Spoken Grammar and ELT Course Materials: A Missing Link?

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Drawing on the evidence of a growing body of corpus research over the past two decades, this article investigates the phenomenon of spoken grammar in conversational English and the extent to which our current knowledge of the area is reflected in contemporary textbooks for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. The article reports on a survey conducted by the authors of 24 general EFL textbooks published in the United Kingdom since the year 2000 and concludes, on the basis of the survey, that coverage of features of spoken grammar is at best patchy. Where it is dealt with at all, there tends to be an emphasis on lexicogrammatical features, and common syntactic structures peculiar to conversation are either ignored or confined to advanced levels as interesting extras. We argue that this is inadequate for many learners, particularly those for whom the development of oral fluency in informal interactions with native speakers is an important goal.

Over the past decade applied linguists have had a considerable and growing interest in the grammar of spoken English. This interest has been stimulated by the development of electronic corpora of natural spoken English discourse (for a useful survey, see Leech, 2000, pp. 681–682) and the striking findings that these corpora have revealed. These findings are reported by, for example, Brazil (1995), Carter and McCarthy (1995, 1997, 2006), and Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999), from whose *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (*LGSWE*) we take many of the examples used in this article. In view of our increased understanding of the ways in which grammar is used in speech, as distinct from writing, it is hardly surprising that some prominent researchers in the field (e.g., McCarthy & Carter, 1995, 2002) have argued that much greater attention should be given to spoken grammar in materials for EFL teaching and learning.

Behind this demand lies the assumption that not enough is being done at present. In other words, there is a missing link between corpus research findings and current pedagogical practice. In this article we seek to test this assumption by surveying a selection of EFL textbooks published in the United Kingdom with respect to their coverage of spoken grammar, both quantitatively (how much attention is given) and qualitatively (what kind of attention is given). If there is indeed a missing link, what is the precise nature of the omission, and what, if anything, should be done to forge the link?

In order to investigate these questions, we begin by defining what we mean by *spoken grammar,* exploring its role in communication and examining commonly occurring features that typify the way it is used. These features then form the basis of our textbook survey. In the final part of the article, we present a case for giving spoken grammar a higher profile in contemporary English language textbooks and thus for connecting the findings of corpus-based research into language use more closely to language learning and teaching.

WHAT IS SPOKEN GRAMMAR?

The subject of this article is the grammar of informal, conversational English, rather than of spoken discourse characteristic of more formal settings, such as debates or speeches. We are therefore using the term *spoken grammar* synonymously with conversational grammar, in keeping with the way the term is normally used in the literature (e.g., Biber et al., 1999, pp. 1037–1125; Brazil, 1995; Carter & McCarthy, 1995, 2006; Leech, 2000). Because our focus is on pedagogical applications of spoken grammar for second language teaching, we are not concerned with *vernacular* or *nonstandard* forms of grammar (Biber et al., p. 1121), that is, forms which are restricted to regional dialects or widely felt to be signs of ill-educated usage.[1] We have also excluded forms associated with particular age groups.[2] All the grammatical features exemplified in this article are taken from descriptions of standard, nondialectal conversational English, although the issue of whether a particular grammatical

[1] Examples of nonstandard features of spoken grammar taken from Biber et al. (1999) are the use of *ain't* and double negation, as in "She ain't never given me no problems" (p. 1121).

[2] An example of a feature associated with the speech of younger speakers would be what Yule, Mathis, and Hopkins (1992) have labeled quotative structures, which make use of the verbal elements *be like* or *go* to introduce direct speech clauses. For example, "He goes, someday I might have a kid and <laugh>." "I'm like, No!" (American English) (Biber et al., 1999, p.1120).

form is standard or nonstandard may sometimes be open to question. Nor are we considering planning errors in speech, such as false starts or *mixed structures* (i.e., where speakers begin an utterance planning one grammatical structure and change in midsentence to another closely associated one, e.g., *There's not necessary to introduce to a new law*). Whereas these phenomena clearly affect syntax and grammar, they do not result in regular, systematic use of specifiable grammatical features.

Spoken grammar is the manifestation of systematic grammatical phenomena in spoken discourse that arise from the circumstances in which speech (i.e., conversation) is characteristically produced. Following Biber et al. (1999) and Leech (2000), we take the view that speech and writing draw on the same underlying grammatical system (rather than on two separate systems) but that the system is adapted in various dynamic and often ingenious ways to meet the particular circumstances in which each medium is used. Speech, first of all, is usually spontaneous and unplanned (unlike most written discourse) and thus has to be adapted to the needs of real-time processing (Leech, 2000). This process results in the "step-by-step assembly of a spoken utterance" (Brazil, 1995, p. 17), as speakers compose their utterances impromptu as they speak, with no opportunity for editing (Miller & Weinert, 1998). Second, speech normally occurs face to face, ensuring not only that there is a "shared context" between the participants (Leech, 2000, p. 694), but also that speakers tend to be more aware of interpersonal factors, factors which will affect the way they use language, including grammatical choices. Indeed, in their analysis of casual conversation, Eggins and Slade (1997) suggest that speakers engage in such conversation primarily to "clarify and extend the interpersonal ties that have brought them together" (p. 67). Third, speech is highly interactive, requiring cooperation and contextual sensitivity from all participants, who take turns to speak and listen, to negotiate meanings, and to respond immediately to one another's contributions (Brown, 1989). Fourth, conversation frequently takes place in informal settings in which the participants have a close symmetry of relationship, a factor which will also impinge on the choice of language used. The combination of these characteristics of speech is reflected in certain general linguistic properties that permeate conversational discourse, as well as a range of more specific grammatical constructions, which speakers do not use to the same extent in writing.

