CONCORDANCES FOR LOWER-LEVEL CLASSES

Gordon Cain
Teacher of ESOL
Coverdale International English College, Australia
Coverdale Christian School, Australia

Abstract

This article relates how the author used a CD-ROM encyclopaedia, a concordancer (Wordsmith Tools), and a word processor to make concordances suitable for lower-level learners. These concordances helped overcome the unfamiliarity of 80-character KWIC lines and the difficulties of obscure vocabulary, and were useful in the teaching of grammar or lexis.

Successful use of corpora with my ESL classes has long been a goal of mine, and an elusive one initially. As a teacher of lower-level ESL students preparing for secondary or initial tertiary studies, few of my students have highly-developed study skills or linguistic sensitivity. In fact, my initial forays into corpora in the classroom met with little success and with questioning from colleagues.

Few of my students have ever seen a concordance line in their lifetime. Good grammarians and lexicographers are the products of years of hard work, study, training and aptitude. To simply hand some well-chosen 80-character KWIC concordance printouts to my students, and expect them to arrive at valid and useful conclusions, was expecting too much of my classes. Furthermore, to attempt to train students in such skills was unrealistically optimistic.¹

If I could not easily change my students’ ability to handle raw KWIC data, at least I could attempt to make my data more useful to my students by simplifying it and organising it better.

I have used concordances in the classroom with great success, as a result of investing much more work into their preparation before using them. The steps involved are:

First, upon finding a grammatical or lexical point that may be usefully addressed with corpus data, I go to WordSmith and print out a raw KWIC concordance for myself². This is then studied and analysed to see what patterns naturally emerge from the data. A quick check of a couple useful grammar books helps clarify my analysis and ensures that I have made no major mistakes.

314
Next, I sort the data into as simple and pedagogically useful patterns as possible, for beginner- to intermediate-level students.

The next step is to find the best examples of each lexical or grammatical point I wish to cover in the lesson. To do this I reduce my concordances to 5-10 clear sentences, bearing in mind the need for simplicity if students are to focus on the key points of this exercise. Often, for this step, viewing all 400 characters of each concordance entry is helpful.

Following that, it remains for me to select and copy the remaining concordance entries to a word processor, where I then reduce each entry to a single, full sentence, and then bold the keyword (global edit commands can do this for you).

The value of sentences versus 80-character lines is probably obvious to anyone who has ever attempted to use KWIC lines of output with linguistically untrained students. By resorting to whole sentences, much of the strangeness of concordance-based work is removed for students, and they are much more comfortable with the process, and thus presumably more apt to learn.

Once my example sentences are in the word processor, I add notes for the students and prepare a useful handout for them. From this, many students come to helpful conclusions.

Next, I provide an activity in which they must apply this new knowledge to examples of English.

Finally, students receive a summary sheet explaining what they have been looking at, and hopefully simply recording conclusions they have already arrived at.

Why do I prefer this to simple 80-character KWIC printouts? First and foremost, it works for me and provides me with a useful permanent resource that I can then reuse many times and at many levels thereafter. Second, it provides a welcome variation to all else that takes place in class, and some students genuinely enjoy it and warm to it. Finally, it is easier for me to teach and for my students to profit from.

One example of a language activity which benefitted from the use of concordances follows:

When student were writing about their home cities, I noted a great deal of confusion around the word *there* and the grammar associated with it.
So, going to my "quick-and-dirty" corpus of articles on various countries from my Grollier's CD-ROM Encyclopaedia and using WordSmith, I selected the show sentence option and printed out a basic 80-character KWIC concordance of there. I then examined and sorted this list. Examples with either obscure vocabulary or advanced syntax were deleted so as to focus on the language point at hand, and not new language (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: My original concordance printout, sorted, for my own use. This shows whole sentences, but in an 80-character KWIC format.

