Turkish efl learners' reflections on corpus-based language teaching

Tugba Simsek *, International ELT Teachers, Cukurova University, Turkey.

Abstract

The aim of this study is investigating Turkish EFL learners' reflections on corpus-based language teaching; what kind of benefits or drawbacks they have experienced during a corpus-based implementation, and what possible suggestions they can make about this particular experience of theirs. The data was collected through minute papers and semi-structured interviews; and content analysis was conducted for data analysis. The results indicated that the participants found the corpus-based instruction very effective especially thanks to the fact that they could interact with real life data directly. They emphasized that interacting with genuine native speaker language made them more motivated and interested in the classroom. In terms of drawbacks, they stated that sometimes the concordances were difficult to understand. Nevertheless, the learners had a positive perception of corpus-based language teaching instruction.

Keywords: Corpus-Based Language Teaching; EFL Learners; Reflection

*ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Tugba Simsek,** International ELT Teachers, Cukurova University, Turkey.
E-mail address: tsimsek@cu.edu.tr

1. Introduction

For EFL teachers creating authentic materials has always been a challenging task in language classrooms, as they generally complain about the lack of materials to provide the students with slice of real life language samples (Fagan, 2005). Taking this problem into consideration, a corpus can serve as an invaluable source of authentic material in foreign language classes, as not only teachers but also students can reach real life language used by native speakers by the means of corpora.

A corpus is a collection of authentic texts compiled together ranging from a couple hundred words to a couple million (Biber, Conrad and Reppen, 1998). It is recently used for various purposes such as direct, indirect and teaching-oriented ways (Leech, 1997). Direct use of corpora consists of teaching about, teaching to exploit, and exploiting to teach. Indirect use includes reference publishing, syllabus design, material development, language testing, and teacher development.

Since corpus is an effective tool to teach in foreign language classes, an issue which should be greatly highlighted is "students' reactions to corpus-based language teaching" (Yoon and Hirvela, 2004). In their study Yoon and Hirvela (2004) have investigated how the students use the corpora and how they feel about using it in L2 writing instruction. It is found that the students are satisfied with corpus-based learning in EFL classrooms and they find it particularly useful to enhance their writing skills.

In this study, Turkish EFL learners' reflections on corpus-based language teaching have been investigated regarding a 6-week corpus-based implementation.

1.1. Problem Statement

In foreign language teaching, using corpus-based method is an effective way of teaching as students are provided with real-life language samples collected from native speakers. Although it has many benefits, it also has some drawbacks as stated in the literature. However, not only prescribed benefits and limitations should be taken into consideration while planning teaching practices. Instead, feedback should also be taken directly from learners to improve corpus-based implementations. Regarding all these necessities, in this study students' reflections on corpus-based language teaching have been investigated.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

This particular study specifically focuses on exploring Turkish EFL learners' perceptions about using corpus-based language teaching in foreign language classrooms. Students were asked to reflect on their corpus-based writing course experience in terms of benefits and limitations of it. Their suggestions were also taken to prepare more effective materials as students' reflections are invaluable resources to gain insight about effectiveness of the teaching method.

1.3. Research Questions

This study aims at finding answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the general perception of Turkish EFL learners in terms of using corpus-based language teaching method in foreign language classrooms?

2. What are the benefits of of using corpus-based language teaching method in foreign language classrooms for Turkish EFL learners?

3. What are the limitations of of using corpus-based language teaching method in foreign language classrooms for Turkish EFL learners?

4. What do Turkish EFL learners suggest to improve corpus-based language teaching method in foreign language classrooms?

2. Literature Review

Corpus linguistics is basically described as a study of language or a linguistic methodology based on samples of 'real life' language use (McEnery & Wilson, 2001). The collection of these real life language samples, namely corpus, is a very useful tool in that respect as a corpus can both give quantitative data by giving the frequencies of the collocations and plentiful authentic examples from real texts in a structured way. Using the corpora, the students can be exposed to the required language input to make them improve their linguistic competence. It is clear that using corpora have much strength in terms of language studies. Some of these strengths can be listed as:

- Its empirical nature which compiles data from a great number of speakers/writers and makes linguistic analysis more objective (McEnery and Wilson, 2001).

