The Value of Computerized Corpora in EFL Textbook Design: The Case of Modal Verbs

Authors : Lexi Li

Abstract : This study aims to contribute to the field of how computer technology can be exploited to enhance EFL textbook design. Specifically, the study demonstrates how computerized native and learner corpora can be used to enhance modal verb treatment in EFL textbooks. The linguistic focus is will, would, can, could, may, might, shall, should, must. The native corpus is the spoken component of BNC2014 (hereafter BNCS2014). The spoken part is chosen because the pedagogical purpose of the textbooks is communication-oriented. Using the standard query option of CQPweb, 5% of each of the nine modals was sampled from BNCS2014. The learner corpus is the POS-tagged Ten-thousand English Compositions of Chinese Learners (TECCL). All the essays under the "secondary school" section were selected. A series of five secondary coursebooks comprise the textbook corpus. All the data in both the learner and the textbook corpora are retrieved through the concordance functions of WordSmith Tools (version, 5.0). Data analysis was divided into two parts. The first part compared the patterns of modal verbs in the textbook corpus and BNC2014 with respect to distributional features, semantic functions, and co-occurring constructions to examine whether the textbooks reflect the authentic use of English. Secondly, the learner corpus was compared with the textbook corpus in terms of the use (distributional features, semantic functions, and co-occurring constructions) in order to examine the degree of influence of the textbook on learners' use of modal verbs. Moreover, the learner corpus was analyzed for the misuse (syntactic errors, e.g., she can sings*.) of the nine modal verbs to uncover potential difficulties that confront learners. The results indicate discrepancies between the textbook presentation of modal verbs and authentic modal use in natural discourse in terms of distributions of frequencies, semantic functions, and co-occurring structures. Furthermore, there are consistent patterns of use between the learner corpus and the textbook corpus with respect to the three above-mentioned aspects, except could, will and must, partially confirming the correlation between the frequency effects and L2 grammar acquisition. Further analysis reveals that the exceptions are caused by both positive and negative L1 transfer, indicating that the frequency effects can be intercepted by L1 interference. Besides, error analysis revealed that could, would, should and must are the most difficult for Chinese learners due to both inter-linguistic and intra-linguistic interference. The discrepancies between the textbook corpus and the native corpus point to a need to adjust the presentation of modal verbs in the textbooks in terms of frequencies, different meanings, and verb-phrase structures. Along with the adjustment of modal verb treatment based on authentic use, it is important for textbook writers to take into consideration the L1 interference as well as learners' difficulties in their use of modal verbs. The present study is a methodological showcase of the combination both native and learner corpora in the enhancement of EFL textbook language authenticity and appropriateness for learners.

Keywords : EFL textbooks, learner corpus, modal verbs, native corpus

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