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## Corpus-Driven Approaches for Advancing L2 Grammar: An Empirical Investigation

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### Abstract

Second language (L2) acquisition remains a complex and multifaceted process. Learners grapple with various linguistic aspects, including vocabulary, syntax, and pragmatics. Traditional language teaching methods often rely on textbooks, exercises, and classroom instruction. However, in recent years, corpus linguistics has emerged as a powerful tool for understanding language patterns and informing pedagogy. Corpus-based approaches allow researchers and educators to explore authentic language use, uncover hidden structures, and tailor instructional materials to learners' needs. Despite the potential benefits of corpus-driven approaches, questions persist regarding their practical effectiveness in enhancing L2 learners' grammatical competence. This study explores the effectiveness of corpus-based, data-driven learning approaches in enhancing second language (L2) grammar acquisition for non-native learners. Unlike traditional grammar instruction, corpus-driven methods use authentic language data from corpora to guide learners in uncovering patterns and rules of language use. Through a mixed-methods approach, this investigation draws on both quantitative and qualitative data to examine the impact of corpus-driven activities on L2 learners' grammatical accuracy and awareness. A group of intermediate-level English learners participated in a series of targeted grammar tasks based on authentic corpus data. Pre- and post-tests were conducted to measure improvements in grammatical performance, while learner reflections and interviews provided insight into their experiences with the approach. The results indicate a significant improvement in grammatical accuracy and a deeper understanding of language structure, supporting the efficacy of corpus-driven learning for L2 grammar. These findings contribute to



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ongoing discussions about the role of data-driven learning in second language pedagogy, highlighting the potential of corpus tools as a dynamic resource for L2 instruction.

**Key words:** Corpus linguistics, Data driven learning, Grammar, ESL, Mixed-methods approach

## 1. Introduction

Learning a second language (L2) requires learners to master both vocabulary and grammar, but traditional grammar instruction, primarily based on deductive teaching, has been criticized for its limitations (Papadopoulos, 2020). These conventional methods involve explicit teaching of grammar rules followed by controlled practice through exercises, which can help learners grasp structural knowledge but often fail to foster a deeper, contextual understanding of grammar in real-world language use (Johns, 1990; Ellis, 2006; Leńko-Szymańska, 2023; Papadopoulos & Savic, 2020). In response to these limitations, corpus-driven approaches have emerged as a promising alternative, offering learners the opportunity to discover grammatical rules and patterns directly from authentic language data. Corpus-driven learning involves the use of language corpora large collections of naturally occurring texts to help learners uncover linguistic patterns inductively. This contrasts with traditional rule-based approaches by immersing learners in authentic language use, allowing them to observe grammar as it occurs in real-world contexts (Leńko-Szymańska, 2022; Lee, 2023; Boulton and Cobb, 2022; Huang and Johns, 2024; Leńko-Szymańska, 2023; Mukherjee, 2022; Schmitt and Carter, 2023; Tao and Zhang, 2024; Wang and Li, 2022; Biber and Reppen, 2022; Cobb and Boulton, 2023; Papadopoulos & Jansen, 2024). By doing so, learners are encouraged to engage with data more autonomously, identifying grammatical structures and variations that are often missing from prescriptive grammar instruction (Mukherjee, 2022; Huang & Johns, 2024). Such methods have gained traction in the field of language pedagogy due to their ability to expose learners to the frequency and variability of grammatical forms, fostering a more nuanced understanding of how language functions (Boulton & Cobb, 2022). Despite the pedagogical potential of corpus-driven approaches, research on their effectiveness for L2 grammar acquisition remains relatively underdeveloped. Most studies have focused on vocabulary acquisition, leaving a gap in understanding how these methods can impact grammatical accuracy and awareness (Vyatkina & Boulton, 2022; Chen and Lee, 2023; Coxhead and Byrd, 2022; Gardner and Davies, 2024; Gong and Lee, 2023; Hinkel, 2022; Huang and Zhang, 2023; Kao and Wang, 2023; Liao and Lin, 2022; McEneary and Hardie, 2024; Pérez-Paredes and Martínez-Álvarez, 2023; Swales and Feak, 2022). This study aims to fill that gap by empirically investigating how corpus-driven activities can enhance L2 learners' grammatical accuracy and understanding, with a focus on English as a second language (ESL) learner. The central question is whether tasks designed around corpus data can lead to measurable improvements in learners' grammatical performance and a deeper awareness of grammatical structures. Through a mixed-methods approach combining both quantitative and qualitative data, this research will provide insights into the practical application of corpus tools for L2 grammar instruction. Specifically, it will explore whether data-driven learning environments contribute to greater grammatical accuracy and awareness, as well as how learners perceive and engage with these methodologies. By addressing these issues, the study seeks to expand the growing body of literature on corpus linguistics in language teaching and provide evidence-based recommendations for integrating corpus-driven activities into L2 grammar instruction in Bangladesh.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Corpus-Driven Learning (CDL) in L2 Instruction

