

## **Voices from the Field: Three Ways to Incorporate Corpus Technology in the ESL Classroom**

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### **Teaching Contexts**

The teaching contexts are two small higher education institutions in Hawai'i. The first is a small liberal arts college with about 150 students from Japan who speak English as an additional language. With an emphasis on presentational and conversational speaking, the college offers customizable programs for beginner to advanced level students. The second school is a small private university with about 3,000 students from 70+ countries, 70% of whom speak English as an additional language. A four-level (two intermediate, two advanced) Academic English language support program is offered at each institution.

### **Problem**

Although there are numerous examples of indirect corpus use in language teaching, many shy away from direct corpus use, which involves teacher- and learner-corpus interaction. Based on teacher and learner feedback, this is due to the overwhelming amount of corpus data and unfamiliarity with corpus query functions and techniques.

### **Solution**

The solution is simple: *I* do, *We* do, then *You* do. These steps are representative of *teacher-centered*, *collaborative*, and *learner-centered* tasks (Hinkel & Green, 2022; Sripicharn, 2003). Essentially, teachers guide learners through the generalization process towards independent learning.

First, *I* do (a teacher-centered task) requires the teacher to select words or phrases to investigate from classroom texts or observations. The teacher extracts at least ten concordance lines and designs concordance tasks with varying degrees of control. As an example, my class investigated the noun/verb *request* using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) to strengthen their research proposals. Adapted from Green (2019), Figure 1 displays the outline used for the task.



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**Figure 1***Teacher-Centered Task Outline*

**Instructions:** *Request* has both noun and verb forms and frequently occurs with other words in academic texts. In this task, examine the following example sentences with *request* from COCA and answer questions about them. What patterns do you see in the use of *request*? Some guiding questions have been provided to help you guess the patterns. You may work with a partner or in a small group.

1. The trial-court may request permission to address the petition... <WEB, 2012>
2. Any State Party may request assistance relating to medical treatment... <WEB, 2012>
3. The Daily News Leader requested information from the Shenandoah Valley Juvenile Center. <NEWS, 2019>
4. The investigations were requested by Washington State president Elson Floyd. <WEB, 2012>
5. The hearing was requested by the Illinois Press Association... <WEB, 2012>
6. The judge signed off on the doctor's request. <ACAD, 2019>
7. The woman's request for a temporary restraining order was approved. <NEWS, 2019>
8. O'Neill turned down the president's request. <NEWS, 2019>
9. Material will be removed upon request of the copyright owner. <WEB, 2012>
10. For a complete list of co-authors, the full paper and editorial is available upon request. <BLOG, 2012>

A. Can you find examples of *request* as a verb? Write the number of each sentence where *request* functions as a verb.

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B. Can you find some examples of *request* as a noun? Write the number of each sentence where *request* functions as a noun.

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C. What are the most frequent words which occur before or after *request* as a verb?

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D. What are the most frequent words which occur before or after *request* as a noun?

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E. What else do you notice about the use of *request* in various texts?

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Second, *We do* (a collaborative task) requires the teacher to begin introducing the target concordancing software (e.g., COCA, AntConc, Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers). As a class, the teacher and learners unanimously decide which words or phrases to

investigate, then use a corpus to examine the data together. In a lab setting, my class chose to investigate the collocation and phraseological behavior of the near synonyms *ask* and *request* for addressing appropriate classroom customs and language. Römer (2010) recommends engaging learners in collaborative tasks like this, where the data is shown in a variety of ways (e.g., list, chart, collocates, compare). Adapted from Green (2019), Figure 2 displays a few basic discussion points used for the task.

**Figure 2**

*Collaborative Task Discussion Points*

Generalizations about *ask* and *request*:

- *Ask* appears to collocate with pronouns more frequently than *request*.

