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How an L2 learner corpus can identify areas of quantifiable improvement in students' written discourse

Empirical measures of development in writing can be difficult to establish, especially as the act of measurement itself involves so many complex and interconnected operations. In the wider context it may also be problematic to declare a programme of instruction as likely to result in improvement, if clear sets of criteria cannot be identified. In other words, it may behove researchers, teachers and course designers to be able to state with at least some confidence, what a course in English can produce in terms of learner outcomes. With this in mind, I have compiled a logitudinal learner corpus of approximately 80,000 words collected over a three-year period from preessional students at the University of Birmingham. This corpus consists of a series of essays which were completed at both the beginning and end of an intensive (20/15/10 and 6 week) EAP programme over three succesive years. The students were given the same title and the same length of time to answer. Papers were matched and the contents analysed according to a range of lexicogrammatical features that previous research (eg Biber et al 1999) has shown to be typical of written academic English. Features of the pre and post course scripts are then compared to a variety of reference corpora including BAWE and the written component of the BNC. A picture emerges of fairly consistent improvement which occurs over a relatively short time period. This finding tends to challenge previous research, which has argued that improvements cannot be detected for periods of instruction less than one year. I conclude that after periods of instruction ranging from as little as 6 weeks to 5 months on an intensive English for academic purposes programme, the students' writing shows greater structural flexibility and that this can be evidenced by reference to corpora.

Reference

Biber,D., Johansson, S., Leech, G. , and Finegan, E. (1999). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Harlow: Pearson Education.