

## TEACHING PREPOSITIONS USING A CONCORDANCER

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### ABSTRACT

This article is about the use of concordance output in the teaching of prepositions to ESL students. The study emphasises that such a tool can help students discover for themselves how certain grammatical rules work. The exercises help to develop students' awareness of the patterns of use of selected prepositions. The software also makes it more convenient for the teacher to prepare his materials and to find the contexts in which students can discover the use of selected problematic prepositions.

### Introduction

Prepositions are one of the most used parts of speech in English. In many cases, it is not always easy to work out which preposition is the most appropriate for every particular context. Many second language learners have difficulties with prepositions as they are one of the most problematic areas (Lindstromberg, 1991 and Capel, 1993). The difficulties faced by learners in understanding how prepositions are used in sentence construction highlights the need for an effective teaching method. One way of overcoming this problem is by using a computer concordancer in teaching.

A concordancer is a computer program which is used to find the occurrences of every single word or phrase in a text. Sinclair (1991a) claims that a concordance is the nucleus of corpus linguistics because it reveals many facts about the language and its patterns show how a language system works when it is analyzed. A corpus is defined as, "a collection of naturally-occurring language text, chosen to characterize a state or variety of a language" (Sinclair, 1991a: 171).

The use of a concordancer in language teaching is not new. Skehan (1981) was one of the first researchers to discuss what a concordancer can offer a teacher. Honeyfield (1989) provides a typology of exercises that can assist teachers in their language classrooms. Tribble and Jones (1990), in fact, argue that the applications of concordance output are much too diverse to list exhaustively.

A number of studies have been conducted in the use of a concordancer in language teaching. Ahmad, Corbett, Rogers and Sussex (1985) report that SEARCHSTRING, which is a concordancing tool, was used at the University of Surrey for the teaching of English, German and Russian. By providing examples from a corpus keyed-in on a computer, the concordance lines are used to show students how to draw facts about grammar and how to use the rules effectively in writing and speaking.

A similar study was also conducted at Sultan Qaboos University (Stevens, 1991). Stevens examines the use of a concordancer in teaching scientific vocabulary. Based on the study, he found that students could explore and deduce the rules or use of scientific vocabulary items drawn from authentic biology texts, if given the appropriate guidance and plenty of examples.

Wichman (1995) also mentions that concordancers could be used to tackle some of the problems faced by learners of foreign languages. He concentrated on the teaching of meaning in his study. Wichman uses a corpus of 100,000 words of English based on the Lancaster-Oslo-Berger (LOB) corpus. The subjects were Germans who were asked to provide the appropriate German equivalent for the English words chosen from the Grammar book **Using German: A Guide to Contemporary Usage** by M. Durrel (1992). The subjects were provided with copies of the computer printouts and were asked to provide the appropriate German equivalent for English words. The study revealed that the students were able to make distinctions between the given words and their meanings.

One of the projects which uses the concordancer exclusively is the Collins COBUILD project. The corpora (over 20 million words) developed in this project are used in the publication of Collins COBUILD series. These include those that deal with the teaching of prepositions. The authentic source gives learners exposure to the contemporary patterns of English usage.

Although there are books available to teach prepositions, students may be able to learn and recognize the typical prepositional uses better if they are asked to detect the pattern on their own. Learners' sensitivity to the language can be developed if they are encouraged to discover the different grammatical rules by themselves. This will be made possible given a concordance output to work on. The concordancer is one example where the technology can be used to promote autonomous learning. Such an approach may help in the empowerment of students (Butler, 1990). Thus, in this study, a concordancer will be used to provide examples of individual prepositions in different contexts. Since the total number of prepositions is rather big, for the purpose of this research only a few of them will be looked at. This study will focus on *in*, *on*, and *at* because these are among the prepositions that are commonly employed by English language speakers.

## Study Procedure

A concordancer, namely **Longman Mini Concordancer (LMC)**, was used in this study. As texts to be processed would have to be in electronic form, a novel, namely **Robinson Crusoe**, was downloaded from the Internet for this purpose. The novel **Robinson Crusoe** was chosen because students are familiar with the story. The number of occurrences of the prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* in the novel is shown in Table 1 below:

Preposition	Occurrences
In	1912
On	691
At	589

Table 1: Frequencies of the occurrences of the prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* in the novel **Robinson Crusoe**

The study was conducted with a group of students who were following proficiency courses at the International Islamic University Malaysia. They consisted of 25 students who were from Malaysia,

Indonesia, Thailand, Liberia and The Gulf. The research was conducted during their grammar classes as the focus of this study was on teaching prepositions.

