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Making Waves for the Future: A Less Complacent Look at Language

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A closer look at language

Waves of the Future being the theme of the JALT 2002 conference, I decided to investigate the word *waves*. Using the Collins COBUILD concordance sampler, I analysed data for the plural noun *waves*, searching three corpora (spoken British English, written British English and written American English) totaling 45 million words. So, in addition to the *ocean waves* painted so beautifully by Hokusai, which I used in my plenary talk, what kinds of waves are there?

1. typical noun + noun collocations included: *sound waves, light waves, shock waves, ocean waves, brain waves, heat waves, gravity waves, air waves, radio waves.*
2. verbs describing *waves* included: *rolling waves, heaving waves, crashing waves, breaking waves.*
3. adjectives: *tidal, foamy, huge, massive, rapid, small-scale, complex, brown, dark, fresh.*
4. verbs collocating with *waves*: *riding, traveling, causing, generating, sent.*

All these seemed similar in British and American, written and spoken. I then looked up *waves of*, and found in the written corpora around twenty samples. Notice what proportion sound positive in meaning and what proportion sound negative (some of course will be neutral):

waves of ideas
 waves of new life
 waves of good fortune
 waves of jubilation
 waves of strikes and street protests
 waves of Albanians streaming into the
 waves of attack and counter-attack
 waves of guerrillas
 waves of doubt and distrust
 waves of the North Atlantic
 waves of change
 waves of grief and agony
 waves of fear
 waves of stormy light-dappled dark

waves of intense nostalgia
 waves of exhaustion
 waves of shiny black hair
 waves of sound
 waves of panic
 waves of passion

Roughly a quarter seemed positive; half were negative. To my further surprise, there were no hits in the spoken corpus at all.

As we have seen here, we can learn a lot from looking closely at real language data. I now want to give some examples of commonly taught language items and evidence from corpus data that show why it is important not to become complacent about the language we teach. In all these cases, conventional pedagogic grammars and texts books have given us information about these items that is wrong or misleading. For example, the rules traditionally given for SOME and ANY are: use *some* in positive statements and *any* in negatives and questions. But is this actually common usage?

Would you like some tea? Do you have some money? Any child below two is eligible. Report any suspicious telephone calls. The meaning of *any* is *all* or *every*; ‘*it doesn’t matter which/when/what*,’ whereas *some* is used when we have something specific in mind (e.g. money for the shopping.) *Any* is often used in questions and negatives simply because these contexts are generally—but not always—non-specific. In this case, then, knowing the *meaning* is far more useful than a misleading rule.

WOULD / ‘D is normally taught in polite requests and conditional sentences. But corpus data reveals other commoner uses. In 48% of sample lines, it is hypothetical in meaning: *it would be nice to keep bees*. Only one in six of these actually occur in a conditional sentence *You would be surprised if I*

told you... In 21% it expresses past habit and is three times as common as *used to...*, both in spoken and written: *they would practise all day standing on their heads; we’d always stop on the way home to pick wild strawberries*

It is also used as past tense of *will*: 6%; to make requests etc 2% and in phrases such as: *I would have thought*.

The word THING is generally taught as denoting an object; but some of its most common uses are pragmatic in nature, in phrases with specific discourse functions: *The thing is* (signaling a problem), *the other thing was* (signaling the importance of what is coming next). It also occurs in lists and in vague language: *and things like that, that kind of thing*. We teach REPORTED SPEECH from books often giving complicated rules for tense switches. But what about: ‘*She was telling me the other day the best hotel in Dublin is The Shelbourne*’? Surely, the tense is selected to reveal the time reference, as it is in any other context. Interestingly we don’t teach REPORTED THOUGHT although in the corpus verbs of mental process reporting thought, e.g. *think, hope, and wonder*, are more frequent than verbs reporting speech. Indeed, learners seem to acquire reported thought naturally without the need for rules.

