Incorporating Corpus Linguistics into ELT in MENA[1] Countries: Bridging the Gap

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Abstract

There have always been debates on how to teach, what to teach and when to teach what. Over time, teaching methods have frequently been revisited and updated. Recently, with the advent of computer technology, there emerged some new teaching methodologies like corpus-based learning (also called Data-Driven Learning (DDL)) and computer-assisted language learning (CALL). This means that the practices and the attitudes towards English teaching need to be updated, too. This is not, however, the case in English classes in MENA countries where teachers predominantly use the traditional methods of teaching.

Consequently, recent reports have shown that MENA countries have the very lowest proficiency in English language in the world. This paper introduces corpus linguistics and corpus-based learning to the MENA English classrooms in order to improve the English language learning process and make, for the time being, a balance between traditional and modern teaching methods. This balance can be realized in incorporating inductive learning with ductive learning one the one hand, and student-centered classes and teacher-centered classes on the other. In order to showcase the advantages of using corpus-based method in the language classroom, corpus-based materials and concordances are designed using the Sketch Engine and the Brown corpus.

Keywords: Corpus Linguistics, Corpus-Based Learning, Concordances, ELT, Inductive Learning.

1. Introduction

The interest in language learning has always been there since time memorial. While new approaches to language teaching keep emerging, the previous ones keep getting updated in order to cope with the time and demands and to provide better options. In the past few decades, some recent approaches like the Suggestopedia, the Total Physical Approach and the Silent Way provide new and revised methods to language teaching. These methods have been a subject to a lot of debates and controversies. The reason seems to have been the familiarity of traditional approaches to educators worldwide and the fear of trying something new. Boulton (2009, p. 02) argues that "their limited adoption world-wide is perhaps partly due to dogmatic adherence to ideology which remains impervious to evidence and experimentation and insufficiently able to adopt to local cultures."

2. Status of English in MENA Countries

English language use in MENA countries traces back to the British colonialism in the twentieth century, resulting in the integration of English in the majority of the states' public schools. Since then, the attitude towards English in MENA region has remained positive and English has been

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[1] The Middle East and North Africa

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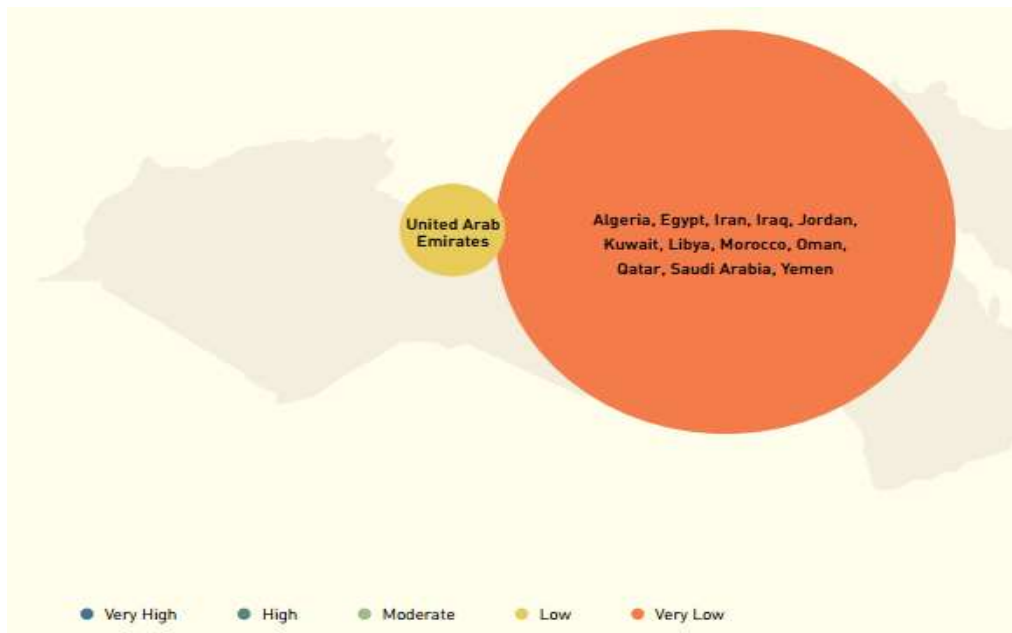
considered a facilitator rather than a hindrance. There are, however, some voices that advocate the prominence of Arabic language in the region; these voices consider English in one way or another a threat to Arabic language.

