different you find this tool in contrast to information we find in dictionaries)?

6. How likely is it that you will use this platform as a reference tool for further language awareness or as a writing reference tool (e.g. for personal needs when you become a teacher in the future)?

7. How likely is it that you will use this tool with your (teenage or adult) language learners in the future?

8. Did you find any disadvantages in using Netspeak?

9. Please provide further thoughts or comments (if any) regarding Netspeak.