

# Using language corpora to develop a virtual resource center for business English

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**Abstract.** A Virtual Resource Center (VRC) has been brought into use since 2008 as an integral part of a task-based language teaching and learning program for Business English courses at Nantes University, France. The objective of the center is to enable students to work autonomously and individually on their language problems so as to improve their language skills. We are currently developing the center by applying the theory of Data-Driven Learning, (DDL, Johns, 1991), with the hope to encourage more students' engagement in the center. This paper will describe how micro-tasks have been designed based on DDL theory and integrated to the VRC in order to help learners overcome their grammar problems. The researcher will follow the activities on the VRC of a group of 30 students over six weeks in order to raise students' awareness about the VRC and encourage them to work on their grammar problems on the center. The expected outcome is that students will engage more in the VRC and through a series of processing stages, i.e. thinking and reasoning, solving problems and making decisions, and regular practice, information can be transferred to the long-term memory to be retrieved in the future (Ellis, 2008).

**Keywords:** corpus linguistics, data-driven learning, Virtual Resource Center, grammar acquisition.

## 1. Introduction

The VRC was developed as part of a task-based, blended language learning and teaching program for Business English courses at the University of Nantes which

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was implemented in 2008 to deal with overcrowded and mixed-ability classes as well as to reduce student drop-out rates. The VRC is a self-access training space that currently provides micro-tasks supporting individual meta-linguistic reflection and contextualized language practice (Bertin & Narcy-Combes, 2012). The VRC allows teachers to draw students' attention to particular language problems that they may have. As they give feedback on the students' written productions, they can send them to the VRC to find solutions to their grammar problems. The VRC has recently been developed in order to encourage more students' engagement.

## **2. Development**

### **2.1. The context**

Languages and International Trade at the University of Nantes is a three-year undergraduate program that combines the learning of up to 2 or 3 languages, of which Business English is compulsory. Although the number of students' enrollment increased by 29% between 2008 and 2010, the drop-out rate at the end of the first year is relatively high, at more than 40%. Another problem of the Business English courses is that teachers have to deal with large size classes of from 45 to 60 students per class and students' language levels are heterogeneous. The large size, heterogeneous class is believed to be a contributing factor that leads to increasing drop-out rates, because individual feedback, student interaction and practice are not adequate in these conditions.

To deal with these problems, a team of teachers and researchers had worked towards a task-based blended language learning and teaching program which was then started in 2008. A VRC, which is aimed at motivating students to work for their individual problems autonomously to improve their language skill, is a constitutive part of this program. However, a recent survey showed only under half of students invested sufficient time for the connection to the center, although a majority of students positively perceived the language resources on VRC useful, (Starkey-Perret, McAllister, Ngo, & Belan, under revision). Therefore, we are currently developing the center by applying the theory of DDL (Johns, 1991), with the hope to encourage more student engagement in the center.

### **2.2. The development of the VRC**

The rationale for choosing this approach is threefold: the DDL approach helps learners to acquire a language by discovering patterns of language use through

multiple samples of the same items in the center of sentences (Key Word in Context, KWIC), which helps learners to identify the patterns, and analyze them so as to generalize the language use. This approach also allows learners to be confronted with authentic resources of language input so they can observe what is written in a given circumstance (Bennet, 2010), which has proved to be one of the advantages over non-authentic/invented examples (Aston, 2000). Moreover, it is believed that as learners learn to observe and make generalizations, they develop more autonomy, and this process promotes noticing and grammar consciousness raising (Boulton, 2010).

New micro-tasks of the virtual resource center are designed under the light of the corpus-based approach and data-driven learning method. Each grammar module contains two main parts: grammar explanations and practice exercises. For the first part, the data-driven learning approach is applied to design consciousness-raising tasks. Instead of providing grammatical rules directly to learners, a set of examples are shown and followed with a number of guiding questions, which would lead learners to notice patterns (Figure 1 and Figure 2). For the latter part, a number of exercises are provided so that students can practice with the grammatical forms that they've learned in the previous part (Figure 3).

The input for examples is collected from the Contemporary Corpora of American English (COCA, <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>), while the input for exercises is from the Google news corpora where large quantities of authentic text are updated hourly. The practice exercises are designed as a self-test so that students can see how far their grammar knowledge has gone. It is hoped that through a series of processing stages and practice, information can be maintained in the short-term memory or transferred to the long-term memory to be retrieved in the future (Ellis, 2008).

Figure 1. Example of a grammar consciousness-raising task – sets of examples

The screenshot shows a software interface for a grammar consciousness-raising task. The interface is divided into three main sections:

- Réglages (Settings):** Located on the left, it includes options for 'Administration SCORM/AICC', 'Paramètres', 'Rôles attribués localement', 'Permissions', 'Vérifier les permissions', 'Filtres', 'Historiques', 'Sauvegarder', and 'Restauration'. Below this are 'Administration du cours', 'Prendre le rôle...', and 'Réglages de mon profil'.
- Expressions of Quantity:** Located in the middle, it is a tree view with options like 'None of', 'Number of Amount of', and 'Few A few of and Little A little of'.
- One of, Each of:** Located on the right, it contains two example boxes. The first box, titled 'One of, Each of', shows five sentences with blanks for 'one of' and 'each of'. The second box, titled 'Example', shows five sentences with blanks for 'each of'.

