

Collaborative Language Research for Travel Industry ESP

Gregory Friedman

Showa Women's University
friedman@swu.ac.jp

Abstract

This paper reports on the methodology and results of a project in which students in an ESP Tourism Industry Communication course searched for and collected examples of professional language from the web to create a class database of key lexis and colligational information. This lexis was subsequently used by the students in spoken and written projects. One of these projects was the creation of original Japan destination websites. In order to determine whether the student writing for the websites was effective for its intended purpose of attracting international tourism, text written by students for a destination was compared in a survey to text from the official English website for the destination. The survey measured the reaction of potential Japan tourists to the text in terms of perceived attractiveness. Results from the survey are considered, issues and problems arising during the project are examined, and directions for further research are proposed.

Key words: ESP, vocabulary, authentic language

I. Introduction

The use of authentic material for input has become increasingly common in FL and L2 classrooms. Media produced for consumption outside the classroom may offer benefits to learners relative to specially-produced educational material (Gilmore, 2011; Johns 1994; Willis 1993). A primary benefit is the affordance of being able to see or hear how the target language is used in real-world contexts. A further advantage is the richness and variety of lexis that can be encountered in such texts. (This richness may also be seen as disadvantageous, in that the length, lexical density, and syntactic complexity of some authentic texts may present challenges for learners.)

For LSP learners in particular, exposure to language as used by professionals in the target field is arguably crucial to their ability to enter and operate within the field successfully. Having command of the vocabulary and discourse strategies of one's peers confers clear advantages. When these strategies and lexical items are specifically required for the successful marketing of a product or destination, as in tourism and hospitality marketing, the need for them arguably becomes even greater.

One approach to authentic language exposure that is frequently applied in LSP classrooms is the use of language corpora. The benefits of corpora to learners have been argued by many researchers (*e.g.*, Braun, 2005; Hafner and Candlin, 2007; Gavioli and Aston, 2001; Grosse and Voght, 2012, *inter alia*). At the same time, some researchers in applied corpus linguistics (*e.g.*, Braun, 2005; Hunston, 2002; Tribble, 2002; Widdowson, 2000) have noted a potential disadvantage for language learners of using concordance line output for lexical study, namely the disconnect between the lines and their original discourse context. Use of corpora by learners in language classrooms has generally been limited to preexisting corpora compiled by linguistic specialists. Concordance lines produced through search queries of these corpora are analyzed by students. As a result, learners typically have little contact with the original discourse contexts from which the concordance lines are drawn. Key features of the discourse relevant to a full understanding of its discrete lexical components may remain unseen. Tribble (2002), though focusing on academic discourse, notes several such features that are arguably just as relevant in ESP tourism contexts, such as the social context and communicative purpose of the text, and the cultural values presupposed by writer and/or reader. Hunston (2002) notes the potential deficiencies when a text is not "encountered in its visual and social context", noting that a "text consists not of the words alone but the spatial context in which the words appear" (23).

This last point may be particularly relevant when linguistic data comes from the richly visual context of promotional material on the web, and when the data is embedded in a series of persuasive claims intended to attract a potential consumer.

Thus, as receivers of mass data produced by educators or linguists, learners are cast in a relatively passive role in the process. This may be somewhat inconsistent with one of the prime motivations for classroom-based corpus work: the idea that students can and should be active participants in language discovery. What may be the advantages for learners in compiling their own linguistic data, as opposed to simply making use of a preexisting corpus? Aston (2002) uses the analogy of home-made versus store-bought food to illustrate five potential benefits:

- *Control*. You can devise your own recipe, choosing your own ingredients, thereby obtaining assortments that may be unavailable in pre-packaged versions.
- *Certainty*. If you make your own fruit salad, you have a good idea of what went into it, and this makes it easier to decide what that strange-looking bit was, or why it tastes too bitter or too sweet. *It is much easier to interpret [results] if you know exactly what texts a corpus consists of, since this allows a greater degree of top-down processing.* [emphasis added]
- *Creativity*. Corpus-making, like cooking, can be fun, giving scope for individual panache. It is also gratifying when your fruit salad turns out to be delicious, or your corpus a useful resource.
- *Critical awareness*. Through trial and error, and consulting books and experts, you will probably become a better chef (whether of corpora or fruit salads) as you compare the effects of different proportions of different ingredients.
- *Communication*. Making your own corpus or fruit salad can have more social spin-offs than opening a supermarket tin, providing lots to talk about with co-constructors and with other chefs.