WordSmith Tools – 22/03/2001 21:10:47

1 south, making double cropping possible there.
2 increasingly violent separatist movement there.
3 hina to take advantage of cheaper labor there.
4 ut more than 45% of the population live there.
5 er called loma, and mesquite also grows there.
6 ng the PLO to evacuate its headquarters there.
7 Most of Peru's mineral wealth is found there.
8 t Siberian inland sea that once existed there.
9 supply for all higher organisms living there.
10 With the overthrow of Leguia there appeared the Partido Aprista Peru there.
11 ed themselves Buddhist or Confucianist, there are about 3 million Roman Catholic there.
12 rs of each nationality group in Russia- there are also 60,000 Europeans and Amer there.
13 In addition, there are approximately 100 in all-rega there.
14 there are communities of immigrant India there.
15 There are few natural springs or rivers, There are few oases, and the region is s there.
16 There are four domestic airlines, two of there are iron ore deposits.
17 there are major uranium deposits in the there are no railroads, and roads are of there.
18 self-sufficient in food production and there are no political parties or legis there.
19 are located in Madrid and Barcelona, and there are persistent food shortages. there.
20 re located in Madrid and Barcelona, and there are public and private schools thr there.
21 are mostly ephemeral, flowing only when there are regional universities in most there.
22 oldings to about 40 ha (100 acres), but there are several other state-run univer there.
23 Since that time there are small communities of Christian there are substantial deposits of chromi there.
24 hough health facilities remain limited, there are three universities, two polyte there.
25 art of the country, near the Black Sea, there are wet seasons or local storms. there.
26 The birthrate is high, and there are widespread evasions of the law there has been some foreign investment f there.
27 36 entaria and the Great Australian Bight, there has been significant progress in h there is a small area with a subtropical there is a government ban on birth-contr there.
28 37 eries C (50 degrees-86 degrees F), and there is a significant Christian minorit there.
29 38 there is a relative lack of indentation. there is also a serious shortage of medi there.
30 39 There is no centralized organized church there is an international airport at Bei there.
31 39 There is no counterpart to the American
there was little industrial activity.
there was no central government to mount
there were 23 million passenger cars and
there were clashes between Iranian demon
there were elections to the local and re
There were further indications that Nort
there were international efforts to rest
there were more than 55,000 Vietnamese r
there were problems of hoarding, illicit
There were serious riots in 1967, inspir
there are replenished by frequent volcan
there at all.
there averages 587 mm (23 in).
there before AD 395.
there during the 9th century, Druzes in
there during the two wet seasons (April
there each peasant family was permitted
there for centuries before the Spanish c
there, including Kuala Lumpur (the capit
there remained after Vietnam’s 1989 mill
There winters are mild and rainy; summer
There, yearly rainfall levels can exceed

(All texts from Grollier CD-ROM Encyclopedia 1997 ©Grollier Corp 1996)

Then expanding my view to 400 characters, I selected and pasted to a word processor the entire concordance of whole sentences. The 400-character view ensures that entire sentences are captured, even if lengthy.

I then arranged these final whole sentences into groups to show the various uses of *there*.

Thus completed, I had a reusable resource for my classes, and I used it in the following way: First, I gave my students the handout of the annotated and organised concordance (see Figure 2). I had them inductively examine my pre-sorted sentences. Most students struggled with this but eventually came up with the correct answers. Certainly the success rate was higher and the bewilderment rate lower than with a printout of raw corpus data.
There: Grammar and use

Group 1: There + BE-verbs. This is the most common use of ‘there’:

**Present tense BE:**
1. **There are** also 60,000 Europeans and Americans, 57,000 Filipinos (mostly domestic servants), and 30,000 Indians and Pakistanis.
2. In addition, **there are** communities of immigrant Indians and Chinese in the cities and towns.
3. **There are** four domestic airlines, two of which are subsidiaries of Qantas.
4. **There are** major uranium deposits in the Northern Territory, South Australia, Western Australia, and other parts of the country.
5. **There are** public and private schools throughout the country, but the quality of education is lower in rural areas.
6. **There is** a significant Christian minority among all three groups.
7. **There is** also a serious shortage of medical equipment.
8. **There is** an international airport at Beirut, and a government-owned railway connects Beirut with Tripoli and Damascus.
9. ... and **there is** heavier rainfall there during the two wet seasons (April to June and September to December).
10. **There is** no centralized organized church.

**Present perfect BE:**
11. **Since** that time **there has been** some foreign investment from China, Thailand, Korea, Singapore, the United States, and elsewhere.
12. Although health facilities remain limited, **there has been** significant progress in health care **since** the reunification of the country in 1976.

**Past tense BE:**
13. [The] economy was based primarily on farming, and **there was** little industrial activity.
14. In 1990 **there were** 23 million passenger cars and more than 5 million trucks and buses.
15. In the 1990s tourists again visited Angkor Wat, and **there were** international efforts to restore Cambodia's deteriorating architectural wonders.
16. In 1990 **there were** more than 55,000 Vietnamese refugees confined in camps awaiting resettlement overseas or repatriation to Vietnam.

**NB:** Other tenses of BE also occur in this use of ‘there’.

Group 2. How is ‘there’ in the following two groups different from ‘there’ in the previous sentences? (Hint: Consider meaning, and consider grammar.):

Group 2A:
17. In 1982, Israeli forces again invaded, occupying Beirut and forcing the PLO to evacuate its headquarters there.
18. In recent years many production processes have been relocated to China to take advantage of cheaper labor there.
19. Soil nutrients there are replenished by frequent volcanic eruptions, and the lava’s alkalinity is conducive to plant growth.
20. [The country] has a mean temperature of -2 degrees C (28 degrees F) in January, and 17 degrees C (63 degrees F) in July; annual precipitation there averages 587 mm (23 in).

Group 2B:
21. . . but more than 45% of the population live there.
22. The West Siberian inland sea that once existed there.
23. Most of Peru's mineral wealth is found there.
24. . . . no form of agriculture is possible there at all.
25. Christianity was firmly established there before AD 395.
26. Most of Malaysia's largest cities are also there, including Kuala Lumpur (the capital), George Town, Ipoh, and Johor Baharu.
27. Many of the several hundred thousand Vietnamese who later settled there remained after Vietnam's 1989 military withdrawal, . .

