Multi-modal Corpus Tool 2.0 for young EFL learners

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Abstract

With the advancement of information technology, various types of corpora and concordance software are being developed for language research across different disciplines. Despite such advancements, the corpus-based approach to language learning (e.g., DDL − Data-driven learning) is still mostly limited to tertiary learners and DDL with young learners in English as a foreign language (EFL) context remains under-researched. This paper discusses the pedagogical potential of DDL with young learners using the Multi-modal Corpus Tool (MmCT) (Hirata, 2016; 2020). After showing that the result of a case study conducted with pre-service teachers on the use of DDL (Hirata, 2020) justifies the need to develop MmCT further for its use with young learners, this paper reports on the recent development of the tool (MmCT 2.0) and describes the pedagogical and theoretical considerations of the newly added functions.

Keywords: Multi-modal Corpus Tool, EFL young learners,
Data-driven learning (DDL),
corpus-based language teaching

Introduction

English corpora and associated concordance software have contributed in providing rich descriptions of the English language and they have influenced different areas of applied linguistics. Pedagogical applications of corpora in ELT are found especially in creating the wordlists and designing teaching materials (Thompson and Nasser Alzeer, 2019). The direct use of corpora as a language teaching approach is called data-driven learning (DDL) (Johns, 1991). In DDL, learners are encouraged to access the corpora directly and explore the language use through the examination of instances in concordances. The effectiveness DDL approach in raising learners' awareness of language usage has been

acknowledged in several research (e.g., Boulton, 2008 Vyatkina, 2016; Vyatkina & Boulton, 2017). Indeed, like many cases of corpus-based language teaching, DDL has also been widely implemented for teaching in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) and in CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) (Corino and Onesti, 2019).

While the majority of the DDL studies have been mainly the ones conducted with adult, or tertiary learners, Sealey and Thompson (2004; 2006; 2007) investigated the use of DDL with young learners who have English as their first language (L1) and report that corpus-based approach promoted children to discuss the features of English language through the exploration of the corpus. More recently, Crosthwaite and Stell (2020) investigated the use of DDL in private tutoring on writing with two L1 primary school students. They report that both students recognised the usefulness of corpora in resolving lexical issues in their writing, and the use of the DDL in tutoring sessions helped the students improve their L1 writing. As can be seen, the DDL and its benefits have been reported in research with adult learners and L1 young learners. However, with L2 young learners, the use of DDL approach is still rather limited. This is largely due to the fact that the mainstream corpora are still mainly text-based and there are difficulties associated with using the available concordance software, as both of them are not usually created for L2 young learners' use in mind.

Considering such situation, the current project aims to address the challenges by creating the Multi-modal Corpus Tool (MmCT), which allows the displays of not only the textual information but also the visual and audio information, in order to assist L2 young learners' comprehension (Hirata, 2016, 2020). Since children are exposed to digital media at an early stage of their lives, it has been argued that having such a tool would help to make the corpus-based DDL more relevant and accessible for L2 young learners, than using the textual corpora alone.

While the development of such tool for EFL young learners is indispensable, it has been argued that it is also important to 'spread the word' among the practitioners about the benefits of corpus-based language teaching (Römer, 2009). One of the reasons for fewer attempts of DDL in L2 pedagogy at the primary level could be that corpus-based language teaching is not simply recognised among practitioners (Hirata, 2020). Arguing that one of the effective ways to introduce the value of corpora to practitioners is to incorporate DDL in teacher education, Hirata (2020)

conducted a case study with pre-service teachers regarding the use of DDL activities in lesson planning and material design using MmCT 1.1 (Hirata, 2020) and a general corpus (i.e., Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)). While the overall result of the case study showed the positive evaluation of DDL in teacher education, it also identified some areas of the MmCT which need to be addressed further for its potential use with young learners (YLs).

This paper aims to present the recent developments of the Multi-modal Corpus Tool (MmCT) for young learners. It firstly discusses the background and the benefits of utilising MmCT with L2 young learners (YLs). After briefly reviewing the potential challenges of using MmCT with YLs, this paper describes the further developments of the tool (MmCT 2.0) and their related theoretical considerations. Along with some remaining challenges identified in the modification process, the future direction of this project is described.

