



BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN TEXTBOOK ENGLISH AND REAL- LIFE COMMUNICATION STYLE

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Abstract: It has long been observed that the English presented in coursebook dialogues differs systematically from the English used in genuine spoken interaction, yet the precise nature and extent of this gap have only been established since corpus linguistics made large-scale, empirical comparison possible. This article reviews corpus-based research comparing textbook English with real-life communication style, focusing on two related but distinct layers of mismatch: discourse-level features of contrived dialogues (turn-taking, hesitation, backchannelling) and core spoken-grammar features (ellipsis, heads and tails, discourse markers) that are largely absent from pedagogical grammars built on written norms. Drawing on studies that directly compared textbook dialogues with authentic recordings and on surveys of published ELT materials, the article synthesizes evidence that textbook English is markedly more fluent, complete and grammatically regular than naturally occurring speech, and that coverage of spoken-grammar features in mainstream coursebooks remains, at best, patchy. The discussion situates these findings within debates on authenticity, learner needs and native-speaker norms, and proposes a staged framework for narrowing the gap through awareness-raising, selective explicit teaching of high-frequency spoken-grammar features, and the deliberate supplementation of coursebook material with authentic spoken data.

Keywords: textbook English, spoken grammar, authenticity, corpus linguistics, ELT materials, discourse features.



INTRODUCTION

Coursebook dialogues have long served as one of the primary means by which learners are exposed to spoken English in the classroom, yet teachers and applied linguists have repeatedly noted that this exposure does not always resemble the way people actually talk. Before the advent of large electronic corpora, such observations remained largely impressionistic, since there was no practical way to compare invented textbook dialogue systematically against genuine speech. The development of corpus linguistics changed this: once substantial collections of transcribed authentic conversation became available, researchers were able to compare textbook English with naturally occurring communication feature by feature, rather than by intuition alone.

Two related but analytically distinct layers of mismatch have emerged from this corpus-based research. The first is a discourse-level gap: contrived textbook dialogues tend to be shorter, more evenly turn-managed, and largely free of the false starts, overlaps, hesitation devices and backchannelling that characterize genuine spoken interaction [1]. The second is a grammatical gap: many core features of everyday spoken grammar ellipsis, “heads” and “tails,” discourse markers, and other structures that occur with high frequency in casual conversation receive markedly uneven treatment in the pedagogical grammars and coursebooks that learners actually use, because those reference materials were historically built on written rather than spoken norms [3; 4]. Gilmore situates both gaps within the broader concept of authenticity, describing a persistent divide between the discourse found in instructional materials and the discourse of genuine, unscripted communication [2].

This mismatch matters pedagogically because learners who have only been exposed to textbook English can be underprepared for the disfluencies, incompleteness and informal grammar of real conversation, even when their command of written, rule-governed English is strong. At the same time, simply replacing all controlled textbook material with unedited authentic recordings is





neither straightforward nor universally desirable, since learners' needs, proficiency levels and goals vary considerably. The present article therefore reviews the corpus-based evidence for both layers of the gap and asks how it might be narrowed in a principled, rather than wholesale, way.

The article addresses three research questions: (1) What specific discourse and grammatical features distinguish textbook English from authentic spoken communication, according to corpus-based comparisons? (2) To what extent do published ELT materials currently incorporate these features? (3) What pedagogical principles can help bridge the gap without abandoning the scaffolding function that graded, controlled materials provide for learners at lower proficiency levels?

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, literature-based content-analysis design, synthesizing existing corpus-based comparisons of textbook and authentic English rather than compiling a new corpus of its own. This approach was chosen because the relevant primary evidence direct comparisons of coursebook dialogue against transcribed authentic speech, and systematic surveys of published materials already exists in a form well suited to synthesis, most notably in Gilmore's discourse-feature comparison of textbook and authentic interactions [1] and in Cullen and Kuo's survey of spoken grammar in contemporary EFL coursebooks [5].

Literature sampling. Sources were identified through targeted searches combining the keywords "textbook English," "authentic interaction," "spoken grammar," "ELT materials," "corpus," and "native-speaker norms". Priority was given to studies that directly compared textbook and authentic spoken data using corpus methods [1; 4], to systematic surveys of published coursebooks [5], to foundational descriptions of spoken grammar [3; 8], and to research examining learner and teacher attitudes toward native-speaker spoken norms in the classroom [6; 7].



