

Faculty Innovator Grant 2011
Center for Learning Technologies

Final Report Form

Primary Faculty Name:	Alla Zareva
Department:	English
Email Address:	azareva@odu.edu
Office Phone Number:	(757) 683-4042
Project Title: (10 words or less)	Student Use of Corpora for Language Research Purposes

Other faculty: N/A

Faculty Name:	Department	Email Address	Office Phone Number

Final Report Form

1. Describe the specific teaching and learning issues being addressed by the proposal.

The central idea of the project was to train undergraduate and graduate students from different colleges (especially, from the College of Education and Arts and Letters), who are planning to enter the English language teaching profession, how to use language corpora to answer (their own as well as their future students') language-related questions in a scientific way. A corpus is a large, representative, electronic (usually searchable) collection of spoken and written texts from different registers (e.g., conversational register, fiction, newspaper and magazines, academic writing, etc.) which allows to capture commonalities in real language use as well as variability across the registers and within each register. The project was also aiming at promoting corpus use as a language learning, analytical, and language teaching tool to create projects, demonstrate variation and regularity in grammar, show how syntactic structures may signal differences in meaning, research near-synonymy, meaning connotations, and collocations, etc.

One of the important messages we try to send to our undergraduate and graduate students is that language is pattern-based (and in that it is highly structured and restricted); yet, it also shows variability and irregularities that need to be recognized, understood, and explained in a scientific manner rather than dismissed or labeled as "wrong." Additionally, the English language has been changing dynamically over the decades which changes, however, most grammars have failed to capture and/or reflect upon as they occurred. As a result, students (both undergraduate and graduate) taking courses in the Department of English that deal with language structure (e.g., ENGL 350: Aspects of English, ENGL 371: English Linguistics, ENGL: 442/542: English Grammar, ENGL 672: Syntax, etc.) come with prescriptive views of "right" and "wrong" and little idea how they can research, explain, and justify both language regularity as well as variability (usually labeled prescriptively as "wrong").

Secondly, one kind of life-long skills we try to develop in our students is their analytical thinking and research skills that will take them beyond the prescriptive views of English grammar. In my view, only by training students how to analyze language (vs. memorize rules) can we change their attitudes towards how language works, how it can be explained, and how it should be taught descriptively.

Third, there are a good number of free-access corpora, tagged for part of speech and accompanied by a concordancer (corpus search software) that are largely underused as a teaching and learning tool. In my view, the main reason why they have been used primarily for research purposes by researchers and underused in the classroom for teaching and learning purposes is that explaining the whole idea of corpus research in addition to training students how to use a concordancer, carry out searches, analyze their results, and write them up is a complex and, in that, time consuming task. Thus, most instructors who are recommending the use of corpora in their classes (mostly among graduate students) cannot afford to spend much time on training corpus use skills and, more often than not, leave it to the students to figure out how to work with a corpus. This,

Final Report Form

in turn, results in little enthusiasm among students to carry out data-driven language research.

The proposed project will aim at creating a practical, informative, and user-friendly web-space for corpus-driven student research which will contain 1) a user-friendly tutorial; 2) links to publically accessible corpora (especially, ones with concordancers) and a brief explanation of how to use them, including practice exercises; 3) projects (on a scale from simple to more complex) that guide students through the process of carrying out a corpus search step-by-step; 4) students' answers (findings from corpus data analyses) in the form of write-ups, which will form a "Bank of English Language Questions and Data-based Answers."

2. Describe the revised specific teaching and learning issues being addressed by the proposal (if applicable):

N/A

3. Describe the development activities involved addressing the learning or teaching issue.

(please see item 9 below)

4. Describe the learning outcomes attained by the project.

1. Students learned what corpus research entails, some important concepts and assumptions related to corpus research, and how it addresses descriptively language questions, which clarified for them in practical terms the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive approach to grammar analysis.
2. Students learned how to carry out corpus searches by being guided through the process of using a concordancer step-by-step, which gave them the independence of looking for answers to language-related question in a scientific way.
3. Students learned how to discover language patterns on which grammar rules (as generalizations) are based as well as how to discover, interpret, and explain variability.
4. Students learned how to analyze the results of their searches and writing up their findings and conclusions, which gave them a hands-on experience of working with data and analyzing them.
5. A great number of the undergraduate and graduate students taking grammar-related classes are either preparing to be teachers or they are already in-service

Final Report Form

- teachers. The corpus experience gave them a more scientific view of addressing their students' language issues and problems as well as a useful tool to share and use with their students.
6. A great number of the graduate students taking grammar-related classes are preparing to be teaching English to speakers of other languages. There is no larger and better collection of English language use than a corpus, so these graduate students learned how to construct tasks for their students that allow them to see how native speakers of English use their language for different communicative purposes across a variety of registers.
 7. Students also learned the principles of constructing a corpus of their own and use their own collections of texts for research purposes.

