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More lexis, less grammar? What does the learner corpus say?

Abstract

Sinclair's (2000) rejection of the separation of grammar and lexis in language description and his prioritization of the 'idiom principle' (1991) has opened up a new area of linguistic research centred on phraseology in the wide sense, with notions like collocation and lexical bundle (Biber et al 1999) playing a key role. As regards teaching, Sinclair's approach to language has led to a growing lexicalization of the syllabus coupled with a gradual depletion of sentence grammar. This appears clearly from the following quote by Lewis, the father of the Lexical Approach (1993, 2000): "If we are to start teaching collocation, we must stop teaching something else to make room. The answer must be to spend less time on formal grammar work, restricted to a small range of traditional EFL 'structures', regularly revisited". As the exact content of the reduced grammar core is not specified, ELT practitioners have had no other option but to make arbitrary decisions as to which parts of the grammar should be shifted to lexis. Porto (1998), for example, suggests introducing the following patterns as lexical phrases rather than giving them grammatical pedagogical treatment: the first, second, and third conditionals; the passive; reported speech; the *-ing* form; the past participle; and *will, would*, and *going to.* The two questions I will address in my presentation are the following: (1) Is there still a place for sentence grammar in foreign language teaching?; (2) If there is, on what basis can it be delimited? I will advocate a balanced approach which, rather than depleting one component (grammar) in favour of another (lexis), involves a profound reshaping of both. In other words, unlike Lewis (1993) who claims that "language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar", I contend that in an applied perspective, it is preferable to view language as both grammaticalized lexis <u>and</u> lexicalized grammar. Corpora play a key role in the implementation of this view, not only native corpora but also learner corpora which contribute to the optimal selection and sequencing of grammatical phenomena. To illustrate the approach, I will focus on the passive structure and show how corpus-based insights drawn from a range of corpora, including the *International Corpus of Learner English* (Granger et al 2009), can help significantly improve the sections devoted to the passive in present-day ELT grammars.

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