Chinese Students' Use of Corpus Tools in an English for Academic Purposes Writing Course: Influence on Learning Behaviour, Performance Outcomes and Perceptions

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Abstract : Writing for academic purposes in a second or foreign language poses a significant challenge for non-native speakers, particularly at the tertiary level, where English academic writing for L2 students is often hindered by difficulties in academic discourse, including vocabulary, academic register, and organization. The past two decades have witnessed a rising popularity in the application of the data-driven learning (DDL) approach in EAP writing instruction. In light of such a trend, this study aims to enhance the integration of DDL into English for academic purposes (EAP) writing classrooms by investigating the perception of Chinese college students regarding the use of corpus tools for improving EAP writing. Additionally, the research explores their corpus consultation behaviors during training to provide insights into corpus-assisted EAP instruction for DDL practitioners. Given the uprising popularity of DDL, this research aims to investigate Chinese university students' use of corpus tools with three main foci: 1) the influence of corpus tools on learning behaviours, 2) the influence of corpus tools on students' academic writing performance outcomes, and 3) students' perceptions and potential perceptional changes towards the use of such tools. Three corpus tools, CQPWeb, Sketch Engine, and LancsBox X, are selected for investigation due to the scarcity of empirical research on patterns of learners' engagement with a combination of multiple corpora. The research adopts a pre-test / post-test design for the evaluation of students' academic writing performance before and after the intervention. Twenty participants will be divided into two groups: an intervention and a non-intervention group. Three corpus training workshops will be delivered at the beginning, middle, and end of a semester. An online survey and three separate focus group interviews are designed to investigate students' perceptions of the use of corpus tools for improving academic writing skills, particularly the rhetorical functions in different essay sections. Insights from students' consultation sessions indicated difficulties with DDL practice, including insufficiency of time to complete all tasks, struggle with technical set-up, unfamiliarity with the DDL approach and difficulty with some advanced corpus functions. Findings from the main study aim to provide pedagogical insights and training resources for EAP practitioners and learners.

Keywords : corpus linguistics, data-driven learning, English for academic purposes, tertiary education in China

Conference Title : ICALELE 2025 : International Conference on Applied Linguistics for English Language Education
Conference Location : Bali, Indonesia
Conference Dates : January 14-15, 2025