Following are examples of some of the general linguistic properties noted in the literature.

The *staging of information* across syntactic boundaries, with "a small quantity of information being assigned to each phrase" (Miller & Weinert, 1998, p. 22), is manifested, for example, in the use of syntactic

devices such as noun phrase prefaces, discussed in the following section, and in the lower lexical density of spoken language compared with written language, noted by Halliday (1985).

A tendency to avoid *syntactic elaboration* and complexity (Leech, 2000; Miller & Weinert, 1998) results in "a very low mean phrase length" (Leech, p. 695), particularly of noun phrases, and in the use of chains of clauses linked by coordinating conjunctions like *and* or simple subordinators like *cos* or *so* (Carter, 2004), in preference to more elaborate sequences of main and subordinate clauses.

A more flexible approach to the *positioning of constituents* in spoken utterances than in written texts affects, for example, the placement of adverbials and question tags, as these examples from Carter (2004, p. 31) illustrate (italics added):

I was worried I was going to lose it and I did *almost.*

Spanish is more widely used *isn't it* outside of Europe.

The frequent use of *vague language* to hedge or modify what the speakers are saying (e.g., *sort of* and *kind of* used before noun phrases, verb phrases, adjectives, and adverbs) has a softening effect, deliberately making the speaker's statements sound less precise and assertive, thus leaving space for negotiation and interaction (Carter, 2004; McCarthy, 1998).

These general properties of spoken language are likely to occur to a greater or lesser extent across languages and will form part of the general communicative and pragmatic competence that learners bring with them from their first language to the task of learning a new one. However, the way these properties are manifested in the deployment of specific grammatical features will inevitably vary from one language to another. These *features*—the way that the grammar of speech is encoded in specifiable linguistic constructions in the target language—would thus become a focus of instruction in a teaching programme that included a component on spoken grammar. These features have also formed the focus of much of the recent corpus-based research into the grammar of spoken English.

FEATURES OF SPOKEN GRAMMAR: THREE CATEGORIES

We have grouped the individual constructions commonly found in spoken grammar into three categories, which we have found useful in describing and assessing the way these features are covered—or not

covered—in EFL textbooks. The particular grammatical features we are focusing on in this categorisation are those especially characteristic of conversation.

Category A features are productive grammatical constructions, that is, constructions which involve a degree of grammatical encoding in their production or grammatical decoding in their interpretation. An example of such a construction, found more commonly in speech than in writing, would be the question tag *isn't it,* placed in midutterance, as cited earlier from Carter (2004). It would be classified as a Category A feature because it would need to change its form to *aren't they* if the subject were a plural noun—thereby requiring the speaker to draw on the grammatical resources of language (in this case subject–verb agreement) to use it accurately.

Category B features, on the other hand, are fixed lexicogrammatical units which do not undergo morphological change and are inserted into the utterance at an appropriate place, typically to modify a constituent in the utterance. Their forms are not affected by the surrounding grammatical context, but their position within an utterance will be subject to certain syntactical restrictions. Again, we are referring here to lexicogrammatical units more commonly used in spoken than in written English. An example would be the hedging devices *sort of* and *kind of,* also noted earlier in Carter (2004).

Category C consists of a small set of grammatical features associated with prescriptive and proscriptive attitudes to grammatical acceptability, in that they appear to violate a surface-level rule of grammar. Examples are the use of *less* rather than *fewer* with countable nouns (e.g., less people), or the use of the indicative *was* rather than the subjunctive *were* in second conditional structures (e.g., *If I was a rich man . . .*). They are common in informal contexts of use, typically found in conversation (although not confined to it) and, unlike Category A and B features, would be regarded by linguistic purists as ungrammatical. For this reason, they are less common in formal written communication.[3] What distinguishes Category C from Category A is that each Category C feature has a clearly identifiable, more formal alternative and selection of one or the other is purely a matter of stylistic preference and conveys no difference in emphasis or meaning.

In the following sections we exemplify and discuss these features in more detail.

[3] Some famously proscribed items like split infinitives or dangling participles may in fact be as frequent, if not more frequent, in written rather than spoken language and hence would not form part of Category C, which is reserved for proscribed items more clearly associated with informal, conversational contexts.

Category A

We are concerned in Category A with syntactical constructions of the type defined earlier that corpus data show are used extensively in speech but found much less frequently in corpora based on written English outside genres such as email messages or computer chat room communication, which in many respects imitate informal spoken language. If listed in standard reference grammars of English (e.g., Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985), these constructions are marked as features of conversational or colloquial style. We focus on four examples of such features that have attracted the attention of many scholars in the field because they frequently occur and which we have consequently targeted in our survey of textbooks. In our discussion we show their role and function in conversational discourse, relating this to the circumstances discussed earlier in which such discourse takes place. The specific examples of each feature are taken from Biber et al. (1999) unless otherwise stated.