II. Methodology

Though some research has been carried out on learners examining corpora of their own language production (e.g., Lee and Swales, 2006; Perez-Paredes and Cantos-Gomez, 2004), few studies have focused on learners gathering and collating examples of lexical usage directly from original sources, then collaboratively compiling their own corpus.

The goals of the present study, therefore, were to place learners in a more central role in the compilation process, and to give them more direct contact with original source material. The course in which the study was carried out is entitled Communication for the Hospitality and Tourism Industry. The course focuses on discourse strategies for use in communicating with inbound international tourists in Japan in a wide variety of contexts. One of the projects that students in the course carry out is to create original websites promoting tourism to specific regions, in particular lesser-known regions. Students work in teams, doing all research, writing, and design for their websites.

As part of the preparation for the project, students read and discussed the content of English-language travel websites, covering both foreign and domestic destinations. Students considered differences in content, writing style, and design between sites produced in other countries and those produced in Japan. On professionally-produced sites, the instructor asked the class to notice certain syntactic features, such as the frequent use of imperative verbs, the use of adverbial phrases, and certain common functional phrases.

Examples of imperative verbs found by students on the travel websites were added to a shared table on google drive. The instructor also added more imperative examples and key functional phrases. The students were then tasked with finding more examples of these imperatives and functional phrases in travel promotion sites around the web. To carry this out, focused searches using WebCorp and Google Advanced Search were employed, enabling the discovery of examples from the target context of travel promotion discourse. As part of the task, students highlighted key colligational components, particularly the object clauses following imperatives or following key verbs in the functional phrases. The students also linked their database contributions back to the original webpage sources, making the database a live, clickable resource. Figure 1 shows sample sentences collected by the students for the phrase *choose from*. In this case, students were asked to highlight the set of things which can be chosen from. One student also found the verb *offer* (also an item in the database) in the sentence, highlighting the relevant colligation for that, as well.

The collected examples offered us many opportunities to discover useful colligational associations. Figure 2 shows a portion of the database itself, for the verb phrase *offer + you/traveler/visitor*. When we looked at these sentences, we found that most of them were followed closely by *opportunity*. The specific pattern we discovered was *[offer + receiver of offer + opportunity + infinitive verb phrase]*. This pattern was not one that I had planned to teach beforehand, but its salience in the student-collected data brought it naturally to our attention.

- We have a wide selection of tours to choose from which we can add in easily to any holiday you have in mind. We are experts in tailor making packages, so let us help you plan the perfect train tour holiday.(Haruka)
- With over 100 destinations and cruises to choose from, our tours offer the traveller choice, interesting itineraries, flexible pacing, good value and quality.(Haruka)
- You can choose from 16 family rides and another 20 rides and attractions for a great day out.(Marina)

Figure 1: Sample sentences from the database: Choose from

offers you offers travelers offers visitors	Located in the Finger Lakes Region on 12 meticulously designed acres of Monet inspired gardens, woodlands and courtyard ponds, Mirbeau Inn & Spa offers you the opportunity to be pampered and to refresh, rebalance and recharge in our uniquely beautiful facility.(Azusa)	Traveling from Pennsylvania to Florida by train offers you the opportunity to take in the scenery and explore train travel.(Azusa)	As largest city of the United States, New York City never sleeps and offers you non-stop fun and spectacle.(Ami)	Mexico offers travelers the opportunity to immerse themselves into a vast population filled with rich history and religion.(Kana)	Myanmar offers you the opportunity to visit not only pagodas and temples with serene Buddhist monks, but also natural Inle Lake, beautiful villages and unspoiled beaches.(Katsu)	L.A. Museum Season Offers Visitors Free Access to City's World Class Cultural Institutions.(Kana)
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Figure 2: Database excerpt: Offer

The purpose of the shared database was to inform and inspire student use of lexis in their writing for the website project. Students were asked to use some phrases or imperative verbs that they or their team members had added to the database, as well as lexis added by others. In addition to the database work, the instructor called students' attention to other functional lexis found in professional travel websites. Though this lexis was not ultimately used for the database, it proved very important for the students' own writing later. An example of this is the common use of sentence-initial adverbial phrases in destination description. Examples of sentences produced by students for their website projects are shown in Figure 3, including imperative verbs, adverbials, and other items. The instructor worked with the students on grammar and style issues through a recursive editing process in Google Docs. Very few direct corrections were given; instead, students received comments containing hints or explanations.

CHIBA

Feel the gentle breeze and spend an unforgettable time in Sawara. Surrounded by weeping willows, the Ono river flows through the center of Sawara. On sightseeing boats, friendly boatmen explain the history of Sawara, and can recommend shops such as *kamata-ya* which sell traditional crafts.
Choose from various activities such as swimming, snorkeling and fishing.

