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## Exploitation of the Didactic Potential of the COCA in Task-Based Language Teaching Involving Cultural References

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**Abstract** | The Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies) on the Brigham Young University website has been used in the English as Foreign Language (EFL) classroom to help learners better understand how language works at different levels of analysis and also to develop their writing skills. However, it also allows learners to explore culture-related content, by giving them access to invaluable information about social, ideological, political and historical contexts. Moreover, it provides the means to examine the ways in which such aspects intersect with language and condition its use. The understanding of this cultural and discursive dimension of language is pivotal in the training of undergraduate students in the areas of humanities and social sciences. To determine how far the COCA can contribute to increase this awareness, a series of task-based activities involving writing was drawn up and carried out in an EFL class of undergraduate students. They were first introduced to this corpus analysis tool and encouraged to explore it further. Later on, in order to complete a writing task, they were prompted to resort to a series of strategies to collect information about relevant events, personalities and social or cultural phenomena, to analyse and interpret data, and to draw conclusions about the modes in which culture and language can interact. This paper provides (a) the rationale and a brief literature review on this topic, (b) a description of the task-based activities, the implementation process, the students' strategies and the evaluation procedures, and (c) a critical reflection on this study that may open the path for further developments in this area.

**Key words** | Corpus analysis tools, culture-related content, discourse, english as foreign language, higher education, task-based language teaching

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## 1. Introduction

There is a whole range of online corpus analysis tools (British National Corpus, the Sketch Engine, Compleat Lexical Tutor, Wmatrix, SACODEYL, IntelliText, etc.) which provide interfaces to corpus linguistic methodologies. Several authors have called our attention to the potential of corpus analysis in language teaching and learning (Chun; Frankenberg-Garcia; Keck; Meunier; Viana and Tagrin). McEnery and Xiao have listed some of its uses, ranging from reference publishing, syllabus design, materials development, language testing and teacher development (where corpora are believed to have an indirect impact on language pedagogy), to LSP and professional communication, learner corpora and interlanguage analysis – providing students with “hands-on know how”, where “they can exploit corpora for their own purposes” (370).

The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (Davies) has been used in the EFL classroom to help learners better understand how language works at different levels of analysis (Wang, Davies and Liu) – for example, through collocation tables, KWIC lists, word frequency lists, etc. (Bennett; Boulton; Callies; Dutra and Silero; Jones; Liu 2010, 2011; Orenha-Ottaiano; Umesaki; Viana). It has also been used to enhance their text production and develop their writing skills (Chang 2010, 2011 and 2013; Karaata, Cepik and Cetin; Kim; Nurmukhamedov and Olinger; Wagner), by helping them to fine-tune grammatical points and by putting them in contact with different genres and styles. However, it can also offer the opportunity to explore culture-related content by shedding light on a huge variety of social, ideological, cultural and historical issues, and on the ways in which these issues intersect with language (Rebechi 336). Culture-related approaches based on corpus analysis can increase our awareness of the discursive practices within institutions, groups and society at large.

### 1.1. *The Importance of Culture in Language Learning*

The close relationship between culture and language has been long acknowledged and has prompted a series of different reflections and approaches. This goes back as early as Wilhelm

von Humboldt's idea that "each language draws a circle around the nation to which it belongs" (224), to Benjamin Whorf's "principle of linguistic relativity" (27 and 29) and Bronislaw Malinowski's concept of "context-of-situation" (37, 69 and 223), not to mention the anthropological projects of Franz Boas (1940, 1974) and Edward Sapir (1963). But it was with Dell Hymes's project of an "ethnography of speaking" in the 1960s that a systematic methodology emerged in linguistics, which provided the tools for an understanding of the modes in which language, speech, communication and culture are interconnected (Hinnenkamp 185-6).

In *Language and Culture*, Claire Kramsch discusses the ways in which language and culture are bound up with each other. She argues that (a) "*language expresses cultural reality*" – insofar as people share not only a common experience and a common stock of knowledge about the world, but also their attitudes and beliefs –, that (b) "*language embodies cultural reality*" – people use language to create experience and to convey meanings –, and finally that (c) "*language symbolizes cultural reality*" – since people consider their language to be a symbol of their social identity (3).

The cultural dimension of language is pivotal in Foreign Language Learning (Andersen, Lund and Risager; Byram and Grundy; Corbett; Diaz-Vera and Caballero; Elsness; Kramsch; Lange and Paige; Risager). Learning a language presupposes learning a culture, since, as Risager argues, "linguistic practice is always cultural, in the sense that it is in itself a form of cultural (meaningful) practice, and because it is imbedded in a larger cultural (meaningful) context on which it leaves its mark" (6). This is particularly visible in certain neologisms that are representative of a period (Bushism, Bushspeak, or Nobama) and that are virtually impossible to decipher without knowledge of the proper context. Learners of a FL must be encouraged to explore the cultural contexts in which that language is the natural means of communication, if only to be able to understand how their own language and culture interfere with – or intersect with – their learning process and enter into dialogue with the language and culture of the other. As Kramsch reminds us:

Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them. (1)

### 1.2. *Why the COCA*

The COCA was chosen for this research for several reasons. To start with, it is one of the largest online corpora of English (American variety). It contains more than 560 million words in as many as 220, 225 texts, covering the period from 1990 to 2017, with an average of 20 million words added each year. It is updated on a regular basis with new texts and it seeks to provide a balanced view of the language as it seeks to evenly cover five distinct registers, namely spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers and academic journals. As far as the spoken texts are concerned, there as many as 118 million words in transcripts from unscripted TV and radio shows. Fiction includes excerpts from chapters of books, short stories, plays and movie scripts. The almost one hundred popular magazines and ten newspapers found in the corpus comprise specific domains, such as news, health, home, financial, women, opinion, etc. The almost one hundred academic journals, on the other hand, were chosen to evenly cover the Library of Congress classification system, and that includes B (philosophy, psychology, religion), D (world history), K (education), T (technology), and so on (Davies).

