

Providing learners with examples of English to illustrate specific grammatical and lexical points is a standard practise for many teachers. In this article, I would like to review possible sources to which teachers and ELT writers may turn in order to obtain such examples. I would also like to discuss principles in how these may be used to teach the target language.

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## I     A typical learner question

At a popular online question and answer forum for learners of English, one man writes:

*“I still feel some complication in understanding these modals: **would have, should have and could have**. Please give me some examples to help me understand.”*

## II    Invented examples

As we will all be aware, providing students with examples of the target language to illustrate specific structures and lexis may sometimes seem like part of a language teacher’s job description. In the classroom, the most convenient place for a teacher to obtain such models is from his or her own head. Inevitably, then, learners of English will be used to invented sentences such as:

- You **should have** taken your umbrella. Then you wouldn't have got wet.
- It was a great party last night. You **should have** come.
- I'm feeling sick. I **shouldn't have** eaten so much chocolate.
- You went to bed very late last night. You **should have** gone to bed earlier.
- I **could have** gone to university, if I'd passed my exams.
- We **could have** gone away if we'd had enough money.
- You did very well to pass the exam. I'm sure I **couldn't have** passed it.
- Why didn't Liz apply for the job? She **could have** got it.
- If he'd taken his umbrella, he **would have** stayed dry.
- The view was wonderful. If I'd taken my camera, I **would have** taken some photographs.
- If he had been looking where he was going, he **wouldn't have** walked into the wall.
- If I'd gone to the party, I **would have** met lots of interesting people.

In recent years, contrived examples such as these may have found themselves on the defensive, as approaches which are task-based or learner-centred, for example, advocate the use of real or authentic language in the classroom.

Despite this, student demand for linguistic 'explanations' can sometimes be too high for a teacher to resist the temptation of creating spontaneous examples on the spot. Doing so is certainly quicker and less likely to break up the rhythm and progression of a lesson than, for example, reaching for a learner grammar book or consulting a text corpus.

In addition, the examples given above may be perfectly adequate to satisfy an inquisitive learner and put him or her on the right track. Nearly all of them involve situations that are familiar to the vast majority of adult human beings (rain, parties, chocolate, sleep, exams, money, etc) and this is one factor to be considered if comprehension of the target language is to be optimised.

But although in improvisatory situations, the language teacher's imagination may be a convenient and effective language source, when designing activities or when writing course books or learner grammars, there are other repositories that can be considered.