In spite of that, English has established itself as the language of trade, business and political communications. It is the most spoken foreign language in the region and there is a remarkably large number of individuals in the region who study English for a range of purposes, in informal and formal settings. Also, English is one the subjects of the national curricular in almost all MENA countries. Regions, however, differ in the stage at which English is introduced. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, English is introduced at the fourth grade whereas it is introduced at the seventh grade in Yemen.

One of the biggest challenges of ELT in MENA is that English teachers (who are mostly from the natives of MENA) are not well-trained for teaching; they lack fluency, accuracy, proficiency and they struggle a lot in getting ideas and information across to the students. They are very static; applying the same method in all their classes and they show no scope of improvement. They do struggle in applying effective EFL teaching methods because they are not sufficiently educated, equipped, and prepared to understand the needs of the students and tailor their teaching accordingly.

Another apparent flaw of the ELT practices in MENA countries is that it is lopsided. The rules that teachers keep presenting to students in the class are the simplest parts of the language. Since students are relying totally on their teachers and not doing any self-learning on their own, they fail to discover the complexity of the language and the other hidden rules required for better fluency and accuracy. Presentation of simple rules leads attaining low levels of language. Intensive, focused, and self-driven discovery of rules lead to a better language level and ensures a high rate of retention.

Considering the way English is taught in the Middle East, it is not surprising that the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have the lowest levels of English proficiency in the world according to a report published in 2015 by EF-EPI (Education First, English Proficiency Index), an international education company that focuses on language, academics and cultural experience. The report also shows that no progress is noticed in English proficiency despite spending big on education, reducing the education barriers and increasing the number of girl students in classes. The picture below shows that all MENA countries have a very low proficiency of English except UAE due to the high number of foreign English speakers.

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Very High ● High ● Moderate ● Low ● Very Low

EF-EPI Report: 2015

Not only do the MENA countries have the lowest levels of English proficiency in the world, the report also shows that the proficiency is declining which is shocking considering the amount of money invested on education. The report shows that MEENA countries spend per student more than any other countries in Asia, but the result is disappointing. This is an alarm for the need of reforming the educational systems in order to make use of the new resources and technology of education.

3. The Corpus-Based Method

The shift of focus in English language teaching from communication to from and structure started in the mid-1990s. This shift was triggered by the criticism against the many aspects of communicative language teaching (CLT). Another reason relates to the inability to define CLT, leaving it open for "unprincipled eclecticism, varying from teacher to teacher" (Hadley 2002, p. 02). The inability to define CLT has led to the emergence of new methods like PPP, Task-Based Learning, Silent Way, etc.

In MENA countries, the debate has not reached the level of CLT much as teachers are still in love with the Grammar Translation Method. Students still depend on memorization for the sake of passing exams, classes are teacher-centered with little involvement of students. Most of the students depend totally on their teachers and completely stick to the textbooks which is normal as the aim is to only pass the test.

Recent approaches to language teaching including corpus-based method highlight the importance of less teacher-dependent learning. Students have had so many options in language learning due to the revolution in technology and internet. Computers can work as informants with witch students can interact for information. Students just need to be trained on how to ask and access computers for information. The passive role of the students in the class hinder the learning process and results in passive learning where students get to learn about the language rather than the language itself. In order to make an urgent reform for the ELT practices in MENA countries, corpus-based method is proposed to the English classroom in the MENA region. It is a recent methodology that makes use of the advent of computer technology and corpora in ELT.