Another reason why COCA was chosen for this study was its versatility. The web interface allows the user to search for words, phrases, lemmas, wildcards, and collocates. Users may also conduct semantically-oriented searches, including the frequency and distribution of synonyms of a given word, which can be further refined in terms of competing registers. Information about genre or the period can be included in the query. The searches can be displayed as a list of all matching strings, or as a chart display.

Finally, another plus is the fact that it can be used free of charge and students can access it simply by registering their names. To facilitate the use of the tool, a series of video tutorials have been made available on YouTube (COCA 1; COCA 2; COCA 3).

### 1.3. *The Intention behind this Study*

In order to determine how far the COCA can contribute to heighten not only the learners' linguistic and metalinguistic awareness in the writing process, but also their comprehension of the linguistic treatment accorded to cultural referents, a series of task-based activities involving writing was drawn up and carried out in an EFL class of undergraduate students. These students were attending the first year of a media and communication studies programme. Task- based language teaching (TBLT) is believed to promote successful second language acquisition. The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) points out that tasks not only compel the learner to draw on his communicative language competences (namely linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic), but also to activate several "appropriate general competences". The competences range from "knowledge and experience of the world", to "sociocultural knowledge (concerning life in the target community and essential differences between practices, values and beliefs in that community and the learner's own society)", not to mention intercultural skills, learning skills, and everyday practical skills (158).

Robinson, drawing on series of studies, lists the most significant claims that have been made about the benefits of TBLT, of which I would foreground the following three as particularly relevant for this project:

- Tasks provide opportunities for *noticing the gap* between a participant's production and input provided and for *metalinguistic reflection* on the form of output;
- Task demands can focus attention on specific concepts required for expression in the second language (L2) and prompt effort to *grammaticalize* them in ways that the L2 formally encodes them, with consequences for improvements in accuracy.

- “Following attempts to perform simpler versions, complex tasks can prompt learners to attempt a more ambitious, complex language to resolve the demands they make on communicative success, thereby stretching interlanguage and promoting *syntactization*, with consequences for improved complexity of production” (2).

These three processes are essential in tasks centred on writing, especially at those levels where learners can already rely on their wealth of linguistic knowledge and skills acquired over the years.

## 2. Objectives and Pedagogical Goals

The objectives of this study were:

1. to determine whether the use of the COCA can improve the learners' writing skills;
2. to verify their ability to use its functionalities;
3. to determine if the learners were able to focus their attention on grammatical concepts and engage in metalinguistic reflection, in such ways that might enable them to improve their accuracy;
4. to ascertain whether the learners could interpret data displayed by the COCA concerning cultural references and integrate them in the elaboration of a text.

On the other hand, given the fact that this study was conducted in the context of the classroom, it was also important that the students should derive some benefits from the activity. Therefore, the following pedagogical goals were set:

1. to encourage learners to use relevant cultural information in their writing;
2. to make them acquainted with tools that help them to understand how language works;
3. to improve their writing skills in those genres that they are expected to produce as professionals.

## 3. Implementation

Mostly composed of students within the 18-21 age bracket, this group of 18 learners were required to take a placement test at the beginning of the academic year. It showed that the

majority were at B2 level of the CEFR in some skills, namely speaking, listening and reading. However, in writing their proficiency was less satisfactory, an assessment further corroborated by a series of written assignments prior to this study. Besides the linguistic limitations typical of this level, those assignments revealed an inability to incorporate cultural references, overgeneralizations, poor organization of ideas, lack of focus and inability to quote or paraphrase adequately, all of this falling typically under band 5 of the IELTS writing evaluation criteria.

Two examiners analysed and assessed a writing assignment prior to the task and produced the following table:

Table 1: Pre-Task Writing Assessment of the Class according to the IELTS Writing Criteria

PRE-TASK WRITING ASSESSMENT					
Student no.	Task Achievement	Coherence and Cohesion	Lexical Resource	Grammatical Range and Accuracy	Score per student
1	4.50	4.00	4.00	3.50	4.00
2	4.00	4.50	3.50	3.50	3.88
3	7.50	6.50	6.50	7.00	6.88
4	4.50	5.00	5.50	4.50	4.88
5	4.00	4.00	3.50	3.50	3.75
6	5.00	4.50	4.50	4.00	4.50
7	7.00	6.50	6.50	7.00	6.75
8	4.50	5.00	4.50	5.00	4.75
9	5.00	4.50	5.00	4.50	4.75
10	6.50	6.50	6.00	6.00	6.25
11	5.00	5.50	5.00	4.50	5.00
12	4.50	4.50	4.00	4.00	4.25
13	5.50	5.00	4.00	3.50	4.50
14	4.50	4.50	4.00	4.00	4.25
15	4.50	5.50	5.00	4.50	4.88
16	6.00	6.50	6.00	5.50	6.00
17	6.50	6.00	5.50	5.50	5.88
18	7.50	6.50	7.50	7.00	7.13
Average score per criterium	5.36	5.28	5.03	4.83	5.13
Overall average score	5.13				

In order to prepare the students for the task, they were first introduced to this corpus analysis tool and encouraged to explore it. The class teacher dedicated two three-hour lessons to this introduction, in the course of which the students watched the video tutorials and took notes. In the first lesson, emphasis was laid on the explanation of the modes of display and the search string. Examples of how to search for exact words or phrases, wildcards, lemmas, parts of speech, etc., were also provided. Afterwards, they were taught a series of strategies to help them to extract information about cultural referents including individuals, social movements, political events, social and cultural phenomena, etc. In the second lesson, they were also taught the basics of how to analyse the linguistic context of the tokens, and to draw conclusions about the modes in which culture and language can interact. Attention was paid to the way in which perceptions and judgments of political events find expression, for example, through lexical choices, subjective descriptive modifiers, or the ways in which one single cultural referent may be worded differently in sources and genres. At the end of both introductory lessons, homework was assigned to make the students more familiar with the system and the procedures (drills that compelled them to go through each mode of search). The results of the homework were then analysed, corrected and/or discussed at the beginning of the following lesson.

