USING GAME PLAYING TECHNIQUES TO ENHANCE THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN COMMERCE

Peter Mayall
School of Economics and Finance
Curtin University of Technology
Australia

Abstract

Learning and interpreting English in a commercial context is one of the hidden difficulties that students face when English is their second language. The difficulties are exacerbated when they are studying on-line or are distance education students with limited face to face lecturing. The cultural diversity of modern universities has resulted in more students falling into the category of those needing help with the interpretation of the nuances of English when applied in a commercial context. There are different studies offering solutions to this problem of interpreting the implied and desired meaning of English when used in a commercial context. There is the move towards the use of computer technology in the form of software for text analysis programs. There are programs, such as the Concordance software, that analyse the language in the context in which it is presented and gives both meanings in a variety of disciplines.

This study uses an alternative methodology and compares the benefits and drawbacks of both using technology and game playing techniques. The method that this study espouses is showing students the common meaning of the chosen words that have been identified as problematical. This is done in storybook fashion where these words are highlighted. The story is then changed to one with a commercial flavour. As there are various disciplines in commerce and they all have their own peculiarities, the story has been adapted to the disciplines of law, electronic commerce, finance and accounting. The theme of the story stays the same but the words that present problems are kept constant. This common theme with the same words highlights how discipline changes give different meanings and how important is the context of how a word is used. This study analyses how beneficial this exercise is to English as a second language students situated in various locations in South East Asia and Australia and questions whether the use of technology in the form of Concordance programs is a better option.

Introduction

One of the common complaints of commerce students is the interpretation of financial problems that they have to solve during the course. This includes tutorial questions taken from text books and exam questions. Lecturers take for granted that students know the meanings of words that are common to the course they are teaching. Words with one meaning when used in an everyday context may have another meaning when used in a commercial context. The confusion that this causes has remained a hidden problem that we lump together with the perception that the students do not understand the concepts of business. The large number of international students and multicultural makeup of classes exacerbates this problem. Universities in the Australasian region are more than ever being encouraged to expand into emerging Asian countries as a way to fund their

budgets. This plus the migration of foreign students to Australian universities is exacerbating the problems of understanding English, especially when applied in a commercial context.

This issue was recently illustrated when an exam paper referred to the "initial capital" in relation to a question on making an investment. The student considered the meaning of this in the context of a recent newspaper article that referred to Rangoon as the "initial capital" of Burma. This interpretation has as much validity as the commercial meaning and is understandably a roadblock to the understanding of what the question required. This lack of understanding is evident on other occasions when students who failed their exams and queried their marks and inspected their paper. "I did not understand the question" or "I did not know what you wanted me to answer" were common complaints. These incidences led me to undertake a study into the extent of misunderstood language issues and trial various methods of revealing to students the different meaning of words when used in a commercial context.

Previous studies have looked at this problem and put forward solutions. Johns (1991) introduced the concept of Data Driven Learning which uses the patterns of usage in the foreign language to explain the meaning of words in the context in which they used. The learner uses concordance programs to explore the various meanings of words. Learning is driven by authentic commonly used language data that is compiled on classroom concordance programs. Concordance is defined in the Collins Cobuild English Dictionary as "an alphabetical list of the words in a book or a set of books which also says where each word can be found and often how it is used." Murison-Bowie (1993) wrote a micro concordance manual to allow students to refer to it when they were confused by words in a passage of literature. Owen (1996) debates the conflict between using intuition to find the true meaning versus consulting a concordance manual. In all of these research projects the students were left to their own devises when searching for the correct meaning of the word in the context in which it is being used. There is also no immediate feedback on the success or otherwise of their endeavours.