Figure 2. Example of a grammar consciousness-raising task – guiding questions following sets of examples

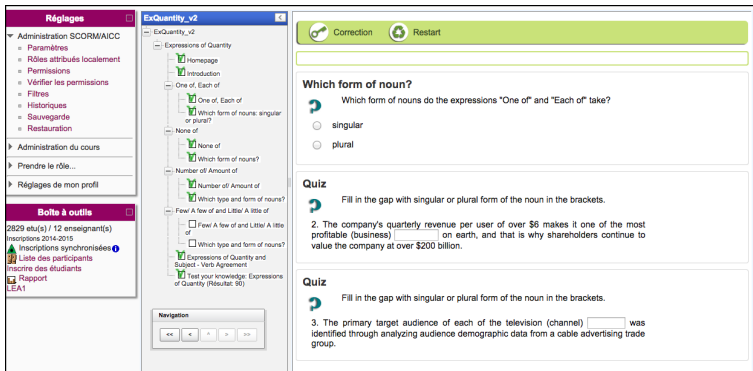
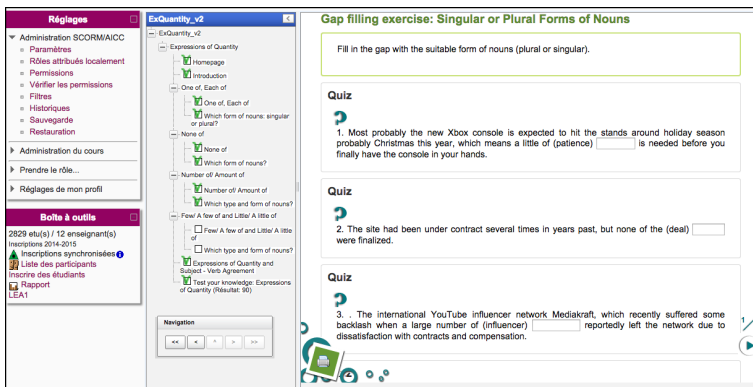


Figure 3. Example of a practice task



Before launching the newly developed version of the virtual resource center, a pilot survey questionnaire was conducted to investigate students' perceptions of the design of the grammatical modules. The survey questionnaire deals with the clarification of task instructions and explanations, and the level of task difficulty. A group of 32 students were asked to work with a grammatical module in 20 minutes and complete the survey questionnaire.

### 2.3. Students' awareness raising activities

In order to raise students' awareness about the VRC and how it would help them to find solutions to their grammar problems, the researcher worked with a group of 30

first-year students and the class teacher over six weeks in the second semester. She helped the class teacher to revise students' written productions each week and sent feedback via email to each student. While pointing out students' grammar errors, the researcher also linked them with grammar modules or exercises available on the VRC so that students could easily find what they needed. The researcher also went through some of the grammar modules with students in the multimedia rooms.

### **3. Discussions**

For the survey questionnaire, the responses were very positive. As regards task instructions and questions, 84.38% of respondents agreed that they were clear and easy to understand. 87.5 % of students claimed that grammatical explanations that follow task questions were also clear and easy to understand. 93.75 % of them thought that the tasks were at the appropriate level of difficulty. A small number of students claimed that they would have felt quite nervous if they had been in a test with these types of tasks/questions and that they would need around 1 hour to complete the given module.

The work with the students in order to raise their awareness about the center and encourage them to engage on it is rather challenging, given the fact that the VRC is a supplementary learning resource and students are not obliged to go there to practice. Even though students were provided with links to related grammatical modules on the virtual resource center to find solutions to their grammar problems, not many of them spent time on the center to review. However, when working on some of the grammar modules with the researcher at the multimedia room, the students were very interested and worked effectively. In general, self-test results of the grammar modules of students at the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, 2001) A1-A2 level range from 45 – 55%; for B1 students, the results range from 80 – 85% while B2-C1 students have from 90 to 95 %. To conclude, over 6 weeks, the researcher has seen 30% of students autonomously engaged onto the center in comparison with 0% prior to that moment.

### **4. Conclusions**

In the present study, the researcher has showed how she has been using language corpora to develop grammar modules on the VRC as a source of supplementary learning, which is aimed at helping students with their grammar problems. Although the effectiveness of these grammar modules cannot be statistically analyzed because students' engagement on the VRC is low in activities and the number of participants, the possibility of better understanding grammatical rules

was observed, especially among B1-B2 students during learning sessions in the multimedia room. In the next phase of the research, the grammar modules will be integrated into the Business Learning courses as post-task activities. Teachers are expected to use the Moodle platform more effectively to make contact with their students as well as to give them task instructions and feedback. With the participation of the faculty of teachers, the number of students engaging on the center is expected to increase and they will also be encouraged to work on more tasks in the center.

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