A total of three lessons were conducted in which the students were asked to:

- do an exercise on collocation;
- explain the uses of the prepositions in, on and at;
- do a gap-filling exercise based on the concordance lines extracted from the novel Robinson Crusoe

Students were exposed to the software in the first lesson. They were allowed to try out simple operations with the LMC before the exercise was given.

## Results Of Study

An exercise on collocation was given to the students before they analysed the selected prepositions in the novel. Table 2 gives the results of the exercise:

No.	Verb	Possible Collocation			Students who answered correctly N=25 (%)
		in	on	at	
1.	Look	√	√	√	21(84)
2.	Aim	×	×	√	20(80)
3.	Arrive	√	×	√	19(76)
4.	Fall	√	√	×	19(76)
5.	Smile	×	√	√	18(72)
6.	Surprise	×	×	√	16(64)
7.	Live	√	√	×	14(56)
8.	Stay	√	×	×	13(52)
9.	Go	√	√	√	13(52)
10.	Settle	√	√	×	11(44)
11.	Sink	√	×	×	9(36)
12.	Concern	×	×	×	8(32)
13.	Fire	×	×	√	7(28)
14.	Ship	×	×	×	5(20)
15.	Drive	×	×	×	3(12)
16.	Confound	×	×	×	0(0)
17.	Aground	×	×	×	0(0)
18.	Afflict	×	×	×	0(0)

Table 2: Students' Answers to the Exercise on Collocation

The tick shows the prepositions that collocated with the given verbs. (x) means the prepositions did not go with the verbs. **Collins COBUILD English Guides 1: Prepositions** (Sinclair, 1991b) was used to counter-check the choice.

Based on Table 2 above, it seems that the majority of the students have problems to identify the correct prepositions for the less common verbs. The fact that none of the students could give the correct answer to all the questions justified the need to pay more attention to the teaching of prepositions.

After doing the exercise, students were asked to work on 40 concordance lines of each of the prepositions in, on and at, and to focus on the differences in usage and meanings of these related prepositions. The students had to come up with the explanations to these prepositions and then compare them with **Collins COBUILD**'s categories. The students were asked to put the explanations into different categories, and to limit these categories to only four. Table 3 shows the four categories that they came up with. The fact that they managed to come up with these four entries might show that learning by discovery had taken place.

No.	Preposition	CATEGORIES			
		1	2	3	4
1.	IN	Place or position: Where Something is	Time: No Specification	Direction of Something	Place: Specific
2.	ON	Location of Something	Time: Specific	To show where something goes	Metaphoric use
3.	AT	Place or position: in general	Time: No specification	Specific place or time	Idioms (Special uses)

Table 3: Students' explanations for the various prepositional usage

After students were shown the different prepositional uses, they were asked to do a gap-filling exercise. The students had to fill in the blanks in a given passage with prepositions in, on and at where appropriate. A total of 30 concordance lines were extracted from the novel **Robinson Crusoe** for this purpose. There were ten lines for each of the prepositions. Table 4 on p. 7 shows the total number of students who put the said prepositions in each line.

Answer as in original text	Concordance lines		Students' answers			
			In	On	At	
in	1	voyage to the Brazils, and arrived	the bay de Todos los santos, or all	4	-	15
	2	the rocks, they would run away as	a terrible fright; but if they were	16	3	1
	3	I omitted setting down before; as	particular, pens, ink and paper, s	25	-	-
	4	op some other hills, which lay as	A ridge from it, northward. I took	6	13	1
	5	for it still; and Providence, as	such cases generally it does, resol	22	1	2
	6	remembering that when I was ashore	Barbary the eating of grapes killed	14	2	7
	7	hen there might be none to assist my	recovery. I observed in this I	13	10	1
	8	hen there might be none to assist my	recovery. "Now" said I aloud	15	10	-
	9	d to secure myself from an attack the	night, either from wild beast	14	1	10
	10	Ship I went away in was cast away	Yarmouth road, it was a great while	10	6	9
	1	t of her, except what might drive	there from her wreck, as indeed div	7	14	4
	2	ith the high tide, and was driven	shore again much nearer the island	4	17	4