MIYAGI

Feel the powerful nature at Kamiwari-zaki. Be impressed by the Pacific Ocean's wild waves coming toward you from these two rocks.

Immerse yourself in Miyagi history! Hikoronosato, Japanese for "bright village", contains the historical silk museum and matsukasa yashiki, a restored Edo-era samurai dwelling. Built in the last part of Edo period, matsukasa yashiki is a rare mixture of samurai housing and peasant housing.

Marvel at Minamisanriku's huge moai. Minamisanriku's moai statue represents the area's friendship with Chile.

AOMORI

Don't miss the opportunity to see endangered species here at Shirakami-sanchi. **Located between** Aomori and Akita prefecture and chosen as a world heritage site in 1993, Shirakami-sanchi is one of the biggest mountainous region of primeval beech forest in the world. To explore this area, **choose from** any of seven paths depending on your stamina. At the museum in the village at the foot of the mountain, **learn** the connection between the ecological system here and beech trees, and **experience** the four seasons in Shirakami-sanchi in a special cinema.

AICHI

Refresh your mind in Mt.Tsugao. **Designated as a national park**, the mountain was considered sacred by ancient people because of its unspoiled forest.

Experience a traditional Japanese tea-ceremony at a Japanese heritage site.

Figure 3: Excerpts from student websites

The sites created by the students were essentially produced as class projects, and, except in one case, are not being used to actually promote tourism to a destination. Therefore, the question remained: did the skills and lexical knowledge learned in the class and applied by the students in the project actually result in material that is effective for its intended purpose? In other words, how would potential tourists react to the material? Would the student writing engender measurable interest in the destinations among potential visitors? In order to ascertain this, it seemed desirable to actually compare student writing with existing web material on the same destination. The goal, therefore, was to compare writing from the class—which was the result of guided vocabulary study of professional English material and feedback from a native English speaker—with more typical Japanese destination writing, which commonly is produced without consultation or feedback from native speakers. In this context, it is important to compare writing samples that describe the same attractions—in other words, to compare apples with apples. Thus, though it would have been preferable to assess potential tourists' reactions to text from all of the students' websites, it proved difficult to find existing material that could be matched attraction-for-attraction with the student-produced material. In some cases, existing material that could be matched was found, but it was of such inferior quality that it would create a stacked-deck effect. Finally, one official English website for a destination was found that matched the destination and individual attractions of one of the student sites: Inuyama in Aichi prefecture. The quality of the English writing on this official site was reasonably acceptable, as well, though with clear indications that it was produced without native feedback (e.g., instances of Japanese English, odd capitalizations, and plentiful historical references).

The survey targeted foreign, specifically American, residents who tend to travel for pleasure frequently ($n=307$). Through survey randomization, respondents were given only one set of excerpts to read, either from the official English website or from the student-written website. Respondents were asked to rate the clarity of the writing for three separate attractions, and whether the excerpts made them interested in visiting each attraction. Subsequently, respondents gave their reactions to the excerpts overall in three areas: trust in the accuracy of the information, interest in traveling to the destination, and expectations of good service in the destination. Finally, respondents rated the actual English quality.

III. Results

The findings from the data can be summarized as follows:

- The student site outperformed the official English site for all three attractions, in terms of clarity and perceived attractiveness
- The student site was judged to have much better English quality overall
- Respondents who viewed the student site had stronger confidence in the accuracy of the information
- Respondents who viewed the student site seemed more interested in visiting the destination (Figure 4)
- Respondents who viewed the student site seemed to have stronger confidence in receiving good hospitality in the destination

For simplicity, data from the three attractions was averaged for Figures 4 and 5, below. As can be seen, respondents found the student writing about the attractions to be clearer than the writing on the official site (Figure 4). Roughly twice as many respondents answered that the student writing made the attractions sound interesting, as compared to the official writing (Figure 5).

