

# Using Concordance-based Material for Teaching Verb Inflections

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In Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore, the medium of instruction in all courses is English, and students who are admitted have had at least 12 years of formal instruction in the language. However, some of them still face problems with English grammar. As NTU believes that its graduates who are going into the workforce should possess adequate communication skills in English, it has language-based courses for students in non-language programs like Engineering and Accountancy.

One of the main problem areas that our students face is in the correct inflectional form of the main verb in various types of verb phrases (e.g. *had studied*, *have been studied*, *will be studied*, *can study*). An example of their writing is given below.

Lastly, the base plate consists of lower finger plate and a groove where staples are bend inwards when the staples are force down by the plunger.... Textbooks and notes are secure by staples. It comes in many sizes as for thicker piles of paper, stronger and bigger staples are use.

In our classes for students with low proficiency in English, we found that an approach using material generated by the concordancer was highly effective in helping our students master which inflectional endings ("-ed", "-s" or zero) were used in which types of verb phrases.

This paper describes our use of such concordance-based materials in our classes for the teaching of verb inflections, and evaluates the approach from both the students' and teachers' point of view.

## Concordancing

The concordancer is a computer program that stores huge amounts of text and rapidly searches through it for any specific word or phrase, displaying it, together with its immediate context, for whatever purpose the user requires. As far as language learners are concerned, the greatest asset of the concordancer is that they are presented the linguistic context for any word or phrase they are interested in, arranged in systematic fashion, to make it easier for them to discover relevant patterns of language use.

To generate teaching materials using the concordancer, we relied on two data banks. The first was based on engineering reports written by academics proficient in

English. This formed the concordance data for students to examine and come up with their own generalizations about language use.

The second data bank was of assignments and final-year projects that students wrote for their other courses. We edited the data by tagging errors, like adding *[INF]* for wrong inflection, or *[PREP]* for wrong prepositions. For example,

Since more people have switch *[INF]* to other means of transport, the percentage of commuters taking the bus will be affect *[INF]* in a decreasing manner.

This meant that, whenever we wanted to have samples of a certain type of student error, all we needed to do was to ask the concordancer to search for the tag we had inserted, and data containing these errors would then be displayed. This second data bank thus was our source of exercises for error analysis by the students.

### Teaching Materials

Our material was concordance-based, because we first got the concordancer to generate the structures we wanted, and then edited the materials into hard copies for our students. For concordance-based data on the verb inflection, we called up auxiliary verbs like *has*, *have*, *will*, and *would* in the "KWIC" format. This arranged the keyword(s) systematically one below the other down the centre of the page, with a fixed number of characters of context to the left and to the right, which makes patterns of language use quite obvious to the user.

When asked for structures with *have*, the concordancer would generate all instances of the use of 'have' in its data bank, giving us not only the desired verb phrases, but also irrelevant data like the following, which then had to be weeded out for the benefit of our students.

drawback for the method. Drum mixers reclaimed material. Also, the materials the cold central plant recycling does not nt the local Government authorities who discuss, in particular, the effect it will	have	to be modified to ensure that the have to remain in the mixer box until have a developed technology at the pre have the legal right to lay down standa have on the type and suitability of the
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Figure 1.

The next step was to arrange the data into groups for the students, with all data, for example, teaching the present participial phrases in the active and passive voices in one group (Fig. 2), and *will/would* + infinitive verb phrases in another (Fig. 3).

ting radius for coating plants which has been established over the years of opening is an established procedure and has been utilized for many years. The and for which the appropriate plant has been developed. Table 1 is a summary of stone and so this material may have been imported from the nearest source drum and batch heater type plants have been successfully converted to produc

ange which has taken place during aging has produced a bitumen which will be described above the chemical change which has resulted in the observed decrease in active product, bitumen. Many countries have recognized that the older section Departments of Transport and Industry have sponsored a development project possible, the relevant river authority will have collected evidence of flood levels i

### Figure 2.

ly assumed that traffic responsive systems would provide more efficient signal control or economic solution, since vehicles would always operate inefficiently with studies. The range and complexity of study will depend on the topography of the region through which the road is to pass will play an important part in the detailed detail to confirm whether the route will in general follow a particular str

### Figure 3.

## Exercises

Students were given a few minutes to study the teaching materials, to try to discern patterns of use for the inflectional forms of the main verbs. Then they were given exercises to do, for us to confirm whether or not their deductions were correct, all within 20-25 minutes of class time. Some of these exercises took the form of filling in the blanks, as shown below:

### Forms of the main verb use

*Fill in the blanks below with the correct form of the main verb "use".*

ment work in Indonesia, these have been \_\_\_\_\_ to control 83 special junctions of water is one method which has been \_\_\_\_\_ to control emissions. Most of many Highway Departments here have \_\_\_\_\_ their standard, a simple test

since these overladen vehicles will not \_\_\_\_\_ this section of the highway.

computer store. The traffic cop would \_\_\_\_\_ this information to make a plan

Alternatively, we asked students to identify and correct errors in verb inflections, based on data contained in our second data bank. As these errors had already been tagged, we called up the tag *[INF]* and generated data in sentence format. An example of such an error-correction exercise is given below:

### Forms of the main verb

*Identify the incorrect verb in each sentence by circling it; then write the correct form above it.*

1. Each interview began with a brief description of the modern facilities the Centre would possessed.
2. From our study of the data, it is very clear that funds have been already release for profitable investment
3. This will provides the company with updated information and enables it to transfer excess materials in one department to other departments facing shortages.
4. Automatic devices or photographs may be used to obtain the traffic data, but this study has rely mainly on observers.
5. If all these methods are practised, it will definitely reduced the stock amount and release a substantial amount for other investments.

To reinforce the grammatical point taught, when students did their essay writing for that lesson, we looked particularly at the verb forms they used, in order to see if they managed to transfer what they had learnt to actual practice. In most cases, the grammar point to be taught arose from the nature of the essay that students were scheduled to write for that lesson. For example, since the passive voice is needed for the writing of procedures, that week we would focus on passive verb forms.

### Evaluation of the Approach

Students said that they liked the approach because the KWIC format made it very easy for them to learn the correct verb forms. The main reason given was that the systematic arrangement of the data made the verb patterns very obvious. All they had to do was look at the verb phrase, and not bother about the larger context. They found such an approach effective in helping them focus on the specific error.

The concordance-based approach also meant that students could speed through the grammar correction exercises in no more than 10 minutes, with hardly any problem. In their essay writing too, in most cases, the number of errors for that grammatical point taught was fewer. In fact, the approach could be said to have been too effective when some students over-generalized the rules to produce phrases like "was feeded" and "had been binded."

From our experience, we feel that the concordance-based approach is very helpful for teaching general patterns of usage (though perhaps not of exceptions). Our students can see at a glance the reality of the abstract "rules" they have learnt from grammar books in the past. The advantage lies in the fact that they can see that it is grammar in use, not in theory alone. Using materials relevant to their course of study further reinforces the reality of the grammar rules for them.

### References

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### About the Authors

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