# *USING CORPORA TO ENHANCE ESP TEACHING*

**Simina Badea**

**Assist. Prof., PhD, University of Craiova**

*Abstract: At the crossroad of conservatism and innovation, legal language reflects in linguistic terms the changes occurred in a society, in a legal system. Teaching legal language, in this particular case teaching legal English to Romanian students, is a process that incorporates the changes visible in both English-speaking legal environments and the Romanian legal environment. It involves the use of various resources, methods and techniques, based on a careful analysis of the theoretical and practical needs of the students. This article aims to highlight the importance and impact of corpora in ESP teaching as a means of developing students' skills of investigation, of enhancing their specialist vocabulary and not only. ESP is an area where teaching-oriented corpora have turned out to be a valuable resource which, nonetheless, is still subject to criticism.*

*Keywords: ESP, legal language, teaching, resources, corpora*

## 1. ESP developments

At the crossroad of conservatism and innovation, legal language reflects in linguistic terms the changes occurred in a society, in a legal system (Dănişor, 2015; Danciu, 2002; Strechie, 2012). Teaching legal language, in this particular case teaching legal English, as an ESP variety, to Romanian students, is a process that incorporates the changes visible in both English-speaking legal environments (where English is the mother tongue, or it is the language of communication or of translated documents at a supranational level, such as the EU level) and the Romanian legal environment.

Recent years have seen important developments in ESP research, dominated by a text/discourse analytic perspective on English for specific purposes. Genre-based studies, the use of computers in approaching specific purpose language use, corpus-based studies have become core areas of ESP research. New techniques (such as ethnographic techniques) and notions (such as that of identity) have been used and explored. The globalization of higher



BDD-V2036 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:24 UTC)

education and the evolution of English as the lingua franca of worldwide communication have led to a growing interest in the acquisition of advanced academic literacies for research purposes and second language thesis and dissertation writing (Paltridge & Starfield, 2011).

## 2. ESP teaching and corpus-based studies

In this framework, the aim of the article is to highlight the importance and impact of corpora in ESP teaching as a means of developing students' skills of investigation, of enhancing their specialist vocabulary and not only.

Diane Belcher (2006, p. 142, cited in Paltridge & Starfield, 2011, p.106) signals the potential of corpus-based studies for ESP research to provide a better "empirically based understanding of language used for specific purposes". ESP is an area where teaching-oriented corpora have turned out to be a valuable resource which, nonetheless, is still subject to criticism.

### 2.1. Corpora and corpus linguistics

A corpus (pl. corpora) is "a collection of texts that has been assembled for the purpose of language study" (Thornbury, 2002, p. 68). The useful information we currently find in dictionaries (frequency of a word, collocations, authentic examples of the word in context) is greatly due to the development of corpus linguistics. Linguists generally see corpus linguistics as a "method of exegesis based on detailed searches for words and phrases in multiple contexts across large amounts of text" (McCarthy & O'Keeffe, 2010, p. 3), in an attempt to make sense of the phenomena revealed in different collections of texts. The method of the biblical scholars indexing the words of the Holy Bible hundreds of years ago fostered modern approaches to corpora, which actually started to develop with the commitment of the American structuralists in terms of collecting real language data and focusing on their scientific study.

### 2.2. The use of corpora in ESP teaching

The aims of corpus-based linguistics in teaching can be summarized as follows (Cheng, 2010, p. 319): teaching about, i.e. the principles and theory triggering the use of corpora, teaching to exploit, i.e. the practical, methodology-oriented aspects of corpus-based analyses, and exploiting to teach, i.e. using corpora as a resource to enhance teaching (Fligelstone, 1993), teaching to establish resources (Renouf, 1997).

Despite criticisms of corpora use in teaching, such as atomised descriptions of language use or ignorance of contextual aspects of texts (which can yet be counterbalanced),



BDD-V2036 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:24 UTC)

Cheng (2010, p. 319-20) and the advocates of using corpora in teaching argue that language corpora and corpus-informed studies:

- facilitate systematic access to naturally occurring language, and corpus-linguistic methods underpin exploratory and discovery learning (Bernardini, 2004), developing students' skills of investigation;
- provide teachers and learners with easily accessible information about real language use, frequency and collocations (Thornbury, 2002);
- encourage autonomous learning and teaching (Braun, 2005);
- capture reality. "Before the advent of corpora, teachers had to rely largely on intuitions about the way words are actually used" (Thornbury, 2002, p. 68). Even if corpora cannot express the full range of linguistic experience, they help teachers get beyond the intuitive level and motivate the decisions for teaching particular linguistic features (Gavioli & Aston, 2001);
- engage learners in the interpretive process to create models of their own (Leech, 1986);
- help teachers improve materials design, syllabus design, language testing, and classroom methodology (Granger, 2003, p. 542), teacher education in general.