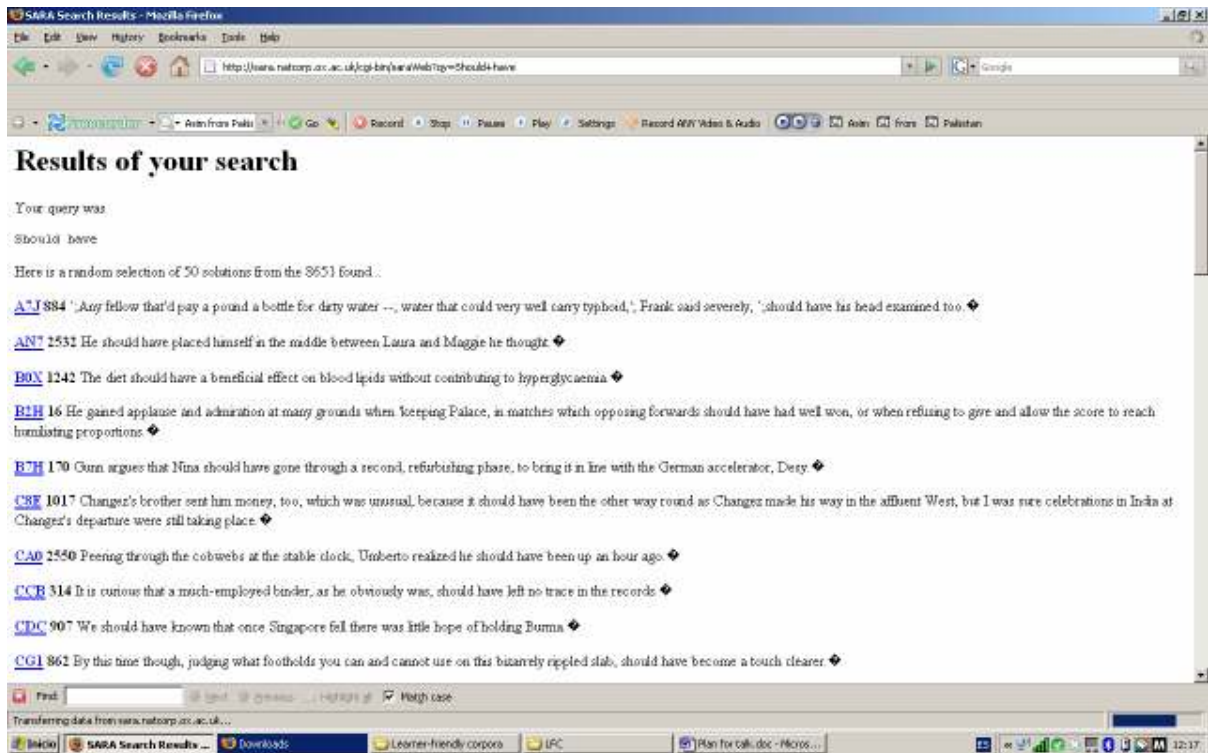
### III Corpora examples

Perhaps instead of looking into their own heads, teachers should look outwards to language itself and supply learners with natural specimens of it. The following random examples come from the **British National Corpus** which allows users to carry out free, online 'Simple Searches' (see references).

- *Why, Gloria my dear, you **should have** called from the station.*
  - *I think it would have been nice to announce the passing of these old trams; there **should have** been a farewell trip on the Promenade.*
  - *Dreaming of the future and rediscovering the feeling of past successes **should have** helped you work out some goals for yourself-what we will call a 'success image'*
  - *I just don't think you **should have** told them that I don't have any confidence with women.*
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- *If I'd done it then, perhaps I wouldn't have been fit to go to the Olympics and worlds, and I'd hate to be sitting here now thinking I **could have** won.*
  - *He **could have** been fifty but possibly thirty.*
  - *Casting into the gap between the willows would have been difficult but I would have taken a bigger net of fish, with a couple of sizeable ones maybe, for I **could have** hauled each fish out of the swim immediately it was hooked and kept disturbance down to a minimum.*
  - *She wished with all her heart she **could have** found contentment with him.*
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- *However, in order to create the 1000-light-year tunnel, says Welsh, several supernovae **would have** been needed.*
  - *In contrast to this static, theatrical production, during the last weekend of the 1988 York Festival the last four mystery plays were re-enacted as they **would have** been in the fifteenth century.*
  - *Many a woman **would have** paid a fortune to have had his eyelashes, thick, long and curling.*
  - *She lifted down the big suitcase from the top of the wardrobe, and, placing it on the bed, began to fill it, folding the garments as carefully as Isabelle **would have** done.*

A quick look at these results may be enough to remind us of the problems associated with authentic examples. First of all, they raise the question of whether or not native norms and standards should be used as a model for learner language production. The language in a corpus such as the British National Corpus, which comes from a diverse range of genres and sources, can be noisy, obscure and maverick in nature – quite unappealing for many learners. As a result, such raw examples can draw attention away from the grammar or lexis that they are intending to illustrate as students will often focus on unknown words, phrases, names or linguistic irregularities.

Furthermore, although these examples are authentic, they are presented in a highly inauthentic way. Each has been brutally ripped from its natural environment and presented in isolation. Elements of discourse and context which are vital for comprehension are absent. The reader is effectively denied the full picture. And the full picture is even bigger than that: A lack of visually-enhancing elements such as user-friendly layout, font variety, colour, graphics, images, etc, means that corpus search results may appear quite intimidating to any non-linguist.



Together, these factors are responsible for getting in between corpus examples and students' comprehension and appreciation of them. Despite this, I have found the British National Corpus useful as a source of examples for the basis of language study activities, especially ones which focus on structure rather than meaning. The worksheet below was created in response to a specific learner question and proved to be successful in dealing with it.

