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A Corpus Literacy Course Evaluation: Strengths and Weaknesses Highlighted by ELT Students

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It has been widely acknowledged that corpora have been profoundly efficacious in language learning and teaching area in direct and indirect ways such as preparing teaching materials including dictionaries, reference grammar books, and textbooks; and direct exploitation of it in the classroom (Johns, 1991; Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finnegan, 1999; McCarty, McCarten and Sandiford, 2005). Particularly, direct use of corpora has become popular in recent years as the computers and internet are readily available, the number of free corpora is increasing, the sizes of corpora are expanding continuously. Moreover, direct use of corpora enables the researcher/teacher a great autonomy and flexibility in its use to address their specific needs. All these, in a nutshell, have introduced new responsibilities for practitioners in their classrooms as only reading and writing is not enough as literacy skills anymore (Warschauer, 2000).

Along with the increasing trend in their use in teaching praxis, mastering the skills to adapt them in classroom setting, redefines the corpus literacy as a need for researchers and teachers. Within the same line of reasoning, it is a requirement for teacher education programs to equip prospective language teachers with corpus literacy to make them more autonomous, to refine their research skills, to train them good material evaluators and developers, and to contribute their awareness in language use and teaching (O'Keffee and Farr, 2003).

Taking all these into consideration, the aim of this study is to introduce a corpus literacy course in a language teacher education program as an elective course for third year students and obtain their reflections to evaluate the efficacy of the course. The course lasted for one semester, and it included both theoretical and practical aspects of corpus linguistics. The first weeks, students were informed about the basics of corpora and concordancers to make them familiar with the field as pre-questionnaire results showed that out of 18 students, 6 stated that they never heard about "corpus", and 7 said that they heard the term; however, they did not have any idea about its meaning. Among the participants, only 1 student could write a correct definition of it. In addition to basic terms, the researcher lectured about the use of corpora in language teaching, advantages of using them in language teaching, identifying register differences through different corpora. After this theoretical part, throughout the following weeks students did more hands-on activities for the topics of different concordancers, computer-aided error correction, and material evaluation,

adaptation, and development. In order to strengthen what students learned, they were assigned to do some practical homework about the topic they covered that week and shared them through Moodle. That platform was chosen for the course to make it a paperless class, and to be a good example for prospective English language teachers. There was no sit-down exam for the course, instead they were evaluated considering their practice assignments they had done throughout the semester.

The study is qualitative in nature, and data were collected through pre-course and post-course questionnaires, minute papers, and reflection papers written by students themselves as well as semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions held at the end of the course. The results reveal the participant-confirmed advantages of the course. The participants asserted that learning about such innovative approach contributed their teaching skills making them more aware about the language use, their errors, register differences as well as equipping them as future teachers in a more well-rounded manner. They also stated how it contributed to overcome their technophobia as most of them found it a daunting work to use technology in their classrooms as teachers and even as students while doing homework. The participants also focused on the authentic language use in material development and the fruitful contribution of corpus in this regard, they added that corpora were invaluable tools to check anything about the language when they were confused. Another issue raised had been the intuition. As non-native speaker teachers, they cannot rely on their intuitions in target language use and corpus support them in this respect as well, that view gained more importance after they evaluated the materials written by non-native speakers of English. However, the technical difficulties and temporary internet accessibility problems have been some of the issues suggested by the participants. The corpus literacy course in this study has been a complementary component in the language teacher education program; yet, the results have revealed a requirement for possible modifications according to the reflections of the students to function better in following academic years.

Keywords: corpus literacy, language teacher education, language teaching

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