

# Towards a framework for teaching spoken grammar

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*Since the advent of spoken corpora, descriptions of native speaker spoken grammar have become far more detailed and comprehensive. These insights, however, have been relatively slow to filter through to ELT practice. The aim of this article is to outline an approach to the teaching of native-speaker spoken grammar which is not only pedagogically sound, but which also reflects current sociolinguistic concerns about using native-speaker models in the classroom. The article proposes some principles for the selection and design of texts and tasks in the teaching of (native-speaker) spoken language. The reactions of a small group of teachers and learners who piloted materials based on these principles are discussed. The article concludes that, through the approach outlined, it is both possible and potentially useful to raise awareness of native-speaker spoken language without detriment to what Modiano (2001: 339) terms 'the cultural integrity of the non-native speaker'.*

## Introduction

In 1995 *ELT Journal* published 'Spoken grammar: what is it and how can we teach it?' by Mike McCarthy and Ron Carter. The publication of *The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* by Biber *et al.* (1999) indicates that, since then, we have gained a more comprehensive, though not definitive, picture of what spoken grammar is. There seems, however, to have been little progress on the question of how we should teach spoken grammar. McCarthy and Carter (1995) did, indeed, propose that an I-I-I paradigm—illustration—induction—interaction—should replace the PPP paradigm, but they did not claim this to be a detailed or definitive methodology. In the intervening years, the question of how we should teach spoken language has been subordinated to the question of whether we should teach it. In effect, the 'how' question has been subsumed by the wider debate about appropriate norms and models of English in the context of the internationalization of English. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that whether we should teach native-speaker spoken language at all is still a legitimate area for debate. This article argues, however, that there is at least a *prima facie* case for teaching spoken grammar, and that by looking in more detail at how we should teach spoken grammar, we will in fact get a different and valuable perspective on whether we should teach spoken grammar. Before looking at the details of the suggested approach, it will be useful to look at the provisional case for teaching native-speaker spoken language.

**The provisional case for teaching native speaker spoken grammar**

I am going to argue that there are three grounds for believing that it may be desirable to teach native speaker spoken language in the classroom:

- 1 Corpus linguists such as McCarthy and Carter (1995) have shown that there are features of spoken grammar which are totally neglected in ELT materials, even though they are commonly used by a wide variety of speakers. As these features are a systematic part of how native speakers interact and establish relationships, it is not unreasonable to suppose that they may be of potential value to the learner. To take just one example, McCarthy (1998: 161–2) has shown that the use of the past continuous to report speech, as in ‘I was just telling John that I’ve written an article’ is very common in speech and has a clear function: it tends to summarize what was said, rather than report exact words. This feature is not, however, taught in any of the materials I have seen.
- 2 Timmis (2002) showed that despite the increasing use of English in international contexts, a significant number of teachers and learners, in various teaching and learning contexts, express a desire to conform to native-speaker grammar norms, including norms of informal grammar (though they are more equivocal when actually confronted with examples of informal grammar).
- 3 The same research (Timmis 2002) indicated that there is a consensus among teachers that learners should at least be exposed to spoken grammar.

This is far from a conclusive case for teaching native-speaker spoken language, but it does suggest that it is at least worth investigating the case further. A useful way of investigating the case further, I am arguing, is to go beyond the purely academic debate, to outline a teaching approach, and to test it out. The purpose of trying out the materials is not only to see if the proposed methodology is viable. It should also give some useful information about whether teachers and learners regard the teaching of native-speaker spoken grammar as desirable. We will now look at the framework I am proposing.

**A framework for teaching spoken grammar**

Spoken data in the classroom

In developing materials for spoken language, the first basic question is: in what shape or form should we introduce spoken data into the classroom? If we accept that spoken grammar features are crucially discourse-sensitive, it seems logical that the target spoken language features should be embedded in a text, rather than simply in a sentence, at least for the initial encounter. If we are going to use a spoken text as a vehicle for teaching spoken grammar, what kind of text should it be? In my view, two overriding criteria should govern our selection of texts:

- 1 Does the text have the potential to engage the students’ interest?
- 2 Is the text plausible as natural interaction?

