

The Potentialities of Corpus Linguistics in Teaching English Grammar: Analyzing The Three Corpus Based Results reached by Biber et al. (1999) in the Longman Grammar of Spoken & Written English (LGSWE).

Asst. Prof. May Ali Abdul Ameer
UNIVERSITY OF AL-QADISSIYAH
COLLEGE OF ARTS/ ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

1. Introduction:

Corpus linguistics has developed a lot in the field of language teaching and learning during the past thirty years. It has attracted the interest of both linguistic researchers and practitioners in the field of language pedagogy and EFL teaching. Integrating corpus-based data within the language teaching environment is shifting the way of teaching to a more inductive one rather than the traditional deductive way. Many research in this field have proved that corpus linguistics can make a difference to EFL learning and teaching by improving pedagogical practice and enhancing learners' autonomy (see (Aijmer, 2009; Romer ,2009; Bennett ,2010). Studies also show that language textbook designers and material developers are benefiting positively from corpus data especially grammar textbook writers, for corpus linguistics can provide them with a new source of information as Biber and Conrad (2004:2) call it a "data-based source rather than intuition". Mindt (1996:245) states that designers of grammar textbook syllabuses should depend on "empirical evidence rather than traditions and intuition when deciding what to include and how to organize a grammar teaching material". He argues that while intuition and traditions are very essential in describing and teaching the basics of grammar, still most English grammar textbooks include " a kind of school English which does not seem to exist outside the foreign language classroom" (ibid: 232). Thus foreign language learners find difficulty in using what they have learnt when communicating with native speakers. So the questions are What about the actual use of grammar forms that native speakers use in every day life? What kind of common forms should grammar textbooks introduce to EFL learners? What examples best represent naturally occurring language? These fundamental questions were answered by Biber et al. (1999) in case studies taken from research conducted for the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (LGSWE)*; Biber et al.,1999), where they addressed three types of results important for Grammar teaching:

1- frequency information

2- register comparisons

3- associations between grammatical structures and words (lexico-grammar)

Therefore the researcher finds it necessary to analyze how Biber et al (1999) addressed these three result using corpus based tools and techniques to write down the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*.

2. Corpus linguistics and English Grammar textbook publishing:

Recently corpus linguistics has played a great role in grammar textbook writing and designing helping both researchers and authors to analyze large amount of authentic language data in such short time. Traditionally grammarians and grammar textbook writers depend entirely on intuition, anecdotal evidence and traditions when coming to determine the content of a grammar textbook (Biber et al, 2002:7). Unfortunately this can lead authors to some sort of bias when deciding how to sequence the grammatical information they want to present and what to introduce first in the beginning chapters and what to save till the end. They may some times devote large chapters to one grammatical structure and neglect others they think are less important only because their intuition says so. While intuition plays an integral part in grammar textbook designing still it lacks the objectivity and constancy that corpus linguistics tools can offer.

Many studies from the field of corpus linguistics have proved that depending on Corpora in describing and determining what kind of grammatical structures should be taught first shifted the way of material designing, as McEnery & Xiao (2007:370) puts it from "how should grammar structures be used by speakers" to "how grammar structures are actually used in real life communication". Corpus research tools and techniques made it possible for linguists and grammar textbook writers to analyze spoken language data which was neglected previously because of its "incomplete clauses, messy repairs and non-standard forms" (ibid). Taking advantage of corpus based grammar textbooks inside the classroom gave teachers and language learners a window into real native language usage providing them with both corpus based language description and authentic drills taken from every day life interaction without the need of corpus techniques and computer software inside the classroom.

Putting these important facts in mind Biber et al (1999) wrote a corpus based English grammar textbook "*the Longman grammar of spoken and written English*" (LGSWE). Depending on corpus-based research and tools Biber et al. described English grammatical structures accurately and efficiently.

3. Biber's et al (1999) *Longman grammar of spoken and written English* (LGSWE) :

Inspired by the general structure and terminology of Quirk's (1985) *Comprehensive Grammar of the English language*, the (LGSWE) is "considered as a new milestone in reference publishing" (McEnery & Xiao, 2007: 366). It's analysis was carried out on the 40 million words of the Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus. The corpus was divided into four registers (conversations, fiction, news and academic writing) within two medias of English language (written and spoken) and taking into consideration the two national varieties of the language (British and American English). The book adopts, as Biber et al calls it, a kind of a "corpus-based approach" :

The LGSWE adopts a corpus-based approach, which means that the grammatical descriptions are based on the patterns of structure and use found in a large collection of spoken and written texts, stored electronically, and searchable by computer.