*“If the **have** in ‘would have’ can be an auxiliary or a main verb, how do we know which one it is?”*

**Consider the following examples. In each case, decide whether the highlighted word is an auxiliary or a main verb. In each case, decide how you came to your conclusion.**

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- 1) Slower learners should **have** three years instead of two to do their exams.
  - 2) You should **have** had children.
  - 3) Those who are making asylum claims should **have** access to free professional legal advice.
  - 4) You should **have** heard the way she talked.
  - 5) We could **have** beaten the best team in the country.
  - 6) Beth loved for children, but she wished she could **have** had them with the man she loved, instead of the man she was indebted to.
  - 7) A prime minister could **have** great influence and authority.
  - 8) He said they could **have** a picnic if they brought some cake out into the garden, but they didn't seem to understand him.
  - 9) Often he would shave, but the next day he would **have** a beard again.
  - 10) The careful search for an abandoned house and a body would **have** to begin.
  - 11) I would **have** known that if I wasn't so stupid.
  - 12) In normal circumstances, Melissa would **have** enjoyed being with him but that evening she wasn't in the mood.
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The worksheet was created by copying and pasting the results of a corpus search onto a Word document, deleting the obscure, longwinded, inappropriate or potentially problematic examples and making gentle alterations to the remaining ones.

#### IV The corpus principle

A corpus such as the *British National Corpus* that has been designed specifically for linguistic investigation is not the only type that can be used by language teachers. In fact when we define a corpus as any bank of language

with a facility for finding what we want, it becomes immediately apparent that there may be many other useful resources at our disposal.

Non-conventional corpora (banks of language that do not exist specifically for linguistic investigation) can be found in some unexpected places.

## V Using quotations as examples

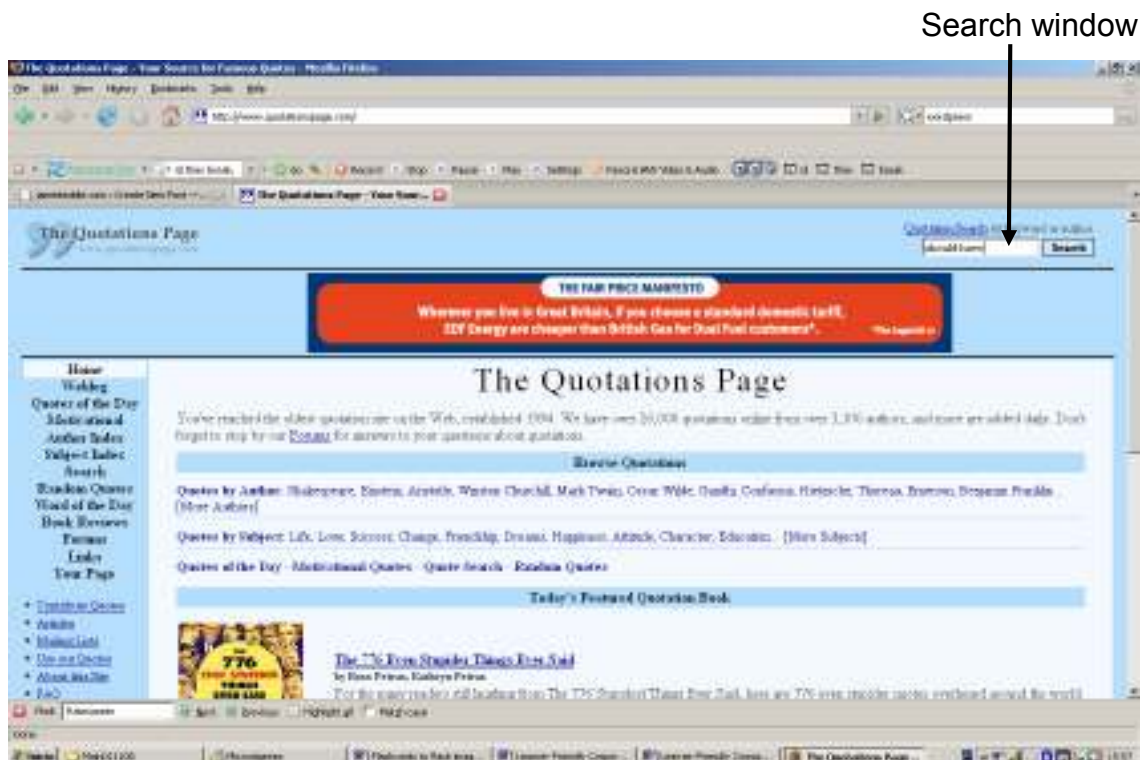
Consider the following examples:

