Corpus Based-Approach in Enhancing Students' Academic Writing Skill: Its Efficacy and Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

The objectives of this article is twofold: to investigate the efficacy of using online corpus-based platform in enhancing students' academic writing and to investigate student's attitude towards using online corpus-based platform. A total of 42 fourth-year students at the Muhammadiyah University of North Sumatera who are about to workon their research proposal were involved as the research participants. Their feedback on using online corpora were gathered using questionnaires and interviews. This is a qualititative descriptive study. The students were trained in using COCA and Ludwig Guru, two most used online corpora systems. It was discovered that the majority of students find using corpora helpful in improving their academic writing skill. However, more intensive use of it is necessary in order to ensure a smooth flow of writing of academic paper. This study sheds light on the resources of repairing errors in students' academic writing.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Corpus Linguistics, Online Corpora

1. Introduction

Norrish (1983) mentions that writing has been known as the most difficult language skill, even for native speakers of one language. His statement implies that even for those whose mother tongue is English, they still face difficulties in composing a good writing, let alone those whose mother tongue is other than English such as Indonesians.Ariyanti & Fitriana (2017) discovered that the most common problems which the students face are the clarity of meaning, the implementation of grammar and vocabulary usage variations, the writing groove, and the application of writing scientific paper technique. The latter more specifically occurs mostly in the case of writing proposal and thesis. These problems are in relation to Lyons & B. (2009) who states that academic writing has at least two principles: clarity and honesty. By clarity, we can infer that the auhtor should be able to deliver his message in an understandable manner and by honesty, it means that the author should be able to acknowledge the author's work by using proper way of referencing.

Academic writing as an determinant factor in one's success in higher education has been a trend in ELT and Linguistics research in the last decade. Within Indonesian context, academic writing is one of the difficult skills to master for most of the university/college students. It is due to the fact that academic writing is particularly different from that of other types of writing. Persada (2016) shows that university students should struggle to maximize their writing performance in the matters of content, organization, vocabulary, language, spelling, and mechanism.

A deep understanding of particular words or diction in an academic discourse is a pre-equisite to writing an attention grabbing academic paper and subsequently impress the readers. However, Indonesian university students tend to adopt the structure of Indonesian grammar and tend to ignore the naturalness of English in writing. To some extent, this ignorance may be influenced by lack of corrective feedbacks by their lecturers. As a fact, most of the Indonesian lecturers are over burdened with 12 credits per semester, not to mention the responsibility of publishing an academic paper binually and conducting a community service at least once a year.

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This is line with Gilmore's (2008:1) argument which states that teachers have the difficulty to balance the needs of individual students for meaningful feedback with the unfortunate reality of ever-increasing workloads.However, there should be an alternative to this. In this 4.0 revolution era, technology plays a dominant role in increasing students' achievement. With specific reference to learning English, a number of free resources can be maximally used to take student's skills to the next level. In relation to academic writing, since vocabulary with respect to academic discourse has its distinct features, a plethora of online resources were developed in order to help writers whose mother tongue is not English. One the resources is online corpus.

The use of online corpora can hardly be found in the majority of academic writing teaching in Indonesia. Most of the academic writing syllabus instruct students towrite academic paper in a standardized grammar and most students tried to make use of online translation tool such as Google Translate to help quickly render their source text into English without any attempt to revise it as natural as possible. Several inappropriate phrases made by students are : "This paper objective is ...", and "This research purpose is ....". Students tend to adopt Indonesian language structure substandardly without attempting to revise according to English standard grammar. Another less natural phrases in the conclusion part of their academic paper are "The conclusion of the research is that" and "I conlude that ...". These examples can be corrected so that they sound more natural (proper phrase listed on table 1)

Based on the foregoing phenomenon, we thus seek to investigate the efficacy of using Online Corpus in enhancing students' academic writing and subsequently hear from students how they have been benefited from using online corpora. The following literature defines the scope of corpora and its contribution on writing academic articles.

2. Literature Review

Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, (1998:4) define a corpus as "a large and principled collection of natural texts, which is compiled so that it is representative of the language in general, a dialect, or other subset of the language. Specifically, Davies (2008) maintains that an analysis of language corpora, such as the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), has expanded understanding of language in many ways. Because such corpora can be systematically searched, researchers are now able to understand how linguistic features are actually used in authentic contexts (Gerrig, Horton, & Stent, 2011; Yoo, 2009).

