Data-driven Learning: Reasonable Fears and Rational Reassurance

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ABSTRACT

Computer corpora have many potential applications in teaching and learning languages, the most direct of which – when the learners explore a corpus themselves – has become known as data-driven learning (DDL). Despite considerable enthusiasm in the research community and interest in higher education, the approach has not made major inroads to mainstream language teaching. This paper explores some of the reasons for this, with the intention of demystifying DDL for use with ordinary learners and teachers in ordinary classrooms.

Keywords: Data-driven learning, corpora, obstacles, roles, teacher, resources, materials.

1. BACKGROUND

There has been continual interest in foreign language pedagogy since time immemorial, but the last 50 years or so has seen particular creativity and diversity as practitioners seek more efficient ways to go about it. Most remarkable perhaps were the "designer methods" (Brown et al. 2007: 9) of the 1970s, such as Suggestopedia, the Silent Way or Total Physical Response. Their limited adoption world-wide is perhaps partly due to dogmatic adherence to ideology which remains impervious to evidence or experimentation, and insufficiently able to adapt to local cultures. Indeed, their existence has left a certain wariness towards any claim of "revolution" or "panacea" in the field. The most successful recent methodology globally has undoubtedly been the very broad church of the communicative approach (CA). While this implied a fundamental rethink of certain underpinnings, it has remained highly eclectic, retaining or adapting many existing tried and tested practices. This makes CA hard to pin down (Hadley 2002), and many would be hard put to see the "communicative" nature of many self-proclaimed teachers, materials and practices.