The taxonomy of strategies and modes recommended was as follows:

- **Strategy A:** Finding out how an influential individual, social group, country or organization was judged/ evaluated in a particular type of publication/spoken language resorting to collocates. Modes advised: KWIC and LIST (see table 1).

Table 2: Example of the Result for Superlatives within Eight Words of the Proper Noun Clinton

	FREQ	Tokens	ALL	%	MI
1	DIREST	2	50	4.00	4.76
2	LESS-THAN-FINEST	1	1	100.00	9.40
3	BEST-PLACED	1	5	20.00	7.08
4	LONGEST-SURVIVING	1	7	14.29	6.59
5	PHONIEST	1	8	12.50	6.40

6	GLOSSIEST	1	8	12.50	6.40
7	BEST-FUNDED	1	23	4.35	4.88
8	HIGHEST-PAYING	1	36	2.78	4.23
9	FLIMSIEST	1	39	2.56	4.12
10	VILEST	1	39	2.56	4.12
11	SHREWDEST	1	54	1.85	3.65
12	STEADIES	1	65	1.54	3.38
	TOTAL	13			

- **Strategy B:** Comparing two public figures. Mode of display advised: COMPARE (see table 2).

**Table 3: Example of the Result for the Comparison of the Adjectives within Eight Words of the Proper Nouns: Luther King and Malcolm X.**

WORD 1 (W1): LUTHER KING (3.38)

	WORD	W1	W2	W1/W2	SCORE
1	ANNUAL	20	0	40.0	11.9
2	NATIONAL	19	0	38.0	11.3
3	FREE	16	1	16.0	4.7
4	CIVIL	127	9	14.1	4.2
5	LATE	28	4	7.0	2.1
6	SLAIN	19	3	6.3	1.9
7	NEW	23	4	5.8	1.7
8	HIGH	11	2	5.5	1.6
9	CIVIL-RIGHTS	11	2	5.5	1.6
10	SOCIAL	14	3	4.7	1.4
11	GREAT	17	5	3.4	1.0
12	YOUNG	12	6	2.0	0.6
13	AMERICAN	13	7	1.9	0.6
14	WHITE	15	11	1.4	0.4
15	BLACK	33	29	1.1	0.3

WORD 2 (W2): MALCOLM X (0.30)

	WORD	W2	W1	W2/W1	SCORE
1	MUSLIM	14	0	28.0	94.5
2	BLACK	29	33	0.9	3.0
3	WHITE	11	15	0.7	2.5

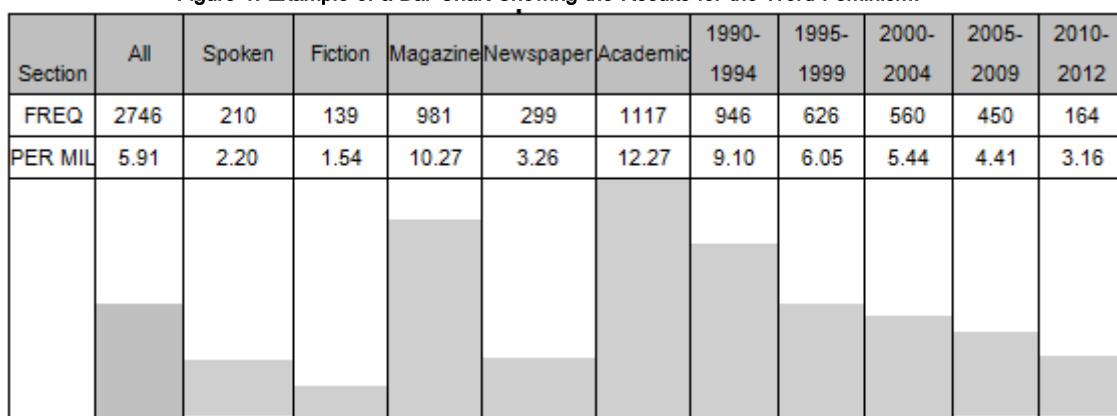
- **Strategy C:** Following and collecting as much information as possible about individuals, events, movements, sound bites, etc. Different modes of display advised (see table 3).

Figure 1: Partial List of the Contexts where the Phrase War on Terror Occurs

1	2012	SPOK	ABC_ThisWeek	Afghanistan. In fact, the policy changed from the Bush administration's <u>war on terror</u> to nation-building. And it changed without any kind of conversation with the American people.
2	2012	SPOK	ABC_ThisWeek	of Republicans who were very strongly for Afghanistan if the target was the <u>war on terror</u> , who are very strongly against nation building in a place where that's not
3	2012	SPOK	ABC_ThisWeek	kill Obama and has in his mind that Obama's successfully re-branded the <u>war on terror</u> , calling it the war on Al Qaeda, and that that was hurting them
4	2012	SPOK	Fox_Baier	two 13-foot crosses. Erected by marines grieving over lives lost in the <u>war on terror</u> , this site established for reaction has become grounds for controversy. KAREN-MENDOZA-MAR: It's
5	2012	SPOK	CBS_NewsMorn	White House leaked the information to make the President look tough in the <u>war on terror</u> . The administration has appointed two U.S. attorneys to investigate the source of the leaks
6	2012	SPOK	CNN_Situation	thank you. Thanks very much. There's classified information about the <u>war on terror</u> that has just been declassified. Our chief White House correspondent, Jessica Yellin has
7	2012	SPOK	CNN_Situation	White House and they're offering up a little more information about the <u>war on terror</u> in both Yemen and Somalia. What's different is now they're formerly declassifying
8	2012	SPOK	CNN_Situation	you know, critics say the White House has been talking up their <u>war on terror</u> to look tough in an election year. And this could give them more ammunition
9	2012	SPOK	PBS_NewsHour	Beast special correspondent and the author of "Kill or Capture: The <u>War on Terror</u> and the Soul of the Obama Presidency." And we thank you both for
10	2012	SPOK	Fox_Kilmeade	United States had a stimulus package, had Obama care, has his <u>war on terror</u> and he doesn't really want to talk about almost anything. KLEIN: Well,

- **Strategy D:** Frequency data analysis to determine how influential or significant an individual or cultural phenomenon was over a period of time, and in what type of publication. Mode of display advised: CHART (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Example of a Bar Chart Showing the Results for the Word Feminism.