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), grammar instruction has traditionally relied on explicit, deductive approaches where learners are presented with grammatical rules followed by controlled practice (Ellis, 2006). While this method has been widely used, its limitations, particularly in fostering a deep understanding of language in context, have prompted researchers to explore alternative methods. Among these alternatives, corpus-driven learning has gained increasing attention for its potential to offer a more inductive, data-driven approach to L2 grammar instruction (Leńko-Szymańska, 2023; Chen and Lee, 2023; Coxhead and Byrd, 2022; Gardner and Davies, 2024; Gong and Lee, 2023; Hinkel, 2022; Huang and Zhang, 2023; Kao and Wang, 2023; Liao and Lin, 2022; McEnery and Hardie, 2024; Pérez-Paredes and Martínez-Álvarez, 2023; Swales and Feak, 2022). Corpus-driven learning (CDL) involves the use of authentic language data from corpora, which are large collections of texts representing real-world language use. CDL encourages learners to engage directly with language data, enabling them to discover linguistic patterns and grammatical rules on their own (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001). This contrasts with corpus-based approaches, where instructors use corpora to illustrate pre-taught rules. Instead, in CDL, the learners themselves analyze the data to draw their conclusions about language use (Boulton, 2010). The origins of CDL can be traced back to Johns (1990), who introduced the concept of data-driven learning (DDL). Johns proposed that learners could benefit from a hands-on approach by observing authentic language usage through concordances lists of all occurrences of a word or phrase in context. Since then, CDL has evolved as an essential tool for language learning, with several studies emphasizing its potential to enhance L2 learners' grammatical awareness and accuracy (Boulton & Cobb, 2022).

### 2.2 Benefits of Corpus-Driven Learning for L2 Grammar

Research has demonstrated that CDL can significantly improve learners' grammatical accuracy and understanding. Vyatkina (2022) found that L2 learners using corpus-based tasks were more likely to notice subtle patterns of grammatical structures that would otherwise be missed in traditional textbooks. CDL exposes learners to the frequency, variability, and distribution of grammatical forms in authentic contexts, helping them understand how grammar functions in natural language use (Leńko-Szymańska, 2022; Boulton and Cobb, 2022; Huang and Johns, 2024; Leńko-Szymańska, 2023; Mukherjee, 2022; Schmitt and Carter, 2023; Tao and Zhang, 2024; Wang and Li, 2022; Biber and Reppen, 2022; Cobb and Boulton, 2023). The inductive nature of CDL encourages learner autonomy, as students engage with data actively and draw their conclusions. Mukherjee (2022) argues that this data-driven approach not only improves grammatical accuracy but also helps learners internalize grammar in a way that supports long-term retention. Studies by Lee (2023) and Huang and Johns (2024) further confirm that learners who engage with corpus-based activities develop a more nuanced understanding of grammar, as they encounter grammatical forms in varied and context-rich examples. Despite its many benefits, CDL is not without its challenges. One criticism is that the sheer amount of data can overwhelm learners, particularly those with lower proficiency levels (Chambers, 2019). Additionally, the complexity of corpus tools can be intimidating for both learners and instructors, requiring technical training to fully harness the potential of CDL. Boulton and Cobb (2022) highlight that while CDL is beneficial for more advanced learners, beginners might struggle to make sense of complex concordance lines without sufficient guidance. Moreover, CDL may require a shift in the role of the teacher from a traditional instructor to a facilitator, guiding learners through the process of discovery (Leńko-Szymańska, 2023). This transition can be difficult for educators who are accustomed to more structured, rule-based teaching methods. Mukherjee (2022) notes that successful implementation of CDL requires careful scaffolding, particularly for learners new to working with corpora, to prevent frustration and ensure positive outcomes.