- Frequency data can be used for evaluation and revision of existing courses besides design of new courses (Henry and Roseberry, 2001).

- The development of educational materials (Biber et. al., 1998).

As stated above, using corpus-based activities in the foreign language classroom can provide both teachers and students with invaluable benefits. As a result, making them aware of these advantages is the first step of teaching and learning through a corpus-based approach (Marza, 2014). Thus, they understand the importance of "appropriate lexico-grammatical patternings with consideration of various contextual and situational features of the discourse for the notions and functions one wishes to convey" better (Flowerdew, 2008, p. 133). In addition, the students can experience that corpora are the sources to raise their awareness of language and textual patterning of genres (Tribble, 2002). Nevertheless, it does not mean that corpora do not have any limitations. As Bennett (2010) states a corpus cannot represent a language as a whole even if all the linguistic patterns are aimed to be included, also it does not tell us the reason why something is the way it is, it just tells us what it is.

Using corpus-based activities is a good way to provide students with real-life language. To get the full advantage of these activities, learning what the students think about interacting with concordances in the classroom has utmost importance as the teacher can update the lesson program or activities according to student feedbacks. Not only the benefits highlighted by the students can be identified and given priority while preparing corpus-based activities; but also the drawbacks of the activities can be eliminated next time.

Several studies have been conducted to investigate student reflections on corpus based-language teaching. Yoon (2008) has found that the awareness of the students has risen after the implementation and they have become more willing to write and they have become aware of the lexical and syntactic structure of English language. Yoon (2011), in another study, has listed the positive reactions of students as corpora provide authentic language, contexts of words and sentence structures, and autonomy in L2 learning. Yoon and Hirvela (2004) have also found a similar result that students have found corpus-based instruction on writing has been very useful for them. In the study of Marza (2014) it is also concluded that the students have a positive attitude towards corpus-based language teaching and learning. One of the most appreciated features of it is that they can directly access to real, unbiased language samples from different genres. They feel quite motivated to use corpora in the classroom as they believe their linguistic awareness and competence increase with the interaction.

In the study of Yoon and Hirvela (2004) the reactions of the students are mostly positive; on the contrary, there are some points students criticize negatively that they have found some of the concordances very difficult for them as the content were highly academic. Chambers and O'Sullivan (2004) have also found similar results that students sometimes have difficulties with concordances and students have asked for more implementation and teacher assistance.

In another study (Breyer, 2009), student-teachers were trained to prepare corpus-based exercises with concordancing programs. The student-teachers stated that finding suitable concordances for beginners was challenging, also finding suitable texts for exercises was difficult. In this study, Turkish

EFL learners' reflections on corpus-based language teaching have been explored to have insights about the advantages and the disadvantages of this method. In addition, students' suggestions for improvements in teaching method have been taken.

3. Methodology

In this study, a 6-week corpus-based implementation was conducted to teach transitional adverbials to 31 freshmen students studying at ELT Department in a state university in Turkey. The reflections of students on corpus-based teaching have been taken by minute papers collected each week except for first and last week. In addition, a semi-structured interview was also conducted with 6 students.

3.1. Research Design

The present study was a descriptive case-study which explored a specific situation in detail. The aim was to get learners' feedback on corpus-based language teaching method. A 6-week corpus-based implementation on transitional adverbials was conducted; during the teaching process, minute papers were collected to get student feedback about the implementation every week except for the first and the last weeks. Two essays were written by the participants in this study; one before the implementation and the other at the end; the researcher compiled two learner corpora with these texts and contrasted contrastive adverbial frequencies to see whether there was an improvement or not. To conduct the semi-structured interviews 6 participants were chosen; 3 of the students were the ones who showed the best improvement and the other 3 who showed the least improvement in terms of adverbial use in argumentative essays. In the implementation, all the materials were prepared with concordances taken from British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus to make students familiar with real-life language.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

