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Elen Le Foll

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‘Whilst I do not object, I strongly believe...’

Exploring spoken argumentative and persuasive discourse

Elen Le Foll (Osnabrück University)

Abstract:

Even at the higher proficiency levels, many learners continue to rely on the same limited range of basic expressions to express opinions, persuade and present arguments (e.g., *I think, X is very important, because of this...*) or are not aware of register differences and thus frequently use words and phrases typical of written discourse in their spoken production (e.g., *it has been argued that, moreover...*). This chapter outlines how advanced students can explore a corpus of transcripts of discussions and debates from the European Parliament to tap into a wealth of useful expressions and find out how they are used in an authentic context. The proposed data-driven learning (DDL) lesson thus involves a hands-on corpus-based activity aimed at enabling students to improve their speaking skills. It relies on the EUROPARL subcorpus of the multilingual InterCorp corpus via the free corpus interface KonText. In the second half of the lesson, students are then encouraged to try out their newly acquired expressions in a series of mini debates on familiar topics to be chosen by the teacher.

Levels: Advanced

Aims:

- Expand students’ range of phrases to express opinions, persuade and present arguments
- Practice discussion skills
- Introduce students to simple searches in a corpus of parliamentary discussion transcripts

Class time: 60 minutes

Preparation time: None

Resources: One computer/tablet with Internet access per group of 2-3 students

Introduction

Many advanced learners continue to rely on the same limited range of basic expressions to express opinions, persuade and present arguments (e.g. *I think, X is very important, because of this*). In this lesson, students will explore a corpus of transcripts of discussions from the European Parliament to tap into a wealth of useful expressions that they can immediately try out in a series of mini debates.

Steps

1. Divide the class into two teams.
2. Ask half of the class to brainstorm arguments in favour of using smartphones in the English classroom and the other half to compile a list of arguments against it. Students should briefly discuss their ideas in their teams and, if necessary, take a few notes.
3. Tell students that you would like to hear their arguments to see which team is most convincing.
4. Award a point per valid argument. At this stage, do not correct language use, but discreetly make a note of the words, phrases and constructions that students use to express their opinions, present arguments, and persuade (e.g. *we believe, if... then..., it's obvious that*).
5. Declare the team with the most points the winner.
6. Write the expressions that students used to express opinions, present arguments and persuade on the board.
7. Introduce the lesson's aim: to learn a broader range of idiomatic phrases to give opinions and present persuasive arguments.
8. Divide students into pairs or groups of three (if feasible, roughly according to their proficiency levels).
9. Explain that students will, in their small groups, examine authentic debates and discussions from the European Parliament in order to learn new phrases in context.
10. Ensure that each group has one computer or tablet with Internet access.
11. Instruct students to connect to the KonText web interface (<https://KonText.korpus.cz>) (Machálek, 2020). If the interface is not automatically displayed in English, students should click on “English” in the top-right corner.
12. Instruct students to click on “syn2020” (A – see Figure 1), then on “All corpora” (B), and finally on “InterCorp” (C). In the list of corpora, they should select the latest version of the English InterCorp (Čermák & Rosen, 2012) – e.g. “InterCorp v13 - English” (D).