on	3	mined the barrel which was driven	shore and soon round it was a barr	3	17	3	
	4	ck of the ship, which were driven	shore by the late hurricane and lo	3	19	3	
	5	ruined and in danger of drowning	this island, I was as far from remo	5	20	-	
	6	salves or two and a table to eat	with some small lockers to put in	4	16	5	
	7	the description of good and evil	the credit side of the account, /H	10	9	6	
	8	I was on desperate expedition	the desert shores of Africa, I neve	4	19	2	
	9	living luxury and extravagancies	one hand, or by hard labor, want of	4	21	-	
	10	uneasy, for fear it should fall	my head, \This violent rain forced	3	22	-	
	at	1	his prediction, which I mentioned	the beginning of this story, viz.	9	-	6
		2	account of my story to a merchant	London, who represented it effectua	15	-	10
3		as well, as among the merchants	St. Salvador, which was our port, a	9	1	15	
4		pe out of slavery from the Moors	Sallee then they bade me come on port a	11	-	14	
5		I went from my father and mother	Hull, in order to act the rebel to	12	-	13	
6		n promoted, but I took my mother,	a time when I thought her a little	1	4	20	
7		them in pieces, and bring as much	a time as I could, for they were no	8	5	12	
8		day I spent in afflicting myself	the dismal circumstances I was brou	9	4	12	
9		some silver. \I smiled to myself	the sight of this money. "O drug!"	7	1	17	
10		t day; and what to do with myself	night, I knew not, or indeed, wher	1	-	24	

Table 4: Students' Use of Prepositions

Some of the answers given by the students did not match the prepositions used in the novel. This, however, does not mean that they were wrong. For instance, the word *in* in question 1 is used in the text itself but only four of the students wrote *in*. The majority of them (14) chose *at*. *At* is in fact, more appropriate because it is followed by a specific place. In most circumstances, however, the students used the same preposition as the one employed by the author. In one question, that is, number 3 for *in*, all the students agreed that it should be *in*.

From the table, we can also see that some of the contexts are more problematic than others. These include questions 4,7, and 8 for the preposition *in*, question number 7 for *on* and questions 2,4,5,7 and 8 for *at*. From this, we can gather that they have more problems with *at* than with *in* or *on*. In cases such as these, after the problems were identified, teachers could proceed to explain the correct usage to the class.

While the students were doing the gap-filling exercise, an active discussion took place among them. This is significant because they were discussing the rules with their partners in their attempts to find the most appropriate prepositions. This again, helped to promote discovery learning.

At the end of the study, questionnaires were distributed to the students to get their feedback on the lessons. The students were asked to tick which of the listed words best described the lessons. A total of

18 adjectives were given for them to choose from. They were free to mark the adjectives that they agreed with. Table 5 is an analysis of the students' evaluation of the exercise.

Positive Words			Negative Words		
Words	No. of responses N=25	%	Words	No. of responses N=25	%
Well-prepared	17	68	Not Well-prepared	2	8
Well presented	8	32	Not Well presented	1	4
Clear	10	40	Not Clear	1	4
Successful	10	40	Not Successful	2	8
Valuable	10	40	Not Valuable	0	0
Useful	15	60	Not Useful	0	0
Easy	4	16	Difficult	4	16
Fruitful	5	20	Not Fruitful	0	20
Require much responsibility from the learner	12	48	Require less responsibility from the learner	2	8

Table 5: Students' Opinion of the lessons

The results indicate that most of the students reacted positively to the lessons. Many agreed that the exercises required them to assume more responsibility for their own learning. A big percentage found the lessons both useful and valuable. Four of the students found the lessons easy, and an equal number said that they were difficult. The majority did not give their opinion on this. Although, classes such as these did not require much of the teacher's preparation time, since the examples were extracted from the novel, most of the students felt that they were well-prepared. Overall, the students seemed satisfied with the lessons.

## Conclusion

The presence of the concordancer made it possible for the teacher to provide authentic examples of a certain language structure with speed. The teacher, in this approach, acted as a facilitator rather than as a know-all. The mistakes made by the students can help the teacher to focus on specific issues in future lessons. This study has also shown that the concordancer can be used to encourage learning by discovery. The students, in this type of class, are compelled to play an active role in the learning process. This approach can also help to boost students' motivation to learn the language.

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