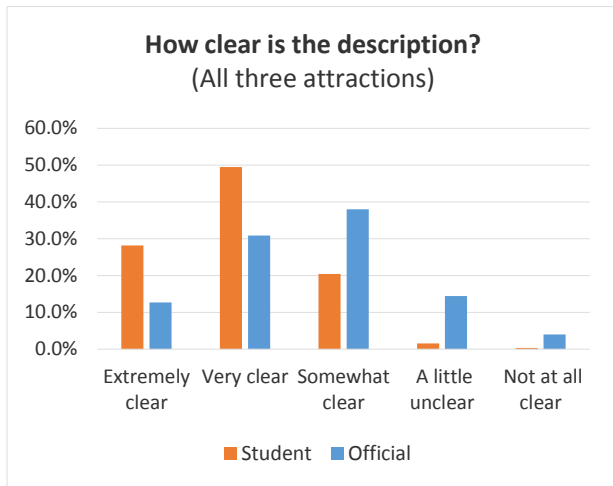


Figure 4. Clarity of description

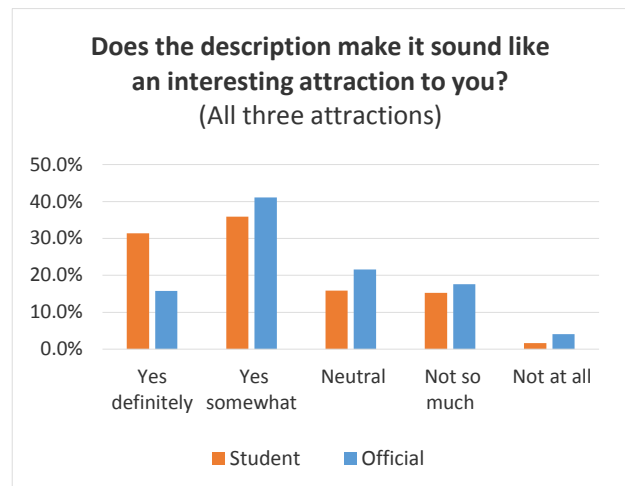


Figure 5. Perceived attractiveness

It was expected that the survey audience would likely prefer the student writing, but the key was whether this would translate into a higher degree of confidence, trust, and actual interest in visiting the destination. Figures 6-8, below, illustrate this effect. 82 percent of respondents had a high or moderate degree of confidence in the accuracy of the information given by the students, compared to 61 percent for the official site (Figure 6). In terms of interest in visiting the destination, roughly equal numbers of respondents felt “somewhat interested” in visiting the destination after reading the excerpts. However, among those who said they were “very interested”, the student writing resulted in a 23 percent response rate, as compared to 14 percent for the official site. Furthermore, 37 percent of respondents who read the official site writing were either “unsure” or “not so interested” in visiting the destination, compared to 27 percent of those who read the student writing (Figure 7). A similar result was found in terms of the confidence of respondents in the availability of good service, hospitality and assistance in the destination (Figure 8). The difference was marked at the high and low ends of the confidence scale. 22 percent of those reading the student writing had high confidence as opposed to 12 percent of those reading the official writing. At the low end, 6 percent of those reading the student writing were “not so confident” or “not at all confident” compared to 12 percent for those reading the official writing.