The above strategies had to be applied in the completion of the following tasks:

1. writing a news story (to provide objective information);
2. writing an editorial (to express an opinion);
3. preparing an interview (to elicit information);
4. setting up a quiz (to produce closed-ended questions).

It should be noted that this type of work is not to be regarded as a mere activity. Each of the four types of text to be produced are closely related to the professional field of the students' study programme, and are the kind of assignment they would do in the real world (Ellis 9ff). On the other hand, it involves planning, phasing, research and the use of different resources, entailing the integration of different skills and abilities (including knowing how to use the corpus, how to extract information and how interpret it) in trying to achieve a goal (Skehan 268). The texts produced are therefore the outcome of a series of activities that form the task.

Students were asked to make reference to the source of information taken from the COCA through footnotes. The purpose was twofold: on the one hand, it served to quantify how

much of the content of the text produced had its origin in the COCA; on the other, it was intended to make students understand the ways in which texts can be embedded inside other texts without committing plagiarism. The completion of the task was mandatory for the students' final evaluation.

The students were free to choose their own topics, as long as they were related to the culture of an English-speaking country. The themes that they chose ranged from the biographies of film directors (Disney, Spielberg, Tarantino), actors (Marilyn Monroe, Chris Smith, Zach Galifianakis) and music bands (Pink Floyd) to politics (9/11, the Iraq War), ethnic minorities (the Chiricahua Apaches) and ideals (the American Dream). Texts contained an average of 437.5 words (SD 44.9) and 7.5 footnotes (SD 1.11), which means one footnote every 58.3 words. Texts were then assessed according to the IELTS writing assessment criteria (GT version), namely task response, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy. These criteria have been consistently used by the teaching staff in the department where the researcher works and have been regularly applied in the assessment of advanced learners. Separate assessments were carried out by the two members of the academic staff of the department who had previously assessed the pre-task writing activity. The scores were later discussed before an agreement was reached for each of the texts produced.

At the end, students were handed out a paper questionnaire (Appendix 1), comprising of 19 questions to explain how they were able to cope with the tool, and, on the other hand, to express their views on the whole teaching and learning process. The questionnaire addressed the following topics: usefulness of the tool in the writing process; usefulness of the tool in the learning of English grammar; usefulness of the tool in providing relevant information about cultural referents; usefulness of the activity in their learning. All 18 students completed the questionnaire.

#### **4. Examples of the Ways in Which the COCA Was Used in the Texts Produced**

The examples below are excerpts taken from the texts produced by the students, without any corrections or changes. These excerpts are immediately followed by the source information and

expanded context as displayed in the COCA and from which the textual elements were taken. The analysis of the compositions shows that the uses that they made of the COCA generally fall under three broad headings: (1) quotation; (2) neutralization; (3) incorporation.

(1) In most cases, students preferred to *quote* directly from the source without making any changes to the original text, as illustrated in Examples 1 and 2 (quotations in italics). Most of them also failed to identify the source in the running text, despite having been specifically instructed to do so. In addition, notwithstanding the advice that they were given, they never attempted to formally introduce the quotation, nor did they ever endeavor to explain the role played by the quotation in their argument.

**Example 1 (Chosen genre: Quiz)**

Today I shall challenge you in ways in which you have never been challenged before!  
Following these simple words, a test shall be issued about the greatest movie director that ever lived: Stanley Kubrick.  
In order to guarantee the faithfulness of the questions you are about to answer, I will present the quotations and authors of the information from which I will draw the questions: if you fail, "it can only be attributable to "your" error".  
So, my fair reader, without further ado, "HERE'S THE QUIZZ"!

**Question 1**

Complete the sentence: *At the opening of Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film \_\_\_\_\_ a group of apes hovers around an object that has suddenly appeared in the desert.*

- a) THX 1138
- b) Planet of the Apes
- c) Flash Gordon
- d) *2001: A Space Odyssey*

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**Source information**

Date: 2006 (Sep2)

Publication information: Vol. 170 Issue 10, p154-156, 3p, 3c

Title: MENTAL LEAP. (cover story)

Author: Jaffe, Eric

Source: *Science News*

**Expanded context:**

... in the upper region. Normally, tentacles are striped, spear-like protrusions. # 36971 What apes can teach us about the human mind # *At the opening of Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film 2001: A Space Odyssey, a group of apes hovers around an object that has suddenly appeared in the desert.* The sleek, black, rectangular object is five times as tall as the apes and clearly crafted by intelligent beings. The apes approach it with caution, and one animal runs a timid hand along the clean edges that glimmer in the sunlight. # Suddenly, something clicks in the ape's mind. The sight of a sophisticated innovation has launched dormant aptitudes, and the ...

(2) In the following example, the student, while still quoting directly from the source text, decided to *neutralize* the features of the delivery of talk, that is, their distinctive features were eliminated and the text adapted to the specific context. The term was borrowed from the field of lexicology where it is used to refer to changes made in texts where “the original alias or even the translation of its semantic content is in some way inappropriate or inadequate to the target culture” (Mehren 166). No information is provided about the context in which the original text was produced. As in the previous case, she did not name the source in the running text, using instead a footnote.