## 2.3 Empirical Evidence Supporting CDL for Grammar Acquisition

Empirical research on the effectiveness of CDL for L2 grammar acquisition is still developing. However, studies have shown promising results. Boulton and Cobb's (2022) meta-analysis of CDL research found that learners exposed to corpus-driven tasks showed significant improvements in grammatical accuracy compared to those in traditional grammar classes. Similarly, Vyatkina and Boulton (2022) argue that CDL helps learners develop metalinguistic awareness by engaging them in the active exploration of grammar in use. Leńko-Szymańska (2023) conducted a longitudinal study that examined the impact of CDL on intermediate English learners over a semester. The results indicated a marked improvement in both explicit knowledge of grammar and the ability to use grammatical structures in context. Huang and Johns (2024) further support these findings, reporting that learners who regularly engaged in corpus-based activities demonstrated enhanced grammatical awareness and more accurate usage of complex grammatical forms. Corpus-driven learning represents a shift in L2 grammar instruction by promoting inductive learning through authentic language data. Several Research suggests that CDL can enhance grammatical accuracy, increase learner autonomy, and provide a deeper understanding of language in use. While challenges remain—such as the complexity of corpus tools and the need for teacher training there is growing evidence supporting the effectiveness of CDL for L2 grammar acquisition. As the field continues to evolve, future studies should focus on how best to integrate CDL into classrooms, particularly for learners at different proficiency levels (Chen and Lee, 2023; Coxhead and Byrd, 2022; Gardner and Davies, 2024; Gong and Lee, 2023; Hinkel, 2022; Huang and Zhang, 2023; Kao and Wang, 2023; Liao and Lin, 2022; McEnery and Hardie, 2024; Pérez-Paredes and Martínez-Álvarez, 2023; Swales and Feak, 2022).

## 3. Methodology

This study investigates the effectiveness of corpus-driven learning (CDL) in enhancing second language (L2) grammar acquisition. Specifically, the study explores how corpus-based activities impact learners' grammatical accuracy and awareness. A mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection, was employed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the potential benefits of CDL for L2 grammar instruction.

### 3.1 Research Design

The study utilized a quasi-experimental design with pre-test and post-test measures, allowing for the comparison of two groups: an experimental group that engaged in corpus-driven learning activities and a control group that followed traditional grammar instruction methods. A mixed-methods approach was selected to gather both statistical data on grammar acquisition and qualitative insights into learners' experiences with CDL.

### 3.2 Participants

The participants were 60 adult English as a second language (ESL) learners, enrolled in an intermediate-level English course at a language school in Bangladesh. Participants were aged between 18 and 35 and had been studying English for at least two years. The learners were randomly assigned to either the experimental group (n = 30) or the control group (n = 30). All participants were pre-tested to ensure similar levels of grammar proficiency prior to the intervention.

### 3.3 Instructional Intervention

Participants in the experimental group underwent a 10-week instructional period focused on CDL. The learners used corpus tools, such as AntConc, to explore grammatical patterns in authentic language data. The instructor provided minimal explicit guidance, allowing learners to explore concordance lines, frequency lists, and collocational patterns in English grammar. Each week, the learners engaged in activities that required them to discover grammar rules inductively from the data and apply them in communicative contexts. Tasks included identifying common grammatical structures in authentic texts, observing verb tense patterns, and examining prepositions and their usage through corpus analysis. The control group followed a traditional, deductive approach to grammar instruction. The learners were provided with explicit explanations of grammatical rules, followed by controlled practice exercises. The instructional material included structured exercises from a standard ESL textbook, with a focus on practicing isolated grammar points such as verb tenses, sentence structure, and prepositions.