Noun Phrase Prefaces

The first example we discuss is the use of *noun phrase prefaces*, coreferential to a pronoun in the following clause, as in this example (the noun phrase preface is in bold type):

This little shop—it's lovely (p. 1074)

The grammatical encoding involved here is in the agreement between the preface itself and the following pronoun. The terms used to describe this feature vary in the literature. Thus noun phrase prefaces (the term used by Biber et al., 1999) are also known as *left dislocations* (Stubbs, 1983; Quirk et al., 1985; Leech, 2000) or *heads* (Carter & McCarthy, 1997). For ease of reference, we follow Carter and McCarthy and use the term *head* to describe this feature.

The head is a fronting device used to orient the listener to the topic the speaker is introducing. It makes explicit, in the form of a noun phrase, the referent of a pronoun used in the main proposition. The noun phrase may be the subject of the proposition, as in the example, but does not have to be, as these further examples from Biber et al. (1999, p. 1074) illustrate:

Those Marks and Sparks bags, can you see **them** all? (British English)

you know, **the vase**, did you see **it**? (American English)

Noun Phrase Tags

In using *noun phrase tags,* the speaker makes explicit the identity of a pronoun used earlier in the utterance, as in this example (noun phrase tag in bold type) from Biber et al. (1999):

I reckon they're lovely. I really do, **whippets.** (p. 1080)

Noun phrase tags, the term used by Biber et al., are also known as *right dislocations* (Quirk et al., 1985) or *tails* (Aijmer, 1989; Carter & McCarthy, 1995). To maintain symmetry with the term heads, we shall henceforth use the term *tails* for this phenomenon.

The tail acts as an immediate reminder of what has been said, or what is important (Carter, Hughes, & McCarthy, 1998) and is typically used when making a comment relating to the topic being discussed in the conversation. Although it frequently takes the form of "an appended noun phrase" (Biber et al., 1999, p. 1080), it may also be expanded to include the verbal element contained in the preceding clause, as the following two examples from Carter et al. (1998), taken from the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English, show:

He's a real problem **is Jeff.**

She's got a nice personality **Jenny has.** (p. 70)

Both heads and tails are grammatical features that break up the normal subject–verb–object sequence of sentence constituents and are highly unusual in written prose (Biber et al., 1999). They serve important purposes in conversation. First, they help to reduce the burden for the listener involved in processing language in real time—in the case of heads, reminding the listener what the topic was. Carter et al. (1998, p. 71) refer to them as *listener-sensitive devices.* Second, it seems reasonable to assume that head structures involving relatively long or complex noun phrase prefaces allow the speaker, not just the listener, more processing (i.e., planning) time. Compare, for example, the following two utterances, one with and one without a head preface:

Those Marks and Sparks bags, can you see them all? (preface + proposition; Biber et al., p. 1074)

Can you see all those Marks and Sparks bags? (single proposition)

Past Progressive Tense

Speakers use the *past progressive tense,* in contrast to the more standard past tense, to introduce reported speech structures, typically with the

verbs *say* and *tell*. The following examples are taken from Biber et al. (1999):

but Yvonne **was saying** on my wages I wouldn't get a mortgage.

He **was telling** me that they'd died of the frost or something. (p. 1120)

The past progressive tense is, of course, widely used across spoken and written registers. However, its use in speech with reporting verbs, where it can be used to introduce both direct and indirect speech clauses, is a feature listed in Biber et al. as a peculiarity of the grammar of conversation. Carter and McCarthy (1995) similarly note its striking frequency in their own minicorpus.

As with heads and tails, this use of the past progressive in reported speech structures reflects some of the characteristics of casual conversation. Biber et al. (1999) refer to its evidential function—to provide supporting evidence in passing of what the speaker is saying, whereas McCarthy and Carter (2002) note its interpersonal function, because its effect is to make the reported statement sound a little less definite, as if the speaker is "adopting an indirect or nonassertive stance" (p. 58). This use of the past progressive in reported speech structures is entirely overlooked in most standard descriptive and pedagogical grammars (Carter & McCarthy, 1995).

Ellipsis

Although *ellipsis*—"the omission of elements which are precisely recoverable from the linguistic or situational context" (Biber et al., 1999, p. 156)—is a feature of both speech and writing, its use and distribution in each medium is not identical. In particular, situational ellipsis, that is, the omission of items which are retrievable from the immediate situation (as opposed to the co-occurring text), has been shown to be a feature identified with conversation, rather than with written texts (Biber et al., 1999, pp. 156–158; Carter & McCarthy, 1995), arising as it does from a combination of informality and shared context (Leech, 2000). Situational ellipsis particularly affects elements at the beginning of a turn or a clause, for example, subject pronouns and operators in questions, as the following examples from Biber et al. illustrate:

Saw Susan and her boyfriend in Alder weeks ago. (ellipsis of *I;* p. 158)

Too old to change, aren't we? (ellipsis of *We're;* p. 158)

Why aren't you working? Got a day off? (ellipsis of *Have you?;* p. 1105)

The terms *initial ellipsis* (Biber et al., 1999) and *front ellipsis* (Leech, 2000) are variously used for this phenomenon, which Biber et al. (1999,

p. 1105) note is more frequent in British English than in American English.