**Example 2 (Chosen genre: Editorial)**

... Photographers, cameramen captured flames, billowing smoke, and the most sadly, bodies of people falling or jumping to their deaths. They chose to die rather than remaining stuck in the towers. New York, the largest city of America, is a too tough target, where these terrorist attacks are very likely to happen: “*we're the number one target in this country. That's the consensus of the intelligence community. We're the communications capital. We're the financial capital. We're a city that's been attacked twice successfully. We've had thirteen terrorist plots against the city since September 11. No other city has had that.*”<sup>4</sup>

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**4) Source information:**

Date: 2011 (11.09.25)

Title: For September 25, 2011, CBS

Source: CBS\_Sixty

**Expanded context:**

... America's largest city. One thousand officers, many of them armed like soldiers, are part of a presence that is meant to send a message – New York City is too tough a target. NYPD counterterrorism is the creation of police Commissioner Ray Kelly. RAY-KELLY: *We're the number one target in the – in this country. That's the consensus of the intelligence community. We're the communications capital. We're the financial capital. We're a city that's been attacked twice successfully. We've had thirteen terrorist plots against the city since September 11. No other city has had that.* SCOTT-PELLEY-1voi: Kelly is a classic cop. He started as an NYPD cadet and rose all the way to commissioner. He left the force before 9/11. But within four months of the attack, the mayor asked him to come back. RAY-KELLY: I jumped at the chance. SCOTT-PELLEY: You knew you needed to do what? RAY-KELLY: I knew that we had to supplement, buttress our defenses of this city. We couldn't rely on the federal government alone ...

(3) The following case illustrates a whole different approach. The student was more concerned with constructing his own line of thought and mastering his ideas, rather than simply quoting whole sentences. As we can see below, there are parts of the text where he *incorporated* small phrases taken from the sources, but they barely qualify as quotations. Therefore, the absence of quotation marks or any indication that the writer is not the original author is not a critical issue. If anything, sources serve to enrich his arguments or corroborate his positions. However, this incorporation of textual elements from other sources into the text presents at least two problems: it can turn the text into a collage of ideas that do not necessarily go together and it can compromise textual coherence and cohesion as the student struggles to incorporate the phrases that he selected into the text. As stated above, although in general terms most students were at B2 level of the CEFR, the fact is that there may be considerable variation among the

students in the command of the language, especially as far as the writing skills are concerned. In this particular case, the student found it difficult to articulate in the text that he produced the elements taken from the corpus.

**Example 3 (Chosen genre: Editorial)**

... Practically the entire America supported the president, but nowadays it has been more "comfortable" put only Bush on the gallows pole, and not to admit their fault. Americans always said that Bush convinced them to desire the war using a speech full of *ideology and religious belief*, including some words of "heavy" sense like "God" and "evil" to *justify the war*. It has been noted that this is not a totally lie, but it is not enough to adopt an ideal and killed thousands of civilians.

**Source information:**

Date: 2004 (2004.10.27)

Publication information: USA

Title: Social Issues Stir Passions

Author: By Linda Feldmann Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*

Source: *Christian Science Monitor*

**Expanded context:**

... what he calls Bush's stubbornness – and a willingness to put *ideology and religious belief* ahead of human progress. # "President Bush just doesn't get it," Kerry said in an Oct. 4 speech on stem cells. "Faced with the facts, he turns away. Time and time again, he's proven that he's stubborn, he's out of touch, he's unwilling to change, he's unwilling to change course." # It was a line of attack that Kerry has used against the president on a variety of issues, including the Iraq war and the economy. # How gay marriage figures in # With less than a week until the election, there is anecdotal evidence that these culture-war issues are giving some Americans pause, if not swaying votes. #

**Source information:**

Date: 2007 (2007.07.16)

Publication Information USA; p. 1

Title: Barack Obama: Putting Faith out Front;

Author: Ariel Sabar Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*

Source: *Christian Science Monitor*

**Expanded context:**

... the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Obama, then running for US Senate, made no secret of his spiritual bent. "We worship an awesome God in the blue states," he said in a keynote address credited with launching his stardom. # But for a liberal Democrat and former constitutional law instructor, the plea for a broader public role for religion has at times required some fancy footwork. # He has called for both "a politics of conscience" based on ecumenical religious values and a clear line between church and state. He has both invoked God in his denunciations of the Iraq war and criticized President Bush for using religious terms like "good" and "evil" to justify it. # "The danger of using good versus evil in the context of war is it may lead us to be not as critical as we should be about our own actions ...

## 5. Results and Discussion

In the texts produced by the students, no significant progression was detected at the level of grammatical range and accuracy in relation to their previous production (see tables 1 and 6). Students failed to use the COCA to avoid frequent errors, either because of a limited perception of their own linguistic difficulties, lack of commitment or habit, or simply inability to take the best advantage of the tool, in spite of the preparatory work done in the classroom.

In the assessment made by the two academic staff, it was agreed that in general most of these texts come closer to the IELTS band 6 criteria, as in the pre-task writing assessment the overall average score was 5.13, whereas in the task assessment that figure rose to 5.53. Examiners concluded that this time students had resorted to a mix of simple and complex sentence forms, and there were now fewer errors in grammar and punctuation impeding communication. Concerning their lexical resources, students also scored an average of 5.33, having revealed an adequate range of vocabulary for the task, despite some inaccuracy in less common vocabulary. Regarding coherence and cohesion, students progressed from 5.28 to

5.75, in that they sought to avoid repetitions and arrange their ideas more coherently. The same happened at the level of task response, where the overall average score was 6.00, as opposed to 5.36 of the pre-task assessment. Instead of an inappropriate format, unclear development of ideas or lack of detail, the texts showed that, despite some inadequately developed ideas, students were still able to address all parts of the task, to focus more clearly on the main ideas, and to present a relevant position throughout the text. This progress was made visible when the examiners compared the texts with the ones these very same students had produced before the study was conducted. Students now appeared to be more concerned about structuring their ideas and more focused on development of the main topic. Then again, this progress may have resulted more from the set of instructions they were given to carry out the task and from what they believed they were expected to produce, rather than from the use of COCA.