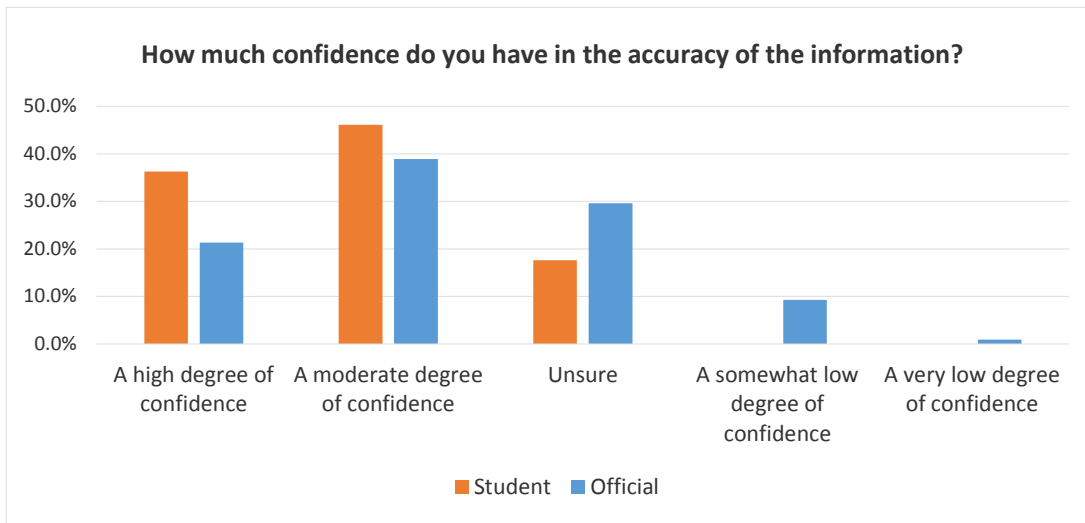


Figure 5. Expectations of service at destination

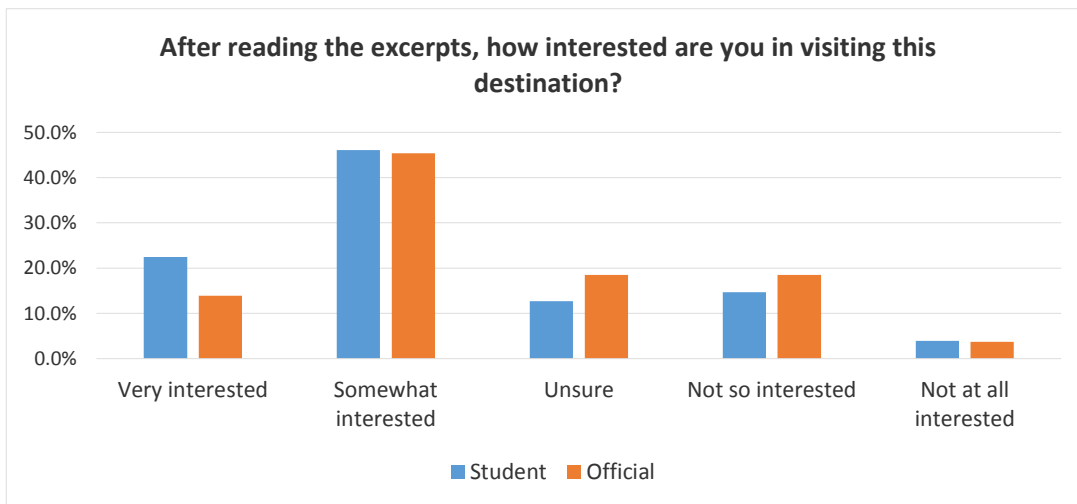


Figure 6. Confidence in accuracy

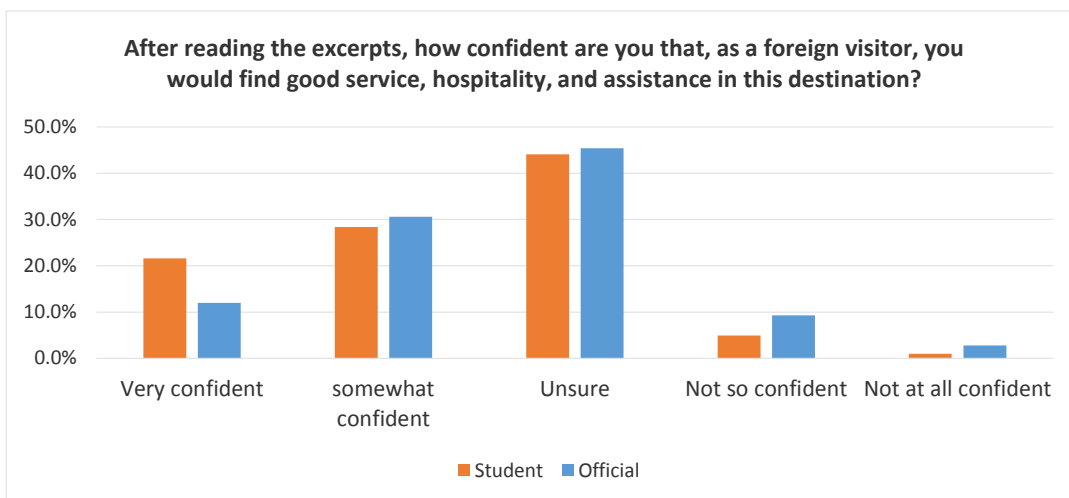


Figure 7. Overall interest in destination

IV. Conclusion

Students in the course engaged in various tasks intended to heighten their awareness of vocabulary as used in the field and to assist them in making use of this vocabulary in their own writing. The instructor engaged with the students in a multiple-cycle recursive editing process to improve their writing overall. The result, in the form of online descriptive travel writing, was evaluated highly by potential visitors to Japan. The survey tool used in the study assessed not only respondents' interest in the destination after reading, but also more subjective reactions such as perceived trustworthiness and expectations of receiving good hospitality in the destination.

The results of the study indicate that awareness of native vocabulary use in tourism promotion, in combination with native speaker participation in the process of creating promotional media, can act to heighten the effectiveness of non-native tourism writing. Given the proliferation of Japanese web material written for foreign speakers without such awareness on the part of the writers, and without such participation, a shift in attitude may be important as Japan prepares to receive a massive influx of foreign visitors for the 2020 Olympics. Destinations that wish to effectively promote international tourism might do well to reconsider the way in which they create online materials.

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