Oxford (1986) wants more emphasis placed on identifying effective second language learning strategies. Pressley, Levin and Delaney (1982) prefer the keyword method. Sternberg (1987) espouses the context method whereas Beck, McKeown and Omanson (1987) prefer semantic processing. Hall, Wilson and Patterson (1981) found that using the keyword method was effective when done individually but less so with group work. This brings into question the effectiveness of using the keyword strategy as most vocabulary work is done in a classroom environment with group interaction. Semantic processing was found to be more effective in this group presentation classroom environment by Crow and Quigley (1985). Oxford-Carpenter (1985) suggests using both semantic processing

and keywords (elaboration) as a way forward. T. S. Brown and F. L. Perry (1991) compared three methods of learning strategies for ESL vocabulary acquisition. They compared keyword, semantic processing and contextual learning. They found that using the keyword method in conjunction with the semantic processing method promotes more vocabulary acquisition than just using the keyword method. These studies show that no method seems to be superior to the next. My study follows in the footsteps of Sternberg (1987) who claims that "most vocabulary is learnt from context." The keyword method is used in that words are chosen based on their importance to an understanding of the material being studied and their frequency of occurrence in the said course. These words are elaborated (semantic approach) by highlighting their primary meaning in a story that students can relate to. They are then transposed by the students into a commercial story which is, in effect, using the context method. Craik and Lockhart (1972) lend weight to the keyword method by suggesting it should be enhanced by elaboration, which also supports the semantic approach. They believe that retention is dependent on the level at which information is processed and at the deeper semantic level, memory becomes more permanent. The approach set out in this paper is therefore a blend of using keywords with semantic stimulation similar to methods espoused by researchers in the above quoted research papers.

Methodology and Results

Concordance is in effect a glossary of words and terms that are chosen from the patterns of usage in the foreign language, in this case, English. Computer programs collate the words that create understanding issues and list the meanings that might apply to these words. The students access the glossary and then choose the meaning that they think is appropriate in the context of where it is being applied. The students are essentially on their own when making this choice. My study works on the assumption that students need assistance at this stage and that technology cannot replace face to face teaching augmented by game playing that enhances the enjoyment of learning and thus the retention of the knowledge gained. This method is in fact encouraged by Lamy and Mortensen (2007) when promoting the use of concordance programs. They wrote that teachers should "generate exercises based on gap-filling exercises and tests." This study compares the concordance method with using game playing exercises The exercises that follow are two examples of the game playing language learning tools used to impart the meaning of words in a commercial context.

When deciding what would be the best method to impart the correct meaning of words a few alternative scenarios were trialled over a period of two years. The first method utilised was verbally explaining the nuances as the words causing confusion were happened upon during lectures. The efficiency of this was tested in

tutorials where a verbal revision highlighted that the students did not absorb the meanings of words that had been covered in lectures. This I put down to the fact that at the time of the lectures students had not been exposed to the topic of finance that included the words with different meanings when used in a finance concept. The crowding of their learning process with peripheral messages not only created a lack of absorption of both the underlying lecture topic but also the explanations of the words in a finance context. This method of instruction was ineffective and therefore discontinued. As a sop to this method the main lecture PowerPoint slides were amended to include a section at the back of the slides. This section was a glossary of financial terms and words that might cause difficulty when used in a financial context. The slides are placed on the Blackboard website that all students can access. The glossary terms from each topic are attached at the end of the slides for that topic. The students thus have a week by week exposure to the words that cause difficulty and this exposure coincides with the lecturer's use of these words. The PowerPoint slides become a reference that can be changed into a hard copy of a glossary that compiles as the lectures progress. A survey of the class undertaking the introductory finance course showed that those students, where English is their second language, did refer to the slides. The students from Vietnam, which is considered the location with the lowest proficiency in English, were more prolific in their use of the glossary and even questioned the omission of words that they had difficulty with. Students who were proficient in English found that they gained marginal benefit from the exercise. As an overall teaching tool only those with the greatest need benefited.

An alternative approach was needed to impart the message and be more inclusive. The exercise was changed. As a trial students were given a page listing the same terms and words that were attached to the end of every lecture as detailed above. On separate pieces of paper the correct meaning, in a finance context, were printed. The students had to match the correct meanings to the handout page. The trials became an exercise in controlled chaos. Students turned in mixed results after trying to shuffle the pieces of paper into the correct spots. The logistics of the exercise overcame any learning benefits. The only benefit that flowed from this exercise was the reaction of students who managed to get the answers right. The joyous outpouring of glee when a correct answer had been given highlighted the benefits of interaction between students and the lecturer when doing the exercise. The students, when quizzed, said they had little difficulty with some words and phrases but remembered vividly those words that they got wrong from the reaction of fellow students when the answer was called out.

