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Student approaches and attitudes towards writing in German as a foreign language, using corpus-linguistic tools

Abstract

Linguistic researchers are optimistic about what corpora can offer language learners; however, very little empirical assessment of the direct use of corpus tools is reported on in context, especially for languages other than English. One method of assessing the effectiveness and value of corpus tools is by collecting students' experiences of using them and establishing if they perceive benefits through using corpus tools.

Following a qualitative questionnaire which examined student approaches to writing in German as a foreign language, and a quantitative analysis of their writing, a writing module was designed and instituted at Rhodes University for third-year German Studies students. The writing module made use of both indirect (paper-based) and direct (computer-based) corpus-based methods to teach everyday academic

vocabulary and formulaic expressions, based on materials developed for the WHiG project in the UK. This study presents an overview of the students' attitudes and perspectives (as recorded in questionnaires and interviews), in order to give voice to the qualitative and subjective dimension of foreign language learning, which is often neglected in corpus-based studies. The participating students perceived an improvement in their writing through a changed approach to researching and using everyday academic German.

Keywords: German as a foreign language; student perceptions; teaching with corpora; everyday academic language; *Deutsch als alltägliche Wissenschaftssprache*; academic writing; students as co-creators of teaching materials.

Introduction

This article reports on students' initial approaches to writing short pieces in a foreign language, the design of a writing module intended to develop their abilities in every-day academic German (Ehlich, 1995), and the students' attitudes and perceptions of using the corpus-based materials.

Traditionally, as German Studies at Rhodes University mostly has *ab initio* students, there has been little focus placed on what would be deemed 'academic literacy' skills in German, and time and curricular constraints have meant that a focus on formal academic writing skills has not always been possible (Ortner & Weber, 2018: 69). However, recognising that academic literacy is an important skill for language learners at university level (Boughey, 2000), a longitudinal project was put in place to develop the third-year and honours level students' everyday academic writing capabilities in the foreign language. Third-year classes in German Studies at Rhodes University are normally small, comprising of five to ten students, as is common to most German language classes at the third-year level at universities in South Africa (see Annas, 2016). A small-scale in-depth case study (Duff, 2008: 32) was thus appropriate for this context, and tracked the development of the students' writing over a period of three years within a larger research project (Ortner, 2015). In this article we focus on answering two research questions:

1. What are the writing attitudes, methods and strategies employed by students when writing in German, and how did they change as a result of the corpus-based writing module?
2. What are the attitudes of German Studies learners' towards the use of corpus linguistic tools in developing academic literacy in the foreign language?

Many positive claims have been made by linguistic researchers about the value of using corpora for language learning (see Aijmer, 2010; Flowerdew, 2012; Boulton & Cobb, 2017; Godwin-Jones, 2017); however, examples of exercises provided are often decontextualized and the students' perspectives of using corpora (either directly on the computer or by making use of paper-based exercises prepared by teachers (Leech, 1997: 6; Römer, 2011: 207) are not often reported on (Varley, 2009, Yoon, 2008). This can be seen as problematic, as student attitudes and perceptions play an important role in the evaluation of new methods and approaches in second language acquisition research (Stephenson, 2009), particularly as motivation has become recognized as a key variable in language learning success (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2014). Yoon (2008) for example found that differences among student attitudes, backgrounds, and writing experiences affected how the students in her study viewed the effectiveness of the concordancing programme. While Yoon (2008) did not look at whether student writing actually improved, she was able to show that the use of corpus-based tools (mostly positively) affected students writing processes. This study thus seeks to address the gap which exists for reporting on the use of corpus-linguistic tools to improve language learning in German (as pointed out by Krummes & Ensslin, 2015), with particular reference to using paper-based data-

driven learning exercises to develop everyday academic literacy. We thus first assess our specific context and existing literature to illuminate the dearth of contextualised research in the field of corpus resources for language learning, and thereafter present our method to obtain data on students' approaches and attitudes. Finally, a discussion of the initial approaches, and changing attitudes of students towards writing in German ensues, drawing conclusions and recommendations for further research. While the results from this small case-study are not widely generalizable, they add to the gap of how best to teach everyday academic writing in a foreign language in the tertiary setting in South Africa where access to the target language is limited, and highlight the usefulness of corpus-based resources in this setting.

Background and literature

Learning German as a foreign language in South Africa requires students with (usually) no prior knowledge of the language to develop their language competencies rapidly over a three-year period (Ortner & Weber, 2018: 71). Students have little exposure to the language outside of lectures, and, due to timetable constraints, comparatively few hours of language instruction, as is the case with many other foreign language programmes at universities across South Africa. By their third year of language instruction (B1 level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2011)) German Studies students are expected to be able to write short texts which relate their opinions, and which are of an academic nature.