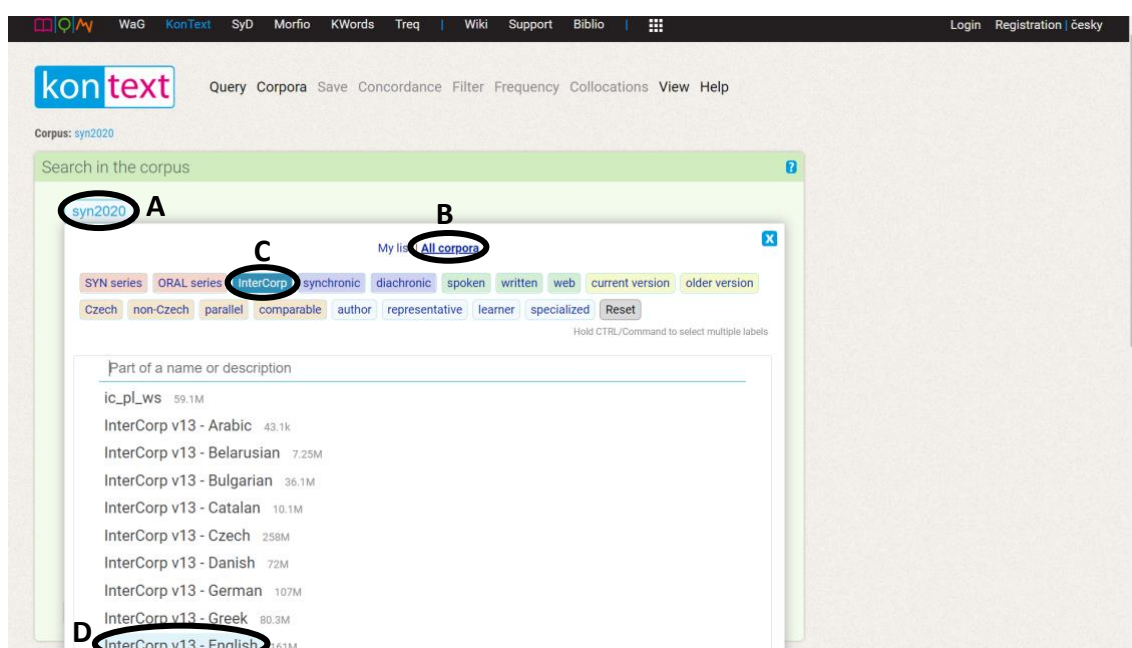


Figure 1: Corpus selection

13. In the query box, instruct students to type the first-person personal pronoun *I*.

14. Instruct students to click on the option “Restrict search”.
15. In the section “text.txttype”, instruct students to tick “discussions - transcripts”. This restricts the search to transcripts of authentic discussions from the European Parliament.
16. Instruct students to scroll down to the bottom of the page and click on the “Search” button.
17. Instruct students to look for phrases and constructions that they did not use in the first discussion activity. The results page shows a list of excerpts from spoken discussions in the European Parliament containing the word / (see Figure 2). Students can click on the back and forward buttons (A) to display more results. Clicking on any pink instance of “I” (B) will open an additional window displaying more context. This may well be necessary to understand the meaning of the expression fully. If students are curious, they can click on “_EUROPARL” (C) to find out, among other things, the name of the speaker who uttered the phrase displayed in the same line.

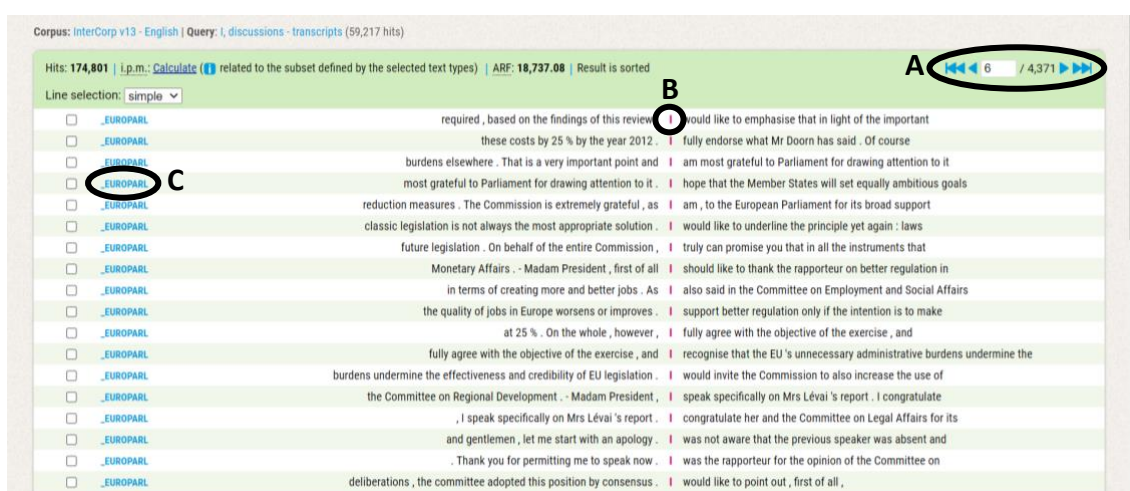


Figure 2: Results page for / in InterCorp - English

18. Ask students to make a list of new expressions that they would like to be able to use to express opinions, persuade and present arguments in future discussions and debates (e.g. “I would like to emphasise that”, “I would like to point out”).
19. Encourage students to infer the meaning of the new phrases from the given context (remind them that more context can be visualised by clicking on / in each line, see B in Figure 2) and make a note of the context in which their new expressions occur.
20. Clarify that not all the phrases displayed will be relevant (e.g. “I congratulate” in Figure 2).
21. Check that students consult several pages of results and that they remember to read the expanded co-text for their selected lines.
22. Once students have made note of a certain number of expressions or after ca. 15 minutes, instruct students to log off the computers.
23. Divide students into new groups of four. Hand each group a card with a pro-contra discussion topic and, if necessary, a few key words (see example card in Figure 4). The core vocabulary for these topics should already have been covered in previous lessons. For example, if over the past weeks, you have explored the topic of climate change, pro-contra discussion topics could include:
 - banning diesel vehicles;
 - heavily taxing short-haul flights;

- boosting wind and solar energy production.

<p>Proposal: Ban diesel vehicles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students A and B are in favour of the proposal. • Students C and D are against the proposal. <p>Key vocabulary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - exhaust emissions - electric cars - pollution - fine particles - toxic

Figure 4: Sample discussion topic card

24. Give students 8-12 minutes to discuss the topic in their groups.
25. Encourage students to use the new expressions they found in the corpus. Whenever they use a new expression, they can tick it off their list. The aim is to tick all the expressions at least once over the course of the discussion.
26. Rotate the discussion cards and give students another chance to use their new expressions with a second discussion topic.

Points for consideration and alternative steps

- It is not necessary to register at KonText for this lesson. Registering is free but is time consuming and therefore unnecessary for this lesson. Simply instruct students to ignore the messages to register.
- Remind students that many Members of the European Parliament are not speakers of English as a first language and that many of the English texts are translations (though largely from highly qualified and experienced translators). If students are in any doubt, they should check with you whether the expressions they find are genuinely idiomatic.
- Note also that the InterCorp - English corpus largely reflects British English usage.
- It is possible to repeat the lesson using *we* as the search term to find further expressions to give opinions, present arguments and persuade.
- Some students may struggle to make immediate use of the expressions that they have selected from the corpus work in the debate activity. This is why it is important that students are familiar with the debate topic(s). Weaker students may be provided with debate topic cards that list more relevant keywords and collocations.
- The debate activity can also be gamified by first compiling a class list of all the corpus-informed expressions students have collected and then students awarding each other one point per expression used in the debate activity.

References and suggested reading

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