

Students' Attitudes toward Corpus-based Teaching Materials in ESL Settings

Yilmin Koo

Department of English  
Northern Arizona University

### **Abstract**

The aim of this project was to make the L2 learners recognize the forms of requests in English and to enhance the ability to produce appropriate forms of requests in academic English settings by using corpus data from the MICASE. The four lessons for this project provided basic awareness and knowledge on English request forms so that the most students were eventually able to use appropriate request forms. Also, this study tried to examine students' attitudes toward corpus-based teaching materials. This project started with and ended with surveys on students' attitudes toward learning request forms. Overall, the results showed that the most students had quite positive attitudes toward corpus-based teaching materials in learning request forms. The ESL teaching materials created for this study were designed to teach students how to make a request in English, based on empirical corpus data from the MICASE. Although not perfect materials, because corpus-based teaching materials in pragmatics are still very scarce and most of the existing textbooks are based on the authors' intuitions or beliefs on their native language, the teaching materials designed for this project can contribute to the field of empirical textbook materials for corpus-based teaching.

## **Background**

The present research project will focus on ESL (English as a Second Language) course materials development for English requests as a part of speech acts. People not only produce speech with grammatical structures and semantic meanings but also perform actions through the speech (Austin, 1962). For successful interaction and communication, various factors should be combined; in other words, the grammatical factors and linguistic structures must be considered within the context of the target language culture.

Oftentimes, textbook authors make instructional or pedagogical decisions out of their language intuition and belief, not based on empirical data (Biber & Reppen, 2002). Native speakers' intuitions are oftentimes not correct. The fact that only a few textbooks use actual empirical data such as *Real Grammar* (Conrad & Biber, 2009), textbook writers should reconsider how to make empirically grounded textbook materials and activities. In this light, corpus-based teaching materials could be used for empirical reasons.

Many studies have focused on specific speech acts and their realization. In particular, the speech act of requests has been a topic in several studies. For example, Fukuya and Clark (2001) focused on six different mitigators used to mitigate the imposition request force. Dealing with pragmatics-focused materials, Crandall and Basturkmen (2004) claimed that the teaching materials for pragmatics did not reflect real spoken English; thus, the textbook materials should use authentic samples of spoken discourse in English.

## **Research Questions**

1. How can corpus-based materials change learners' attitude toward learning requests in English in academic settings?

2. How can corpus-based materials be used to enhance teaching requests in ESL settings?

### **Research Methods**

16 students at level 4(A) participated in this study. This study began with a needs-assessment survey. Corpus-based teaching materials were created for four sessions of requests based on the survey results and researcher's observations. Modal and conditional structures were used as the two main syntactic structures. Activities for the sessions included DCTs, role-plays, and error corrections. Excerpts from the MICASE (Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English) were converted into animation files for pedagogic mediation. After these four sessions of learning request forms, the students' attitudes toward corpus-based teaching materials were asked in another survey.

The corpus used in this project was the MICASE which consists of approximately 1.8 million words of transcribed academic speech (Simpson et al 2002). The MICASE reflects English language users' spoken linguistic performance in academic settings. The reason why MICASE is selected in this project was that most of the students at PIE would possibly be college students in the United States while they did not seem to be exposed to pragmatic knowledge on how to make requests in academic settings.

### **Results**

There were two main purposes of this study. One was to teach students how to make requests in academic settings. The other was to obtain information about the students' attitudes toward the corpus-based teaching materials. Teaching materials based on the MICASE corpus were created in this project so that most students eventually learned how to make requests

properly in authentic English contexts. Regarding the first purpose, almost every activity from session 1 to session 4 was executed smoothly and as expected, with the exception of the word jumbling activity and written handout activity. These failures were partially due to the students' preference to visual aids over written forms and partially due to a lack of grammatical knowledge. In terms of the second purpose, the overall survey results showed that the students had quite positive attitudes toward the corpus-based teaching materials. It was reported that most students thought the four sessions were helpful and interesting. Moreover, they wanted to have corpus-based teaching materials for their individual studies. Specific reasons were collected through an individual follow-up interview after the second survey.

### **Relevance to PIE and second language learning**

The results showed that the students favored the teaching materials used in this study. In particular, they showed a great interest in the teacher-made videos and animations. This could provide ESL teachers practical ideas of how to tailor corpus-based materials. The ESL teaching materials created for this study were designed to teach students how to make a request in English, based on empirical corpus data from the MICASE. Although not perfect materials, because corpus-based teaching materials in pragmatics are still very scarce and most of the existing textbooks are based on the authors' intuitions or beliefs on their native language, the teaching materials designed for this project can contribute to the field of empirical textbook materials for corpus-based teaching.