Thus, the learner who chooses to begin learning a foreign language (L2) at the tertiary education level must not only make great advances in grammar learning, but also learn how to 'speak and act' on paper, within the academic discourses which are specific to the target language (Gee, 2008: 162; Fandrych, 2008: 1; O'Donnell, *et al.*, 2013: 84). This includes making use of "a special language, often using everyday words but with specific connotations and precise definitions that are importantly different from the normal meanings" (Laurillard, 1997: 172). This may be called 'everyday academic language' or '*alltägliche Wissenschaftssprache*' in German (Ehlich, 1995, Fandrych, 2008). In this semantic category everyday vocabulary items may take on a new metaphorical meaning which are specific to both the spoken and written academic context (Steinhof, 2007). Examples of this include noun-verb collocations such as *einer Frage nachgehen* (to pursue a question) or *ein Problem beleuchten* (to 'illuminate' a problem, meaning to gain a deeper understanding of a problem). In both of these examples, the verb takes on a different meaning to its ordinary literal meaning (pursue/illuminate). These noun-verb patterns (collocations) are often not directly translatable from the students' mother-tongue, and thus can be difficult for students to use correctly in the foreign language (Augustyn, 2013: 28), resulting in peculiar non-idiomatic phrases which may be characteristic of learner texts (Krummes & Ensslin, 2015: 114). This may result in the case where writing appears to be a word-for-word translation of the mother tongue, or "English dressed as German" (Jaworska, 2011: 3).

Thus, acquiring academic literacy in German involves becoming familiar with many formulaic phrases and items of vocabulary which may appear in everyday language, but which have specific, set uses in formal writing. This is normally gained through exposure to language (Wray, 2000: 463), through which language users develop a mental corpus which is informally examined in the mind to produce language intuitions (Gabrielatos, 2005: 6). In countries where the target language is not widely spoken (as is the case of German in South Africa), learners may lack sufficient exposure to be able to form and recognise patterns, particularly in specific styles such as academic writing. Reading facilitates language learning, as research has shown that the amount of individual reading undertaken impacts strongly upon vocabulary knowledge (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). However, this is often expected to be undertaken outside of the classroom as extended reading, given the limited number of contact hours in a language. The students in this study reported undertaking very little everyday academic German reading outside of the classroom.

Using corpora to identify everyday academic phrases

In order to address this lack of language exposure, linguists suggest making use of corpora¹ to provide condensed examples of genre-specific language forms in academic writing to aid language learners (Daskalovska, 2015: 131; Coxhead, 2000: 215)². Concordancing software³ provides an overview of all instances of a search term commonly referred to as a KWIC (key word in context) concordance (Johns, 1991: 2), and can show which words are statistically most likely to occur together, known in corpus linguistics as collocation (Krummes & Ensslin, 2015: 112; Daskalovska, 2015: 131).

Research has shown that mother-tongue speakers may possess an inherent feel for these types of language patterns (Gabrielatos, 2005: 6). However, language learners lack these intuitions and may guess at patterns based on their mother-tongue or other known languages (Vyatkina, 2013: 45). Corpus-based materials such as concordances and key words in context may thus be powerful learning aids, providing language learners with authentic examples in context (Daskalovska, 2015: 131). Making use of corpora to teach students language patterns in a deductive way is known as data-driven learning (Johns, 1991: 2), an approach which seeks to turn language learners into active linguistic researchers, and invert traditional ‘present, practice, produce’ methods in language teaching (Boulton & Cobb, 2017: 350; Daskalovska, 2015: 131).

Despite these positive claims made by linguistic researchers, corpus-based examples and exercises have not yet become a normal part of language coursebook materials, and reported pedagogic interventions of this kind are limited, especially for languages other than English (see Reder, 2013; Targońska, 2014; and especially Krummes & Ensslin,

1 Collections of text which are assembled according to a set of design criteria, and which are stored electronically and analysed using specialised computer software called concordancers (Paquot, 2018: 1).

2 See Coxhead, 2000 for an overview of the creation of an academic word list for English.

3 See for example ‘AntConc’, a freely downloadable concordancing software (Anthony, 2019).

2015 who report on the lack of corpus-based materials in German foreign language teaching).

Developing corpus-based materials for language learners

Research conducted in the UK for the project “What’s Hard in German?” (WHiG) employed corpus linguistic methods in order to identify “linguistic structures that pose a specific difficulty for the acquisition of German as a foreign language” (Krummes & Ensslin, 2015; Jaworska, *et al.*, 2015). The authors created materials focussed on providing students with a variety of alternatives for the key discourse structuring elements of academic writing, i.e. introducing, providing examples, citing the work of others, putting forward one’s own opinion and concluding.