This study was conducted with 31 freshmen students in ELT department of a state university in Turkey. The participants in this study were chosen by typical case sampling which is a sub-category of purposive sampling. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to determine the participants for semi-structured interview. To conduct the semi-structured interviews 6 participants were chosen; 3 of the students were the ones who showed the best improvement and the other 3 who showed the least improvement in terms of adverbial use in argumentative essays.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, Turkish EFL learners' perceptions about corpus-based language teaching were investigated; the data was collected through minute papers from each participant for four weeks. In addition, semi-structured interviews were also carried out with 6 participants, 3 participants with best improvement and 3 participants with least improvement. The collected data was analyzed through content analysis, by identifying the recurring codes and specifying themes from the statements of the participants.

4. Results and Discussion

In this study two types of data, minute papers and semi-structured interviews, were collected to investigate Turkish EFL learners' perceptions of corpus-based language teaching in foreign language classroom. Firstly, results of minute papers are given in Table 1 an overview of the minute paper administration has been given:

Simsek, T. (2016). Turkish efl learners' reflections on corpus-based language teaching. *Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*. *6*(1), 21-27.

Table 1. Overview of Minute Paper Administration

Weeks/domains	Instances of collecting minute papers	Total number of collected minute papers	Statement Numbers
Week 1- General views	1	21	32
Week 2- Effect on language classes	1	28	44
Week 3- Effective-ineffective sides	1	26	65
Week 4- Overall evaluation	1	27	54
Total	4	102	195

As it is seen in Table 1, minute papers were collected four times and there were 102 papers in total. The second week of the implementation the first minute papers were collected. The question was "What do you think about using examples from a corpus (authentic sentences of native speakers) in writing classes?" As it was a writing class and focus was on contrastive adverbials, in 7 statements (21.87) out of 32 they stressed that the classes were quite effective in teaching adverbials. They stated that their writing has improved; they became more aware of the target languages' linguistic patterns. Yet the most recurring statement was that they were glad to interact directly with native speakers' real life language it was stated 8 times (25%) out of 32 statements, they added that they had knowledge about natives' world view more closely. The results are parallel with previous studies that Yoon and Hirvela (2004), Yoon (2008), Yoon (2011), and Marza (2014). In those studies, students also expressed their positive attitudes towards corpus-based language teaching.

In the second minute papers students were asked "What are effects of corpus-based language teaching on foreign language classes?" Out of 44 statements, 14 of them were emphasizing the native speaker use. They stated that they saw real-life examples; they could see differences between them and natives in terms of adverbial use. 13 of the statements highlighted that their writing improved; in addition, participants also asserted that with the help of implementation their English in general, their reading skill and their critical thinking skills has also improved. As Marza (2014) stated, students found interacting directly with unbiased, real-life data quite motivating and effective.

In the third minute papers students were asked "In what ways using corpus examples may be effective or ineffective in writing classes?" Out of 65 statements, 17 statements expressed that newly learned adverbials would be long-lasting (26.15%); 12 statements (18.46%) emphasized that concordances were good examples of authentic language. 9 statements (13.94%) revealed that their essays improved in general and another 9 statements (13.94%) claimed that their knowledge on syntax improved. One of the participants suggested that corpus-based teaching should be used in earlier years of education, too. They were content with the exercises, yet they suggested to use more exercises if possible. As stated in Yoon (2008), students expressed that corpus-based implementation on writing had positive effect on their linguistic competence.

In the last, fourth, minute papers students overall evaluated was compiled. The question was "What is your overall evaluation about using corpus in foreign language writing classes?" Out of 54 statements, 15 of them (27.77%) highlight that participants' essays improved remarkably. 8 (14.81%) stated that they learned new adverbials, also & of them added (11.11%) that the lessons were joyful and informative. As the results of minute papers show students had a positive attitude towards corpus-based language teaching, especially emphasizing the importance of interaction with real-life language. The results of minute papers have been revealed above; in the following section the results of semi-structured interviews with 6 participants are given. Four questions have been asked to the participants:

Question 1: What might be the effect of a corpus-based implementation on writing classes?