3.1. Samples of Corpus-Based Activities

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This section includes some corpus-based materials for the sake of showcasing the advantages of corpus-based method. They are just samples of what teachers can do with a corpus in language teaching. The types of corpus enquiry tools are very large in number and can be used to create various types of materials. One of these very interesting corpus query tools is undoubtedly the sketch Engine (Kilgarriff, Rychlý, Smrz, & Tugwell, 2004) which provides so many options for the interested language teacher. Not only is it pre-loaded with many corpora, but it also has built-in tools that allow teachers or learners to create their own corpora either through using the WebBootCat tool or working on the existing corpora in the website. The Brown Corpus, a corpus of Present-Day Edited American English compiled at Brown University in the 1960s, is used. It consists of 1,007,299 tokens.

3.1.1. The Concordance

The first option is concordancing through which a teacher can obtain a concordance list using either the sentence mode or the famous KWIC mode and they can be manipulated in many ways like ranking the hits by quality.

Wish is one of the troublesome verbs for pre-intermediate and intermediate students. In most of the grammar books, they focus only on the hypothetical use of wish and ignore other uses. This is confusing for students as most of them think that it is only used in the scenario where it is followed by past tense and only were in case of verb to be. This is misleading and confusing. First, in informal conversations, *was* is frequently used instead of the formal *were*. Second, *wish* has its literal meaning that is wishing someone good luck, which is followed by the infinitive to. It can also be transitive and intransitive, and it is commonly used as a noun. Some of these details would be missed in a traditional class where teachers spoon-feed the rules to the students. If the teacher wants to have a single grammar focus, the sketch engine allows the teacher or the learner to manipulate the setting and look for the

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word, the type of the token that follows or precedes the word, and the size of the window for the token to occur.


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Query wish 193 > Positive filter (excluding KWIC) V.* 158 > Random sample 158 (134.39 per million) ⓘ

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A03            the needs of those millions who have no  wish  to receive care at the taxpayers <g/> ' expense
A13       Milwaukee rookies sighed and remarked , ``  Wish  I was 40 , and a top-grade big leaguer
A21            suspicion removed . Still , I do <g/> n't  wish  to appear happy at somebody else <g/> 's
A36            legislation in the field of labor `` if we  wish  to prevent monopolistic fixing of wages
A36       of wages , production or prices and if we  wish  to preserve the freedom of the employer
A39              in the minors " , Maris recalls , `` I  wished  I had gone to Oklahoma " ) . To an extent
A41       who were in no hurry for independence and  wished  to wait until the Congo grew up . However
B02       less exciting than New York Democrats may  wish  , it nevertheless must be made . The vote
B08       and to show off her ring I had a sobering  wish  to say something meaningful to her , something
B08  meaningful to her , something her mother would  wish  said . For a while there was such shrill
B15           Asian languages in the seventh grade . I  wish  you could see the situation as I see it
B16           urging the sale of meat after 6 p.m. , I  wish  to state the other side of the story .
B16    Illinois Commission for Handicapped Children  wishes  to commend the recent announcement by the
B19           ? To the editor of the Inquirer : I just  wish  to congratulate Inspector Trimmer and his
B19        Square to the editor of the Inquirer : I  wish  to advocate two drastic changes in Washington
B22       tightening up " and `` economizing " . We  wish  the President would remember that `` fiscal
C07   Chabrier and his librettists chuckle . But they  wish  they could bring it back . Chabrier <g/>
C11     undergoes artificial insemination against the  wishes  of her husband is the unlikely heroine
C12    becoming conscious of quality and `` does not  wish  to be associated with radio which is any
C14         the contemporary musical scene . But one  wishes  , when the appetite is whetted , as it

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In this exercise, the teacher can ask the students to go through the verbs that follow *wish* carefully and report to him either in speaking or writing. The best thing about this method is that students get to practice more than one skill.