As there are very few corpus-based resources for German Studies, we decided that these materials would be adapted to our context teaching academic writing to third year and honours students at Rhodes University. Students were introduced first to paper-based exercises, and later to direct computer-based corpus exercises for writing (the design of the module is expanded upon in the sections below)

A dearth of studies on student attitudes and perceptions

While linguistic researchers are optimistic about the use of corpora in revolutionising language teaching, there are few studies locally and globally which take students’ subjective perceptions of this experiencing this type of method for learning to write in a second language into account. In our local context, this may also be because there are very few studies on using corpus-based materials for language teaching in the South African context (Taljard, 2012)⁴, and none for German other than Ortner & Weber, 2018.

As stated previously, student attitudes and perceptions of a teaching approach or method form an important part of evaluating its effectiveness in context (Stephenson, 2009), particularly when this is a novel approach in the context. Although the WHiG project provides a good outline of the methods followed in creating the materials, the authors provide only scant anecdotal evidence of students’ perceptions and attitudes towards

4 Taljard (2012) has attempted to address this gap for the Bantu languages by examining how corpora can be used to assist with teaching Northern Sotho to beginner students at the university level. As Taljard (2012) points out, there are South African mother-tongue corpora which have been created for the purposes of lexicography however, these are not often used directly to create teaching materials. Furthermore, there is very little learner corpus data which has been collected and published in South Africa for German, other European, or indigenous languages (Taljard, 2012: 377) (for a comprehensive list see Goossens & Granger, 2019). Where corpora of learner writing are found in South Africa, they tend to typically be focused on learner English writing (see Van Rooy & Schäfer, 2002, Van Rooy, 2005, Van Rooy, 2008), or the compilation of learners’ corpora to assist creation of word lists or glossaries which are subject-specific for second language learners of English (Van der Walt & Fourie, 2005). The creation of South African mother-tongue language corpora and learner corpora provide valuable insights for creation of better learning and teaching materials and methods (Taljard, 2012; Granger, 2004).

using the developed materials to improve their academic writing in German (Krummes & Ensslin, 2015: 120-121). They also do not report on how the students in their study traditionally approached writing longer texts, and what resources they used before the corpus-based materials were introduced.

The few existing studies on students' perceptions of using corpora for language learning present mostly positive findings (see Yoon, 2008; Varley, 2009; Oghigian & Chujo, 2010). For example Yoon (2008: 31) in a study with Korean learners taking a course "English for Academic Purposes" found that "Once the corpus approach was introduced to the writing process, the students assumed more responsibility for their writing and became more independent writers, and their confidence in writing increased". Varley (2009: 133) similarly reports that students in New Zealand, enrolled for a Bachelor of Arts on English as an additional language "generally had a positive response to corpus consultation and were able to identify benefits clearly, particularly in the areas of vocabulary acquisition and increased awareness of syntactic patterns". Oghigian & Chujo (2010: 208) report that in their study with Japanese beginner learners of English, students found the data-driven learning activities "novel, appealing and useful".

These studies are, however, undertaken in the global North, with students studying English (see Yoon, 2008; Varley, 2009; Oghigian & Chujo, 2010). There is thus a lacuna to be filled when considering using corpus-based materials in the global South, and for languages other than English.

Furthermore, by understanding more about what students' writing approaches are, where the perceived challenges lie, and what students' attitudes towards writing are, lecturers can offer direct support (for example using corpus-based materials) and tailor their teaching accordingly, as was undertaken in the larger study. This forms an important aspect of reflective teaching practice. Thus, this study also reports on a 'blind spot' in the literature, which is how students write in a foreign language, and what resources they traditionally make use of.

Method

This longitudinal case study (Duff, 2008: 32) took place at Rhodes University over a period of 3 years, from 2013 to 2015. The participants of this case study were 23 German Studies students who consented to take part in the research. Although two participants had had previous exposure to German prior to university, the rest were beginner-level students with an average of two to three years of German Studies at the undergraduate level. As the main study was performed over two years, four members of the second-year group of 2014, and one member of the third-year group of 2014 were able to continue the everyday-academic writing module in 2015. This continuation has provided particularly good insights, and has allowed for a longitudinal analysis of both the writing ability and the improvement of the writing of these five students, and their questionnaire and interview responses are analysed in the discussion below.