The participants stated that they learned both new vocabulary and new adverbials, not only their essays have improved but their general knowledge has also developed with the corpus-based implementation as the concordances are taken from real life samples and popular topics.

Question 2. What can be the reasons of that increase/decrease in their use of adverbials after the corpus-based implementation?

Participants who showed improvement listed the reasons of increase as the implementation itself, real life examples, exercises from corpus, examining the corpus-examples, and the homework given. The reasons of decrease listed by the participants were the habit of using the same adverbials all the time and the difficulty of eradicate that habit. In addition, being afraid of making mistakes was also another reason of decrease in terms of contrastive adverbial use in argumentative essays.

Question 3. What might make the corpus-based implementation more effective as a course?

To make the course more effective participants suggested that the researcher must be stricter on students and convince them about the positive outcomes of the course; in addition, simpler concordance lines should be chosen for activities. Apart from these points, they have found the implementation effective.

Question 4. How could the content of corpus-based implementation be more efficient to teach contrastive adverbials?

Participants made some suggestions such as the content should be simpler as the concordance lines were difficult for students; in addition, giving adverbials in whole texts was another suggestion as it has been found to be easier for them to learn in whole texts rather than separate concordance lines the same as the study of Chambers and O'Sullivan (2004). Similarly in Breyer's study (2009).

5. Conclusion

In this study, Turkish EFL learners' reflections on corpus-based language teaching have been investigated. The results show that learners find corpus-based language teaching method as an effective way of teaching especially thanks to its unbiased, real-life language samples. They stated that the method not only improved their writing, but also their reading skills, linguistic awareness, and general linguistic competence. As limitations, they asserted that concordances were sometimes difficult, and decontextualized. If simpler and contextualized concordances were utilized, they would feel better. As a result they suggested using more comprehensible concordances in context. As it is understand from overall results, using corpus-based teaching method is a useful way of foreign language teaching for their improvement in different language areas such as writing, reading, grammar, and syntax.

References

Bennett, G. R. (2010). *Using corpora in the Language Learning Clasroom: Corpus Linguistics for Teachers*. Michigan ELT.

Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., & Finegan, E. (1999). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Harlow, England: Longman.

Breyer, Y. (2009). Learning and teaching with corpora: reflections by student teachers. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *22*(2), 153-172.

Chambers, A., & O'sullivan, I. (2004). Corpus consultation and advanced learners' writing skills in French. *ReCALL*, *16*(01), 158-172.

Fagan, S. D. (2005). Using Corpus Linguistics to Teach ESL, Proceedings of the CATESOL State Conference, 2005.

Simsek, T. (2016). Turkish efl learners' reflections on corpus-based language teaching. *Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*. *6*(1), 21-27.

Flowerdew, J. (2001) Concordancing as a tool in course design. In: Ghadessy, M., Henry, A.and Roseberry, R. (eds.), *Small corpus studies and ELT: theory and practice*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 71-92.

Henry, A., & Roseberry, R. L. (2001). Using a small corpus to obtain data for teaching a genre. *Small corpus studies and ELT*, 93-113.

Leech, G. (1997). Teaching and language corpora: A convergence. In *Teaching and language corpora* (pp. 1-23)

Marzá, N. E. (2014). A Practical Corpus-based Approach to Teaching English for Tourism. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, *3*(1), 129-136.

McEnery, T., & Wilson, A. (2001). *Corpus linguistics* Edinburgh University Press.

Tribble, C. (2001). Small corpora and teaching writing. *Small corpus studies and ELT: theory and practice, John Benjamins, Amsterdam*, 381-408.

Yoon, C. (2011). Concordancing in L2 writing class: An overview of research and issues. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *10*(3), 130-139.

Yoon, H. (2008). More than a linguistic reference: The influence of corpus technology on L2 academic writing. *Language Learning & Technology*, *12*(2), 31-48.

Yoon, H., & Hirvela, A. (2004). ESL student attitudes toward corpus use in L2 writing. *Journal of second language writing*, *13*(4), 257-283.