

Investigating the Diagnostic and Evaluative Functions of a Learner Corpus

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Abstract

Similarities and disparities between learner English and NS English have been under investigation since learner corpora studies started in the late 1990's. However, the diagnostic function and the evaluative function of a learner corpus, when compared against a native speaker (NS) corpus, have not been extensively explored so far. Based on a large-scale study of verbs in a learner corpus (COLEC) and a native-speaker corpus (LOCNESS), this paper investigates in detail how a corpus-based comparison between learner English and NS English could be used to diagnose the needs of learners in the production of written English. I will demonstrate by looking at verbs (and verb-related nouns) how such a corpus-based comparison could have an explicit diagnostic function. As McCarthy (1990: 87) maintains, predicting learners' needs in vocabulary improvement is vital in selecting what to teach. Only when we know the very details of the English production by the learners can we offer guidance as to how many more verbs they need to learn to use and in what way (in order to write English as naturally as native speakers). Two terms in the domain of learner corpora studies, 'overuse' and 'underuse', have been in use since the start of the new enquiry, but not without problems. My conservations in using these two terms will be explained while the diagnostic function is discussed. Apart from having a strong diagnostic function, a corpus-based comparison has a secondary function, i.e. the evaluative function, which can serve to evaluate the proficiency level of collective learner English. I believe that this function has potential values for resolving practical issues such as computer-aided essay marking. The pedagogical implications of discovering such functions in teaching material writing, testing, computer assisted language learning (CALL), data-driven learning (DDL) and learner dictionary compilation will also be discussed.

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