Background: Multi-modal Corpus Tool for YLs

With the Global Innovation Gateway for All (GIGA) School initiatives (MEXT, 2019), more and more schools in Japan have started using ICT devices. Under this initiative, computers (e.g. Tablet PC) are provided to all students in compulsory education. The use of digital technology in education has been accelerated amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and as reported in the recent survey (MEXT, 2021), the use of Tablet PC has become a normal part of everyday teaching as well as learning activities of young learners nationwide.

Children's growing familiarity with ICT would certainly be a positive factor in considering the incorporation of corpus-based language learning (e.g., data-driven learning, DDL) in primary ELT. As Boulton (2012, p. 25) says: "It seems likely that many learners around the world are already 'Googling the Internet in ways not entirely dissimilar to DDL, a practice may be actively encouraged by the teachers while remaining invisible in the DDL research literature." Indeed, what learners are required to do initially in DDL (i.e., inputting a word or phrases in the search box) may be very similar to the experiences of using the search engines, which are familiar to most young learners these days. However, one of the differences is what learners are required to do after the search results are displayed in the form of concordance outputs. While the rearranged (or, 'sorted')

concordance outputs may enable learners to notice patterns of the language, this is different from how children usually read or decode the information.

Research have suggested that use of digital devices affects children's learning, especially how they develop their early literacy skills (Burnett & Daniels, 2015, Neumann and Neumann, 2017). With the growing influence of information technology from an early age (Marsh, Hannon, and Lewis, 2015), children nowadays are surrounded by digital devices, and they understand meaning around them by making use of the information in multiple modalities (Parry & Taylor, 2018). Therefore, if we were to conduct DDL on the text-based concordances alone, it would be too distant from children's reality. This is one of the reasons why this ongoing project aims to create the Multi-modal Corpus Tool for young learners (Hirata, 2016; 2020).

Along with the increasing familiarities with digital devices, being surrounded by multimedia is also a part of children's everyday reality. The multimedia has become part of ELT, and is often utilised as a meaning-focused input. For instance, Webb and Rogers (2009) proposed an approach called, extensive viewing (EV) (Webb, 2015), suggesting that viewing of movies and television programmes in L2 can be treated as a rich authentic input in L2 instruction. Pujadas and Muñoz (2019) conducted a longitudinal study about the use of TV series with captions and subtitles with L2 learners in secondary school education. They report that the extensive viewing approach with on-screen texts together with pre-teaching of the target lexical items contributed to the development of learners' vocabulary. With young learners, Green (2021) proposes the extensive viewing approach with subtitles for teaching English with young learners, and reports that the display of subtitles helped the learners' comprehension and promoted their incidental vocabulary learning. Although the approach is different, it can be said that the extensive viewing approach shares the theoretical grounds with the current project of DDL through MmCT, that having the audio-visual information together with the texts (i.e., subtitles) assists the young learners' comprehension of meaning and contributes to their language development.

Research has suggested that it is important to ensure the language texts or materials used for language instructions are accessible and appropriate for the level of the target learners, and the comprehensible input is essential in learners' language learning (Krashen, 1994). When

dealing with children in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context, it is necessary to consider this aspect in preparing teaching materials or tasks. Language presented to children at the primary level are often organized around certain topics (i.e., topic-based syllabus, Bourke, 2006) rather than the traditional structural syllabus. Moreover, the classes with young learners tend to have more focus on speaking and listening, and there is little emphasis on the teaching of literacy.

However, under the current Course of Study by the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT, 2017), all four skills need to be dealt with at Grades 5 and 6 in the primary English education. In terms of learning the grammatical rules, children are expected to notice the differences in word order between Japanese and English, and become aware of the English word order system. In teaching children, the traditional grammar instruction of "teacher fronted grammar explanation" (Sakui, 2004, p. 159) which involve teaching the grammatical rules and applying the rules in translation, should be avoided. Nevertheless, it is necessary to find ways to promote children's 'noticing' about how English works, without the traditional explicit grammar teaching.