At a surface level, ellipsis appears to reduce the degree of grammatical encoding required. However, the speaker still needs to be capable of retrieving the omitted elements when decoding elliptical utterances. Also, when using ellipsis productively, as the second example from Biber et al. (1999, p. 158) shows, the correct use of the question tag *aren't we* depends on the speaker's awareness of what has been omitted from the first part of the utterance. For these reasons, situational ellipsis is classified as a Category A feature.

Category B

Category B consists of lexicogrammatical units (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992) which are fixed in the sense that they cannot themselves be grammatically modified (e.g., through inflection or change in person or number) but which can combine with other structures to form larger syntactic units. They may consist of single lexemes, for example, stance adverbials such as *really* or *actually,* both shown by the Biber et al., (1999) corpus to be significantly more frequent in conversation than in written registers (p. 869) or short phrases, such as *sort of* and *you know.* Because they are fixed phrases, they are stored and accessed by the speaker as ready-made lexical units of language requiring little encoding work. The encoding is in the task of slotting them into an utterance in a syntactically acceptable place but does not involve changing the form of the phrase itself. For this reason, they are likely to be easier to learn than Category A features and more readily accessible to the learner for immediate use. The four examples of such units, which follow, have all been shown to be used frequently in spoken communication (Biber et al.) and form the focus of our textbook survey of items in this category. The first three are associated with vagueness and imprecision, allowing the speakers to appear less categorical about what they are saying and giving the listener room to fill the gaps and form a personal interpretation of the speaker's meaning. Although not all Category B features have this function, we have selected these examples because vague expressions of this kind are interesting reflections of the interactive, interpersonal dimension of spoken language and make an important contribution to "the informal, convergent tenor of everyday talk" (McCarthy, 1998, p. 118).

Particles

Example 1 of a Category B unit is use of the particles *sort of* and *kind of* as hedging devices to make the reference of an item deliberately vague

(Aijmer, 1984), for example, "a funny sort of place," "he sort of looked at me and gasped." Aijmer also notes the function of these phrases as conversational fillers, indicating to the hearer that the speaker is pausing to find the correct formulation of what the speaker wishes to say. They are thus further examples of how speakers adapt their use of language to the requirements of real-time planning.

Vagueness Tags

Example 2 of a Category B unit is use of *vagueness tags* (De Cock, Granger, Leech, & McEnery, 1998) or *vague category identifiers* (Channell, 1994), such as *and things like that, or something,* and *and stuff like that,* used frequently at the end of utterances in conversation to allow the listener to identify a general set of items based on the characteristics of the items given before the tag (p. 122). Like *sort of* and *kind of,* they are associated with imprecision in speech and, for this reason, are described by Biber et al. (1999,) as "retrospective vagueness *hedges*" (p. 1080).

Modifying Expression

Example 3 of a Category B unit is use of the modifying expression *a bit* or *a little bit* with adjectival and noun phrases (e.g., *a bit better, a bit suspicious, a bit of a bore*). Channell (1994) notes that it appears particularly in spoken language "as a hedge or modalizer of the speaker's attitude" (p. 111), adding that it thus has the pragmatic force of politeness. In this, it reflects the interactive nature of conversation and its consequent association, noted in the literature, with expressions of feelings, attitudes, and politeness (Biber et al., 1999; Leech, 2000).

Discourse Markers

Example 4 of a Category B unit is use of the discourse markers *you know* and *I mean,* as in these examples from Biber et al. (1999):

> *American English:* And they spend hundreds of dollars on those dogs, *you know.*
>
> *British English:* There's this panda—and he's really bored with, *I mean,* he's getting no sex so he breaks out of erm—London Zoo to go off and find a partner. (p. 1078)

Biber et al. (1999) classify these features as *inserts,* that is, standalone words which do not enter into syntactic relations with other structures but which tend to "attach themselves prosodically to a larger structure" (p. 1082). Leech (2000) describes them as belonging to a class of "rou-

tinized particles loosely integrated with clause grammar" which strongly reflect the "interactiveness of conversation" (p. 696). Biber et al. note that they are among the most frequent inserts in both British and American conversational English.

Category C

In Category C we have placed items identified as being associated with informal, conversational contexts which would be considered grammatically incorrect by prescriptive guides to correct usage. For each item there is a correct alternative. Examples from MacAndrew (1991) include the use of *less* instead of *fewer* with countable nouns:

> You would have less cars on the road and less accidents. (p. 56)

and the use of *more* as a comparative marker with adjectives of one syllable, in preference, or as an alternative, to the -er morpheme:

> It's definitely cheaper and more fresh. (p. 20)

Carter and McCarthy (2006) include both of these features as examples of informal usage. With reference to the first item, they state that "although, traditionally, *fewer* is the comparative form used with plural count nouns and *less* with singular noncount nouns, increasingly, in informal spoken English, *less* is used with plural count nouns" (p. 103). This suggests that some of these Category C features may also be associated with language change. We are interested in finding out in our textbook survey whether learners are made aware of such phenomena or whether they are only presented with the forms traditionally felt to be correct.