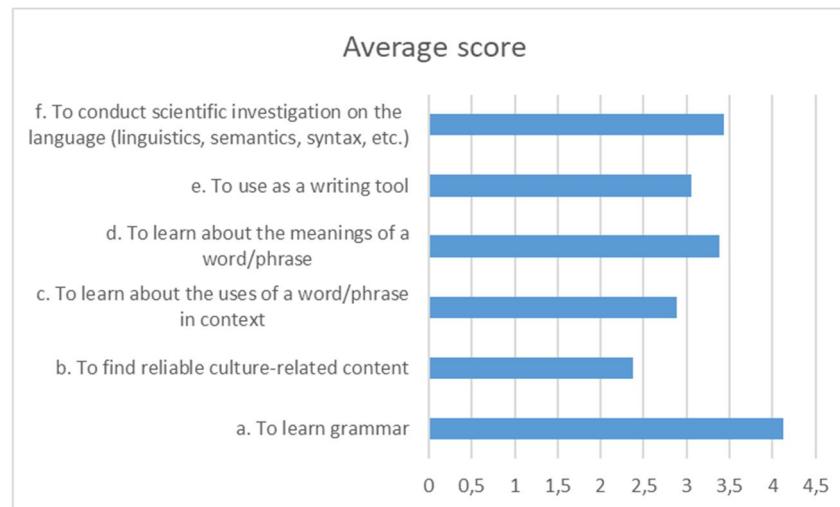
Table 6: Task Assessment of the Class According to the IELTS Writing Criteria

TASK ASSESSMENT					
Student no.	Task Achievement	Coherence and Cohesion	Lexical Resource	Grammatical Range and Accuracy	Score per Student
1	5.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	4.50
2	5.00	4.00	4.00	3.50	4.13
3	7.50	6.50	6.50	7.50	7.00
4	5.00	5.50	5.50	4.50	5.13
5	5.00	4.50	5.00	4.00	4.25
6	6.00	5.50	4.50	4.00	5.00
7	7.50	7.00	6.50	7.50	7.13
8	5.50	5.50	4.50	5.00	5.13
9	6.00	5.00	5.00	4.50	5.13
10	6.50	7.00	6.00	6.00	6.38
11	6.00	6.00	5.00	4.50	5.38
12	5.00	5.00	4.50	4.00	4.63
13	6.00	6.00	5.00	4.00	5.13
14	5.50	4.50	4.50	4.00	4.63
15	6.00	6.00	6.00	5.00	5.75
16	6.00	6.50	6.00	5.50	6.00
17	7.00	6.50	6.00	5.50	6.25
18	7.50	7.50	7.50	7.50	7.50
Average Score per Criterium	6.00	5.75	5.33	5.03	5.53
Overall Average Score	5.53				

It should be pointed out that none of the compositions indicated that the students were engaged in exploring the interpretive potential of the tool – either through inductive or inferential reasoning –, based on the results yielded by the strategies and modes recommended above. In spite of having been given examples of how to develop their ideas resorting to such strategies, they were unable to put those suggestions to use and limited themselves to resorting to quotations either as a means to corroborate their positions (especially in editorials) or as a source of factual information (as in the quizzes and news stories).

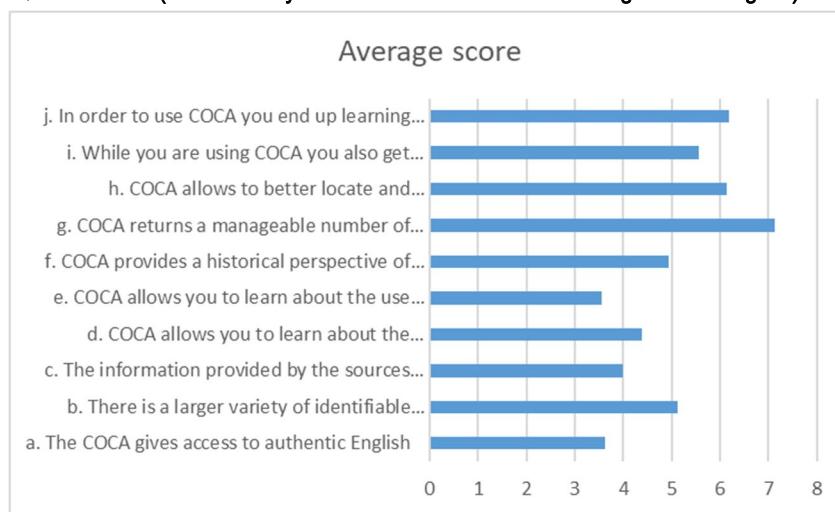
The students' answers to the questionnaire indicate an overall positive response to the learning potential of the tool. Concerning the use of the COCA as an aid in the writing process, two thirds of the respondents ranked it as the third most useful aspect of the interface. When asked if they would continue to use the COCA as a writing tool of reference, 50% stated it was probable, whereas 19% said that it was almost certain. In relation to the learning of English grammar through the COCA, students ranked it as the least important aspect out of six. Paradoxically, in the same question they ranked the learning of the uses of a word/phrase in context as the second most important aspect. For this question ("The COCA is more useful to..."), students were asked to rank the answers from 1, the most important, to 7, the least important. The results can be seen below. Given the nature of the task, their answers were the following (Figure 2; see also Appendix 2 for ranking according to score and standard variation):

Figure 2: Graph Displaying the Results of the Average Score of the Answers to Question no. 15 ("COCA more useful to...").