(Biber et al., 1999:4)

When writing the (LGSWE) the author tried to question the traditional procedures of grammar textbook writing. He found that grammatical structures are not presented in a naturally occurred language, more empirical evidence is needed in order to help EFL language learners to practice grammatical structures in both "controlled and open-ended ways" (Fuchs & Schoenberg, 2013, Para. 10). The book gives "a thorough description of English grammar, which is illustrated throughout with real corpus examples, and which gives equal attention to the ways speakers and writers actually use these linguistic resources" (Biber et al. 1999:45).

The researcher argues that the uniqueness of the LGSWE lies in the way it took into consideration three important issues relevant to English grammar teaching and relevant for any corpus based grammar textbook writing, which are : Frequency information, register comparison and the association between grammar structures and words (Lexico-grammar). Thus the researcher finds it necessary to briefly mention how Biber et al. (1999) addressed these important issues in the LGSWE.

3.1. Frequency information:

The frequency of an item or a grammatical structure means how often it occurs in a language or how much it is rare. Determining the rareness and regularity of a word or a structure plays a key role in foreign language teaching making the learning process easier and beneficial by helping EFL teachers and material designers to "determine teaching priorities in English language teaching" (Leech, G, 2003:2). Yet before the emergence of computers in the field of language teaching, many years ago, frequency information has been neglected and ignored because of some problems related to its theory and practice on one hand and being time and effort consuming on the other. Looking for frequencies of words and structures back then means doing it "by hand with a team of helpers and restricted to the written form since no tape recorders were provided" (ibid). Now with the development of Corpus linguistics and its thrilling applications in language teaching and textbook designing, frequency information has been a priority in most grammar textbook publishing for its reliability and its undoubted outcomes. Taking advantage of grammatical frequency in particular, the LGSWE revealed surprising results concerning the regularity and irregularity of some grammatical structures. On the light of these results some reconsiderations should be made in English Grammar teaching, one of which is the most common belief that the progressive form is the most common form used by native speakers in conversations. The frequency results showed that although the present progressive form is the most used form by native speakers in conversations than the past progressive but the simple aspect (especially the present simple tense) was 20 times more used in conversations by native speakers. As shown in figures (1) and (2) taken from Biber et al. (1999).

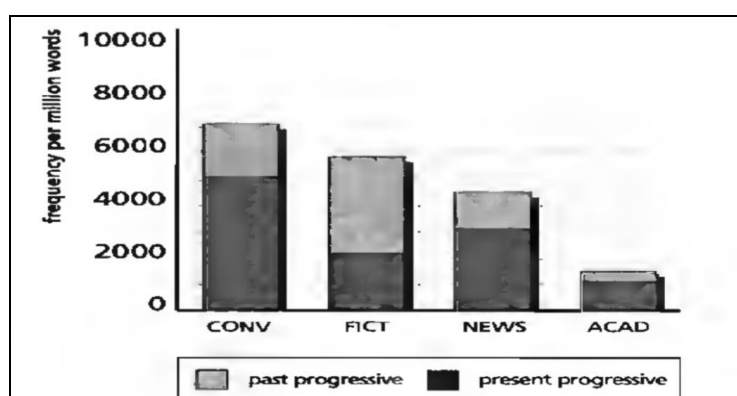


Figure (1): frequency of present and past progressive aspect in four registers (based on Biber et al. (1999), figure 6.4)

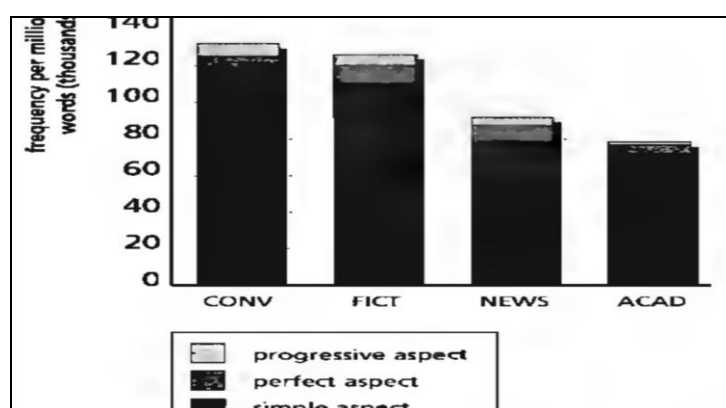


Figure (2): frequency of progressive, perfect and simple aspect in four registers (based on Biber et al. (1999), figure 6.2)