As seen above, corpora have the advantage of language in use, therefore they can claim a certain authority over invented language, over examples that lexicographers used to devise, on condition that they are used with responsibility, i.e. they are selected, adapted and supplemented whenever necessary based on the analysis of learners' needs. Frequency information is another bonus of corpus-based dictionaries, an important tool in the teaching-leaning process. Such dictionaries provide statistically accurate data about frequency, given that "one aspect of knowing a word is knowing how frequently used it is" (Thornbury, 2002, p. 69), a fact with an impact on the learner, and especially on the teacher and coursebook writer, influencing their decisions with regard to word selection for active study.

Two important tools that a teacher can use when he has to manage corpus material are concordancing and keyword programs (Thornbury, 2002). Concordances are a suitable way of presenting corpus data to law students, enabling them to find out the regularities and patterns (either lexical or grammatical) associated with such words as: law, legal, illegal, pursuant to, criminal, tort, convention, shall, etc. For instance, a search for the word legal in the British National Corpus renders this adjective available for more focused study, displaying many of the nouns that collocate with it[1]: legal change, legal fictions, legal cruelty, Legal

[1] See http://bnc.bl.uk/saraWeb.php?qy=legal&mysubmit=Go, accessed 28 November 2015.



BDD-V2036 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:24 UTC)

Correspondent, legal process, Legal Administration, legal procedures, legal sanctions, legal concept (of marriage), legal contract, legal alcohol limit, legal office, legal action, legal entity, legal aspects, legal system, legal rules, legal battle, legal obligation, legal apparatus, etc. It is interesting to note and, at the same time, it is an opportunity for the teacher to emphasize the fact that the English word legal can be translated into Romanian as 'legal' (e.g. legal obligation 'obligaţia legală', legal alcohol limit 'limita legală a acoolemiei') or 'juridic' (e.g. legal system 'sistem juridic', legal rules 'norme juridice'), depending on the noun it combines with and the context. As a task, students can be asked to draw two lists, one containing collocations where the English adjective legal is translated as 'legal' into Romanian, and the other comprising expressions where legal becomes 'juridic' in Romanian.

Even if a corpus rarely reflects 'typical' usage in every aspect, for Romanian law students the use of corpora and corpus-based studies during the English classes encourages observation and investigation, developing discovery techniques in point of specialist vocabulary or grammar (e.g. the use of imperative, authoritative shall, the types of verbs it collocates with, the use of modal verbs, tenses, prepositions specific to legislative texts and legal language in general), enhancing interactional strategies and authenticating discourse, since students can thus move from discourse observers to discourse participants. Studying legal English means, first of all, studying legal vocabulary in context, discovering lexical as well as (integrated) grammatical patterns from the perspective of a discipline-specific study of vocabulary use in legal settings. And this can be partly done by selecting and analyzing the right discipline-specific corpora, one of the best resources available for vocabulary input. Law students can benefit from the output of such research in that they can more easily acquire the core vocabulary of legal English (covering different branches of law), to a great extent related to the frequency that specific terms and phrases have in legal texts, although frequency is not the most important determinant of what to teach. Moreover, they can discover collocations and terms that occur less often, but reflect crucial legal concepts, enjoying at the same time the innovation of the use of authentic, corpus-based examples breaking with the tradition of using examples invented by lexicographers. Last, but not least, all these help students to examine language from a critical angle.

Another perspective is offered by Tony McEnery & Richard Xiao (2011), who explore the potential uses of corpora in language pedagogy in terms of both **direct use of corpora** and **indirect use of corpora**. They rightly note that in the last years, language teaching has used corpora in a more integrative, indirect way. The first extraordinary advantage of the corpus-



BDD-V2036 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:24 UTC)

based approach is signposted by the lexicographers' work, which led to important developments in the designing of learner dictionaries including quantitative data. The authenticity of examples, the frequency information and quantification of collocation enhance disambiguation, recording even subtle changes in the meaning and usage of a lexical item and improving grammatical descriptions.

The realistic dimension of corpus data might be of great help in developing syllabuses and teaching materials so that learners will communicate better with native speakers, in the framework of a selection of vocabulary, grammatical structures and functions that students encounter in real life (in the case of law students, 'real life' covers a wide range of situations, from what they come across in legal environments, including conferences or courses they take at partner universities, to what they discover in law books, contracts, EU legislation, case law, etc.).

Collocations facilitate communication and in this respect, corpora prove their usefulness.

As for language testing, Alderson (1996) envisaged the following possible uses of corpora in this area: test construction, compilation and selection, test presentation, response capture, test scoring, and calculation and delivery of results. Over the last years corpora have been used by major providers of test services for a number of purposes: as an archive of examination scripts, to develop test materials, to optimize test procedures, to improve the quality of test marking, to validate tests, and to standardize tests (McEnery & Richard Xiao, 2011, p. 369).

Researchers agree that corpus linguistics should be included in initial language teacher education as a means of developing research skills and raising language awareness.