Analytic framework. Two complementary sets of indicators, drawn directly from the reviewed studies' own coding schemes, were used to organize the findings.

(a) Discourse-feature indicators, following Gilmore's coding of textbook versus authentic service-encounter dialogues: length and turn-taking patterns, lexical density, frequency of false starts and repetitions, pausing, frequency of terminal overlap or latching, and the use of hesitation devices and backchannelling [1].

(b) Spoken-grammar feature indicators, following the McCarthy–Carter description of spoken grammar and its treatment in pedagogical materials: ellipsis, “head” and “tail” structures, discourse markers, vague language, and other syntactic patterns characteristic of real-time, unplanned conversation as opposed to planned written prose [3; 4].

Scope. The review focuses on general English as a Foreign Language (EFL) coursebook dialogues and pedagogical grammar references aimed primarily at adult and young-adult learners, since this is the population targeted by the great majority of the reviewed studies [1; 5].

Limitations of the method. As a literature-based synthesis, this study reports and interprets findings already published by other researchers rather than compiling and coding a new corpus of coursebook or authentic dialogue. The underlying primary studies themselves are also based on limited samples seven dialogues in one case [1] and twenty-four UK-published textbooks in another [5] a constraint that is addressed further in the Discussion.

RESULTS

Discourse-level differences between textbook and authentic dialogue. Gilmore's investigation compared seven “service encounter” dialogues published in coursebooks between 1981 and 1997 with comparable authentic interactions, and found that the textbook dialogues differed considerably from their authentic equivalents across a consistent set of discourse features: length



and turn-taking patterns, lexical density, the number of false starts and repetitions, pausing, the frequency of terminal overlap or latching, and the use of hesitation devices and backchannelling [1]. In broad terms, the textbook versions were more compact, evenly structured and disfluency-free than the authentic conversations they were meant to represent. Notably, when Gilmore extended the comparison to more recently published coursebooks, he found that dialogues published after the turn of the millennium had begun to incorporate more of these natural discourse features than their older counterparts, suggesting a gradual, if incomplete, shift in materials-writing practice [1].

Treatment of spoken grammar in pedagogical reference materials. Using evidence from a mini-corpus of conversational English, Carter and McCarthy examined how four grammatical features that occur with noticeable frequency in everyday spoken interaction were treated in a set of popular pedagogical grammars. They found that treatment of the selected features ranged “from adequate to patchy to complete absence” across the grammars surveyed, and concluded that even very small amounts of authentic spoken data can nonetheless yield significant evidence usable within inductive, awareness-raising approaches to teaching the grammar of conversation [4]. This finding is consistent with McCarthy and Carter’s broader argument that spoken grammar constitutes a describable, rule-governed system in its own right, and not simply a defective or careless version of written grammar, and that language teaching aimed at fostering natural spoken interaction should draw on this system directly rather than relying solely on grammars derived from written norms [3].

Coverage of spoken grammar in published coursebooks. Cullen and Kuo extended this line of inquiry from grammar references to coursebooks themselves, surveying twenty-four general EFL textbooks published in the United Kingdom since the year 2000. They concluded that coverage of spoken-grammar features in these materials was, at best, patchy: where spoken grammar was addressed at all, there was a tendency to emphasize lexicogrammatical



features such as fixed expressions and discourse markers, while syntactic structures peculiar to conversation were either omitted altogether or confined to advanced-level units as “interesting extras” rather than being integrated into the core syllabus [5]. The authors argued that this treatment is inadequate for learners whose goals include developing oral fluency in informal interaction with native or proficient speakers [5].

Learner and teacher attitudes toward spoken and native-speaker norms. Evidence on how learners and teachers themselves view this gap complicates any simple call to replace textbook English wholesale with authentic conversational forms. Timmis’s classroom-based survey of student and teacher attitudes toward native-speaker grammatical and pronunciation norms found a nuanced picture rather than uniform preference for either fully “authentic” or fully “standard” models, indicating that many learners continue to value grammatical accuracy and a recognizable standard form even as international and lingua-franca uses of English expand [6]. In a related, more targeted study, Timmis proposed a framework for teaching spoken grammar that treats awareness-raising helping learners notice and recognize spoken-grammar features in input as a distinct and often more appropriate first step than requiring learners to actively produce every such feature themselves [7].

