A Corpus-based Study on the Mastery of English Language Grammar among Mature Learners of a Tertiary Open distance Learning Institution:

The case of ABOVE, a lexical item that belongs to multiple grammatical categories

The FEL Corpus Linguistics Research Team

This paper is based on a corpus of written material produced by students of a tertiary ODL institution.

- Written corpus comprising the work of adult Malaysian learners
- The texts are essays for the English for Science and Technology Purposes and English for the Workplace. These courses were selected for two reasons;
  - They both require all assignments be written in English
  - They both require all assigned works to be submitted via the online submissions system.
  - Both courses are compulsory to learners at the university.
- The corpus itself comprises 21947 files.

What tool was employed and what corpus was used?

- Wordsmith 6 corpus analysis program to analyse a corpus of 21947 assignments papers collected from the courses mentioned and over three years.

- For the purpose of this paper, only the concordance function is used with specific focus on the patterns and clusters.

Why was ABOVE focussed on?

- **ABOVE is a complex word: it is essentially a preposition but also functions as a noun.**
- **Phrase Structure Rules**
  - Prep P →Prep NP
  - Cop + Prep (is in the garage)
  - Verb + Prep (lay on his side)
  - Adj + Prep (I am happy for you / I am averse to the idea)
    - (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999:401)
- ABOVE can also appear as a NP (The above)

What was found?

- ABOVE is not a common word in the corpus with only 0.64 occurrence for every 1000 words. Thus appearing 19,215 times in the corpus of 29,888,850 words.

- In the First position preceding ABOVE configuration, the most common occurrence is as a NOUN – "the ABOVE" with 5460 occurrences.

- In L1+ABOVE, we find that the subjects are proficient in the use of ABOVE as a noun with only one glaring ungrammatical pair – "mention ABOVE" which appears 171 times. The correct version – "mentioned ABOVE" however occurs 1604 times.

- Looking at the combination of the keyword ABOVE and the word in the first position to the right of the word, we find that the occurrences **do not point to any ungrammatical combinations**. In this position, a grammatical combination would be indicated by the Prep + NP rule where the preposition is followed by any word class that are possible grammatically correct constituents of a NP.

- To verify that the observations above are correct, we looked at the clusters of words involving ABOVE that occur more than 100 times in the entire corpus. Again we find that there are no glaringly ungrammatical clusters.

What does the finding mean?

- Based on the observations made above, we conclude that in the case of ABOVE the students involved are indeed able the use the grammatical item appropriately: they know how to use the word ABOVE as a preposition and as a noun appropriately. For further research on this specific topic, we recommend a cluster and concordance analysis of other prepositions in the corpus.

Why is significant?

- The learners can use ABOVE which is multiclassed word.

- Multiclassed words like ABOVE are not easy to understand and use.

- The learners may not all that fluent in English but they are able to master the use of this class of words.