As pointed out earlier, the young learners' courses tend to be designed around topics and related lexical items, rather than the instruction of language structures. As Selivan (2018) suggests, grammar can be taught lexically 'using lexical items as a springboard for grammar exploration' and such exploration will contribute to the learners' understanding of 'how grammar and vocabulary go hand in hand, and how grammar is used to manipulate and mediate meaning' (Selivan, 2018, p. 85). Existing research on DDL report that the approach is especially effective in raising awareness of the language patterns (e.g., Vyatkina, 2016; Vyatkina & Boulton, 2017) and its effectiveness with younger learners have been reported (e.g., Boulton, 2009; Kim 2019, Sealey and Thompson, 2004, 2006). Therefore, it can be argued that DDL could be one of the options for grammar instruction for young learners in Japan. As suggested, it is possible to help expand children's knowledge of certain lexical items that they encounter in lessons by incorporating the corpus-based exploration of language through DDL, and it can be regarded as "an added-value offered by corpus-aided discovery learning" (Bernardini 2004, p.32). Since DDL is an inductive approach, it gives the children the opportunities to notice and discover the lexico-grammatical rules through exploring the usages directly in the corpus. This would be more suitable for young learners

rather than the explicit explanation of grammar rules in a traditional manner. As discussed previously (Hirata 2016, 2020), it has to be stressed that it is not the intention of this project to suggest that the existing approach in TEYL could be replaced by DDL. Rather, the current project aims to explore ways to enhance the children's exposure to English language by offering audio-visual information together with the textural concordances through MmCT.

Further development of the Multi-modal Corpus Tool 2.0 (MmCT 2.0)

The compilation of the multimodal corpus and the development of the Multi-modal Corpus Tool (MmCT) are both ongoing projects. As pointed out in existing literature (e.g., Römer, 2009), it is necessary for practitioners to realise the benefits of DDL for the successful implementation of the approach in practice. Hirata (2020) investigated the possibility of incorporating DDL activities in a pre-service teacher training course. In the study, the participants were introduced to access two types of corpora: 1) a general corpus (i.e., Corpus of Contemporary American English) and 2) a multi-modal corpus tool (MmCT 1.1), and they were encouraged to use the corpora in their lesson planning and material designs. The survey was conducted after they experienced DDL, and the participants were asked to evaluate their DDL experience and the use of two corpora. As reported in Hirata (2020), the results showed that the participants were convinced of the benefits and usefulness of corpora, and DDL contributed to raising participants' awareness towards language use and language presented in textbooks. Regarding the potential use of MmCT with EFL young learners, some suggestions for the improvement of the tool were also identified. The following section firstly describes the main functions in MmCT and explains the newly added functions in the latest version (henceforth, MmCT 2.0) together with some discussions of remaining challenges identified during the process.

The following figure (Figure 1) shows the overall framework of the Multi-modal Corpus Tool 2.0 (MmCT 2.0), and the process of displaying the video clips and texts (concordances) in *MovieConc*.