The next logical step was to solve the chaotic aspect of handling multiple pieces of paper. A question sheet was compiled with the meanings of the words and phrases left blank. The questions and required answers were contained on the same page. No answers were supplied so the students were required to show some

understanding of what the words might mean. In trials of this method it was found that students from countries where English is less frequently used, for example Vietnam, performed the worst. In fact those from Vietnam had difficulty right from the start and gave up trying quite quickly. Their correct answers averaged in the low 25% quartile. Hong Kong students fared marginally better and scored in the 25% to 50% quartile. Singapore students, where English is more widely spoken, scored up to 60%, with scores averaging between 50% and 60%. The lack of answers and guidance combined to result in low scores and little, if any, learning. The exercise pointed to the fact that students needed guidance and when left to their devices did not succeed.

It was decided to introduce a modicum of help, but also tease the students into comparing the different meanings when used in different contexts. The aspects of the above exercises that were considered as beneficial were also incorporated into the following trial. The feedback and class participation was one feature that was considered essential to the success of imparting the necessary understanding. This was to be brought to the fore by introducing a game playing component into the exercise that was to be conducted in a tutorial class environment. The help aspect was to be guidance towards the correct answers by supplying the first letter of the answer. Illustrations were also added to mimic, as near as possible, the computer based learning exercises that are available in schools. These illustrations also added a sense of fun and game playing. The resultant exercise is attached.

In the 'fishing trip' exercise the students read a story that uses words that are subject to frequent misinterpretation and these words appear in an every day non-commercial context that imparts a meaning they would relate to. These words are highlighted and must be entered in the following story that is finance based. Their meaning is now wholly commercial and used in a different context. The sentences in which they appear give the students a clue as to the words to choose and their meaning. The first line says "Bruce had a successful business" which equates to a 'going concern' which is the correct answer to fill in the following spaces. The illustrations aid the flow of the story and add a bit of colour to the characters.

In contrast and as a comparison to the above exercises students were asked to utilise a copy of the concordance program containing the same set of words as the fishing trip exercise. The program contained a glossary of words and a set of matches that listed the different meanings. Students had to choose the appropriate meaning. This concordance exercise required students to make their choice without any assistance, thus mimicking computer learning programs that are programmed to set out these meanings in an array from which students must make their choice. Students found that they stalled when asked to make an unaided choice. It there came as no surprise that when the students were asked to choose the method that they preferred and they considered imparted the message the best.

The overwhelming and unanimous result was that they preferred the game playing scenario. The behaviour of the students during this exercise showed the popularity of this format. Correct answers were cheered and correspondingly incorrect answers met with howls of disappointment. The response was such that future activities have been moved into a lecture theatre where students can respond electronically from an inter-active answer pad attached to their podium. The 'fishing trip' exercise is to be incorporated into a common core communications unit and used to show the nuances that await these students going forward. The inter-active system is to be used to enhance the game playing aspects of the learning process. The 'fishing trip' has been successfully adapted by the Information Technology faculty. The Law department have signalled their desire to 'go fishing.' The ultimate aim is to have a story that fits all of the faculties in the business school. During 2008 it is planned to expand the exercise even further. Funding has been set aside to roll out the program to the accounting, marketing and management faculties. Not only the law department are to keep good **council** while doing some **practice** at fishing from the sand **bar** but the accountants are to **profit** from **entering** a fishing competition to **square the ledger**.

Instrument Used

Both of the two finance focussed handouts plus the information systems follow-on are shown below. The 'fishing trip' with the required solution based 'fishing for money at the Stunned Mullet Bank' (attached) has been enhanced with relevant pictures to add to the game playing aspect of the exercise. The information systems take-off (attached) has yet to be developed beyond the trial stage. Student feedback is essential to fine tuning the final handout and this is in progress.