5. Describe unexpected outcomes, if any.

N/A

6. Describe the impact of the completed project on your colleagues, department, college, or community.

(please see item 7 below)

7. Describe how the project can be a model, template, or prototype for use by other instructors.

A good number of courses and instructors in the English Department can benefit from this project.

1. ENGL 350: Aspects of English

Traditionally, the Department of English offers several sections of ENGL 350 per semester, so all instructors teaching this class can use the project idea for collaborative data-based projects. However, in fairness, I should say that their willingness to incorporate the idea into their teaching practices will depend on their own level of comfort with corpus use.

2. ENGL 371: English Linguistics

Several sections of his course are offered every semester. It usually contains a substantial section on English syntax and language variation, both of which can meaningfully incorporate the model of analyzing language structure by using corpus tools.

Final Report Form

3. ENGL 442/542: English Grammar

As a combined graduate and undergraduate course offered primarily to future teachers, this course actively incorporated a model of investigating grammar patterns and contribute with tasks and student projects that develop students' awareness of register, regularity, constraints, as well as variability. The students who have taken this class while the project was running were very enthusiastic about the usefulness, potential, and practical benefits of their corpus experience.

4. ENGL 670: Methods and Materials and TESOL

The course is offered to graduate students in the TESOL Program (College of Education) and Applied Linguistics (Arts and Letters) who will be entering the language teaching profession. They can use the project's template as a training tool to create tasks for their students and encourage their language discovery skills.

5. ENGL 672: Syntax

The central focus of this course is on English structure. To my knowledge, the instructor does briefly introduce her students to corpus-driven analysis, so this course can use the project's information for training purposes as well as contribute to the project with tasks and student work on corpora of other languages.

6. ENGL 695: World Englishes

The materials created in the process of the project development can be used for the purposes of this class to look comparatively at linguistic features characteristic of different varieties of English (e.g., American English, British English, Australian English, etc.).

8. Describe the technology used to help address the issues described in the proposal.

1. COCA concordenser
2. Blackboard posted tasks
3. (an unsuccessful attempt) to build a faculty website

9. Describe products, if any, that are a result of the project.

One of the main goals of the project was to create a practical, informative, and user-friendly web-space for corpus-driven research. As a result of the project, the following products were created:

- 1) I created several user-friendly tutorials, describing step by step the use of one of the open-access corpora (Contemporary Corpus of American English [COCA]: <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>), which can also be used with several other free access corpora.

Faculty Innovator Grant 2011
Center for Learning Technologies

Final Report Form

2) I compiled links to free access corpora (especially, ones with concordancers) and a brief explanation of their composition.

3) I created a number of mini-projects (on a scale from simple to more complex) that guide students through the process of carrying out a corpus search step-by-step, analyze their data, and draw conclusions from the patterns.

4) I consulted, collected, and edited undergraduate and graduate students' corpus projects, which will form a "Bank of English Language Questions and Data-based Answers."

10. Describe the future plans for this project, if any.

My future plans are in the following directions:

1. Since this is an on-going project, to continued building/developing the "Bank of English Language Questions and Data-based Answers" with new research findings from students' projects.

2. Probably, organize a series of workshop for students to train them how to code their own corpus data and use different software for analysis, including Wordsmith Tools.

3. Build a website or develop it in the form of an interactive e-portfolio with Google Sites to share the students' research and the other project products.

11. Attach a financial report with updated Budget Plan Matrix.

Final Budget Matrix

Budget Item (equipment, personnel, software, etc.)	Qty	Total Cost	Source of Funds	
			Amount from FIG	Amount from Other Source
Wordsmith Tools	license for 10 users	£275.00	\$400.00	\$ 50.00 (Department of English)
Project content development (i.e. tutorial, explanations, exercises, etc.) and a conference presentation on the project		\$ 1,800.00	\$ 1,500.00	\$ 300.00 personal funds
Technical support and maintenance		\$ 300.00	\$ 300.00	