TEACHING SPOKEN GRAMMAR: A SURVEY OF TEXTBOOKS

Selection

Twenty-four mainstream textbooks at five levels—beginner/elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate, and advanced—were chosen for the survey. The books are listed in Table 1, and are henceforth referred to as B1, B2, and so forth, according to this list. All the books were published in the United Kingdom between 2000 and 2006 and designed for students in EFL courses both in the United Kingdom and internationally. The start date of 2000 was chosen to allow time

TABLE 1
List of Books Included in the Survey

Book reference	Book details
	Beginner/elementary
B1	Soars and Soars (2000a) *New Headway Beginner*
B2	Soars and Soars (2000b) *New Headway Elementary*
B3	Potten and Potten (2001) *Clockwise Elementary*
B4	Cunningham and Moor (2005a) *New Cutting Edge Elementary*
	Pre-intermediate
B5	Dellar and Walkley (2005) *Innovations Pre-Intermediate*
B6	Acklam and Crace (2005) *Total English Pre-Intermediate*
B7	Cunningham and Moor (2005b) *New Cutting Edge Pre-Intermediate*
	Intermediate
B8	Forsyth (2000) *Clockwise Intermediate*
B9	Gairns and Redman (2002) *Natural English Intermediate*
B10	Soars and Soars (2003a) *New Headway Intermediate*
B11	Cunningham and Moor (2005c) *New Cutting Edge Intermediate*
B12	Clare and Wilson (2006) *Total English Intermediate*
	Intermediate/upper intermediate
B13	Dellar and Hocking (2000) *Innovations Intermediate/Upper Intermediate*
	Upper intermediate
B14	Naunton (2000) *Clockwise Upper Intermediate*
B15	Haines and Stewart (2000) *Landmark Upper Intermediate*
B16	Kay and Jones (2001) *Inside Out Upper Intermediate*
B17	Dellar and Hocking (2004) *Innovations Upper Intermediate* (2nd ed.)
B18	Cunningham and Moor (2005dd) *New Cutting Edge Upper Intermediate*
B19	Acklam and Crace (2006) *Total English Upper Intermediate*
	Advanced
B20	Walton and Bartram (2000) *Initiative Advanced*
B21	Jones and Bastow (2001) *Inside Out Advanced*
B22	Haines (2002) *Landmark Advanced Student's Book*
B23	Cunningham and Moor (2003) *Cutting Edge Advanced*
B24	Soars and Soars (2003b) *New Headway Advanced*

for the published findings from research (e.g., Brazil, 1995; McCarthy & Carter, 1995) to influence textbook content.

To compare like items as closely as possible, we selected books which are published for use in general EFL courses for adult learners and avoided books published for specific contexts (e.g., for a particular country), for specific groups (e.g., young learners), or for specific purposes (e.g., exam preparation or ESP/EAP classes). The books are broadly communicative in nature, with a range of authentic listening and reading texts, communicative tasks to develop receptive and productive language skills, and exercises to develop competence in the language systems of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Students are often required to work in pairs or small groups on a wide variety of tasks related to topics of general interest, such as family and friends, likes and

dislikes, eating and drinking, leisure and lifestyle, jobs and work, and fame and fortune.

Textbooks at all levels (from beginner to advanced) were chosen to see whether attention to specific features of spoken grammar was more evident at one level than another. We did not, however, expect to find much overt attention to these features at lower levels, that is, beginner and elementary, and hence we weighted the selection of books slightly in favour of those at intermediate, upper intermediate, and advanced levels.

Aim

The aim of the survey was twofold. First, we wished to find out the extent to which common features of spoken grammar, revealed in corpus studies of conversational English and highlighted in the literature, have found their way into a representative sample of mainstream EFL textbooks. Second, we wished to find out what kind of attention was given to these items in cases where they were included in a particular book. Thus, the survey had both a quantitative and a qualitative dimension. The items of spoken grammar which formed the basis of the survey are those that, as a result of their frequency in conversational English, have attracted the attention of researchers in the field. We have used these items to exemplify our description and categorisation of spoken grammar described in the first half of this article.

Method

Each textbook was searched page by page for reference material, exercises, or activities that overtly focused on the features of spoken grammar identified in our Categories A–C. Because our interest was in the extent to which overt attention was given to spoken grammar, examples of grammatical features that only appeared in text material (e.g., textbook dialogues or transcript material for listening texts) were not included in the search unless these features were highlighted in some way for the learners' attention. This highlighting would usually be a brief explanation accompanying an example of the feature, followed by a short practice activity requiring the learner to use the feature productively in speech. Whatever the level of overt attention, each feature of spoken grammar highlighted in one way or another in each book was recorded by a check mark on a grid (see Tables 2 and 3). The items of spoken grammar listed on the grid include the eight examples discussed earlier, four in Category A and four in Category B. We were interested to

TABLE 2

Features of Spoken Grammar in a Survey of British EFL Textooks: Beginner/Elementary, Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate Levels

Feature	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	B6	B7	B8	B9	B10	B11	B12
	Beginner/elementary				Pre-intermediate			Intermediate				
Category A												
Heads												
Tails												
Past progressive reporting verbs					√							
Initial situational ellipsis				√								
Other												
Category B												
Sort of/kind of												√
Vagueness tags								√	√			
A bit/a little bit					√				√			
I mean/ you know						√		√				
Other: OK, now, right, well, you see, anyway, actually						√		√	√			
Category C												
There's + plural noun: *There's lots of things left to do.*					√							
Me + NP in subject position: *Me and my brother. . .*					√							
If + was in 2nd conditional structures: *If I was younger, the job would be easier.*									√			