3.1.2. Cloze Exercise

A cloze as defined by Jonz (1990) is "the practice of measuring language proficiency or Language comprehension by requiring examinees to restore words that have been removed from otherwise normal text." Cloze has been used intensively in testing language proficiency, but it has been proven effective in language teaching, too. It fits reading comprehension exercises more, where students are given a text with some vocabulary removed from it and they have to guess the missing words relying on contexts. It can be challenging through using distractors; extra words along with the key words.

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A03	the needs of those millions who have no	wish	to _____ care at the taxpayers <g/> ' expense
A13	Milwaukee rookies sighed and remarked , ``	Wish	I _____ 40 , and a top-grade big leaguer
A21	suspicion removed . Still , I do <g/> n't	wish	to _____ happy at somebody else <g/> 's
A36	legislation in the field of labor `` if we	wish	to _____ monopolistic fixing of wages
A36	of wages , production or prices and if we	wish	to _____ the freedom of the employer
A39	in the minors " , Maris recalls , `` I	wished	I _____ gone to Oklahoma ") . To an extent
A41	who were in no hurry for independence and	wished	to _____ until the Congo grew up . However
B02	less exciting than New York Democrats may	wish	, it nevertheless must _____ made . The vote
B08	and to show off her ring I had a sobering	wish	to _____ something meaningful to her , something
B08	meaningful to her , something her mother would	wish	_____ . For a while there was such shrill
B15	Asian languages in the seventh grade . I	wish	you _____ the situation as I see it
B16	urging the sale of meat after 6 p.m. , I	wish	to _____ the other side of the story .
B16	Illinois Commission for Handicapped Children	wishes	to _____ the recent announcement by the
B19	? To the editor of the Inquirer : I just	wish	to _____ Inspector Trimmer and his
B19	Square to the editor of the Inquirer : I	wish	to _____ two drastic changes in Washington
B22	tightening up " and `` economizing " . We	wish	the President _____ *remember* that `` fiscal
C07	Chabrier and his librettists chuckle . But they	wish	they could _____ it back . Chabrier <g/>
C11	undergoes artificial insemination against the	wishes	of her husband _____ the unlikely heroine
C12	becoming conscious of quality and `` does not	wish	to _____ associated with radio which is any
C14	the contemporary musical scene . But one	wishes	, when the appetite _____ whetted , as it

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Cloze exercises are interesting in language teaching. They give language learners a chance to lean words through contexts instead of memorizing them in isolation. The secret of interest lies in creating a cloze exercise that involves words related to a particular topic. The problem with cloze exercises is that they are time consuming and they are not easy to prepare. Using the sketch engine, however, it is fast and easy to create a cloze material for teaching.

4. Advantages of Corpus-Based Method
4.1. A middle Ground Between Traditional and Recent Approaches

The biggest advantage of integrating the corpus-based method in the English class in MENA countries is to strike a balance between traditional and recent methods of teaching. As a modern approach, corpus-based method sees grammar as a set of interrelated prototypes rather than static rules. It is an organic system that consists of conscious-raising activities. "Conscious-raising is the deliberate attempt to draw the learners' attention especially to the formal properties of the target language" (Rutherford and Smith, 1982, quoted in Hadley, 2002, p. 09). This, indeed, explains Jones' (1991) statement on DDL that "research is too serious to be left for researchers." Students work as researchers in the journey of learning the language attempting to figure out rules and patterns on their own.

Corpus-based method draws from the traditional approaches in that it uses carefully prepared materials for language teaching. The materials are selected and presented by the teacher. The difference lies in the fact that corpus-based method uses authentic materials extracted from authentic language samples as opposed to the traditional approaches that use idealized and contrived language. Another difference relates to the way these materials are presented. In traditional methods, teachers present the rules to the students first and then give them the materials to practice and consolidate what they have

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learned. In corpus-based method, the teacher is a facilitator who present the materials to the students and the latter figure out the rules and the patterns on their own with the guidance of the teachers when needed.