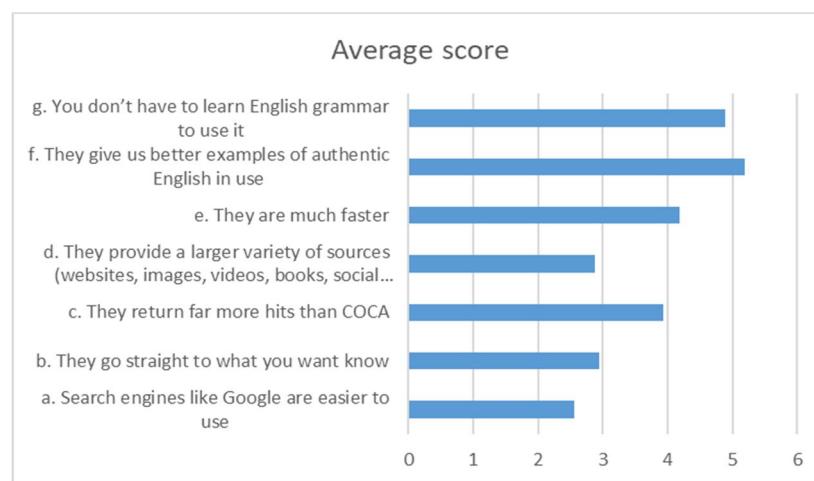
They were also asked to compare the information provided by the COCA with that of a search engine like Google and rank the answers in terms of relevance (answers were ranked from 1, the most important, to 10, the least important). Figure 3 displays the average score per answer (see also Appendix 2 for ranking according to score and standard variation):

Figure 3: Graph Displaying the Results of the Average Score of the Answers to Question no. 7 (“In What Way is COCA Better than a Search Engine like Google?”).



However, according to the students, search engines like Google offer the following advantages. Figure 4 displays the average score per answer (see also Appendix 2 for ranking according to score and standard variation).

Figure 4: Graph Displaying the Results of the Average Score of the Answers to Question no. 8 (“In What Way is COCA Worse than a Search Engine like Google?”)



It should be noted that no similar study with search engines was carried out with these students, and therefore their evaluation is based on their own empirical experience in using such engines. In this case, students were asked to compare COCA with Google (Question no. 8: In what way is COCA worse than a search engine like Google?).

With regard to usefulness of the tool in providing relevant information about cultural referents, 43% stated that it was relevant and 31% that it was very relevant.

Finally, in an overall appreciation, 93% agreed that the COCA met their needs as learners of EFL.

## 6. Conclusions

For the first time, students explored a tool that gave them a clear view of the grammatical workings of real-life language (research objective 3.). To use it efficiently, they were compelled to revisit grammatical concepts and adopt a more analytical perspective. And yet, despite the preparatory work carried out in class and out of class, students still offered substantial resistance to metalinguistic reflection and to the use of grammatical categories. They also revealed some difficulty in coping with some technical aspects of the tool (research objective 2.), especially when confronted with choices that involved some knowledge of grammar. Nevertheless, one must take into account the fact that this task served mainly as an introduction to the COCA and its potential application as a grammatical resource and writing aid. The fact that the students did not always seek to apply the strategies suggested by the teacher indicates that more work should have been done to prepare students to take full advantage of the tool.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, the tasks gave the students the opportunity to see the way in which language is used at an ideational level to prompt judgments, corroborate or challenge ways of thinking regarding specific cultural referents, since the tool allowed them to easily identify evaluative elements (research objective 4.).

As far as the tasks were concerned, both the deliverables and the questionnaire showed that the COCA was useful insofar as it provided ideas that were integrated in the compositions.

True, the conventions governing quotation and paraphrasing were not always respected, but at least the students were compelled to reflect on how to interrelate and integrate texts from different sources in their own writing. As a consequence, they revealed – as far as research objective 1. is concerned – some progress in terms of consolidation of the textual coherence and cohesion in their compositions and in addressing the requirements of the task, although in some particular cases, there were students who still failed to show any improvement, especially in terms of lexical resource and grammatical range and accuracy. It was furthermore difficult to ascertain whether the work done in class had a lasting effect on the students' learning habits, as this kind of tasks using this sort of tools was not part of their classroom routines. In order to achieve the pedagogical goals that were set for this study, it would have been necessary to go on implementing this type of activity for a longer period of time. This shows that further research is necessary to shed light on the pedagogical potential of these tools in vocational training, if possible under other conditions, namely over longer periods, with students from other study programmes, at other levels of proficiency (C1 or C2) and/or in other national contexts. In the meantime, COCA has been used by other teachers in the department as a teaching and learning resource for purposes other than writing, and that includes language testing, teacher development, LSP and professional communication.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Questionnaire

Please, fill in this questionnaire on the COCA assignment

Did you do the assignment? Yes  No

If not, why?

- a. I did not know I had to do it.
- b. I did not have enough time to do it.
- c. I wasn't interested.

If you did the assignment, please answer the following questions:

1. How would you classify the usefulness of the COCA interface in terms of your needs as a learner of English? (Tick the most adequate answer)

Indispensable	very useful	Useful	slightly useful	Useless
<input type="checkbox"/>				

2. Has this assignment helped you to cope with information in sources of different genres in the process of composition of a text in English?

a lot	Quite	just enough	slightly	not a bit
<input type="checkbox"/>				

3. How relevant was the information gathered through COCA for the topic that you were exploring?

a lot	Quite	just enough	slightly	not a bit
<input type="checkbox"/>				

4. How well did you learn to use the information gathered through COCA in the text that you were writing?

a lot	Quite	just enough	slightly	not a bit
<input type="checkbox"/>				



5. How would you use the information gathered through COCA? (rank your answers from 1, the most important, to 4 or 5, the least important)

- a.  quotations, as in direct speech;
- b.  paraphrases, as when you restate a text in other words;
- c.  collect raw data (facts and figures, statistics) to process, interpret or ask questions;
- d.  relate data from different sources;
- e.  other uses: please specify\_\_\_\_\_.