- *I always wanted to be somebody, but I **should have** been more specific.*  
Jane Wagner, (and Lily Tomlin)
- *The hardest work in the world is that which **should have** been done yesterday.*  
Author Unknown
- *Don't fear failure so much that you refuse to try new things. The saddest summary of a life contains three descriptions: could have, might have, and **should have**.*  
Louis E. Boone
- *It's our fault. We **should have** given him better parts.*  
Jack Warner, on hearing that Ronald Reagan had been elected governor of California
- *I didn't see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that **could have** ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life.*  
Steve Jobs (1955 - ), Stanford University commencement address, June 12, 2005
- *The worst thing you can possibly do is worrying and thinking about what you **could have** done.*  
Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742 - 1799)
- *I am entirely certain that twenty years from now we will look back at education as it is practiced in most schools today and wonder that we **could have** tolerated anything so primitive.*  
John W. Gardner (1912 - 2002)
- *If I had only known, I **would have** been a locksmith.*  
Albert Einstein (1879 - 1955)

- *If government could create jobs and raise children, socialism **would have worked**.*  
George Gilder
- *An intelligence test sometimes shows a man how smart he **would have been not to have taken it**.*  
Laurence J. Peter (1919 - 1988)
- *My wife and I tried to breakfast together, but we had to stop or our marriage **would have been wrecked**.*  
Sir Winston Churchill (1874 - 1965)

A well-selected quotation will be short and autonomous in meaning, humorous and/or thought-provoking. As long as books such as *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* have existed, teachers have been able to make use of them as a resource for the classroom. However, as is the case for any reference book, a user is limited to its organisation and indexing systems. So although we could make use of such a tool to obtain quotations that originated from the same author, or that share a common theme (money, love, religion, etc), it would be unpractical to use it to find a set of quotations to illustrate specific grammatical structures or lexical items.

All of the quotations that are given above were found using the corpus principle. In this case, the language database in question was an online quotations bank ([www.quotationspage.com](http://www.quotationspage.com)). Unlike books, users of databases can run instant searches of keywords to find virtually anything they want (quotations containing either *should have*, *could have* or *would have*, for example).



Examples like these have the potential to succeed where the others fail. Unlike the standard invented examples that have seen, quotations are often engaging, stimulating and memorable. In the right circumstances, they could be used as springboards to get students thinking and speaking or writing.

Unlike the corpus-obtained examples, they are generally able to stand free as complete texts. Although certain cultural knowledge will be necessary in many cases, a teacher can choose the ones that he or she feels will be best suited to the students.

Lists of quotations can be used for the basis of diverse classroom activities. Some examples:

- Give the list to students and ask them to choose their three favourite quotations.
- Use the quotations to create gap-fill or other language study activities.
- Use the quotations for the basis of dictation activities.

## VI Using book or film titles as examples

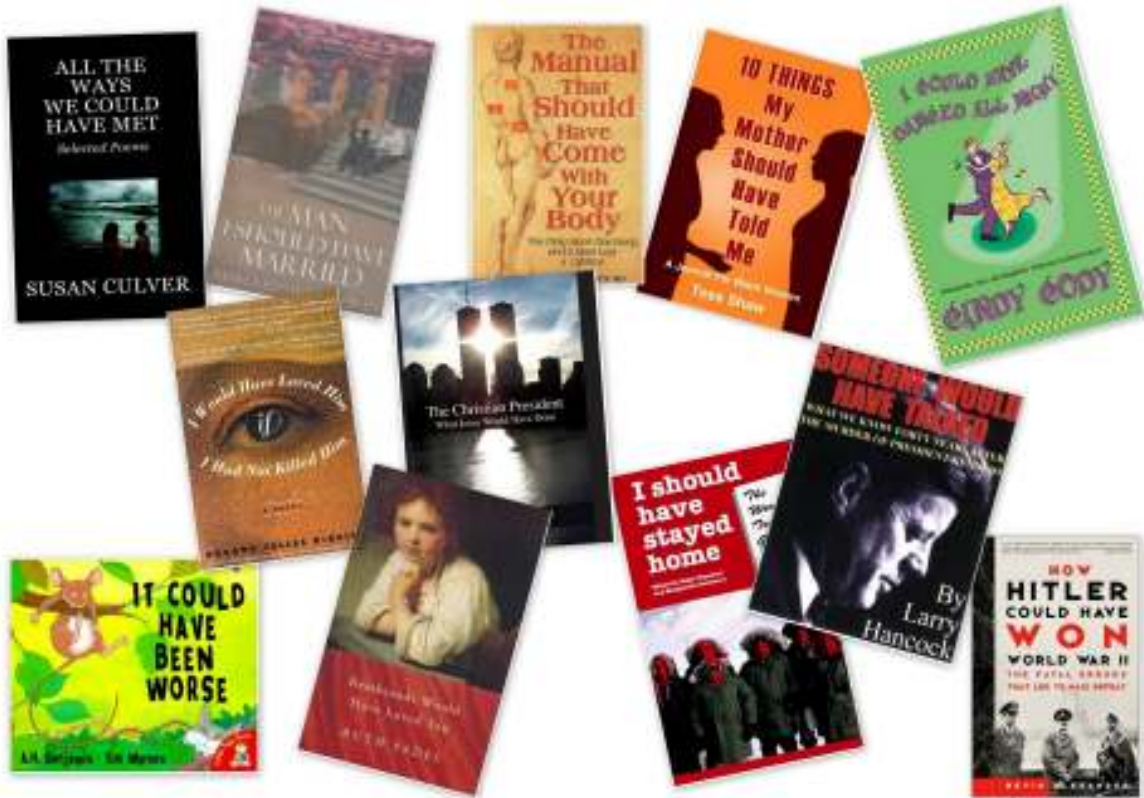
Here are 12 book titles that illustrate the current language point in question:

- The man I **should have** married
- 10 things my mother **should have** told me
- The manual that **should have** come with your body
- I **should have** stayed at home
  
- How Hitler **could have** won World War II
- It **could have** been worse
- I **could have** danced all night
- All the ways we **could have** met
  
- The Christian president: What Jesus **would have** done
- I **would have** loved him if I had not killed him
- Someone **would have** talked
- Rembrandt **would have** loved you

A book title can almost be regarded as a free-standing miniature text – short, succinct and autonomous in meaning. However, in order for it to be appreciated in full, it must be observed in its natural habitat: on the book cover itself.

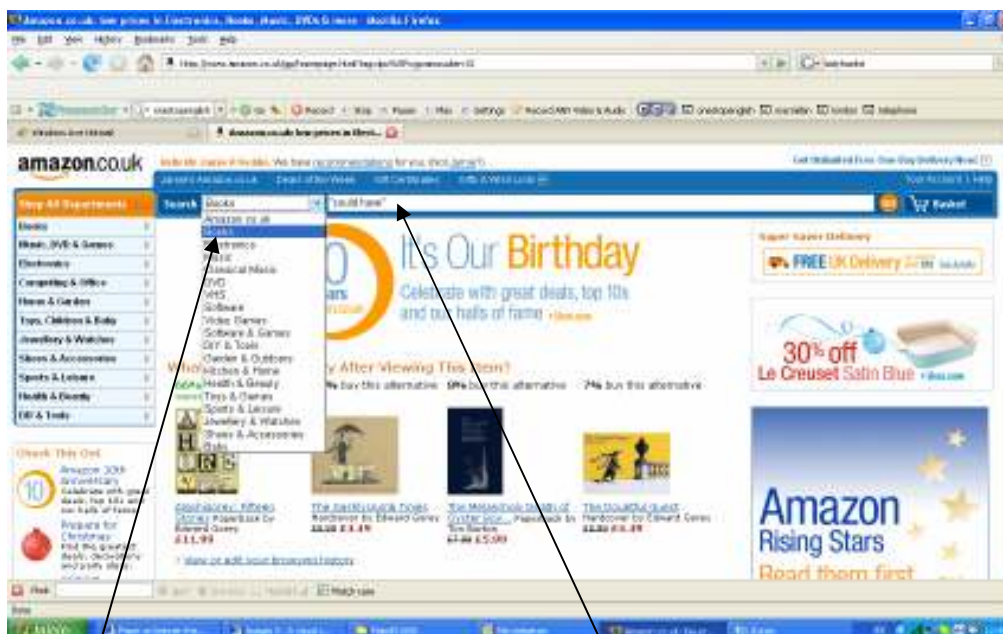
A book or film cover has an important job: It should advertise the product within and communicate a basic idea of what it is about, what genre it belongs to and who it is aimed at. Although we may not know specifically what the title refers

to, elements of colour, design, image, graphics and font will allow the imagination to take over and come to its own decision. Together, these factors contribute to enhanced student comprehension of the language of the title.