There has been a number of studies investigating the use of corpus in enhancing students academic writing. One of them includes Gilmore (2008), who found that the participants in his study were able to significantly improve the naturalness of their writing after only a 90-minute training session and that the majority of students found British National Corpus and the COBUILD Corpus and Collocations Sampler are beneficial, although there was a marked preference for the COBUILD Corpus and Collocations Sampler.Another study conducted by Ide. (2010) found that corpus consultation can help students develop a fuller understanding of the citations appropriate in their discourse and encourage them to adopt these practices in their own academic writing, thus providing writers with a mechanism to participate as a more competent member of their discourse community. A benefit of using COCA was proved by a study conducted by Davies (2008) who attempted to search for the frequency of a phrase "working place" and 'workplace". He found that COCA collocatesreveals that while *working place* appears in 2 cases, *workplace* appears 2045 times withinacademic discourse, indicating it is a better lexical choice for the paragraph.

Corpora can equally be used in the revision stages to self-correct or to correct issues highlighted by the teacher (Gaskell & Cobb 2004; O'Sullivan & Chambers 2006).

According to Johns (1986), one of the most interesting uses of a concordancer is for the teaching of writing, as it gives students the opportunity to compare their performance with that of experienced native speakers. Despite a numerous studies have made use of COCA in their studies, to the best of our knowledge, none has made use of Ludwig Guru as another corpus platform. Therefore, we try to make use of this latest platform as well in addition to COCA.

3. Research Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized two types of online corpora, namely COCA and Ludwig Guru. The Contemporary Corpus of American English (COCA) as a contemporary and genre-based corpus was used for this research because it is free to access, and it is a mega corpus which includes over 450 million words which means that it stores comprehensive and highly representative data.

While Ludwig Guru has been a recent online corpus developed by a number of linguists and computer experts to help non-English speaker writers write well according to the standard of Native speakers which also stores millions of corpus from accross any text genre.

Research Participants

This study was conducted on the fourth year students of English Education Department, Muhammadiyah University of North Sumtatera, Indonesia who have finished their theoretical credits and are proposing a research title.Final year students who proposed their research proposals are gathered in order to train them on how to use online corpora. The training took place three times. A total of 42 students participated in the research. The reason behind selecting this final year students is based an empirical finding of Chang (2010, 2011), who discovered that such techniques (the use of online corpora) may require intermediate and upper levels of proficiency before they are successful.Based on their grades transcript, it is believed that those students are at the intermediate level of English.

Data Collection Technique

Students research synopsis were gathered in order to preliminarily evaluate their grammars and diction.Upon evaluating their preliminary works, training was conducted. It was initially planned that the training be conducted in four consecutive meetings. At the second meeting, the students have become confident and knowledgable enough about usingthe online corpus.On the third meeting the students were asked to write a short paragraph on a particular academic topic they are interested in by integrating the online corpora. On the fourth meeting, students feedback using open- ended questionnaires and Likert Scale questionnaires were collected. In order to strengthen their feedback, data triangulation through interviews were conducted in order to gain more comprehensive answers towards the contribution of using online corpora in academic writing.

4. Findings and Discussions

Table 1. Examples of phrases/clauses mostly used in academic articles

No.	Phrase	Frequency	
		COCA	Ludwig Guru
1.	Stating an objective of a study		
a.	This study aims to	41	30
b.	The objective of this study is	25	50
c.	This research is aimed at	none	3 exact, 45 similar
d.	The purpose of this study is to	134	50 exact
e.	The aim of this study is to	25	30
f.	This paper aims to	18	50
2.	Referring to the table above		
a.	The above table shows that		50 similar
b.	It can be seen from the above ...	5 exact	45 similar
3.	Reporting Verbs		
a.	.... states that	8476	50 exact
b.	..... said that		
c.	..... postulates that	128	1043
	....mentions that ...	356	
d.	,.... maintains that	1528	4746
e.	..... puts forward that	28	50
f.	..... puts forth that	20	67
g.	..... expressed that	307	673
h.	..... argues that	7111	
i.	..... claims that	5127	
j.	..... point out that	4443	15643
4.	Referring to the previous explanation		
a.	From the explanation above,		-
b.	From the above explanation,	1	-
c.	Based on the foregoing,	16	50 similar
5.	Stating the conclusion of a study		
a.	We can conclude that,	91	30
b.	We came to the conclusion that	28	48
c.	It is concluded that	66	49
d.	The results of the study lead to the conclusion that	*Limited words exceeded*	49 similar

From the above table, according to the American English usage as recorded in American Corpus COCA, the most frequent way of stating an objective of a study is "the purpose of this study is to..". While Ludwig guru suggests that the common expression is either "The objective of this study is" or "The purpose of this study is to" or "This paper aims to". While to refer to the previous argument mentioned, Ludwih Guru suggests to use "Based on the foregoing,".