6. Did you also try to clear doubts about the English language (collocations, idioms, prepositions, word order, etc.) through COCA?

all the time	quite often	sometimes	seldom	Never
<input type="checkbox"/>				

7. In what way is COCA better than a search engine like Google? (rank your answers from 1, the most important, to 10 or 11, the least important)

- a.  The COCA gives access to authentic English;
- b.  There is a larger variety of identifiable genres (spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic), or even sub-genres (or domains, such as movie scripts, sports magazines, newspaper editorial, or scientific journals) that can be used in academic or other professional contexts;
- c.  The information provided by the sources is more reliable;
- d.  COCA allows you to learn about the meaning of words and phrases;
- e.  COCA allows you to learn about the use of a word or phrase;
- f.  COCA provides a historical perspective of the evolution of the use of a word, concept or reference;
- g.  COCA returns a manageable number of hits (a number of hits that you can go through);
- h.  COCA allows to better locate and scrutinize the word, phrase or reference

that you are looking for;

- i.  While you are using COCA you also get the chance to learn English;
  - j.  In order to use COCA you end up learning some grammatical aspects of the language;
  - k.  Other: please specify\_\_\_\_\_.
8. In what way is COCA worse than a search engine like Google? (rank your answers from 1, the most important, to 7 or 8, the least important)
- a.  Search engines like Google are easier to use;
  - b.  They go straight to what you want know;
  - c.  They return far more hits than COCA;
  - d.  They provide a larger variety of sources (websites, images, videos, books, social networking, etc.);
  - e.  They are much faster;
  - f.  They give us better examples of authentic English in use;
  - g.  You don't have to learn English grammar to use it;
  - h.  Other: please specify\_\_\_\_\_.
9. How much training and know-how does COCA require for you to be able to use it efficiently?

a lot	Quite	just enough	little	None
<input type="checkbox"/>				

10. How useful were the teacher's explanations as he introduced you to COCA?

Indispensable	very useful	Useful	slightly useful	Useless
<input type="checkbox"/>				



11. Did the teacher show you the difference between the list, chart, KWIC and compare modes of display?

Yes

No

12. How well did the teacher supervise the work that you did in class during this activity?

a lot	Quite	just enough	slightly	not a bit
<input type="checkbox"/>				

13. How clear were the instructions for the activity posted in the Moodle?

totally clear	very clear	clear	somewhat confusing	totally confusing
<input type="checkbox"/>				

14. How much did you learn from this assignment?

a lot	Quite	just enough	slightly	not a bit
<input type="checkbox"/>				

15. COCA is more useful (rank your answers from 1, the most important, to 6 or 7, the least important):

- a.  To learn grammar;
- b.  To find reliable culture-related content;
- c.  To learn about the uses of a word/phrase in context;
- d.  To learn about the meanings of a word/phrase;
- e.  To use as a writing tool;
- f.  To conduct scientific investigation on the language (linguistics, semantics, syntax, etc.);
- g.  Other: please specify\_\_\_\_\_.



16. What type of text did you choose to write for this assignment?

- a.  a news story (to provide objective information);
- b.  an editorial (to prove a point or express an opinion);
- c.  an interview (to elicit information from someone);
- d.  a quiz (challenging readers' perceptions).

17. What were the strategies that you adopted?

- a.  Finding out how an influential individual (Bill Clinton), social group (feminists, hippies), country (Portugal, the UK, Russia, China) or organization (the GOP, the EU, the New York Times) was judged/evaluated (through subjective descriptive modifiers, for example) in a particular type of publication/ spoken language resorting to the collocates (KWIC and LIST);
- b.  Comparing two public figures (Bill Clinton and Barack Obama) resorting to the COMPARE mode of display (other names associated; adjectives and/or adverbs associated);
- c.  Search string: following and gathering as much information as possible about an individual, event or movement in different modes of display (LIST+adj.ALL);
- d.  Frequency data analysis to determine how influential/significant was an individual or cultural phenomenon through the years or in what type of publication using the CHART mode of display.

18. Will you continue to use COCA in the future as a writing tool of reference?

Definitely	almost certain	Maybe	unlikely	No
<input type="checkbox"/>				

19. Would you recommend COCA for other people to use as a writing tool?

Definitely	almost certain	Maybe	unlikely	No
<input type="checkbox"/>				



## APPENDIX 2

Average results are shown in brackets and are followed by standard deviation values; simplified ranking takes into account the interval resulting from SD and average. The same principle applies to all the other ranking questions.

Ranking of answers to question no. 7 ("In what way is COCA better than a search engine like Google?") according to score and standard variation:

- 1 The COCA allows you to learn about the use of a word or phrase (3.56; SD 2.12);
- 2 The COCA gives access to authentic English (3.63; SD 3.11);
- 2 The information provided by the sources is more reliable (4; SD 2.73);
- 2 The COCA allows you to learn about the meaning of a word and phrase (4.38; SD 2.79);
- 3 The COCA provides a historical perspective of the evolution of the use of a word, a concept or reference (4.94; SD 3.09);
- 4 There is a larger variety of identifiable genres (spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic), or sub-genres that can be used in academic or other professional contexts (5.13; SD 3.26);
- 4 While you are using COCA, you are also learning English (5.56; SD 2.67);
- 4 The COCA allows to better locate and scrutinize the word, phrase or reference that you are looking for (6.13; SD 2.46);
- 4 In order to use COCA you end up learning some grammatical aspects of the language (6.19; SD 2.20);
- 5 The COCA returns a manageable number of hits (a number of hits that you can go through) (7.13; SD 1.74).

Ranking of answers to question no. 8 ("In what way is COCA worse than a search engine like Google?") according to score and standard variation:

- 1 They are easier to use (2.56; SD 1.65);
- 2 They provide a larger variety of sources (websites, images, videos, books, social networking, etc.) (2.88; SD 1.64);

- 2 They go straight to what you want know (2.94; SD 1.34);
- 3 They return far more hits than the COCA (3.94; SD 2.14);
- 3 They are much faster (4.19; SD 2.06);
- 4 You don't have to learn grammar to use it (4.88; SD 1.74);
- 4 They give us better examples of authentic English in use (5.19; SD 1.90).

Ranking of answers to question no. 15 ("COCA is more useful...") according to score and standard variation:

- 1 To find reliable culture-related content (2.38; SD 2.69);
- 1 To learn about the uses of a word/phrase in context (2.88; SD 1.40);
- 2 To use as a writing tool (3.06; SD 1.72);
- 2 To learn about the meanings of a word/phrase (3.38; SD 1.55);
- 2 To conduct scientific investigation on the language (linguistics, semantics, syntax, etc.) (3.44; SD 1.5);
- 3 To learn grammar (4.13; SD 1.73).