In adopting these criteria of plausibility and interest, I am deliberately bypassing the intense debate about authenticity, and allowing a place for both naturally occurring and specially constructed texts. Though it seems odd to have to specify that a text should be interesting, for me,

the single biggest challenge in teaching spoken language actually lies in finding texts which are natural, or naturalistic, and interesting. As Cook (1998: 61) has pointed out, a good deal of natural conversation is ‘impoverished, inarticulate, and boring’. If we do find a text which is interesting and plausible as natural interaction, we will also want to make sure that it is not too dense in unknown lexis or obscure cultural references. And while I would argue that learners are more willing and able to relate to alien contexts than some commentators would allow, we have to draw the line somewhere, e.g. a conversation in a cricket changing room. These criteria are quite difficult to meet, but thanks to the availability of texts on the Internet, it may be getting easier. While preparing some materials for Singapore, for example, I found an interview with the singer Coco Lee which contained a number of interesting features of spoken language. It was, however, a written transcript of the interview, and this raises the question of how the text should be experienced in class. I would argue that, wherever possible, the text should be listened to in the first instance. There are four reasons why I feel it is important for learners to listen to the texts:

- 1 Although we may not be able to describe the pronunciation features of spoken language accurately, at least pronunciation gives clues as to the nature of the interaction, the relationship between the participants, etc.
- 2 In my view it is at least questionable whether we should develop materials which focus solely on spoken language. Just as I would argue that treating phrasal verbs separately creates, or reinforces the erroneous impression that they are peripheral, exotic, and confusing, I would argue that it is a mistake to segregate work on spoken language for the same reason.
- 3 I would also argue that, quite apart from any particular feature we are focusing on, ultimately, and more importantly, we are fostering the skill and habit of listening and noticing.
- 4 Global listening is one way in which we can ensure that texts are processed for meaning before they are analysed for language (see below).

### **Tasks/methodology for spoken language**

Once we have got the data into the classroom, what are we, or more importantly the students, going to do with it? If we are to meet the rather exacting criteria set out at the beginning of the article—pedagogically sound materials which reflect sociolinguistic concerns—I am going to argue that we need four types of task: cultural access tasks, global understanding tasks, noticing tasks, and language discussion tasks. These task types are described and explained below.

### **Cultural access tasks**

It would be naïve and rather arrogant to assume that learners are automatically willing and able to relate to any native-speaking context. Equally, it seems to me to be unduly pessimistic to assume that learners are automatically unwilling and unable to relate to a context simply because it is a native-speaking context. Tomlinson (2000) has suggested that one way in which some native speaking contexts can be made more

accessible to learners is to relate the context to a similar aspect of the learners' culture. The aim of cultural access tasks, then, is to help learners to relate the themes/topics of the text to their own culture, and perhaps more importantly, to universalize the issues of the text. Below is an example of such a task, used in conjunction with a videotext set in Cornwall. This particular task aims to connect the local theme of the video—the advantages and disadvantages of living in Cornwall—with more general issues which are likely to be of interest to the learner. Straightforward though this task is, it worked well in piloting.

*Take a moment to think about these questions and then discuss them with a partner:*

- a What is the difference between quality of life and standard of living?
- b Which is more important to you, quality of life or standard of living?
- c Do you feel proud of the area you come from? What makes it special (Traditions? Customs? Skills? Language? Other things?)

## Global understanding tasks

It has been persuasively argued (Van Patten 1990; Willis and Willis 1996) that learners will gain more from language work on a text if they have already got a general understanding of it. Global comprehension—or 'gist listening'—tasks have been common practice in communicative methodology for many years. (See e.g. Underwood 1990). Below is an example of such a task from the pilot materials.

### **Listening to understand 1**

*Listen/watch and tick the things which make Cornwall special:*

- a It is geographically isolated.
- b They still speak a different language.
- c They have a strong sense of community.
- d There is a tradition for large families.

## Noticing tasks

Batstone (1996: 273) provides the following definition of noticing: 'Noticing is a complex process: it involves the intake both of meaning and of form, and it takes time for learners to progress from initial recognition to the point where they can internalize the underlying rule.' There are three reasons why I believe that noticing tasks are particularly appropriate for teaching spoken language:

- 1 Second language acquisition research has shown that a premature focus on production can be counter-productive.
- 2 In the case of spoken language it is at least questionable whether we want learners to produce these forms at any stage.
- 3 For many features of spoken language it is quite hard to frame useful and digestible production rules.