As for reporting verbs, The large volume of search results on each platfrom above does not necessarily mean that they are the most accurate and natural way of expressing an original opinion. They are just an alternative of saying it the other way. However, to reportanother author's work, the most common way of expressing it is "(Name of Author) postulates that ...." or "(Name of Author) maintains that ......". Despite the above query results indicated that there are thousands of context related to other phrases like "states that", "said that", "point out that", however, they can not be used without looking carefully at the sentence context. Whereas to conclude the end results of the study, Ludwig Guru accurately suggests to use the phrase "The results of the study lead to the conclusion that...".

Below are the query results for the phrase "the aim of the study is to..." on both Ludwig Guru and COCA.

Figure 2.
Query Results of the phrase '*the aim of this study is to*' on COCA.

As we can see above, when we type the word "the aim of this study is to" on COCA, the result generated another context before it. By that we can see the context of how the phrase is used. Another feature is that the field of study is generated on the left coloumn giving us information of where the source of the text comes from. The searched phrase is highlighted in green so as to make the user easy to spot the word/phrase.
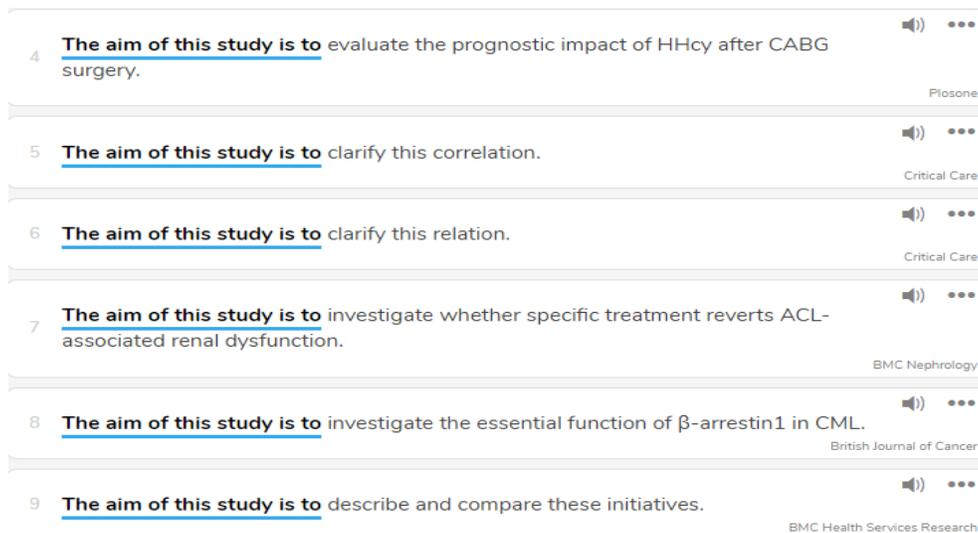
Figure 2.
Query Results of the phrase 'the aim of this study is to' on Ludwig guru.

While on Ludwig Guru, the source of the phrase is generated on the right. This tool allows us to explore more the sentence source. The searched phrase is underlined in blue so as to make the user easy to spot the word/phrase.