Conclusion

Learning about the hidden meanings of English is a challenge to both the students who must master it and to the teachers who must impart it. The retention of this knowledge is also paramount. This study has made a comparison of using technology to present to students a glossary of commonly misunderstood words with their various meanings shown, the so called concordance method, with game playing teaser handouts. The results from student feedback was that when faced with making a choice on their own from the concordance list of meanings presented to them by computer of what meaning to take they felt lost and wasted a lot of time at this juncture. They responded positively to the 'fishing trip' handout and overwhelmingly preferred this method of tuition, both for the face to face element but also the game playing aspect. Their response was also vocal and emotional which was another indicator to the success of this method. This response has led to the adoption of this method of teaching in core commercial

subjects. Technology is being used in the form of locating the lessons in wired feedback lecture theatres with 'buzzer style' response seating that allow all students to partake. The 'fishing trip' handout is planned to be adapted to all commercial subjects and used in these interactive lecture theatres.

References

Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., & Omanson, R. C. (1987). The effects and uses of diverse vocabulary instructional techniques. In M. G. McKeown & M. E. Curtis (Eds.), *The nature of vocabulary acquisition* (pp. 147–163). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Brown, S., & Perry, F. L. (1991). A comparison of three learning strategies for ESL vocabulary acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly, 25*(4), 655–670.

Craik, F. I. M., & Tulving, E. (1972) Levels of processing: A framework for memory research. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior, 11*, 671-684.

Crow, J. T., & Quigley, J. R. (1985). A semantic field approach to passive vocabulary acquisition for reading comprehension. *TESOL Quarterly*, *19*(3), 497–513.

Hall, J. W., Wilson, K. P., & Patterson, R. J. (1981). Mnemotechnics: Some limitations of the mnemonic keyword method for the study of foreign language vocabulary. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 73*, 345–357.

Johns, T. (1991). Should you be persuaded: Two examples of data-driven learning. *English Language Research Journal*, *4*, 1–16.

Lamy, M-N., & Mortensen, H. J. K. (2007). Using concordance programs in the modern foreign languages classroom. *Information and Communications Technology for Language Teachers*, Module 2.4.

Murison-Bowie, S. (1993). Linguistic corpora and language teaching. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 16*, 182–199.

Owen, C. (1996). Do concordances require to be consulted? *ELT Journal, 50*(3), 219–224.

Oxford, R. (1986). *Second language learning strategies: Current research and implications for practice (TR3).* Los Angeles: University of California, Centre for Language Education and Research.

Oxford-Carpenter, R. (1985). *A new taxonomy of second language learning strategies.* Washington, DC: CAL/ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics.

Pressley, M., Levin, J. R., & Delaney, H. D. (1982). The mnemonic keyword method. *Review of Educational Research, 52*, 61–91.

The Fishing Trip
commonly misunderstood words

The weekend had finally arrived! It was a **capital** idea that father and son would **venture** into the countryside and **share** in the experiences of a fishing trip together. The weather was not **going** to be of **concern**, as there was not a cloud in the sky, so Bruce and his son George were eager to set off on their fishing trip to Mandurah. It was **fundamental** for Bruce to relax with his son, as work and been very busy and had taken most of his time.

He hoped his son was **mature** enough to enjoy the trip and might **redeem** himself by catching a fish. Perhaps they would take this **opportunity** to enjoy themselves as the trip would **cost** a lot.

They first drove to the shopping **forum** to buy some fishing **tackle,** which was guaranteed to catch the biggest fish, but they had run out of **stock**. They drove slowly through the **yield** sign and round the **curve** so he wouldn't lose **control** of the car. George noticed that their car needed petrol, so they drove to the petrol refuelling **facility** and filled up the tank. The petrol overflowed but they did not bother to clean this **discharge**. Bruce **redeemed** his discount petrol **coupon** by signing his **initial** 'B' on the signature line.

Once they had pitched their tent, George grabbed his fishing rod and rode his **operating cycle** down to Lake Bonnydoon. He found a great fishing **spot** and sat on the edge of the lake next to a large **plant** and set up his fishing rod. Suddenly the plastic **float** disappeared underwater, so George held tightly onto the **handle**. After much pulling, he finally managed to reel in the fish. It was **outstanding**!