TABLE 3

Features of Spoken Grammar in a Survey of British EFL Textbooks: Intermediate/Upper Intermediate, Upper Intermediate, Advanced Levels

Feature	B13	B14	B15	B16	B17	B18	B19	B20	B21	B22	B23	B24
	Intermediate/ upper intermediate	Upper intermediate						Advanced				
	Category A											
Heads										√		
Tails												√
Past progressive reporting verbs												
Initial situational ellipsis		√										
Other: Unfinished conditional for polite instruction/ request: *If you'd like to hold on a minute*		√										
Other: Affirmative question tag after affirmative verb: *So he's rich, is he?*	√											√
	Category B											
Sort of/kind of	√				√					√		
Vagueness tags	√				√					√		
A bit/a little bit	√		√		√		√			√		
I mean/you know	√	√	√		√					√		
Other: *Well, you see, anyway, a lot, really, actually, basically, just*	√	√	√		√					√	√	√
	Category C											
There's + plural noun: *There's lots of things left to do.*	√									√		
Less + plural noun: *Less people read the classics now.*	√									√		

see which, if any, of these items, all noted as being of high frequency in corpus studies, were selected for attention in the textbooks. We did not, however, restrict our search to these preselected items but also noted any other grammatical structures specifically associated with speech which were included in the books. These structures were organised as either Category A or B according to the operational definitions discussed eariler, and noted under *Other* in Tables 2 and 3. For Category C, we did not have predetermined items but left the selection open to record whatever features happened to appear in any of the textbooks.

FINDINGS

Tables 2 and 3 show which features of spoken grammar identified in Categories A–C are included or not included for special attention in the 24 books surveyed. The table is organised by level of textbook, distinguishing between beginner/elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate, and advanced. Points worth noting are elaborated in the following sections.

Variation in Overt Attention

Although all 24 books surveyed include work on speaking and many on informal conversational English, usually in special sections with titles like "English in Use" (B8, B14), "Features of Natural Conversation" (B15), "Natural English" (B9), and even "Spoken Grammar" (B13), the textbooks vary considerably in the extent to which they provide overt attention to particular features of spoken grammar of the kind identified in Categories A–C and listed in Tables 2 and 3. A number of books provide fairly extensive coverage, with the *Landmark* and *Innovations* series being perhaps the most systematic of the selection, whereas nearly half of the books surveyed (11 out of 24) do not include any of the features listed in Tables 2 and 3, or any other features under Other in Categories A and B. As expected, the lack of explicit treatment is most apparent in the four books at the beginner/elementary level (B1–B4).

Category B Attention

Most of the space allocated to spoken grammar is for Category B features, together with a range of conversational fillers, idioms, and other fixed expressions presented as conversational gambits, for ex-

ample, “What are you up to this weekend?” (B13, p. 57) and “How interesting!” (B9, p. 16). Category B features seem to be given more attention in the upper intermediate and intermediate textbooks as opposed to the advanced books, which in view of their easier learnability and availability for immediate use, is perhaps not surprising. Examples of these features included in the books, and highlighted for the learners’ attention, are

He’s *a bit* strange, *a bit* weird. (B13, p. 15)

She was *sort of* annoyed with me. It was *kind of* expensive. (B13, p. 99)

My dad thought I was a pick-pocket or a drug addict *or something*. (B13, p. 99)

I’m not really interested in art and *all that stuff* / and *stuff like that*. (B8, p. 57)

Yeah, but *I mean* you’ve got to live with each otherŋ.ŋ.ŋ. (B15, p. 62)

Well *you know,* I mean I haven’t really got much time for that, *you know*. (B15, p. 72)

Category A Attention

By contrast, there is little overt focus on Category A features. Heads and tails only feature in the advanced-level textbooks, tail structures appearing in just one of the books (B24) in a section on conversational tags, and head structures appearing only in B22 under “Exploring Natural Speech.” Examples of each structure included in the two books are provided in bold type:

She’s one of the all-time greats, **Liza Minnelli is**. (tail structure, B24, p. 46)

Conflict—I’m getting better at it—much better than I used to be. (head structure, B22, p. 97)

Situational ellipsis features in just 2 out of the 24 books (B5 and B15). Examples drawn to the learners’ attention include

Sounds a bit risky to me. Got the time? Must dash. (B15, p. 102)

One of the books (B5) includes the use of the past progressive tense to report what people say, with this example taken from a conversation the learners had previously listened to:

Paul was telling me about your new car. It sounds really good. (B5, p. 114)

Perhaps understandably at this pre-intermediate level, the learners are not shown how this tense can be used to introduce a reported speech

clause (with backshift rules, etc.), nor are they given any information about its particular use in conversational as opposed to written English. This books also does not differentiate between the use of the past simple or past progressive in the reporting verb, again not surprisingly at this level.