Direct use of corpora "has so far been confined largely to learning at more advanced levels" (McEnery & Richard Xiao, 2011, p. 370), i.e. teaching corpus linguistics as an academic subject, providing instructions on how to prepare and carry out corpus-based studies, using a corpus-based approach to teaching language and linguistics courses (e.g. sociolinguistics and discourse analysis).

LSP and professional communication have benefited from the corpus-based approach in, for example, the use of concordancing in teaching academic English vocabulary and writing or in teaching domain specific translation, in the establishment of the features of metadiscourse specific genres or the examination of citation practices in academic texts.

**3. Conclusions**



BDD-V2036 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:24 UTC)

Different areas of knowledge, among which lexicography, translation, stylistics, forensic linguistics, language teaching (including ESP teaching), are the beneficiaries of corpus investigation results especially over the last two decades (Cheng, 2010, p. 319). The way teachers have used corpora has been more integrative and indirect, probably influenced by the language level of learners and corpus-focused experience of the teacher as a mediator in class, time constraints and curricular requirements (McEnery & Richard Xiao, 2011, p. 365).

Although some argue that there are no specific structures, functions or discourse structures that might be associated with specific purpose language use (see, for instance Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, cited in Paltridge & Starfield, 2011, p. 106) and therefore corpus-based studies are not of great help in the conceptualization of learning, the advocates of these studies rightly note that they provide us with empirical data and greater empirically-based insight into the nature of specific purpose or domain-specific language use, equally revealing patterns and instances of professional communication. Researchers agree that there is still much to find out about the relationship between the conclusions relying on this kind of studies and the teaching-learning process.

**REFERENCES:**

Alderson, C. (1996). Do corpora have a role in language assessment? In J. Thomas & M. Short (Eds.), Using corpora for language research, (pp. 248–259). London: Longman.

Belcher, Diane (2006). English for specific purposes: Teaching to perceived needs and imagined futures in worlds of work, study, and everyday life. TESOL Quarterly, 40, 133–156.

Bernardini, S. (2004). Corpora in the Classroom: An Overview and Some Reflections on Future

Developments. In J. Sinclair (Ed.), How to Use Corpora in Language Teaching, (pp. 15-36). Amsterdam and Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.

Braun, S. (2005). From Pedagogically Relevant Corpora to Authentic Language Learning Contents. ReCALL, 17(1), 47–64.

Cheng, Winnie (2010).What can a corpus tell us about language teaching? In Anne O'Keeffe, Michael McCarthy (Eds.), The Routledge Handbook of Corpus Linguistics, (pp. 319-332). Routledge.

Chilom, Elena Tereza (2002). Istoria dreptului românesc. Craiova: Editura Universitaria.



BDD-V2036 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:24 UTC)

Dănişor, Diana (2015). Interpretarea gramaticală a legii civile - de la tehnica redactării la aplicările sale practice în Codul civil. Teză de doctorat, Universitatea din Craiova.

Fligelstone, S. (1993). Some Reflections on the Question of Teaching, from a Corpus Linguistics

Perspective. ICAME Journal 17, 97–110.

Gavioli, L. & Aston, G. (2001). Enriching Reality: Language Corpora in Language Pedagogy. ELT Journal, 55(3), 238–46.

Granger, S. (ed.) (2003). The International Corpus of Learner English: A New Resource for Foreign Language Learning and Teaching and Second Language Acquisition Research'. TESOL Quarterly, 37(3), 538–46.

Hutchinson, T. & Waters, A. (1987). English for specific purposes: A learning centred approach. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leech, G. (1986). Automatic Grammatical Analysis and Its Educational Applications. In G. Leech and C. Candlin (Eds.), Computers in English Language Teaching and Research, (pp. 205–14). London: Longman.

McCarthy, Michael & O'Keeffe, Anne (2010). Historical perspective – What are corpora and how have they evolved? In The Routledge Handbook of Corpus Linguistics, (pp. 3-13). Routledge.

McEnery, Tony & Xiao, Richard (2011). What Corpora Can Offer in Language Teaching and Learning. In Eli Hinkel (Ed.), Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning, vol. II, (pp. 364-380). Routledge.

Paltridge, Brian & Starfield, Sue (2011). Research in English for Specific Purposes. In Eli Hinkel (Ed.), Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning, vol. II, (pp. 106-121). Routledge.

Renouf, A. (1997). Teaching Corpus Linguistics to Teachers of English. In A. Wichmann, S. Fligelstone, T. McEnery and G. Knowles (Eds.), Teaching and Language Corpora, (pp. 255–66). London: Longman.

Strechie, Mădălina (2012). Termes latins à valeur juridique. In Studii şi cercetări de onomastică şi Lexicologie (SCOL), anul V, Nr. 1-2, (pp. 255-262) Craiova: Editura Sitech.

Thornbury, Scott (2002). How to Teach Vocabulary. Longman.

http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk



BDD-V2036 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-14 00:05:24 UTC)