4.2. Inductive Learning

Recent methods of teaching emphasize the use of inductive method of learning in classrooms. As traditional methods failed to prepare the students to communicate, modern methods needed new ways of involving students in the learning process. In traditional teaching, the role of the learners is very passive, they are only receptive, and the communication almost goes in one direction, from teachers to students. Traditional methods present the language rule in silver platters to the learners who have to memorize and then apply. Learning this way enables students to accumulate knowledge about the target language but not the language itself. This is the case in most of the MENA classrooms where teaching is very traditional, and the outcomes are disappointing.

Introducing corpus-based method to MENA classes can bring about a radical shift in the learning process. The inductive learning will enable Yemeni students to be involved in the learning process, figuring out rules on their own and building their own learning styles. Students discovering patterns on their own is called inductive learning. The students go through the raw data and discover patterns and move into generalizations. Practice comes first and then comes the rule in contrary to deductive learning where students are given rules to practice upon and accept blindly.

Boulton (2009) talks about the basic premise of data-driven learning "where learners examine naturally occurring language and discover patterns on their own. DDL is alleged to have many advantages-to foster learning autonomy, increase language awareness, and improve ability to deal with authentic language, and so on."

4.3. Language Skills Integration

Since students are learning on their own with little guidance from the teacher, they get to use more than one language skill in the class. In the case of *wish*, again, given the concordance, the students can identify the rules in groups and ask the teacher for help when in doubts. In the group discussion, they are going to learn grammar through the rule they come up with, they are going to learn the new vocabulary as they explain to each other or get the meaning from the dictionary or the teacher if it is hard to get from the context and then they might be asked to report their findings in writing. Thus, in one corpus-based exercise, the students get to speak, write and get to know new grammar rules and vocabulary.

4.4. Promoting Research

Corpus-based learning (or DDL) is built on the notion that "research is too serious to be left for researchers." (Johns, 1991, p. 2). It looks at the language learner as a research worker who embarks on the journey of discovering the target language. Throughout his experience in using concordance, Johns (1990) realized that the use of concordance can have a considerable influence on the process of language learning. This influence can be seen in developing the students' ability to see pattering in the target language and form generalizations to account for that pattering.

'Every student a Sherlock Holmes' is T. Johns' slogan for the DDL prospective on the language learner (Johns, 1997:101). The advantage is for students to get involved immensely with authentic natural data instead of the artificial language. As researchers, students can always have several ways of looking up something or conducting inquiry. They are equipped with the techniques and the skills that enable them to conduct learning on their own instead of depending totally on teachers. This, in

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turn, will help the learners mature as researchers, not only in language learning, but also in other academic and professional matters as well. We live in the era of research and technology. Now everything is researched not accepted blindly and DDL provides the learner with both research training and technology in order to be a Sherlock Holmes.

4.5. Building Confidence

Having no slightest chance to communicate in the language, MENA learners are very low in confidence about their language. They find it very difficult and embarrassing when involved in a very basic conversation. This is not surprising considering the way they learn English. Having very few and shy chances to communicate in English does not provide a confidence boost.

Corpus-based method makes the difference when it comes to confidence. The corpus-based approach ensures that students are involved in their learning, they discover things on their own and they interact in the class with peers and teacher. Consequently, their confidence gradually builds up and it becomes normal for them to interact in other situations. The more the students communicate in the language, the better their confidence becomes.

5. Conclusion

Considering the status of English language teaching in MENA countries as discussed above, one can argue that data-driven learning has a lot to offer to MENA classrooms. Adopting corpus-based materials in the language classroom is hugely recommended for better outcomes. The introduction of corpus-based method is a radical change that strikes a balance between traditional methods of teaching to recent and updated methods that cope up with technology. It is time for teachers to realize that students can be in charge of their own learning. Giving the students the chance to discover things on his own boosts their confidence and prepares them for self-independence style of learning.

Some of the finest merits of corpus-based method are that it encourages inductive learning which maximizes the chance of retention. Students can retain the things they learned through induction faster and better. Also, through using corpora on their own students can develop many skills: the ability to research, the ability to report, the ability to analyze, the ability to make conclusions, and so on.

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