For example, when you see the books in question, you realise that ‘*Someone would have talked*’ is an investigation of Jack Kennedy’s assassination, that ‘*The man I should have married*’ is a romance novel, and that ‘*It could have been worse*’ is a children’s picture book.

The corpus principle can be used to obtain images of book or DVD covers whose titles contain specific structures or lexis. In this case, the database used is a well-known online book, film and music store: [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk). At this popular site, users can search for book or DVD titles that contain specific words or structures in the titles (‘*should have*’, ‘*would have*’ or ‘*could have*’, for example).



Select Books or DVD from dropdown menu

Type word or phrases into search window (phrases in inverted commas – “could have”, etc)

A selection of suitable book or DVD covers to illustrate a language point can be downloaded from the site and arranged as a slideshow. Such slideshows can become an integral part of any lesson plan which makes use of titles. One obvious activity, for example, would be to give students a list of titles and ask them to decide or guess the genre of each book or DVD before being given access to the images.

Finally a note about the language of titles: One frequent criticism of pedagogical grammars is that they are heavily biased towards teaching learners how to construct sentences, often at the expense of other features of the language. One such feature that may have been overshadowed is the noun phrase. It is interesting to note that the balance changes when we are dealing with the language of book and film titles. In the twelve titles listed above, there are an equal number of sentences (*'I should have stayed at home'*, *'It could have been worse'*, etc) and noun phrases (*'The man I should have married'*, *'The manual that should have come with your body'*, etc). Usually, however, when working with titles, noun phrases usually find themselves in the limelight.

## VII Examples from a personalised corpus

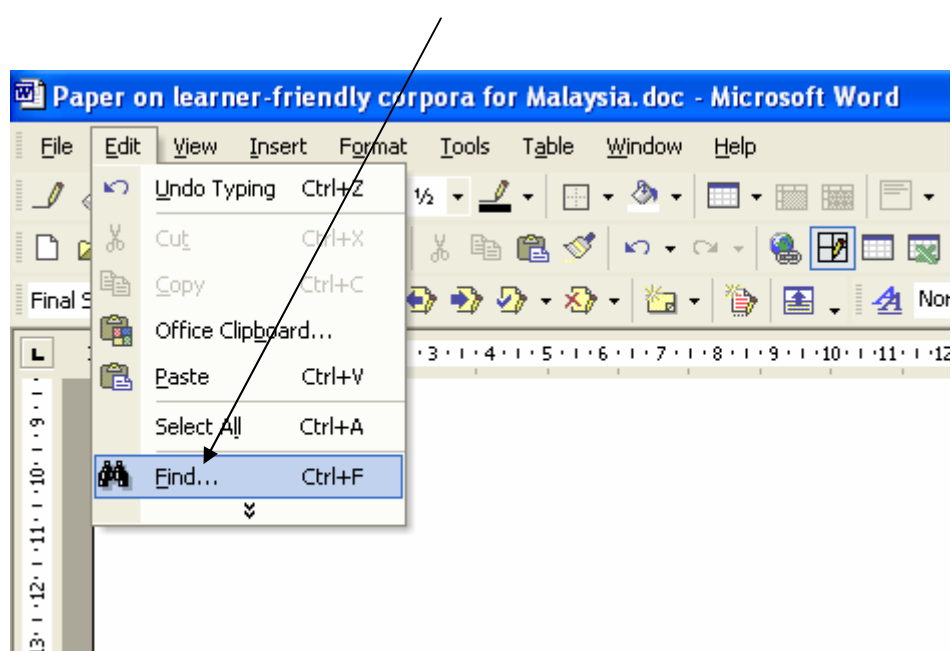
Perhaps one of the most effective sources of examples in the classroom comes from learners themselves. The following examples of the target language all came from the same student – a Catalan man who will be referred to as Rafa.