Notice the use of ADVERBS OF FREQUENCY with the continuous tense (which breaches the rule that they are used only with present simple): *At eight o’clock I’m generally having my breakfast*. Here we might equally well say: *I’m generally having my breakfast when the post arrives*, which shows that we do not only have the INTERRUPTED PAST but also interrupted present and future: *He’ll be cooking supper when I get back tonight*. We could save time by teaching the meaning of *-ing* forms, and illustrating a general rule that works for all tense patterns.

Above are examples of rules that don’t work, uses that are not taught and gaps in coverage. I’m sure you will have

noticed others, and may find more if you examine closely the language of your own learners' target discourse community (TDC). In fact, if you do notice any wordings or uses that are new or different from those taught in text-books or pedagogic grammars, why not look them up on the same website I used to look up 'waves of'? (Collins Cobuild). There is so much English to be learnt, it is vital not to waste learners' time with misleading rules and untruths. But how do we find out what language will be useful and typical?

A more sharply focused Needs Analysis

This wave began in the 1970s, with the work of Munby (1978) and others, investigating ESP contexts. At that time, people concentrated on investigating the skills and sub-skills learners would need, and in what social and professional contexts they would need them (i.e., performance objectives). But skills are not enough—they give us at best an impressionistic picture of what to teach. We need to see the detail, to know what specific language learners will have to handle (i.e., knowledge objectives). This includes factors such as genres, types of interactions, topics and levels of competence.

We can begin by investigating and collecting sample language from the learners' TDC. If they were nurses, their target discourse community would include hospitals, nursing homes and training contexts. With EAP students, sample language might comprise lectures, tutorials, lab work, library, WWW resources, textbooks, and coffee bar chat with peers. With exam-oriented students, on the other hand, their TDC might simply be the exam context itself, in which case an investigation of past exam papers and of previous students' exam experiences might be useful. With young learners, their TDC could include things children will enjoy doing in a future classroom community: learning about their

world, hearing or reading stories, making things, and emailing pen-pals in other countries.

Ideally we need to shadow people in the TDC at work and observe/record what they say, who they listen to, what they read and write during the course of a typical day. If we cannot work-shadow them, we can obtain recordings and ask for samples of data. For example, to investigate the English which primary teachers typically use, a colleague and I sent out blank cassettes to mainly non-native primary English teachers asking them to record their next lesson (see Willis, 2002). We listened to all their recordings, transcribed lengthy extracts, analysed and classified language samples, looked at young learner course books thus gaining a clearer picture of typical classroom English (Slattery and Willis, 2001).

However, in Japan, there are many students who, having little motivation for learning English, have no TDC in mind. Their teachers, who know them best, might be obliged to negotiate one or two TDCs with them. For example, as Internet users, they might engage with chat rooms and teenage web pages; as TV viewers, with video or film extracts, or magazines with story features and problem pages, or songs used in karaoke bars. Learners could be asked to collect sample extracts from sources that interest them to be used in class as language data. Learners can go on to create their own English web pages, or begin their own email correspondence with students from other countries. For example, an Aston M.Sc. participant teaching writing to 12 year-old pupils in Turkey forged a pen-pal link with a school in Spain; pupils corresponded in English; she collected and analysed whole sequences of their letters and gained many insights useful for future writing courses.

This investigation of language used in the TDC brings us on to my next wave: collecting and assembling typical language data from the TDC to create a specifically tailored research corpus from which to build a syllabus.

Creation of corpora for syllabus and course design: from research corpus to pedagogic corpus

After identifying appropriate sources of language data, the steps for compiling a research corpus are, briefly, as follows:

- decide the amount, weights and balance of the types of language to be collected (e.g., proportion of spoken to written; proportion of spontaneous to planned language; proportion from each context/source).
- assemble written and spoken language for your research corpus.
- record and transcribe representative samples of spoken language.
- for an electronic corpus, scan in sample texts and type in transcripts.