A sample of noticing tasks is included in the Appendix, but I would like to draw attention here to the two main principles behind the tasks: they encourage learners to compare their expectations of native-speaker English and the reality of native-speaker English, and they encourage learners to compare what they would say with what native speakers would say. In effect, many of the tasks are ‘spot the difference tasks’.

## Language discussion tasks

If we are serious about reflecting sociolinguistic concerns, then we need tasks which encourage learners to use Gavioli and Aston’s (2001: 241) phrase, to ‘adopt a critical, analytic perspective’ to the language features they have ‘noticed’. These tasks ask learners to reflect on why speakers use certain forms, what the effect of them is, and whether or not it would be appropriate for the learners themselves to produce such forms. One of the functions of these tasks would be to ensure that learners do not fall into the trap of what Seidlhofer has called ‘unilateral idiomaticity’ (Jenkins, Modiano, and Seidlhofer 2001): if they feel they want to use this kind of spoken grammar at all, they should be aware of the occasions when it might actually impede communication. Below are some examples of the general questions which might be discussed:

- How formal/informal do you think the dialogue is?
- How well do you think the speakers know each other?
- What do you think they would say in a more formal context?
- What would you say in a similar context in your language?
- Would you like to use this kind of spoken language? Why? Why not?

It can be argued, of course, that such questions have a value beyond raising sociolinguistic issues: they may promote broader language awareness and produce worthwhile communication in themselves.

## From theory to practice

I designed a unit of materials in line with the principles outlined above. It was based on a video text from the 1990 BBC Series ‘People and Places’. Though it is obviously dated, I chose this text because it was tolerably engaging, and contained a number of interesting features of spoken language. As can be seen from the example below, the focus was not purely on grammatical features, though grammatical features had been my starting point. In the actual process of designing materials it seemed to be uneconomical and arbitrary to focus exclusively on grammatical features.

Spoken language features in the materials

- **Heads:** e.g. All my friends down there, we all went to school together.
- **Tails:** e.g. They demand breakfast, the children ...
- **Ellipsis:** e.g. Business booming, is it?
- **Flexible word order:** e.g. This is where you were brought up, I should think, was it?
- **Vague language:** e.g. That’s where the smugglers and that used to keep the loot.
- **Different uses of ‘like’:** e.g. It’s like a ghost town; just to wet the lip, like ...
- **Agreement by synonym:** e.g.

**Chris:** Lovely day, isn't it?

**Trudy:** Smashing!

The materials were piloted by 6 teachers in 3 different institutions: Leeds Metropolitan University, Birmingham University, and Innsbruck University. Around 60 learners were involved. The sampling was opportunistic in that the teachers were colleagues of mine who responded to my desperate entreaties for volunteer pilots. The teachers were clearly well disposed to the teaching of spoken language, and the UK-based learners were likely to be better disposed than the average to learning spoken language. Given this in-built bias in the sample, I am not going to argue, despite the very favourable general response to the materials, that the responses can prove or disprove the overall viability of the approach I have outlined. I do, however, think that some of the comments offer very interesting food for thought.

#### Learner responses

The general tenor of the responses from these learners was that it was interesting and useful to look at informal language. In the interests of transparency I have summarized below the results of a very simple questionnaire given to the learners, but given the bias in the sample, I do not attach too much weight to these statistics.

#### Results

92% found the language tasks useful or very useful.

80% found the materials interesting.

86% agreed that they had learned something useful about spoken English.

These results are not so surprising, perhaps, given the learning context. There were, however, specific comments which raised interesting issues. Given that one of the aims of the materials was to encourage learners to compare their expectations of native-speaker English with the reality, the following comments were interesting:

Spoken English is difficult because you expect a complete grammar structure. It is useful to know the ellipsis and vague language and to perceive its meaning.

I found this task very interesting [see appendix, sample noticing task 2] and was after surprised by the things I found out (words you can leave out etc). I've never thought there would be a lot of differences in task 2 (translations) but there are!

There was also a reference to the relationship between second language and first language awareness:

It was interesting to find out how native speakers speak to each other. I could find connection to my mother tongue, which make things (in English) clearer.

A number of students were struck by what they described as the 'flexibility' of spoken English and considered that some aspects of this flexibility made communication easier:

I have realized I don't need to use all the words in a spoken English phrase. It is easier.

you can repeat the subject twice to emphasise the phrases and make it clearer.