Having implemented the corpus based approach on their academic writing, the following feedbacks on using the system were gathered:

Question:

1. *How has using online corpus helped you in academic writing skill?*
   S1. I never thought of using online corpus like this. This tools have helped me improve my academic writing especially on the introductory part and conclusion part.
   S2. I have improved my grammar and sentence structure with the help of Ludwig guru.
   S3. Using both COCA and Ludwig guru have significantly enhanced my writing skills especially in academic discourse.
   S4. I would always refer to these online corpus tools before submitting my final assignment.
   S.24 Admitted that she has consistently used the word "states that" in citing the scholar's opinion. She never thought that there exists a number of alternatives of citing another author's opinion.
   S.8 Argued that using corpora has helped her in a way that it fixes her structures at the phrase level, thus, she improved in her writing.
   S.5 Claims that she has become more confident in writing her research paper. Ludwig Guru is her first consultation before COCA.
2. *What kind of difficulties did you usually face during writing academic articles?*

   S.12. It is always hard to write in a meaningful way. I mean, it is difficult for me to cite other's paper.
   S.21. My vocabulary is limited. I like to open up a print dictionary like John. M. Echols so that I can write better.
   S.31. Writing academic article is difficult because it needs specific words which I am not familiar with. I tend to use Google Translate to translate sentences or phrase that I have write before. Sometimes, my lecturer corrects my work because the of the structure.
3. *Can you specify, which part of grammar unit you are benefited using online corpus?*

   S8. I am helped by the level of phrase. Like "according to" which I usually use, now I change it to "as "name of author" postulates", it sounds better and more natural.
   S32. Some words I never knew, such as the phrase "based on the foregoing". I usually write "based on the explanation above". I would make myself used to using the former phrase than the latter.

The graphs below present the results of data tabulation of the questionnaires distributed regarding students' perception respectively towards COCA and Ludwig Guru.
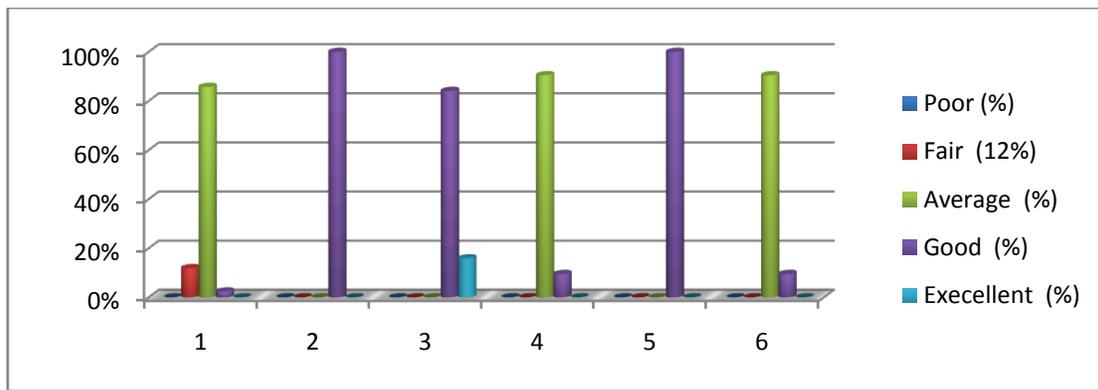
Figure 1. Students' perception towards the the contribution of COCA on their writing skill.

The graph above indicates that according to bar no. 1, five (12%) participants reported that their English writing skill is at a fair level before they are taught COCA, while another 36 participants (86%) reported that their English writing skill is at an average level before they are taught COCA and 1 participant (2%) participants (86%) reported that their English writing skill is at a good level.

While bar 2 indicates that 42 participants (100%) reported that their English writing skill is at a good level after they are taught COCA. Bar 3 indicates that 37 participants (84%) reported that COCA is more helpful than a dictionary at a Good level,while 7 participants (16%) reported that COCA is more helpful than a dictionary at a Good level at an Execellent level.

According to bar 4, 38 participants (90%) reported that the basics of COCA is at Average level to understand, while 4 participants (10%)reported that the basics of COCA is at Good level to understand.Bar 5 indicates that all of the participants (100%) know what to type in when they are searching in COCA.