He had never seen so many beautiful colours on a fish. His dad said that catching such a colorful fish was more than **par** for the course and as they had caught such a big one, they could **scrap** the rest of the fishing and spend the **residual** time relaxing. A smaller fish would have been of **nominal** value and its flesh not so **divisible**, so at least they both could have **equity** in the fish. A fisherman nearby liked the catch and they **mutually** admired it and, as they thought the catch would not be matched by anyone else, they considered it **exclusive**. The **long** and the **short** of it was that catching this fish **warranted** a **return** to this lake in the **future**!

Fishing for money at the Stunned Mullet Bank

BRUCE

EVIL BORIS

Bruce had a successful shoe business that the Stunned Mullet bank thought was a g_____ c_____ so when his current loan was to m_____ they expected him to pay the amount and thus r_____ the loan. Inflation was on the rise so the n_____ r_____ of interest on the loan was expected to rise, thus the y_____ c_____ would be upward sloping.

Bruce could refinance his shoe business by borrowing either long-term or on the short-term money market. These cash markets were a good f_____ to borrow money and the loans would be m_____ e_____ as he had to choose one or the other. He couldn't borrow half of the money short-term and half long-term as his security on the loan was not d_____. The loan f_____ was to be secured on p_____ and machinery that he had. The bank had valued the plant at the same value as Bruce had, so its f_____ value was the same.

One reason for the loan was the long time between buying stock for the shoe factory, turning it into finished goods and the receipt of money for these goods. The bank said his o_____ c_____ was too long so Bruce decided to get finance by issuing a debenture for a face value of $100,000 paying 10% interest and repayable in 5 years' time. When the debenture was due to be repaid, he could s_____ the plant and use this r_____ value to d_____ the loan. The i_____ investor response to the debenture with a $100,000 p _____ value with a c_____ of 10% that would m_____ in 5 years' time, was slow. The rate of interest paid on similar debentures was higher than 10% so traders thought this o_____ c_____ of alternative investments too tempting.

Information Systems fishing trip - Jim and Bob's Fishing Trip

Jim and Bob were both **members of the same class** and decided to go on a fishing expedition during the summer holidays. Together they caught a **bus** to the coast, although they stopped at the **hardware** on the way to buy Bob a new tackle box. When they arrived they unpacked their gear and sat on the end of the pier.

Bob liked to use a hand-reel, while Jim preferred to use a **net**. Jim already had his net in the water while Bob was still having trouble trying to bait his hook with a **worm**. Eventually he sorted it out and lowered his **line** into the water from the **top down**.

"I told you my net was faster," Jim boasted.

By midday Jim had caught a whole **stack** of fish, but Bob hadn't managed a single **byte**. "That was a complete **flop**," he moaned, and suggested they head across the road to the **kiosk** for some lunch. While they were standing in the **queue**, they saw an attractive woman under a **tree** on the other side of the road – Jim had a vague **memory** of seeing her before… that's right! She was a famous **model**, and he'd seen her in a celebrity dancing competition on TV a few nights ago. She danced very well - Jim remembered she'd received **five nines** from the judges.

Eventually they got to the front of the queue and the **server** behind the **counter** took their order: some fish and **chips** for Jim, and a pie for Bob. Bob took the **token** to collect their order and they chatted while their lunch was prepared. Until Jim spied a banana peel on the floor, that is.

"That could be dangerous," he mused aloud.

Jim had no sooner said this when the girl behind the counter slipped on it. Jim and Bob both watched in horror as their **server crashed** onto the floor, sending pie, fish and chips everywhere.

"Ow," cried the girl. "That really **hertz**!"

Bob was worried that she might have injured her **backbone**, and was very relieved when she got up and started to cook their lunches again. Too hungry to wait, though, Jim and Bob bought a couple of sandwiches and a couple of **cookies** from the **sidebar** and left.

When they returned to the pier, the model they had seen earlier was **lurking** around near their fishing equipment, and as they got closer, they realized she was **sniffing the net!** A little taken aback, they asked her what she was doing – she said she'd lost her credit card in a **fishing scam**, but of course her **card** wasn't in Jim's net – just a few **C-shells**. (And none of them contained any **Perl**s, either.)

Nevertheless, Jim was a nervous kind of guy and didn't want to get caught in the **frame** for something he didn't do, and anyway, it was getting late and **traffic** would be **congested** on the **home drive** if they didn't leave soon. So they collected their gear, packed up the car and went home.