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the results in Section 3 point to two layers of the same underlying problem, operating at different levels of language. At the discourse level, the dialogues learners are asked to listen to and imitate have historically been considerably more fluent, complete and evenly managed than real conversation, stripped of the false starts, overlaps and hesitation markers that are pervasive in authentic talk [1]. At the grammatical level, the syntactic patterns that are characteristic of unplanned, real-time speech ellipsis, heads and tails, and related structures are unevenly represented both in the reference grammars teachers consult and in the coursebooks learners study, despite being



demonstrably frequent and systematic in authentic spoken corpora [3; 4; 5]. Because both layers stem from the same historical bias toward written-language norms in materials and reference-grammar design, addressing one without the other is unlikely to close the gap fully.

It would be a mistake, however, to read this evidence as an argument for discarding controlled, simplified textbook dialogue altogether. Learners at lower proficiency levels benefit from graded input that is intelligible without the support of prosody, gesture and shared physical context that aid comprehension in face-to-face authentic speech; wholesale authentic material can be overwhelming before learners have a basic grammatical and lexical foundation. Gilmore's own finding that more recent coursebooks have begun incorporating more natural discourse features, without abandoning their pedagogical structure entirely, suggests that a middle path retaining graded control over vocabulary and pacing while selectively reintroducing authentic discourse features is both feasible and already underway in parts of the ELT publishing industry [1]. Timmis's evidence on learner and teacher attitudes reinforces this point: many learners continue to value accuracy and a recognizable standard, so bridging the gap should be framed as an addition to learners' repertoire rather than a wholesale replacement of what they already value [6].

On this basis, the article proposes a three-part framework for narrowing the gap between textbook English and real-life communication style. First, awareness-raising before production: following Timmis's framework, learners are first helped to notice and recognize high-frequency spoken-grammar features (ellipsis, heads and tails, discourse markers) in listening input, without an immediate expectation that they reproduce every feature in their own speech [7]. Second, selective explicit teaching of high-frequency features: rather than attempting comprehensive coverage of spoken grammar, materials writers and teachers can prioritize the small set of features shown by corpus research to occur most frequently and systematically in everyday conversation, following the same



frequency-and-range logic that Carter and McCarthy applied when identifying which features were most poorly represented in existing grammars [4]. Third, deliberate supplementation with authentic material: teachers can supplement coursebook dialogues, particularly at intermediate level and above, with short authentic recordings or transcripts, addressing Cullen and Kuo's concern that spoken-grammar structures are too often relegated to "advanced extras" rather than integrated progressively across levels [5].

This synthesis has limitations. The primary discourse-comparison evidence reviewed here is based on a small sample of seven textbook dialogues [1], and the coursebook survey evidence is limited to twenty-four UK-published titles [5]; both samples, while carefully analyzed, are too small to support strong claims about ELT materials worldwide, particularly materials published outside the United Kingdom or produced more recently than the studies themselves. In addition, because this review is a literature-based synthesis rather than a new corpus study, it cannot independently verify whether coursebooks published after these surveys have continued the trend toward greater authenticity that Gilmore observed [1]. Future research should replicate both the discourse-feature comparison and the materials survey using more recent and more geographically diverse coursebook samples, and should test the three-part framework proposed here directly, measuring whether staged awareness-raising and selective explicit teaching of spoken grammar improve learners' comprehension of, and comfort with, authentic real-life communication.

CONCLUSION

This article reviewed corpus-based research on the gap between textbook English and real-life communication style, distinguishing a discourse-level gap in the naturalness of coursebook dialogues from a grammatical gap in the treatment of spoken-grammar features in pedagogical reference materials and coursebooks. The evidence reviewed shows that textbook English has historically been considerably more fluent and grammatically regular than



authentic speech, and that spoken-grammar coverage in mainstream ELT materials remains patchy and often confined to advanced levels, even though corpus research has identified a well-defined, teachable set of features that characterize real spoken interaction. Rather than treating authenticity and pedagogical control as opposing goals, the proposed three-part framework awareness-raising before production, selective explicit teaching of high-frequency spoken-grammar features, and deliberate supplementation with authentic material offers a principled way to help learners move from competence in textbook English toward genuine comfort with the way people actually talk.

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