The methodology followed proceeded as follows:

- 1) Participants were asked to complete set writing tasks in German alongside their normal assignments, and to submit these electronically via e-mail. Writing pieces were assessed according to the CEFR criteria (rubrics for assessing writing according to this framework accessible on Goethe.de), and detailed formative feedback was provided to the participants via the 'track changes' function on Microsoft Word.
- 2) The writing pieces collected were used to begin creating a learner corpus of German writing at Rhodes University. The learner corpus was used both to compare the writing of our participants to mother-tongue German speakers, as well as to internally compare the nature of our students' writing before and during the writing module in order to explore the usefulness of a corpus-based approach to learning new German academic vocabulary in the South African tertiary setting (the quantitative findings from this section of the study have been reported on in Ortner & Weber, 2018).
- 3) Participants completed a questionnaire (Appendix A) which aimed to assess their attitudes towards, and experiences of, writing in German. The questionnaire was followed by a semi-structured interview (Appendix B) in which specific themes from the questionnaire were elaborated on. These insights were used as a basis from which to develop the instituted writing module.
- 4) A series of lectures was introduced, based on corpus data from the WHiG project and aimed at specifically introducing everyday academic German vocabulary and phrases which could be integrated into the writing pieces. Participants were given further writing assignments (added to the learner corpus) in which they could practice the newly learnt academic phrases.
- 5) Participants were again asked to complete a questionnaire (Appendix C), aimed to assess their attitudes towards the writing module, and their experience of using corpus-based materials. This was used to evaluate the success of the module, and is reported on in this article.

Table 1 summarises the participation of students in the study.

Table 1: Participation in the study by German Studies (GS) student participants

Year Group	Participant No	Consent Forms	Pre-writing module questionnaire 2014	Interview 2014	Post-writing module questionnaire 2015
2013 GS3 Cohort	P1	1			
	P2	1	1	1	
	P3	1			
	P4	1			
	P5	1			
	P6	1	1	1	
	P7	1			
2014 GS2 Cohort/ 2015 GS3 Cohort	P8	1	1	1	
	P9	1	1	1	1
	P10	1	1	1	
	P11	1	1	1	
	P12	1	1	1	1
	P13	1	1	1	1
	P14	1	1	1	
	P15	1	1	1	1
	P16	1	1	1	
2014 GS3 Cohort	P17	1	1	1	
	P18	1	1	1	
	P19	1	1	1	
	P20	1	1	1	
	P21	1	1	1	1

Pre-writing module questionnaire and interviews

The first questionnaire (Appendix A) allowed for a more in-depth knowledge of participant backgrounds (including their self-selected literacy practices) which provided valuable metadata for the creation of the learner corpus, as well as a broad spectrum content analysis of attitudes towards writing in German Studies (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010: 98-

99). This was achieved mainly through the use of open-response items in the form of fill-in items, short-answer items, and a few longer exploratory open-response items (Brown, 2009). Open-response questions were employed in this case to allow participants to engage with the question and “express their own ideas more fully” in their own words (Brown, 2009: 202). This type of questionnaire, which is usually time consuming both to complete as well as to analyse (Brown, 2009), was possible in this case because of the small sample size.

Time was given in class to fill out the questionnaire, to ensure that the participants did not feel rushed, and were able to give their full attention to the questions. Care was taken to keep both the number of questions, and the questions themselves, short and succinct, in order to avoid participant fatigue. All participants took part in this questionnaire.

Semi-structured individual interviews (Richards, 2009: 185) were undertaken with 16 participants in 2014 following shortly after the first questionnaire, expanding on topics of interest from the questionnaire, allowing for further in-depth qualitative content analysis of the students’ experience of writing in German (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010: 98-99), presented in the discussion below.

Design of the writing module

At the end of 2014, a preliminary series of three lectures was given to 16 students (eight second-year, six third-year and two honours-level students) on corpus linguistics and academic literacy in German Studies.

The learning outcomes for the participants of this short module were as follows: participants should

- understand what a corpus is, and how this can be used to study language;
- understand why formulaic language is important;
- recognise that grammatical sentences may not be idiomatic;
- use one new German ‘academic’ word/ collocation in context per lecture;
- gain a better understanding of everyday academic German.

Having clear learning goals or outcomes is important for module-based assessment which “links student performance to specific learning outcomes in order to provide useful feedback to the instructor and students about how successfully students are meeting specific outcomes” (Doyle, *et al.*, 2000: 19). In the second and third lectures the class began to explore the WHiG handouts, and we focussed on three specific lexical items in context (*Beispiel()* (example), *Meinung()* (opinion), *laut* (according to)). Due to the time constraints (three lecture periods) we opted for a paper-based approach as an introduction to corpus-based learning materials rather than an intensive computer-

based module where time is needed to acquaint participants with software, as well as a venue in which to perform these operations. Certain sections of the WHiG handout were too advanced for our second-year learners. Nevertheless, they provided a good base from which to introduce the participants to formulaic German, and enhance their understanding of academic collocations.

