Corpus Wars: Struggling to Find New Ways of Analyzing and Teaching Vocabulary

Laurence Anthony

Center for English Language Education in Science and Engineering (CELESE)

Faculty of Science and Engineering, Waseda University, Japan

http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/   anthony@antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp

Corpus linguistics has become a well established methodology in the field of applied linguistics. With the first electronic corpora of around one million words dating back to the early 1960s, corpora have now massively increased in size, and corpus studies have subsequently become increasingly sophisticated. The impact of corpora studies in the analysis, teaching, and learning of languages has also increased, so much so that some claim that the results of corpora driven studies, for example, have resulted in a paradigm shift.

Although corpus linguistics is now well respected, the road has not always been smooth. Early pioneers such as John Sinclair had to battle against the established beliefs concerning grammar, as he introduced the new concept of "lexical items," which merged the boundaries between words and grammar. There has also been struggles in the ongoing debate regarding corpus-based and corpus-driven approaches, with tensions mounting between the opposing camps. Finally, there has been a recent movement in vocabulary learning and teaching that goes against many of the principles established through corpus studies. Researchers like Paul Nation have carried out extensive studies that once again question the role of vocabulary in language learning. Ironically, many of these studies have been corpus based, but they offer a more practical approach for language teachers dealing with vocabulary in the classroom

In this paper, I will look at the struggles and tensions that have developed as researchers and practitioners have worked with corpora, and suggest possible directions for future research. I will also address how ICT can help resolve some of the problems in the field, leading to improved analysis, teaching, and learning of languages.