There are three entries in Table 3 under *Other* in Category A. Two concern the use of an affirmative question tag after an affirmative verb in the preceding clause, for example: "So he's rich, is he?" (B24, p. 46) and "So he helped you, did he?" (B13, p. 42). Biber et al. (1999, pp. 208–209) noted that a speaker uses this feature of conversational grammar as a device to echo or comment on something the previous speaker has just said. B13 points our that it is often used to express surprise (p. 42), a point perhaps reinforced by the fact that all their examples begin with "So . . .". The third entry is the use of conditional clauses in unfinished sentences to give polite instructions: "If you'd like to hold on a minute" (B15, p. 122). This construction would be very unusual in writing in its elliptical form but would not be so unusual if the second half of the sentence were to be completed, for example,

If you would like to *hold on* a few days, we will have the articles sent to you.

Category C Attention

Four of the books draw the learners' attention to Category C features and to the ways in which observation of certain rules of grammatical agreement may be relaxed in informal usage. Examples from B22 and B13 include (relevant features are once again in bold type)

There's lots of things left to do. (B22, p. 73)

There's a lot less/more people there. (B13, p. 122)

Less people read the classics now. (B22, p. 73)

There's more/not as many cars on the road there. (B13, p. 122)

Whereas this indicates an attempt to make learners aware of how grammar may be affected by informal contexts of use, it is interesting to note that only one of the intermediate-level textbooks surveyed points out that *If I was . . .* is an acceptable spoken alternative to the more formal *If I were . . .* in its unit dealing with second conditional clauses. The example given is

If I was younger, the job would be easier. (B9, p. 108)

One of the books (the pre-intermediate-level B5) draws the learners' attention to the use of the object pronoun *me*, in preference to *I,* in the

subject position of an utterance like "Me and my brother both support Hull City football club." This use is noted by Carter and McCarthy (2006) as one which is "usually found only in speech" (p. 380). In the textbook, it is presented for receptive rather than productive use, with this explanation:

> We don't usually start with *me* like this when we write. Some older people even think it is wrong.
>
> Are there things like this in your language? (B5, p. 16)

As this comment shows, this structure would be regarded by many as nonstandard, and for this reason presumably, it is highlighted in the textbook for recognition purposes only. It serves to illustrate the fact that, when investigating features of spoken grammar, the borderline between standard and nonstandard usage is not always clear.

Mode of Presentation

Where features of spoken grammar were highlighted, the textbooks in general followed a similar mode of presentation and practice, whereby the feature in question is initially encountered in a stretch of authentic, or plausible, semiscripted conversational discourse, presented as a listening text. After a task to check global comprehension of the text, the learners' attention is drawn to the target feature of spoken grammar (e.g., by listening again or reading a transcript of the text and underlining examples of the feature), and its communicative purpose and use in the listening text is either explained or explored through some—usually rather brief—questions for discussion. There is then typically a short practice activity, where the learners are required to use the feature in a fairly controlled setting. The procedure is thus similar to the three I's (illustration, induction, interaction) approach to teaching spoken grammar advocated by McCarthy and Carter (1995). It is also consistent with the task sequence of global understanding, noticing, and language discussion suggested by Timmis (2005), although the discussion questions are notably less critical and analytical than Timmis (p. 121) advocates. The following extract from B22, in which head structures are introduced, is fairly typical. The advanced-level students have just listened to a tape in which seven people talk about their attitudes toward conflict. They have answered questions relating to the comprehension of the tape and have proceeded to talk briefly with each other about real-life situations where they had to deal with conflict. The language focus is illustrated in this extract.

Exploring natural speech

1. Why do the speakers start their answers with the word *conflict* in these extracts rather than use the normal word order?
   a. Conflict—I'm getting better at it—much better than I used to be, but it's not enjoyable, it's never enjoyable having to deal with conflict.
   b. Well conflict—I'd rather not talk about it, that's basically how I deal with it.
   2. Reply to these questions in a similar way:
   a. How do you feel about family rows?
   b. What's your attitude to war?
   c. Do you find it easy to deal with disappointments?
   d. Do you ever have problems with your neighbours? (Haines, 2002, p. 97)

DISCUSSION

The textbook analysis shows that the British ELT market has attempted to include various phenomena of spoken grammar shown to be frequent in corpora of spoken English over the past 20 years. Approaches to teaching these features, as illustrated by the textbook material, are also consistent with contemporary approaches to teaching grammar in general, with an emphasis on noticing and exploring language in contexts of authentic use.

It should, however, be noted that there was a marked preference for Category B features and that structures in Category A were, by and large ignored. Only 4 of the 24 books surveyed included any reference to Category A features. Those that were included were only introduced as additional pieces of language, mainly at the upper intermediate or advanced levels. Given that the majority of learners never continue classes to the point at which advanced-level textbooks are used, they would not come across these features except informally in their exposure to English outside class. In considering the question in the title of this article, then—Is there a missing link between spoken grammar and ELT materials?—the answer in the case of the British market must be a qualified yes, certainly with respect to Category A structures. The question whether there are good pedagogical reasons for devoting more attention to Category A features of spoken grammar is discussed in the following section.