## Teachers' responses

As with the learners' responses, the general tenor of the responses was positive, though one teacher commented that the learners found the text of limited interest and the tasks heavy. From the following comment, however, we can see that the aim of providing a culturally accessible text had, in this case, been met in the way it was intended to:

I think the topic of regional identity dealt with in the video is quite accessible and relevant to international students, as they have parallel situations in their country.

We can also see that the aim of promoting noticing was met, at least in some cases:

Very useful. Reading about this [spoken grammar] and discovering it are two different things. Comments like 'this sounds so bad', 'I can't speak like that' [and] it's wrong' were not uncommon. Coming from their unquestioned position of superior knowledge (in their eyes) of what is 'right' and 'good', this was a real lesson for them (which I don't think they would have accepted without the video evidence!)

Very valuable, I think, as almost none of them had ever been made aware of these characteristics of informal spoken English (e.g. ellipsis), whereas of course they encounter this type of language on a daily basis as students in the UK.

I would acknowledge, however, that two teachers questioned the exclusive focus on noticing. One felt that a handout with the relevant grammar rules was appropriate for her students in her context. Another felt that the students would be more motivated if they were given production tasks.

## Conclusion

I would not wish to extrapolate too far from the small sample of feedback data, nor would I wish to argue that this approach to teaching spoken grammar is necessarily applicable in all learning contexts. I would hope, however, that I have shown that this approach is at least potentially viable in some contexts. The strength of the approach, I would argue, is that it exploits a convenient harmony between a methodological emphasis on noticing, and a sociolinguistic view that native speakers (and their cultures) should not be portrayed as models to imitate or aspire to. In the vexed debate about the relative merits of native speakers and 'expert users' as models of English, I think one simple notion has been overlooked: native speakers are habitual users of English for all communicative purposes. This does not mean that they are more articulate, impressive, or persuasive users of English than non-native speakers. But it does mean that they are more likely than non-native speakers to use English habitually for certain purposes: telling jokes, telling stories, office banter, phatic exchanges, endearments, and insults, for example. If learners are interested in this broadly affective domain of

language use, the native speaker will have something to offer them. Although the approach I have outlined is based predominantly on native-speaker models, I do not think it is necessarily incompatible with the current focus on a lingua franca core. In my view, both the 'lingua franca core' (Seidlhofer 2001) and native-speaker models can form part of what Prodromou (personal communication) has referred to as the 'heteroglossia'—control of different varieties for different communicative purposes—which might prove necessary for efficient international communication. Native-speaker models might form a small part of this 'heteroglossia', but they are likely to be of some value to those learners who, for whatever reason, want to go beyond the core and look, for example, at spoken grammar. Widdowson (1996: 67) once remarked that an implicit assumption of those arguing for the use of authentic texts in class was that learners had to 'refer to and defer to' the native speaker. The main argument of this article is that, at least for some purposes, the native speaker can be an interesting point of reference without being an object of deference.

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## Appendix

### Sample noticing task 1

- 1 Look at the Chris/Trudy/Enid dialogue below and put brackets round any words you think might not be necessary in informal spoken English, e.g.

How are you?

I am fine thanks and how are you?

I am fine too. It's very cold isn't it?

How are you?

[I am] fine thanks and [how are] you?

[I am] fine [too]. [It's] very cold isn't it?

**Chris:** Oh, hello Enid. It's nice to meet you.

**Trudy:** Hello, how's the family?

**Enid:** They're very well. How are your family?

**Trudy:** They are smashing.

**Chris:** It's a beautiful day, isn't it?

**Enid:** Yes, it is.

**Chris:** Is your business booming?

**Enid:** Well, it's not too bad you know.

- 2 Now listen/watch and check which words are missed out on the video dialogue.

### Sample noticing task 2

- 1 Look at the dialogue [see dialogue in sample noticing task 1] and translate it into your language.
- 2 Now translate it back into English without looking at the original.
- 3 Now look at the original and find any differences between your dialogue and the original.

### Sample noticing task 3

Listen/watch and tick the sentence which Trudy says.

- a That's where the smugglers used to keep the tobacco and loot.
- b That's where the smugglers, they used to keep the tobacco and loot.
- c That's where the smugglers and that used to keep the tobacco and loot.