28. Group 3. Out of 63 sentences, only three followed this pattern:
29. There winters are mild and rainy; summers are warm, humid, and rainless.
30. There, yearly rainfall levels can exceed 3,700 mm (146 in).
31. All of this was true in the agricultural sphere, too, but there each peasant family was permitted to farm a small parcel of land.

What is different about this use of ‘there’ from all the others? (Hint: Consider location and meaning.)
Next I handed to my students a list of sentences they had written, edited to preserve anonymity, though few really seemed to care about that. (see Figure 3).

**Correcting Your Sentences!**
Now decide which of these sentences written by students are correct, and which are incorrect. Rewrite the incorrect ones correctly. (NB: The mistakes only concern ‘There’ and its grammar — mainly the verbs.):

1. In the Po Lin Monastery there have a giant Buddha statue. So you should go there and have a look.

2. Then when it is dinnertime, why don’t you go to Aberdeen to have a seafood dinner, because the seafood there is fantastic and fresh.

3. On the Peak, you can see a beautiful night view of Hong Kong there.

4. From 1:30-4:30 is shopping time in Tsim Sha Tsui, because there are so hot in the afternoon.

5. At 4:00-7:00 go to Stanley and have a walk on the beach in the evening. There are nice sunsets.

6. When you get there you catch a bus which is going to [the city].

7. When you get there you should catch a taxi to the Fish Market.

8. There are everything in [the city] for tourists.

9. There are many famous brand of goods there including perfumes, clothes, foods and the like.
10. So you shouldn’t miss the chance to eat dim sum or Chinese food there.

11. You can have a vegetarian lunch in there.

12. There are many shops and cheap things there.

13. There we can buy some food.

14. You can see the night view in [my city], there is also beautiful.

15. Beside the hotel, there is a small river and a ship situated on the river.

16. This will take you to the city. . .There is a hot springs which is warm year-round.

17. [The city] is many people visit there because there are easy to find shops. . .

18. [The city] is many wholesale shops in there, so many people visit there.

19. Seoul is a great place to spend a day, because there is lots of transport.
Several of the sentences are correct, and the rest are incorrect. It is up to the students to work in small groups of two to four, distinguishing correct from incorrect sentences, and correcting the latter. I find it is best to keep up the pace at this point, limiting their time to, say, 20 minutes. I also do not give any answers to the students, choosing rather to force them to wrestle with the language and coming up with their own questions and difficulties. If students finish early, I only go so far as to tell them how many sentences they have correct, but not even which ones. This keeps them focussed on the language task at hand.

Their questions and difficulties are then hopefully resolved when I project an OHT of the handout onto the whiteboard, and have the class correct the sentences. After they have put in their best effort, I intervene and point out any mistakes that remain in their work on the board, and help them with any they cannot correct.

Next I return their original writings to them, with only problems related to *there* marked but not corrected. Students then return to the computer lab and correct their writings. This again forces the students to grapple with language on their own (or with each other). Deeper mental processing is thus required, further reinforcing the point being taught. The teacher of course must monitor and ensure that students revise their work *correctly*.

Finally - and perhaps the next day, as retention benefits from breaks - I hand to the students my grammar summary for *there*. Perhaps it would be better to first ask students to attempt to formulate and write their own grammar of *there* before giving them my 'authoritative' version. The advantages would be that they are further forced to wrestle with the behaviour of the language they are examining and they would be forced to use English to express these abstractions.

Thus completed, and in its final form, this lesson resource is reusable for many classes and many levels in the future. Students, meanwhile, need no linguistic training, no initiation into the use of corpora or concordances, and no special software. They do however have to do inductive language work based on concordances, and they do gain the benefits of examining real examples. Their teacher, meanwhile, has created a reusable resource that should last for many years into the future without becoming stale or out-of-date to the students. And other teachers who are not trained in corpora can also use this resource with little preparation.

---

1 In 'An Evaluation of Intermediate Students' Approaches to Corpus Investigation', C Kennedy and T Miceli report on their efforts to initiate intermediate-level students of Italian at an Australian university into the use of corpora and concordances. Their conclusion after a semester of effort was that the apprenticeship now appears to be far more complex than we thought'
Before I do this, I set 'Characters in save as text' to 400 or more for later use. This means that WordSmith will create 400-character concordance lines, rather than the standard 80-character lines.

Ref C Tribble 'KWIC and Dirty Corpora' . . .

Grammarians and grammars describe there as an adverbial in most instances. I choose to simplify this metalinguistic concept to both adjective and adverb (Groups 2A and 2B of the handout). While this is not strictly correct, it is far simpler for the students to understand, and avoids teaching uadverbialsú in order to teach there.

This idea came from Rivolucri, M., and P Davis Dictation

Gordon studied finance and theology, and worked as an accountant, before becoming an English teacher. He has taught migrant, tertiary and high school students. His ESL interests include enhancing the acquisition of academic English and inspiring ordinary students to excellence. He can be contacted at: gpcain@rivernet.com.au