The preference for dealing with Category B features may well reflect the textbook writers' perceptions regarding teachability and learnability alluded to in the previous section. As fixed phrases, these bits of language might be regarded as easier to learn (and teach) on the grounds

that they can simply be added to the learner's lexicon without involving a restructuring of her grammatical knowledge. Second, given the fact that grammatical items we have classified under Category A are by and large ignored, the concentration on Category B features suggests a rather limited view of what spoken grammar actually is. There seems to be a tendency among some of the textbooks to associate distinctive features of conversational English solely with language chunks, rather than with generative grammatical structures. This in itself may be due to other influences from applied linguistics in the past 15 years emphasising the importance of formulaic language and routines in language learning and language use (Aijmer, 1996; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Pawley & Syder, 1983; Widdowson, 1989).

CONCLUSION: THE CASE FOR TEACHING SPOKEN GRAMMAR

The case for teaching spoken grammar rests on an acknowledgment of the fact that written and spoken language are not replicas of each other and that the teaching of speaking skills should reflect this difference. In conclusion, we present four arguments for including a more serious treatment of spoken grammar in ELT textbooks, particularly those designed for use in contexts where learners look to native speaker models, from which most of the available corpora of spoken English are taken, as a point of reference for acceptable usage.

Frequency of Use

The first argument relates to frequency of use. One of the main functions of electronic corpora is to provide hard evidence about which items of language occur most and least frequently in natural situations, so that curricular decisions about syllabus content can be based on actual attested use, rather than on intuitions which are often unreliable or simply wrong (Biber & Conrad, 2001; Biber & Reppen, 2002). The evidence from corpus studies of spoken English shows that all the features discussed in the first part of this article occur frequently in conversational discourse. Heads and tails, for example, occur in the Biber et al. (1999) corpus "over 200 times per million words in conversation" (p. 957), which makes them twice as frequent in the same corpus as *ought to* modals, or *get* passives ("We got married," "They got arrested," etc.), both fairly standard items in intermediate-level language syllabuses. Similarly, Carter and McCarthy (1995) point out the striking frequency in their

Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English of past progressive reporting verbs in indirect speech, in the specific genre of casual conversation, as distinct from other genres of informal spoken language, such as service encounters and narratives.

Justification of Inclusion

Frequency of occurrence does not in itself justify inclusion of an item on a teaching syllabus. As Cook (1998) has argued, frequency and desirability are two different things and "something is not a good model simply because it occurs frequently" (p. 61). However, with respect to the items of spoken grammar discussed in this article, there are no reasons to suppose that they are bad or in any other way inappropriate models of usage. Rather, as has been argued, they serve a range of important communicative functions. These functions, relating to the unplanned, interactive, and interpersonal nature of conversation, mean that features like heads or tails cannot simply be covered by more conventional structures and, in contexts where learners need English to interact with native speakers, deserve to be taught for more than just recognition purposes.

Consequences to Learners

Neglecting to teach these features may lead to learners' either avoiding them or transferring equivalent features from their first language, as an illuminating study by De Cock et al. (1998) has shown. Comparing speech data of nonnative and native speakers, the authors found some striking differences between a group of advanced French EFL learners and a group of native English speakers in the United Kingdom in their use of vagueness tags and other common formulae of the kind grouped in our Category B. For example, the French learners made heavy use of the vagueness tag *and so on*, which rarely occurred in the native speaker data, and little or no use of tags like *and everything, and things,* and *or something,* which were used frequently by the native English speaker group. Similar discrepancies were found in the use of *sort of, I mean,* and *you know,* which were frequently used by the native English speaker group but considerably less so by the French learners, and in the use of the insert *in fact,* where the reverse pattern was found. The study suggests that these advanced learners of English experienced the need to use vague language and inserts, but either due to lack of contact with the target language or lack of explicit teaching, they were left alone to formulate their own expressions, drawing on their own resources (e.g., transfer from L1 or from a written model of L2). The resulting expres-

sions they used inevitably differed in kind and in application from those used by native English speakers.

Evidence Based on Research

Whereas mismatches between English language learner and native English speaker usage may not be cause for great concern in the global arena in which English is used, and in which the great majority of its users are not native speakers, learners still need models of some kind as a point of reference. And some evidence, from research conducted by Timmis (2002) into the kind of English that students actually want to learn, suggests that native speaker norms of English exert a very strong appeal to learners from a diverse range of countries and contexts of language use, and that these norms include "the kind of informal, spoken grammar highlighted in the work of Carter and McCarthy (1997)" (p. 246). Just over half of Timmis's 400 respondents agreed that it was important for them to be able to use the kind of English illustrated by short authentic examples of informal spoken English provided, whereas 22% disagreed. Perhaps it is more interesting that of those who agreed, two thirds were living and studying in countries where English was not the dominant spoken language.

Further Study

Clearly, further studies of this kind are needed to ensure that the learners' voice is not disregarded in decisions about whether to devote more attention in ELT textbooks to spoken grammar than presently exists. In the absence of such studies, it is surely patronizing, as Carter and McCarthy (1996) have argued, for materials writers to decide on the learners' behalf that they do not need to concern themselves too much with features of spoken grammar. "The real challenge," they suggest, is "to provide descriptions and to develop materials which serve the needs of teachers in all situations, whether they be native or non-native, so that they can decide how best to make such hitherto unrecorded aspects of English more widely accessible" (p. 370).

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