While bar 6 indicates that 38 participants (90%) reported that COCA is not easier to use than Ludwig Guru, and other 4 participants 10% reported that COCA is not so easier to use than Ludwig Guru.
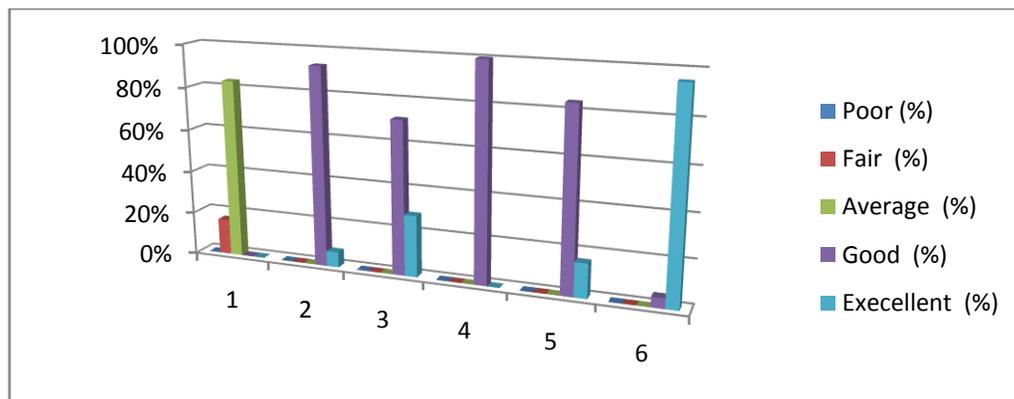

Figure 2. Students' perception towards the contribution of Ludwig Guru on their writing skill.

The graph above indicates thataccording to bar no. 1, seven (17%) participants reported that their English writing skill is at a fair level before they are taught Ludwig Guru Online Corpus, while another 35 participants (83%) reported that their English writing skill is at an average level before they are taught Ludwig Guru Online Corpus.

According to bar no. 2, thirty nine (93%) participants reported that their English writing is at good level after being taught Ludwig Guru Online Corpus, while the remaining 3 participants (7%) reported that their English writing is at an execellent level after being taught Ludwig Guru Online Corpus.

Bar 3 shows that 30 participants reported that Ludwig Guru functionality better than a dictionary at a Good level (71%), while other 12 participants (29%) reported it at an excellent level. Bar 4 indicates that 42 (100%) participants reported that they have no difficulty in understanding the basics of Ludwig Guru.

While according to bar no. 5, 37 (84%) participants reported that they know well what to type in when they are searching in Ludwig Guru, while the remaining 7 participants (16%) reported that they execellently know what to type in when they are searching in Ludwig Guru.

As bar 6 indicates, 2 participants (5%) reported that Ludwig Guru is easier to use than COCA at a Good level, while the remaining 40 (95%) reported that Ludwig Guru is easier to use than COCA at an execellent level. It can be concluded that most participants prefer to use Ludwig Guru due to its easy functionality and user-friendliness.

5. Conclusion

We have outlined the benefits of using online corpora and successfully gathered students' reponses on it. Thus, this study led to the conclusion that, using online corpora such as COCA and Ludwig Guru has brought huge amount of benefit to the students in terms of academic discourse writing. Several suggestions and recommendations for students and for future research are made.Firstly, it is technically recommended that students set their web-browser tab onto automatically set COCA online and Ludwig Guru online as the main pages so as o facilitate them with fast search on the words that may seem difficult to be used in their academic writing. Hence, error in academic writing can be mitigated. Secondly, it is recommended that further study can touch on a wider scope of research participants from multiple universities so as to discover its massive impact on most Indonesian EFL learner's skill in academic writing or in other genre writing.

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Appendix I

Questionnaire Items on student's perspective on the use of COCA

No.	Question Items	Likert Scale				
		Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Execellent
		1	2	3	4	5
1.	How would you rate your English writing BEFORE you are taught COCA Online Corpus					
2.	How would you rate your English writing AFTER you are taught COCA Online Corpus					
3.	COCA is more helpful than a dictionary for my English writing.					
4.	It is easy to understand the basics of COCA and					
5.	I know what to type in when I am searching in COCA.					
6.	COCA is easier to use than Ludwig Guru					

Appendix II

Questionnaire Items on student's perspective on the use of Ludwig Guru

No.	Question Items	Likert Scale				
		Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Execellent
		1	2	3	4	5
1.	How would you rate your English writing BEFORE you are taught Ludwig Guru Online Corpus					
2.	How would you rate your English writing AFTER you are taught Ludwig Guru Online Corpus					
3.	Ludwig Guru is more helpful than a dictionary for my English writing.					
4.	It is easy to understand the basics of Ludwig Guru					
5.	I know what to type in when I am searching in Ludwig Guru.					
6.	Ludwig Guru is easier to use than COCA.					

Appendix III

Interview Questions
1. How has using online corpus helped you in academic writing skill?
2. What kind of difficulties did you usually face during writing academic articles?
3. Can you specify, which part of grammar unit you are benefited using online corpus?