- “You **should have** stayed at home.” [What Rafa said when Jamie came to class with a cold]
- “They **shouldn’t have** given that information to anyone.” [Writing about a situation in which a company divulged his personal information to a third party]
- “I **could have** been a cabinet minister but I am too honest.”
- “Hauge **could have** played the advantage rule, but he decided to give a free kick to Barça and send Lehmann off.” [Writing about the Champions League final 2006 between Arsenal and Barcelona]
- “If Lehmann hadn’t been sent off Arsenal probably **would have** won.” [As above]
- “If the CiU had won over 50% of the votes, the tripartite **would have** had a problem” [Talking about the results of the Catalan election]

These six examples of the target structure come from a 12,000-word Microsoft Word document which was built up over two years of weekly one-to-one classes with Rafa. Following each meeting, the Word document grew as the following were added to it:

- All texts that were presented during our meetings
- All of Rafa’s written compositions
- Anything that Rafa said that was either praiseworthy or in need of correction

As in the above cases, a search facility is a vital part of any corpus and in this case, the Word for Windows **Find** function, located under the **Edit** dropdown menu, was used to uncover cases of ‘*should have*’, ‘*would have*’ or ‘*could have*’.



As with the British National Corpus search, this approach can involve extracting and isolating examples of language from their contexts. However, the advantage is that students will already be familiar with the sources from which they originate. Once these have been identified, comprehension of the extracts can be straightforward.

This technique could also be used to find specific examples of grammar or lexis in ebooks that students have read or digital formats of scripts to films that they have seen.

## VIII Teacher and writers

By providing learners with multiple illustrative examples of a specific structure or lexical item, we hope that they will:

1. Comprehend them
2. Engage with them
3. Recognise patterns within them
4. Be able to reconstruct them

The choices that the teacher, activities designer, or course book writer makes can affect the outcomes at all levels.

## IX Comprehension

First of all, we should decide how to optimise students' comprehension of the examples of language that we present to them. Do we play it safe and give out simplistic examples of the type discussed under the 'Invented examples' subheading? Such models may be perfectly accurate for beginners or for students of the particularly inquisitive variety.

For more advanced learners and for more specialised language, we may choose to exploit a corpus such as the British National Corpus. The fact that such databases have been designed specifically for linguistic investigation ensures that in most cases, we will be able to find examples of what we are looking for. However, this may come at the expense of reduced student comprehension since the language that surfaces from such searches is notoriously noisy. In fact, rather than help learners, it may even confuse them further as the precious 'rules' that have been learned and internalised are seen to be broken. In order to optimise comprehension, the teacher may 'cherry pick' the most suitable examples and even make gentle alterations to any parts of the language that may stand in the way of comprehension.

The third possibility that has been discussed is the potential to harness the power of certain popular online resources and regard them as non-conventional corpora (online book stores and quotations sites are the two that were addressed). The examples that are obtained from a search of these sites are succinct and generally autonomous in meaning. In the case of the former, they are also visually supported. These factors contribute greatly to increased learner comprehension of the language.

Finally, we saw how a personalised corpus can be built up over time and consulted as and when necessary. The fact that such examples will come from texts that were presented during class time or language that emerged from students themselves will greatly contribute towards learners' comprehension of them.

## X Engagement

As has been discussed, for reasons of practicality or in order to optimize comprehension of language, there are times when teachers or ELT writers may choose to avoid authenticity and use invented examples:

- *You **should have** taken your umbrella. Then you wouldn't have got wet.*
- *I **could have** gone to university, if I'd passed my exams.*
- *The view was wonderful. If I'd taken my camera, I **would have** taken some photographs.*

Although texts like these may be easy to comprehend, it would be difficult to argue that they are also engaging and interesting. On the other extreme, we may find ourselves with the same problem when using raw corpus search results:

- *Why, Gloria my dear, you **should have** called from the station.*
- *If I'd done it then, perhaps I wouldn't have been fit to go to the Olympics and worlds, and I'd hate to be sitting here now thinking I **could have** won.*
- *However, in order to create the 1000-light-year tunnel, says Welsh, several supernovae **would have** been needed.*

If we look back at the non-conventional corpora (Amazon.com, quotations sites, personalised corpora) we find that many of the '*should have*', '*could have*', and '*would have*' examples obtained from them are humorous, stimulating or personalised. Students may find themselves more involved with examples such as these and this may be an important factor in order to achieve goals: If learners are to internalise the grammatical or lexical features that are being presented to them, then surely they will be more likely to do so if the illustrative examples are memorable.

## XI Pattern recognition

Assuming that students comprehend the illustrative examples that are presented to them, we should then consider whether they will recognise or notice semantic or structural patterns within them. For example:

- Will students realise that in the examples discussed above, the *have* that follows either *should*, *would* or *could* is an auxiliary verb rather than a main verb?
- Will students realise that such structures are followed by past participles?
- Will students perceive the semantic difference between the three modal auxiliary verbs, *should*, *would* and *could*?