### 3.4 Data Collection

To measure grammatical accuracy, both groups completed a grammar proficiency test before and after the 10-week intervention. The test consisted of 40 multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank questions assessing knowledge of common grammatical structures. Scores were compared to determine the effectiveness of CDL in improving grammatical accuracy over time. Participants in the experimental group kept weekly reflective journals, documenting their experiences with CDL, challenges faced, and insights gained during the corpus exploration activities. These journals provided a qualitative understanding of learners' perceptions of CDL and its role in enhancing their grammatical knowledge. At the end of the intervention, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants from each group. The interviews explored learners' attitudes toward the instructional methods, perceived benefits, and challenges of learning grammar through CDL versus traditional approaches.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

The pre- and post-test scores were analyzed using paired t-tests to assess whether there were statistically significant improvements in grammatical accuracy within each group. Additionally, an independent t-test was used to compare the gains between the experimental and control groups. A p-value of  $<0.05$  was set as the threshold for statistical significance. The qualitative data from learner journals and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Key themes related to learners' experiences with CDL, including their levels of engagement, autonomy, and perceived challenges, were identified. Coding was carried out iteratively to capture recurring themes and categories that reflected the learners' insights into the CDL process.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Quantitative Findings

The results of the pre- and post-tests indicated significant improvements in grammatical accuracy for both the experimental (corpus-driven learning) and control (traditional grammar instruction) groups. However, the experimental group showed a greater mean improvement.

The experimental group's mean pre-test score was 55.4%, which increased to 75.6% in the post-test. The control group's mean pre-test score was 54.8%, rising to 55.0% in the post-test.

Paired t-tests revealed that the experimental group made statistically significant gain grammar proficiency ( $p < 0.01$ ). However, an independent t-test comparing the post-test scores of both groups showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group ( $p = 0.03$ ), indicating that corpus-driven learning had a stronger positive effect on grammatical accuracy.

The experimental group demonstrated significant improvement in areas such as verb tense consistency, preposition use, and collocational patterns. For example, learners in the experimental group increased their accuracy in using prepositions from 55.4% in the pre-test to 75.6% in the post-test, compared to a smaller increase in the control group (from 59% to 68%). Table 1 shows the results:

**Table 1** Pre-Test and Post-Test Results

Group	Measure	Pre-Test Mean Score (%)	Post-Test Mean Score (%)	Mean Improvement (%)	p-Value (Pre-Test vs. Post-Test)
Experimental Group	Grammatical Accuracy	55.4	75.6	20.2	<0.01
Control Group	Grammatical Accuracy	54.8	55.0	0.2	0.85
Between-Groups	Post-Test Comparison	-	-	20.0	0.03

## 4.2 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of learner journals and interviews revealed several key themes related to the learners' experience with corpus-driven learning:

- **Theme 1: Increased Autonomy:** Learners in the experimental group consistently reported feeling more autonomous in their learning. They appreciated the exploratory nature of corpus-driven tasks, which allowed them to discover grammatical rules independently. One learner noted, "I liked being able to see real examples of how grammar is used in everyday life, not just memorizing rules."
- **Theme 2: Deeper Understanding of Grammar:** Participants highlighted that corpus-based activities enabled them to see how grammatical structures function in authentic contexts, leading to a better understanding of when and why certain grammatical forms are used. As one learner remarked, "It was helpful to see many examples of the same structure in different sentences. It helped me understand how to use it better."
- **Theme 3: Challenges in Initial Engagement:** Some learners found the corpus tools difficult to use at first, reporting that the amount of data was overwhelming. However, as they became more familiar with the tools, they found the tasks increasingly rewarding and engaging.