2015 Lecture series

In 2015, a series of ten lectures was delivered in the first semester. This was undertaken with the four third-year students and the one Honours student enrolled for German Studies in that year. All participants taking the subject in 2015 had also been involved in the 2014 writing assignments and module. As the participants were therefore acquainted with the project and had linguistically and methodologically advanced, the learning outcomes for 2015 were adapted to reflect this. The 2015 lecture series began with a short overview of academic writing and corpus linguistics, and how corpora can provide useful learning tools, especially for the specific context of academic writing in German. The aims of the module were outlined and the first writing topic was issued. Participants were encouraged to discuss academic literacy and metaphors of understanding this concept (Boughey, 2000) and how this may differ or be similar across languages, and to reflect on their experiences from 2014. All students for this lecture series possessed personal laptops, which enabled a far more in-depth approach than the 2014 lecture series, as the students were able to perform computer-based corpus exercises in the lecture venue individually using the FALKO L1 and Linguee.de corpus resources⁵. The learning outcomes for the 2015 lecture series were as follows: participants who complete the module should

- gain a better understanding of academic literacy;
- understand what a corpus is, and how this can be used to study language;
- understand why formulaic language is important;
- recognise that grammatical sentences may not be idiomatic;
- form an understanding of academic German collocations, and how to find them using online corpus resources;
- use academic German collocations within their own writing pieces;
- use AntConc concordancing software;
- generate a word-list;

⁵ FALKO L1 is a corpus of mother-tongue German argumentative essays, accessible for research under a Creative Commons License (see Lüdeling, *et al.*, 2008). Linguee.de is a freely available online parallel concordancer which draws on the web as a corpus. Linguee.de thus provides students with an opportunity to search for words and phrases and see their use in context across languages.

- examine keywords in context;
- be able to normalise the frequency of a keyword when comparing two corpora
- understand the notion of 'keyness';
- be able to sort a concordance list in meaningful ways;
- formulate grammatical rules based on corpus evidence;
- compare a corpus of learner writing to a corpus of mother-tongue writing.

The design of this module will be expanded on in the discussion, as many of the features of the design were in response to the answers received from participants in the initial questionnaire.

Post-writing module questionnaires

The second questionnaire (Appendix C) was conducted at the end of the writing module (end of the first semester, 2015) and aimed to explore the participants' attitudes towards the module. The five participants who took part in the writing module were asked to complete the second questionnaire via the online Rhodes University student platform, in order to ensure the anonymity of the participants (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010: 17). Closed-response items (Brown, 2009: 202) presented with a range of scaled responses were used to collect numerical data pertaining to participants' evaluations of certain aspects of the module, and of aspects of their own personal writing development, for example, whether the participants felt their writing had improved since 2014 and whether they felt the writing module was helpful. The response choices included the following items: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree. Each closed-response item was followed by an open-response question which allowed the participants to elaborate on the answer given and provide an explanation thereof. An example of this type of question would be "why do you think this is the case?".

A follow-up questionnaire (Appendix D) was delivered in the second semester of 2015 and sought to explore whether participants had perceived an impact on their writing in other subjects and other languages as a result of participating in the corpus-based German writing module (Canagarajah, 2011). Participants were asked to state (a closed-response question item) whether they thought their writing had improved (as a consequence of producing texts in German) with regard to writing in an academic way, as well as structuring assignments. They were then given the space to elaborate as to why they thought this was the case for each of the above questions (an open-response question).

Discussion

Students' approaches to writing (pre writing module)

In order to align our teaching to the students' needs, we firstly explored how our students were approaching writing in German, the tools used and difficulties experienced in a qualitative questionnaire and follow-up interview. It was revealed that almost a third of participants (23%, 3/13) were writing their assignments in English first and then translating them into German. Some participants displayed anxiety at the thought of writing in German straight away. Two participants stated that they did both, depending on their level of comfort with the vocabulary. For example, P18 states: "I tend to do both. If I know the words, then I plunge straight into German, but if I am unsure, then I do it in English first". Although the others (8/13) reported writing in German first, some of these participants (2/13) reported "thinking it through in English first". Others reported writing directly in German to avoid "the trap of direct translations" and "getting confused by the English word order".