For the first two points, it should be fairly straightforward to bring such structural elements to learners' attention by asking appropriate questions or by creating activities such as gap-fills or categorization tasks (see activity on page 5).

The last point, however, is particularly important for the language point in question. Although as teachers or writers we may take care to select examples that our learners will comprehend, how could we ever ensure that a student won't construe '*The man I **should** have married*' as '*The man I **could** have married*'?

Once again, invented examples may be one way to avoid such potential confusion. It is difficult to imagine how a learner could misinterpret, '*I'm feeling sick. I **shouldn't** have eaten so much chocolate.*' And of course, by using such examples, teachers may ensure that students are protected from maverick language which does not conform to the regularities of 'TEFL grammar'.

Another possibility would be to take a deductive approach and explicitly present students with the necessary information they will require to comprehend the target language and negotiate pitfalls.

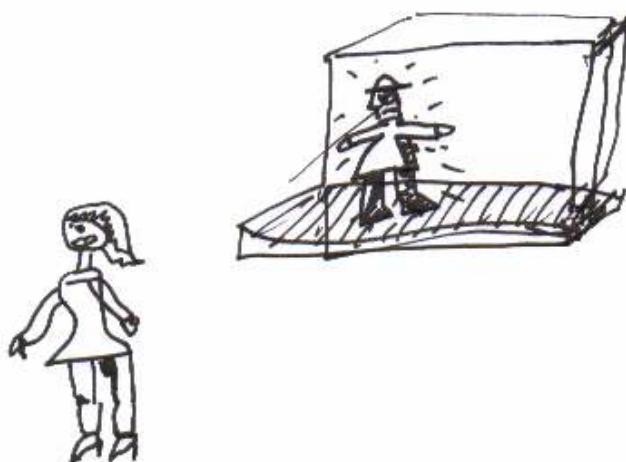
Finally, one highly effective way of encouraging learners to notice patterns is by asking them to translate illustrative examples into their mother tongues. This can work best as a collaborative process: Students who share the same L1 can work together and come to consensus translations for each book title, quotation, etc.

## XII Reconstruction activities

'Understanding' the language illustrated within the examples that are presented is one thing. Being able to reproduce it is another.

Gap-fill activities, L1 translations, categorizations and teacher explanations may contribute towards students' linguistic awareness. But inevitably, they will stop short of actively training learners to reproduce the target structures or lexical items on the agenda.

A natural progression, then, may be for teachers to plan and prepare activities or games in which learners are required to recall and reproduce/reconstruct examples of the target language which they have already met. These could include, for example, activities in which the already-familiar illustrative examples are drilled, dictated or chanted. Other possibilities include having learners convert their mother tongue translations (see 'Pattern recognition' above) back into English or creating their own picture flashcards that can be used to recall and reconstruct the language.



*"If he had been looking where he was going, he **wouldn't have** walked into the wall."* (Drawing by Roser)



*"I'm feeling sick. I **shouldn't have** eaten so much chocolate."* (Drawing by Miquel)

## XIII The learner

Perhaps most importantly, students can be trained to make use of the corpora principle for themselves to find their own illustrative examples, answer their own linguistic queries and thus gain autonomy for their own learning. Although as discussed above, conventional corpora may not be to everyone's taste, the familiarity and potential usefulness of databases such as online book stores and quotations sites qualifies them as user-friendly corpora.

In addition, learners can be encouraged to create their own personalised corpora of familiar texts and written assignments, and shown how to navigate these using search facilities.

## XIV Summary

In the digital age, language teachers and language learners can take advantage of familiar online databases, digitally-stored texts and user-friendly search facilities to obtain examples of language to illustrate specific words, phrases, collocations and structures. Unlike conventional corpora which are created specifically for linguistic investigation, non-conventional corpora such as quotations site and online book stores have the advantage of being accessible, familiar and learner-friendly.

## XV References

**BBC Learning English** ([www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish)) - The source of the learner query on '*should have*', '*would have*' and '*could have*'

**The British National Corpus** 'simple search'  
(<http://sara.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/lookup.html>)

**The Quotations Page** ([www.quotationspage.com](http://www.quotationspage.com))

**Amazon** ([www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)) - Online music, film and book store

**www.jamiekeddie.com** - Author's blog at which many other ideas for learner-friendly corpora ideas are discussed