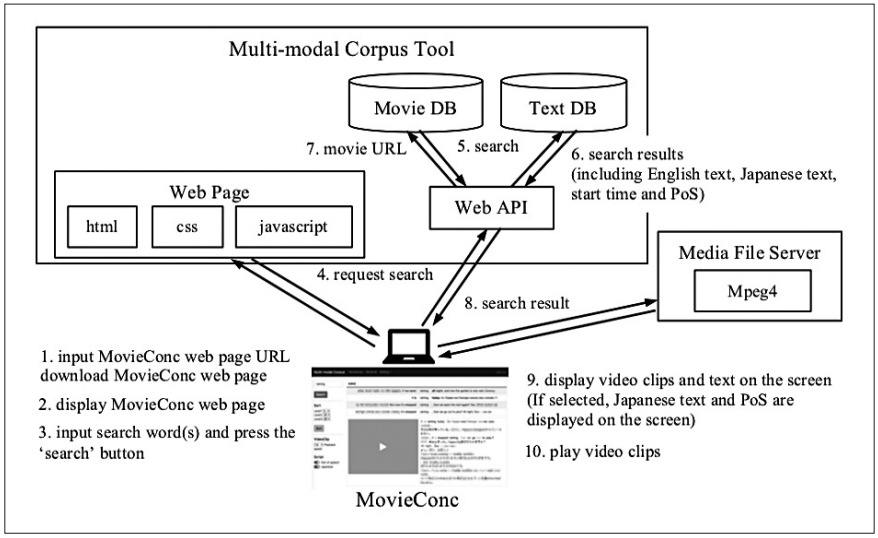

Figure 1: Framework of Multi-modal Corpus Tool 2.0 (MmCT 2.0)

The MmCT 2.0 has the following main functions: 1) *MovieConc,* 2) *Wordlists*, and 3) *KWIC* (Key-Word-In-Context). The main feature of this tool is the *MovieConc* which allows the display of the search word and corresponding videos and audio information together on screen. It also includes a function that allows users to adjust the playback speed of the media files. It was considered necessary to have this function for EFL young learners, as some may prefer the audio or videos played at a slower speed for their comprehension. The subtitles are also set to appear on each video, and the texts are displayed on the right side of the screen next to each video, corresponding to each scene. The *Wordlists* function allows the presentation of words and their frequency in the corpus. It displays the words appear in the corpus, either in order of their frequency or in alphabetical order. The *KWIC* (Key-Word-In-Context) function allows the display of search word in the middle ('node' word) and surrounding texts on both sides (i.e., concordance). It has a function called "sort" which enables the rearranging of the surrounding texts ocurring at the specified position with respect to the search ('node') word (e.g. L2: two words to the left from the 'node'). This function is useful in making the patterns visible in concordance outputs. On KWIC (i.e. concordance) screen, the

corresponding videos of search word(s) can be displayed, when a user clicks on the instances of the search word(s) on the concordances.

The following section explains the new features and their rationales added in MmCT 2.0: 1) the function to limit the duration of playing videos on *MovieConc*; 2) the colour coding and display of parts of speech information and 3) the display of learners' L1 on *MovieConc* and *KWIC*.

The function to limit the duration of playing video(s) on MovieConc

As mentioned above, the *MovieConc* allows the display of video and the text: the corresponding scenes in the video clips are identified based on the search word in the SRT files, which enable the system to identify the locations of the search word appear in each video.

While acknowledging the *MovieConc* was useful for understanding the meaning of the searched word(s)/phrase(s) with the audio-visual information, it was pointed out in the survey (Hirata, 2020) that children may continue to watch the videos, once they press the 'play' button, as the previous version (MmCT 1.1) did not have any functions which allow users to set how long each video can be played. Taking into account the advice on the potential distraction, the function of limiting the duration of playing each video was added in the latest version (MmCT 2.0). In this way, it would be less likely for young learners to get too distracted while working on the DDL using MmCT.

The colour coding of Parts of Speech (PoS)

Another newley added function is the colour display of the words in concordances according to the parts of speech (PoS). As reported in Sealey and Thompson's study (2004), the colour-coded PoS information helped L1 young learners identify and discuss the features of the English language in exploring the concordance lines. Although the previous version (MmCT 1.1) had the function of the colour display, the colours were assigned based on the positions of the surrounding words with respect to the search word after the alphabetical sorting. In the MmCT 2.0, texts in SRT files in the database were annotated with PoS information using SpaCy, available in Python OSS library. With the SRT texts annotated with PoS, the MmCT 2.0 can display words in different colours according to their PoS in the concordances in both *KWIC* and *MovieConc*.

As discussed earlier, since the explicit teaching of grammar is not usually encouraged in primary EEL education, DDL may have a place

because of its inductive nature. It is hoped that this new function would facilitate L2 young learners to notice the language patterns in English. Nevertheless, as discussed in Hirata (2020), it would be very challenging for EFL young learners to work on corpus-based language learning without any guidance, and teacher's mediation would be certainly required in discovering the language rules. As Kim (2019) reports in her recent study of teaching prepositions using a paper-based DDL with Korean primary learners, additional training on corpus-based activities is necessary with young learners. Indeed, the effective use of DDL approach in awareness-raising activities with EFL young learners need to be researched further for its successful implementation.