A lack of confidence to write directly in the target language was found to correlate with an inadequate grasp of the necessary vocabulary for writing assignments in German. Translation is an important tool for foreign language vocabulary learning, and students make use of this method when writing their own work (Augustyn, 2013: 29). While language textbooks may provide vocabulary lists of everyday concrete objects, "teaching materials fall short on exposing the learner to more important high-frequency non-referential concepts" (Augustyn, 2013: 30). Students then need to turn to external resources such as the dictionary. All students reported making use of dictionaries, and responses to the questionnaire showed that participants displayed a marked preference for online resources (the majority of participants (11/13, 85%) listed Leo.org as their online dictionary resource of choice, with Dict.cc (3/13, 23%) and Reverso.com (1/13, 8%) only receiving small mention). The popularity of Leo.org is unsurprising as this resource had been introduced in class. However, students are also introduced to dictionary work in translation classes and taught dictionary skills using the *Langenscheidt* dictionary, and one would surmise that this would be a popular choice; however, this was only mentioned by one student. While participants found their dictionary resources helpful, they noted many limitations in their use, largely centred on a lack of contextual information, leading to infelicitous word choices when completing assignments. The preference for online sources may be attributed to a shift in popularity from print sources to online sources throughout tertiary settings (Chauhan, *et al.*, 2012). Online sources tend to be viewed as more convenient and more accessible than print sources. This is shown in P13's response: "I use Leo.org and I also have the app for my I-pad". The writing module sought to harness this trend and provide students with further online resources to aid writing.

Moreover, participants made mention of the fact that their preferred online resources did not assist with context, or with "natural" phrasing. Which word to choose from a list of possible translations also presents significant challenges for the participants, and was

viewed as a time consuming process. The responses revealed a need for better, context-based resources, which are easy to use and navigate, an area which was focussed on specifically in implementing corpus-based tools in the writing module. In order to combat this challenge of decontextualized dictionary searches, participants were introduced to the online corpus resource, Linguee.de which shows a search term in context in two parallel corpora. Participants found this particularly helpful, as will be shown in the sections below where the post-writing module questionnaire responses are discussed.

Lastly, while students did report engaging with the German language outside of the classroom, the engagement was not with academic texts. Three of 13 (23%) participants admitted that they did not engage with any German reading privately⁶. Those who answered that they did engage with reading texts outside of the classroom listed news articles (7/10, 70%), followed by novels and short stories (6/10, 60%), as the most popular reading matter choices. In addition to this, some participants listed less formal social media sites such as Facebook (3/10, 30%), and social activities such as e-mails (P16), along with engagement with German songs (P06), and recipes (P02). Again, there is a noticeable trend towards the use of online resources. There was a noticeable paucity of German academic reading taking place privately, cementing the need for directed instruction into the norms of academic writing and the use of academic collocations in German Studies.

Writing module design

The lecture series began with an introduction of the aims and outline of the module and a recap of the terms and concepts introduced in 2014. A further handout created by the University of Bangor was used to explore the structure and functions of the three main parts of an essay or piece of academic writing (Krummes & Ensslin, 2015). The academic vocabulary items *Thema()* (topic), *Frage()* (question) and *Erachten()* (opinion) and their collocations were explored by means of paper-based exercises. As participants had thus far only indirectly interacted with corpora via paper-based exercises, in the third and fourth lectures participants were introduced to direct corpus exploitation.

Participants were explicitly taught about corpora and their uses, and shown in class how to make and manipulate their own corpus. As all participants of the module possessed their own personal laptops, each student was able to download the free online concordancer, AntConc, for their own personal use (Anthony, 2014). The class chose a German literary text with which they were familiar to download from 'Project Gutenberg' (gutenberg.org), an online text repository. The participants cleaned the text and uploaded it to AntConc (Anthony, 2014). Participants were taught simple operations such as how to create a word list, how to examine keywords in context, and how to do a simple sort of the keywords in context. In the following lecture, participants were tasked to identify the top ten nominal items in the frequency list, and discuss what this may tell one about the content of the text (Baker, 2006: 121).

6 We suspect that this number may actually have been higher.

Lecture 5 involved finding academic German sources online for a specific assignment, as students had expressed that they found it difficult to find appropriate materials to reference in their weekly paragraphs. The participants were asked to discuss ways in which to present the information gleaned from the websites, using the academic collocations they had learnt in class in previous lectures. In lecture 6, time was provided in class to start revising a chosen paragraph the students themselves had submitted during the module and making corrections based on the feedback they had received by the module convenors. This was as the lecturers had noticed a recurring pattern of errors in certain students' work, and there was the feeling that students were not internalising the formative feedback given on assignments. We thought that by having students rewrite some of their paragraphs, they would be able to internalise better the formative feedback given. We decided that a booklet of the class's re-written paragraphs would be created and printed, in order to heighten motivation for the task, as well as to create a feeling of achievement and pride among the students for their own written work⁷. The booklet also includes students' reflections on the process of writing more, and learning to write better, in German and is titled "Writing for RUDaF".

