

Oslo Interactive English - Final Report

Introduction

Oslo Interactive English (OIE) is a flexible learning environment, offering supplementary exercise material on the Web to undergraduate students of English at the University of Oslo.

Aims

OIE has two main aims:

- to improve students' language skills
- to introduce the corpus method to the students

The structure of OIE

The exercises

The exercises focus on English grammar in use and have been divided into seven main topics:

- Adjectives & adverbs
- Nouns & verbs
- Function words
- Vocabulary
- Text
- English vs. Norwegian
- Miscellaneous

Each of these topics includes exercises on various subtopics. Each subtopic contains eight exercises that all follow one of four different exercise types: multiple choice, gapping, error correction, and "open".

The use of the corpus method is most prominent in the multiple choice and open exercises, where the corpus has to be consulted in order to answer the exercises. In the multiple choice exercises, the students are given specific corpus search tasks to perform. This exercise type is therefore first and foremost an introduction to the corpus method.

The open exercises also require that the students use the corpus. However, more corpus skills are needed, since guidance as to which searches to perform is not given to the same extent. Furthermore, the open exercises are more theoretical in nature, i.e. in addition to corpus skills, the students need some knowledge of English grammar to solve the tasks presented.

In the gapping and error correction exercises, it is up to the students whether and how they want to use the corpus.

The exercises of each subtopic are set up in the following order:

- #1 and #2 -- multiple choice
- #3 and #4 -- gapping
- #5 and #6 -- error correction
- #7 and #8 -- open

This ordering ensures learning progress both as regards language skills and corpus skills. Before the students are comfortable with the corpus method it is recommended that the exercises are answered in that order. However, once the students' corpus skills have improved, the exercises can be answered in any order.

Suggested answers

When the students submit their answers to one of the exercises, their score will pop up in a small window. From there they can click their way to the suggested answers.

For students who score less than 100% there are links pointing to online grammars concerning the topic in question. There is also a link that will take the students to the corpus search hints page.

The corpus

The OIE corpus is password protected and is only available to students at the University of Oslo. Username and password can be obtained from the lecturers or from an online automatic reply service.

The corpus consists of approx. 7 million running words of 20th century fictional and non-fictional English. The texts include books, reports, speeches, and film scripts.

The main bulk of the corpus is taken from the *Longman/Lancaster English Language Corpus* which was purchased by IBA in the early 1990s. However, the original corpus is hardly recognisable since the OIEC is about half the size of the *Longman/Lancaster English Language Corpus*. In addition, texts have been added and quite a lot of editing has been done, e.g. errors caused by the scanning process have been corrected, "damaged" chunks of text (caused by the scanning process) have been deleted, etc.

The students have the corpus at their disposal at all times, either directly from the exercise page or from the corpus search window.

The development of OIE

OIE has been developed over the past year (2004-2005) mainly by one person working half time.

It has required various skills, including programming skill in php, JavaScript, and Perl, web publishing (html, xml) and design skills, corpus skills, knowledge of various aspects of the English language that are part of the curriculum for undergraduate students of English.

Remaining tasks

Although OIE is fully functional, there is still room for improvement.

Should future funding become available, the following points ought to be given priority:

- Development of more exercises;
- Improve "Specific search hints";
- Show more context in corpus searches;
- Trivial Corpus Pursuit;
- Funny illustrations;
- Integration of the OSEN Translation course;

Concluding remarks

Working on OIE has been rewarding in many ways. It has given insight into the various aspects of making a web-based and data-driven course; what the main challenges of such an undertaking are; what skills are required to undertake such a task.

Some effort went into the planning stage of how to create a package that would be attractive to students. How to present exercises that are more "fun" to solve than more traditional language exercises.

The aim was to develop non-obligatory exercises that combined the practical aspect of answering exercises and discovery-learning (by using a corpus). One challenge relating to this was to integrate the corpus / data-driven method into exercise types that are not traditionally connected with corpus work.

Although OIE can be accessed and explored by students in their own time, experience (from researchers in the field) has shown that students tend to need some face-to-face (non-virtual) guidance when it comes to corpus use. It is therefore suggested that an introduction to OIE is given in one of the on-campus courses at the start of every term. OIE is also suitable for group work where a teacher is present. Courses in continuing education can also benefit from the exercise material found in OIE.

OIE has not yet been evaluated, neither by teachers nor students. This should be done as soon as possible, since the success of OIE very much hinges on the result of such an evaluation.