The display of learners' L1 on MovieConc and KWIC

In Hirata (2020), though the functions of displaying the multi-modal information were appraised by the participants, it was also pointed out that some young learners, especially those who have little chance to be exposed to English, might still find it challenging to understand the concordance lines in *MovieConc* and *KWIC*. Kim (2019), who conducted a corpus-based grammar instruction with young EFL learners using paper-based DDL, also reports that translation of the concordances or explanation of certain words in children's mother tongue was necessary for conducting the activity with her students in Korea.

Indeed, the use of mother tongue (L1) in foreign language teaching has been debated over the years (Widdowson, 1974, Atkinson, 1987, Seidlhofer, 1999). In classrooms, L1 is often used when teachers provide lexical or grammatical explanations, or when organizing "the class for students to use as part of their collaborative learning and individual strategy use" (Cook, 2001, p. 402). Moreover, it has been suggested that the mother tongue contributes especially in helping learners understand difficult concepts or ideas (Marian & Spivey, 2003). As Swain & Lapkin (1998, p. 333) suggest, learners' L1 is a "mediational tool fully available to learners, to regulate their own behaviour, to focus attention on specific L2 structures, and to generate and assess alternatives". In addition, the use of "L1 provides a sense of security" (Auerbach, 1993, p.19) to the learners. This is particularly true in the case of teaching EFL young learners in Japan who have little chance to use English in their daily lives. Moreover, using the learners' mother tongue also offers "additional cognitive support that allows them to analyse language work at a higher level than would be

possible where they restricted to sole use of their L2" (Storch and Wigglesworth, 2003, p. 670). Regarding the use of translation, Seidlhofer (1999, p. 240) notes that "[i]t is entirely natural to seek to make new experience meaningful by referring it to conceptual categories drawn from previous experience, and so the translation is, in this respect, the reflex of natural learning."

Given the potential importance of utilizing learners' L1 in their L2 learning, the function of displaying the Japanese equivalent texts was added so that children can check the meaning in their own language, when necessary. Since the primary focus of the DDL is to offer opportunities for inductive learning, the function of displaying Japanese was set up as optional so that each user can decide whether to have Japanese translation on the screen or not (i.e., the option button is displayed on the screens of *MovieConc* and *KWIC*). Moreover, since this function allows learners to check the instances in both languages in one screen, it may encourage the learners to find out the similarities and differences between English and Japanese (L1), which is also one of the objectives in primary ELT in Japan (MEXT, 2017).

One of the remaining challenges related to this function is the preparation of corresponding Japanese texts. When the Japanese equivalent texts were not available, machine translation software was used initially to create the translated texts, which required the manual checking of the outputs. As this is a time-consuming process, further research needs to be conducted in this area to improve the process of data preparation.

Conclusion and Future Work

Research has suggested that for the successful implementation of DDL with young learners, it is vital for children to be equipped with ICT skills (Crosthwaite and Stell, 2020). The recent children's growing familiarity with ICT and multimedia highlighted the relevance of DDL approach using the Multi-modal Corpus Tool, which is being created with an aim of assisting EFL young learners' comprehension of meaning. This paper presented the recent developments of the tool and discussed areas that could be applied in TEYL in Japan. Although we began to see some cases of corpus-based language teaching with young learners, it is clear that more research is needed in terms of how such an approach can be applied widely in children's L2 learning. Still, much work needs to be done

before implementing the DDL with young learners using MmCT 2.0. The remaining challenges and the future directions of the study include:

1) Further developments of child-friendly interface and functions in MmCT; as well as ensuring the quality of translation and the display of Japanese in *MovieConc* and *KWIC*;

2) Further specification of corpus data suitable for yound EFL learners and its clearance of copyright issues;

3) Further investigation into the use of corpus-based approach with Japanese YLs; and

4) Promoting the integration of DDL in YLs teacher education.

Despite these challenges, it is hoped that MmCT will be one of the platforms which contributes to EFL young learners' language learning in the future.

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