Participants were then tasked to look up incorrect collocations and terms on Linguee.de in class. We returned to the WHiG handouts for guidance during this process, and re-capped what was learnt and how the collocations are best used for each section of an essay. Following this, a 'pop-quiz' was issued in lecture 7, tasking the participants to write down one of the collocations learnt in class for each 5 sections of an essay, namely: introduction, providing an example, putting forward your opinion, presenting somebody else's opinion, and concluding a paragraph or an essay. At the end of lecture 7, and for the duration of lecture 8, the participants examined and compared the RUDaF and FALKO L1 corpora using the concordancing software,

AntConc, introduced in lecture 3. Participants were taught how to normalize the frequency of two lexical items as they appear in a frequency list, in order to make an accurate claim about the 'keyness' of a term in a corpus. Participants were tasked to specifically focus on the items from the pop-quiz, and to find a good example collocation from each corpus and to write it down underneath their own made-up example. In keeping with current research, the corpus exercises were structured to create a "guided dynamic partnership" (Oghigian & Chujo, 2010: 202) between the language teacher and the language learners. We sought to provide guided searches which would be fruitful and informative revealing patterns which could be explained in class and fit into the context of the learning outcomes.

Participants noted the interesting similarities and differences in the two corpora with regard to usage. In lecture 9 participants were tasked to evaluate and improve upon a handout which can be found online as a resource for academic writing at a German University (Schultis, 2011), including only vocabulary items in isolation with no reference to meaning or usage, no explanations, or examples of collocations. The participants

⁷ This was found to be successful in informal report back from students, one of whom posted the cover of the publication on their personal social media (Facebook etc.).

were given the task of improving this worksheet using their knowledge of corpus tools and resources to better the worksheet. They completed this exercise in class, working in pairs, and using their personal laptops to access Linguee.de and FALKO L1 as references. The participants completed this task in the final lecture of the series, lecture 10. Also addressed during this lecture were the nature and purpose of the online module evaluation questionnaire, which participants were asked to complete at home, on the online learning management system.

Post-writing module attitudes to corpus-based tools

The post-writing module questionnaire and reflective writing pieces revealed that 4 of the 5 participants felt that their writing had improved since 2014. Participants reported that they found the knowledge of academic collocations to be helpful and the use of corpus tools such as Linguee.de to be enlightening. Participants also reported particularly appreciating that corpus tools allowed them to create more diversity/variation in their writing.

Participants evaluated looking at a German corpus and looking at a word/phrase in the context of a German/ English parallel corpus as the most useful tools for language learning with an average score of 4.0/5. Following this, participants perceived looking up the word/phrase in a parallel corpus (German with English translations such as Linguee.de) to be helpful with an average score of 3.8/5. These two high scores show that participants valued a corpus-based approach to learning new vocabulary. Also viewed by participants as “helpful” with lower ranking scores were seeing the word/phrase as it appears in a list of possible words to use (3.4/5), and completing corpus-based exercises such as the typical academic German words worksheet (3.2/5). Participants rated using “a dictionary definition” as a tool to learn a new academic word /phrase with the lowest average of 3.0/5.

In longer-answer questions, participants stated that their approach to writing had changed: they no longer attempted to “shoehorn” their English-based writing into German, but rather “switched on” the “tiny German parts” of their brains, and were able to “think in German and write much faster”. While they expressed that this was “still not easy” participants felt a gained sense of confidence, expressing “I am so much better at it than I was before”. In the follow-up questionnaire in 2015, participants reported that by learning more about academic writing in German, they also became more aware of their own academic writing in English. This was particularly the case for the weaker students, such as p13 who reported:

I think that because we were given tools (i.e. “*der Zweck*” or “*zufolge*”), it confirmed my knowledge of how one should structure an essay. I always struggled to start an essay but it has become easier by considering how I would do it in German and also what should come next and providing examples has a more [*sic*] clearer place in my essays. Before, I used to have to write parts

and make the essay flow afterwards, but now I can write an essay that flows the first time.

This points to the value of a multilingual education which assists in becoming more aware of the writers own language use in the mother-tongue or other second languages (Canagarajah, 2011: 113).

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has provided evidence of the unconfident attitudes and English-based writing strategies exemplified by students when writing in German, and has shown how these approaches changed as a result of a corpus-based writing module for everyday academic German. Almost all participants perceived an increase in both confidence and writing ability and attributed this specifically to the corpus-based writing module. Moreover, students positively evaluated the use of corpus tools for learning academic collocations in German, ranking these as more helpful than traditional vocabulary learning materials such as the dictionary. These findings mirror the results of student attitudes toward corpus tools in other similar research undertakings in foreign contexts (Yoon, 2008; Varley, 2009; Oghigian & Chujo, 2010). The corpus tools used in this context were thus evaluated as an effective aid to teach new everyday academic vocabulary, taking both the quantitative findings of the use and improvement of academic collocation in students' writing (Ortner & Weber, 2018), and the student perceptions reported on in this study, into account. The results of this small case study reveal that there is scope for further use of corpus-based tools to enhance foreign language students' writing abilities, especially when they lack exposure to the target language in specific styles such as academic writing.