3.2 Register variation:

One of the most great contribution of corpus-based grammar research is highlighting the essential role register variation plays in grammar description. General descriptions of grammatical patterns are not useful for all English registers. For example it has been found that in academic writing the verb *BE* is the most used lexical verb than any other verb, while the verb *say* is the most frequent lexical verb used in academic writing and newspaper writing (Biber et al, 2002:33). Specifying the grammatical patterns for each register can have a great impact on both the process of teaching and material designing by helping teachers and writers to focus on what grammatical structure is most used in a particular register. The variation among registers is also very important for ESP (English for specific purposes) methods by "providing the essential information required to teach these kinds of approaches" (Biber et al 2002:7). Figure (3) shows the frequencies of post-modifier complexes among four registers: conversation, fiction, newspaper writing and academic writing. As it is clear, pots-modifiers are relatively common in academic writing:

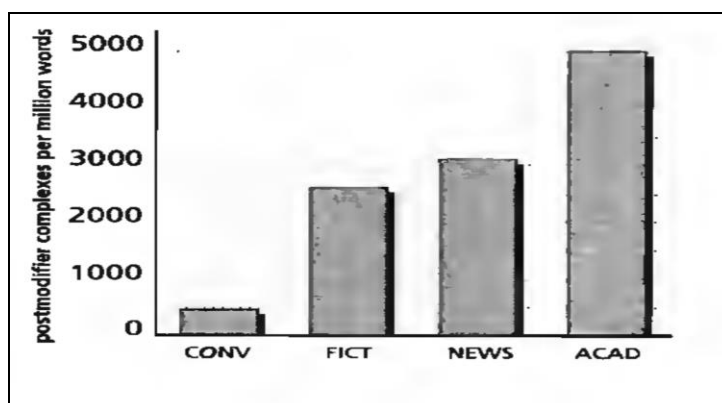


Figure (3): frequency postmodifiers in four registers (based on Biber et al. (1999), figure 8.1)

3.3. Associations between grammatical structures and words (lexico-grammar):

Another most important finding of corpus-based studies is the relation of grammar structures and words. The LGSWE highlighted such an important fact by showing empirically that words do not randomly appear in a given grammatical structure rather there is some sort of association between them. This important finding can help grammar textbook writers to provide illustrations, examples and drills that reflect such kind of relation. For example Biber et al (1999) found that verbs like *think*, *say* and *know* are the most frequent verbs occurring with *that-clauses* in both British and American conversations. While the verbs *suggest* and *show* are most common with the same structure in academic writing. Another similar case is shown with the *verb+ to infinitive*, with only four verbs commonly occurring in speaking and newspaper writing: *want*, *seem*, *try* and *like*. While *begin to* is very common in fiction writing and *tend to* and *appear to* is most frequent in academic writing.

These important lexico-grammar findings can prevent teachers and students from memorizing long lists of words and grammatical constructions that can be both time and effort consuming. It can shift the teaching process to a more manageable and easy-going one only by focusing on frequency information concerning word-verb association.

4. Conclusion:

It can be concluded that the LGSWE has established a new generation in English Grammar teaching and authentic grammar description. It gave grammatical descriptions to everyday language use and in two forms of the English language, spoken and written. Needless to say that it gave such descriptions along with frequencies and charts i.e. quantitative corpus findings with qualitative descriptions of such findings. The LGSWE managed to meet three basic requirements necessary for any corpus-based grammar textbook publishing. These following requirements, the researcher believes, were reached upon through three corpus-based results taken from case studies conducted for the LGSWE:

1. Stressing the importance of grammatical frequency information. Frequency information was taken from a 40 million word corpus *the Longman Corpus Of Spoken And Written English*.
2. Taking into account register variations of the language. The Corpus was divided into four registers: Conversations, fiction writing, newspaper writing and academic writing.

Shedding the light on the grammar of spoken language, a thing that was neglected previously and was determined by intuition.

3. Showing the relationship between certain lexical items and grammatical patterns (lexico-grammar). Focusing on such associations plays a great role in grammar teaching making it more manageable and concentrated.

Finally the researcher suggests that EFL teachers and educators must take advantage of such corpus based grammars in order to improve both the teaching process and the teaching outcome. Such books can offer EFL learners a chance to interact with native speakers at any time and for free.

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