ASK					REQUEST						
	WORD	W1	W2	W1/W2	SCORE		WORD	W2	W1	W2/W1	SCORE
1	OURSELVES	1365	0	2,730.0	112.4	1	IT	660	2744	0.2	5.8
2	YOURSELF	4985	2	2,492.5	102.6	2	SOMETHING	41	326	0.1	3.1
3	MYSELF	2967	2	1,483.5	61.1	3	WHO	694	5879	0.1	2.9
4	ME	55818	80	697.7	28.7	4	ONE	115	1253	0.1	2.2
5	HIM	30867	58	532.2	21.9	5	THEY	417	8928	0.0	1.1

- Verbs which occur before *to ask* + *ask* are *have*, *want*, and *going*.

HELP	ⓘ	★	ALL FORMS (SAMPLE): 100 200 500	FREQ	TOTAL 67,398   UNIQUE 3,922 +
1	ⓘ	★	HAVE TO ASK	6973	
2	ⓘ	★	WANT TO ASK	5676	
3	ⓘ	★	GOING TO ASK	4595	

- Nouns which occur after *request* are *information*, *permission*, and *anonymity*.

HELP	ⓘ	★		FREQ	
1	ⓘ	★	INFORMATION	556	
2	ⓘ	★	PERMISSION	442	
3	ⓘ	★	ANONYMITY	370	

- We almost always *ask questions* and rarely *request questions*.

ASK					REQUEST						
	WORD	W1	W2	W1/W2	SCORE		WORD	W2	W1	W2/W1	SCORE
1	QUESTIONS	9733	3	3,244.3	358.2	1	QUESTIONS	3	9733	0.0	0.0

- We more often *request access* than *ask (for) access*.

ASK					REQUEST						
	WORD	W1	W2	W1/W2	SCORE		WORD	W2	W1	W2/W1	SCORE
1	ACCESS	158	274	0.6	0.1	1	ACCESS	274	158	1.7	15.7

- *Ask* occurs idiomatically in *asking for it* and *ask for this*.
  - *Well, that's just asking for it.* <SPOK, 2010>
  - *Don't act like you didn't ask for this.* <TV/M, 2019>

Third, *You do* (a learner-centered task) requires the learners to become independent detectives, form their own language questions, and draw conclusions about the form, meaning, and use of a particular word or phrase. Since these are independent searches, learners can conduct this task asynchronously. However, it is essential to note that this task should not be introduced by the teacher until learners are familiar with *teacher-centered* and *collaborative* tasks. In both teaching contexts discussed in this paper, it takes time to reach this point with a group of learners, but the pay off, in my opinion, is significant. Adapted from Green (2019), Figure 3 displays a basic outline used for such a task.

**Figure 3**

*Learner-Centered Task Outline*

**Form, Meaning, and Use Handout**

As you engage in your linguistic “detective” work, take notes on the patterns you see. Try to make distinctions between the structure’s form, meaning, and use.

Structure under investigation: \_\_\_\_\_

Form (How is this structure formed?):  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Meaning (What does this structure mean?):  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Use (How is this structure used?):  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Conclusion

Indeed, incorporating corpus technology and tasks in the ESL classroom can be intimidating. Nevertheless, it has significant potential to enhance our understanding of naturally occurring language. As my students grew familiar with the corpus-based *I do*, *We do*, *You do* tasks, they grew increasingly self-motivated and confident in their ability to investigate the language independently, which is the ultimate goal! They realized that they did not have to continue relying on the teacher or on living abroad to learn authentic language patterns. In fact, my most successful students developed the skills necessary to continue learning in any context. When using raw corpus data in class for the first time (from COCA, specifically), I did not anticipate student and faculty concerns regarding roadblocks with precision and encounters with explicit themes or language. To avoid these issues, I suggest starting with a smaller, specialized corpus, such as using COCA's Virtual Corpus tool to 'create' a corpus for general audiences (e.g., PG, G, family). Or, even better, create your own!

With some training and creative work-arounds, I believe that these three steps (*I do*, *We do*, *You do*) can help guide teachers alongside learners, resulting in memorable learning and teaching moments.

## References

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## About the author

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