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Appendix: Questionnaires and interview questions.

A. Questionnaire 1, Language Attitudes:

1. Language Background

- 1.2 What is your mother tongue?
- 1.3 What other languages do you speak in order of proficiency?
- 1.4 When did you begin to learn to speak and write German? (Year: e.g. 2011)
- 1.1 In what context? (I.e. formally at school or university, or informally in the home or in a German speaking environment?)
- 1.5 Why did you decide to begin learning German?
- 1.6 What section (Grammar/Translation/Literature/Cultural Studies) of German Studies do you find most difficult?
- 1.7 Why?
- 1.8 What section (Grammar/Translation/Literature/Cultural Studies) of German Studies do you most enjoy?
- 1.9 Why?

2. How do you approach writing in German?

- 2.1 When writing in German, specifically when writing the longer pieces for *freier Ausdruck*, do you first write your work in English, and then translate it, or do you proceed to write straight in German?
- 2.2 Do you use a dictionary? Yes/No
- 2.3 If yes, what type of dictionary do you use? Online/Print/Both
- 2.4 What is the dictionary/s that you use called?
- 2.5 Do you cross-check the words you look up? (I.e. when unsure of a selected word, do you look up that word in a monolingual dictionary, or look up the word found from the other side of the dictionary in order to check that the selected word matches the meaning?) Yes/No

- 2.6 Do you only look for single words, or do you look for whole phrases?
- 2.7 Do you find the dictionary helpful? Yes/No
- 2.8 Why or why not?
- 2.9 What problems or limitations have you experienced when working with the dictionary?

3. Engaging in Texts

- 3.1 Do you engage in German reading privately? Yes/No
- 3.2 If yes, what type of reading do you do? (Novels, recipes, academic texts, news articles, etc.)
- 3.3 How often? Daily/Weekly/Monthly/Yearly
- 3.4 Do you engage with German via other sources (movies, radio-podcasts, audio books, etc.) Yes/No
- 3.5 If yes, what type of engagement do you do? (movies, radio-podcasts, audio books, etc.)
- 3.6 How often? Daily/Weekly/Monthly/Yearly

4. Any additional comments

B. Follow-up interview questions:

I would like to talk about writing, and about academic literacy.

Are you familiar with the term academic literacy?

Are you familiar with the 'Learning Guide' published by Rhodes University?

Do you enjoy writing at University?

Do you enjoy writing in German?

Do you enjoy reading in German?

What types of texts do you most enjoy?

What is your favourite section of German Studies?

Is writing in German a priority for you, why/ why not?

How do you approach writing in German? Talk me through the way in which you prepare a longer piece of writing in German... (Write it out in one go and then check mistakes, bullet points, write out in English and then translate, ask a friend, get a family member to read it)

What are the particular problems and challenges with which you are faced?

What do you feel are your particular strengths?

What do you feel are your particular weaknesses?

With what aspect of writing would you like more help?

C. Questionnaire 2, Experiences relating to the writing module (issued online through the learning management system, RUconnected):

You have been writing German paragraphs for over a year now...

To what degree (1-5) do you feel that your writing in German has improved since 2014?

Why do you think this is the case?

Do you feel more confident in your writing?

How do you approach writing now? Is this different to how you used to approach writing tasks before you started writing regularly in German?

To what degree (1-5) did you find the writing course helpful?

What aspects of the course did you find particularly useful?

What aspects of the course do you feel need to improve?

Did you find the corpus exercises useful? Why/Why not?

On a scale of 1 to 5 (1= not at all helpful, 5=extremely helpful) how would you rate each of the following methods for learning new academic German phrases

The word/ phrase as it appears in a list of possible words to use

A dictionary definition

Looking the word/ phrase up in a parallel corpus (German with English translations) such as Linguee.de

Seeing the word/ phrase in context in a German corpus

Corpus-based exercises such as the key-words worksheet

D. Questionnaire 3, follow-up:

Dear valued participant,

Seeing that you were previously so kind as to reflect on whether or not your German writing improved as a result of the writing course (writing paragraphs), we would now like to know whether you think your writing of assignments for your other academic courses/subjects has improved (as a consequence of producing texts in German).

With regard to writing in an academic way? Yes/No

Why do you think this is?

With regard to structuring an assignment? Yes/No

Why do you think this is?

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