At this stage you have a ‘sea’ of language, which you can then look at more closely. The next steps are:

- analyse the corpus; identify frequent words, phrases, chunks, patterns; identify and classify common functions, semantic areas, topics.
- make lists of things to include in your course syllabus.
- select a set of teaching materials - texts and spoken language - that reflect the kind of language used in the TDC: a ‘pedagogic corpus’.
- use your lists to check coverage, and refine the selection of texts if necessary.

This ‘pedagogic corpus’ will be far smaller and more clearly defined than the larger research corpus, more like a small lake than a sea. (I illustrated this in my plenary with two abstract paintings of wavy lines by Bridget Riley.) In some cases, teaching materials can include extracts from the research corpus, so long as the contexts and language are sufficiently familiar and culturally accessible to the learners. This was possible with the course for primary teachers of English. However, with a pre-experience workforce or if using a more general corpus, finding suitable extracts from a research corpus is less easy.

If created following the steps above, the pedagogic corpus of materials should form a microcosm of the research corpus. Having looked this closely at the language of the TDC, you can be confident that what you teach will be of direct use to your learners. Unlike other materials, the TDC has not been selected on the basis of guesswork or intuition.

Identification of chunks and lexical patterns—the link between vocabulary and grammar

For my third wave I want to look more closely at one aspect of corpus findings, chunks and lexical patterns, also known as lexical phrases (Pawley & Syder, 1983). These form a cline between rigidly fixed phrases, like *of course*, *as a matter of fact*, *at the end of the day*, where no words are likely to change (you would not say *as a matter of truth*;) and phrases or frames that are partially fixed, that have one or two open slots somewhere like *waves of or see you next week* where the time phrase is changeable.

fixed -----	partially fixed
prefabricated chunks	semi-fixed phrases
fixed phrases	patterns
poly-words	frames
multi-word items	

Widdowson (1989:135) stresses the importance of such chunks:

Communicative competence is not a matter of knowing rules for the composition of sentences... it is much more a matter of knowing a stock of partially pre-assembled patterns, formulaic frameworks, and a kit of rules, so to speak, and being able to apply the rules to make whatever adjustments are necessary according to contextual demands. Communicative competence in this view is essentially a matter of adaptation, and rules are not generative, but regulative and subservient.

Now go back and see how many chunks and frames you can identify in this extract. Which are fixed? Partially fixed? Most people find about twelve (e.g., *a matter of, a kit of rules*), some nesting inside others. They make up a considerable proportion of written text and they are also very common in spoken language (Foster, 2001; Ketko, 2000). They are important because they help:

- speakers to compose quickly in real time (we rarely compose word by word; we think ahead in meaning units, if there is a pre-assembled phrase for what we mean, we use it.
- writers to conform to genre conventions and sound expert in their fields.
- learners to impress their assessors, e.g., by sounding fluent (Baigent, 1996).

How can we help learners identify and acquire them? Several research-based classifications of chunks exist, but we need a systematic way to classify them for learners. I have begun attempting this by identifying three, four and five word chunks and examining their functions, using a Hallidayan three-way analysis:

- Ideational: topic-related, notional e.g. time, location, quantity etc
- Textual: discourse organising, signalling devices, markers of clause relations e.g. *with the result that*
- Interpersonal: interactional, vague expressions, evaluation and comment etc (adapted from Halliday, 1994:179)

but I need to do a lot more before I can publish this - this wave needs to gather momentum!

Some aspects of spoken language

Both written and spoken language occurs somewhere along this cline:

spontaneous	planned
ephemeral -----	permanent
private	public

A shopping list written for oneself would be at the spontaneous end, as would a casual chat with friends in a bar, while a business product presentation to an invited public would be at the other. Most learners have greater problems with the spontaneous spoken, partly because they have less exposure to this and also because its grammar is different from planned or written language grammar, which is the grammar that is

generally taught. Another problem is that conversation flows like waves converging onto the seashore, it is difficult to hold it still in order to retain new words and expressions or perceive patterns. One way to hold up the flow is to record and transcribe interactions, for example, recordings of tasks (that learners have done themselves, so they are already familiar with the context) performed by fluent speakers (Willis, 1996).