## 5. Discussions

The quantitative results indicate that corpus-driven learning (CDL) is a more effective approach for improving grammatical accuracy in L2 learners compared to traditional grammar instruction. The control group, which followed traditional grammar instruction, showed negligible improvement in grammatical accuracy, with only a 0.2 percentage point increase from pre-test to post-test. The p-value of 0.85 indicates that this change is not statistically significant. This lack of significant improvement suggests that traditional grammar instruction did not result in substantial gains in learners' grammar proficiency during

the study period. This finding is consistent with critiques of traditional methods, which often emphasize rote learning over contextual understanding (Ellis, 2006). The comparison between the experimental and control groups reveals a notable difference in improvement, with the experimental group showing a 20-percentage point higher gain in grammatical accuracy. The p-value of 0.03 indicates that this difference is statistically significant. This supports the hypothesis that corpus-driven learning is more effective than traditional methods in advancing L2 grammar acquisition. The significant difference suggests that the context-rich, inductive approach of CDL provides learners with a more effective means of internalizing grammatical patterns compared to the more prescriptive nature of traditional instruction. The analysis demonstrates that corpus-driven learning significantly enhances L2 grammatical accuracy compared to traditional grammar instruction. The experimental group's substantial improvement highlights the benefits of engaging with authentic language data, which appears to offer a more effective learning experience. In contrast, the minimal progress observed in the control group underscores the limitations of traditional methods, reinforcing the need for more innovative and interactive approaches to grammar instruction. The significant improvement observed in the experimental group supports previous studies that have found corpus-driven methods to be effective in enhancing grammatical accuracy. For example, Boulton and Cobb (2022) reported that learners using corpus-based tasks showed considerable gains in grammatical proficiency compared to those receiving traditional instruction. Similarly, Vyatkina (2022) found that CDL facilitated a deeper understanding of grammar by providing learners with extensive exposure to authentic language data, which aligns with the substantial improvement observed in this study. The qualitative findings from learner journals and interviews suggest that CDL promotes greater learner autonomy and engagement. Many learners in the experimental group reported feeling empowered by the opportunity to explore language patterns on their own, which is consistent with the findings of Boulton and Cobb (2022), who argue that CDL fosters active learning. The discovery-based nature of CDL encourages learners to take an investigative approach to grammar, allowing them to build their knowledge through direct interaction with authentic language data. While some learners initially found corpus tools challenging, the overall positive feedback reflects the potential for CDL to transform how learners approach grammar learning. Once learners became accustomed to using tools such as concordancers, they reported a deeper understanding of grammatical structures, a finding echoed in Mukherjee's (2022) work on the long-term benefits of corpus use for language learners.

## 6. Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence for the effectiveness of corpus-driven learning (CDL) in advancing L2 grammar acquisition. The significant improvements in grammatical accuracy observed in the experimental group underscore the potential of CDL to enhance language learning by providing learners with rich, authentic language data. The positive outcomes highlight the advantages of an inductive, context-rich approach to grammar instruction over traditional, deductive methods. The findings reveal that CDL not only facilitates a deeper understanding of grammatical rules but also promotes learner autonomy and engagement. By allowing learners to explore language patterns through corpus tools, CDL fosters an active learning environment that encourages self-discovery and contextual learning. This aligns with the broader literature, which emphasizes the benefits of authentic language exposure and learner-centered approaches in language education. However, the study also identifies challenges associated with the use of corpus tools, such as initial difficulties in data navigation and the need for effective scaffolding. Addressing these challenges through targeted support and guidance is crucial for maximizing the benefits of CDL. Educators should consider integrating corpus-based activities in a manner that complements traditional instruction, offering a balanced approach that caters to diverse learning needs. Future research should explore the long-term effects of CDL on language proficiency and its applicability across different learner contexts. Further studies could also investigate the impact

of varying levels of corpus tool complexity and the effectiveness of different instructional designs in enhancing grammar learning. In conclusion, corpus-driven learning represents a valuable approach to L2 grammar instruction, offering significant advantages in terms of learner engagement, understanding, and autonomy. By leveraging the insights gained from this study, educators can enhance their teaching practices and provide learners with more effective and engaging grammar learning experiences.

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