Learners love studying transcripts if they have been involved in a similar interaction, expressing similar meanings. Here are some ideas for features that learners could be asked to focus on. Real-time spontaneous spoken language contains:

1. highly interactive phrases: (checking: *See what I mean?* clarifying, use of tags: *isn't it?* short questions: *What number?*).
2. a lot of evaluation: (*That's great/awful. Really? Well, OK. Yes but..*).
3. additive patterns: (narrative: *and then, ..Then... noun groups: My friend, her stepmother, her partner works for Aldi too...).*
4. ellipsis: (phrases: *I think so. Afraid not. Don't know why.*).
5. vague or imprecise expressions: (*sort of / kind of; something like that anyway, and stuff like that*).
6. set routines for specific activities: (direction-giving: *You know the library?* anecdote-telling: *There was this man...*).

(Adapted from Willis, D. forthcoming)

In addition, spoken language is **co-operative** and often **repetitive** (A: *Nice, that.* B: *Yeah, really nice.*); it is **formulaic** (*Would you like to... At the end of the day...;*); it makes heavy use of **basic level vocabulary** (*nice, big,*) and **reporting** (phrases

with *think/thought say/said/was saying*).

A closer look at features of spoken language can help learners gain confidence. They will realise there is no need to always construct perfect 'sentences'; they can learn routines and formulae to give them time to think about what to say next, and use evaluative comments to help conversations along. But their major need is to listen to spontaneous talk, and to experiment with speaking spontaneously themselves, in a meaning-focused environment. Rote learning and practice of conversational gambits may help, but will not in themselves be sufficient for acquiring communicative competence. Thinking about how learners acquire spontaneous spoken language brings us to my fifth wave.

SLA research and learning processes

In the past there has been much research on the acquisition of grammar (e.g., Lightbown, 2000). Behaviouristic theories are now largely discredited; we all realise that what is taught is not immediately learned or deployable. The metaphor of teaching single items as bricks to build a wall is no longer tenable. Now, there is more awareness of interlanguage development—of a learner's language as a developing system (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). We must recognise the conditions for natural acquisition and re-create them in our classrooms by providing:

1. exposure to language in use (i.e., rich input);
2. opportunities for learners to interact, experiment and achieve things using the language (i.e., output);
3. materials and methods that motivate learners and make them feel successful.

These are vital conditions, without which learners will never learn to communicate. To help them achieve greater accuracy, we can supplement these with some focus on language form, but always in the context of meaning. These are the basic principles behind task-based learning (Willis and Willis, 1996). Furthermore, it is now thought possible that different aspects of language can be learned through different learning processes. Ellis, N (1997) suggests that the form, collocation and grammatical class of a word can be acquired naturally given adequate exposure (implicit learning), whereas the semantic properties of a word can be learned explicitly (e.g. dictionary work and memorisation). Willis, D (forthcoming, 2003), suggests that different language learning problems require different learning processes:

- recognition: entails noticing then memorising useful items, e.g., words like *ice cream*, fixed phrases, routines, frames like *Do you* in questions.
- system-building: a more complex process of putting things (such as inversion in questions forms or the structure of noun groups) together and incorporating them in their own writing or planned oral presentations.
- exploration: a constant process supported by rich input, where learners look out for and reflect on language use such as tense and aspect (e.g., when to use the present perfect) and information structure.

Complex words like *agreement* may require a combination of several processes: system-building and exploration, before their meanings and patterns are fully mastered. These processes need to be supported by language use in the classroom, allowing learners to begin by improvisation, stringing together words and phrases to get meanings across, and later to consolidate, systematising and incorporating items into their own language use. In the future, we need more research on acquisition of overall competence, including lexical competence, not just grammatical.

Over to you

I have outlined here the five waves that I hope will gather momentum in the future. I hope you, working together with your colleagues, will recognise the importance of some of them, and ride the waves of change right into your classrooms.

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