

Written versus spoken grammar

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



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Abstract

Through examination of the expected educational outcomes of TESOL courses, one can begin to have a relevant discussion as to the debate between written and spoken grammar. In general academic consensus it is shown that the inclusion of spoken grammar in English teaching is preferable as it is desired by learners and the outcomes themselves. Thereafter, the challenges facing English teachers in Kuwait will be determined in relation to this debate to assess whether the inclusion of spoken grammar in addition to written grammar will have an overall positive effect on addressing these challenges. It will be argued that the inclusion is highly necessary however not without proper management by the educators as to the types of spoken grammar sources included.

Introduction

The learning environment that is provided in foreign language adult education is unique in the challenges that it presents to educators and the learning techniques used to affect the various educational outcomes that

are expected. The relevance of these techniques is widely applicable to a variety of situations and locations that present these unique challenges based on culture and geography. To this extent there are three competing considerations with regards to the relevance of the debate between written and spoken grammar to the English teachers of Kuwait. The first is the debate between written and spoken grammar – which is largely related to whether spoken grammar should be included in the teaching strategies of English teachers. The second is the learning objectives of TESOL courses and how these relate to teaching strategies generally and expected educational outcomes. The third consideration is whether the debate in light of the learning objectives of TESOL is relevant to teaching of English as a second language in the country of Kuwait. The central hypothesis of this paper will examine the difference between written and spoken grammar to determine the associated educational outcomes that can be expected and how these relate to the particular aims of TESOL type courses. Thereafter, the inclusion of spoken grammar and the debate surrounding its inclusion will be discussed and analyzed. The last consideration will require an in-depth analysis of the particular challenges of the education system in Kuwait and this will then tie into the idea of the relevance of spoken and written grammar debates. The particular relevance of these debates with relation to Kuwait will be discussed in terms of the outcomes and challenges experienced. Thereafter concluding that the particular nuances of the education system in Kuwait make the need for interpersonal and interactive language uses even more pronounced.

The infrastructure of the education system in Kuwait is reasonably advanced as there has been a recent push by the government to improve education access and quality, however with the emergence of these institutions and of the economy as a player in the global economy has led to the need for effective second language learning courses, such as TESOL. Political discussion and economic debate is encouraged in the Kuwait democracy which sets it apart from other main Arab Gulf countries, therefore making the need for effective communication even more pronounced. The major challenges that Kuwait faces in terms of the English language learning as a nation and therefore the problems and challenges faced by English teachers in Kuwait, are related to the overbearing influence of culture in language and the problems of motivation with students. It will be discussed through careful reflection that the inclusion of spoken grammar through certain authentic material uses will help in combating these challenges faced by educators. Through this inclusion it is also relevant to note that this has led to the evolution of teaching methods and methods of assessment away from exam-based assessment models as this has also been identified as a challenge to learners in Arabic countries.

Written versus Spoken Grammar

The difference between written and spoken grammar essentially comes down to a debate between formal and informal grammar. It is however important to note that there are arguments made that spoken grammar is inchoate and does not technically exist, and that spoken grammar is essentially the same as written grammar in terms of all belonging to the use

of grammar generally rather than a particular system. These different arguments, although noted, do not present difficulty to the most widely acknowledged theory of spoken grammar and therefore shall not be considered within the ambit of this discussion. Suffice to say however that the argument presented for spoken grammar is not a unified position, although supported by the majority of academic writers. The argument for spoken grammar is essentially that it is a distinct approach from that used in written grammar. There is an argument for a linear model of grammar with spoken grammar being separate and distinct, although familiar through the use of written grammar (Brazil, 1995). Over time this model has evolved into a dynamic system of grammar that is easily adaptable and flexible for language use and inclusion (Carter & McCarthy, 1997). The distinction is practically important for language use as often the use of written grammar in speech and conversely spoken grammar in writing, can often not be contextually appropriate and can lead to confusion. Simply put, people generally do not speak the way that they write and they certainly do not write the way that they speak.

Spoken grammar often includes contractions, such as ' I'll', ' don't' or ' can't' which are strictly speaking not appropriate in written grammar, as well as the inclusion of slang words or colloquialisms. Spoken grammar also includes breaking of strict written grammar rules such as beginning sentences with prepositions. Conversely, there is grammatical syntax that exists almost exclusively in written grammar that is not used in spoken grammar such as the existence of the perfect past tense. Spoken grammar is also more dynamic and immediate, therefore often including many grammatical errors

that are unacceptable in written grammar. This is as a productive of rapid speech and thought development. Written grammar is more planned and precise, therefore allowing fewer margins for error and engaging with a more sophisticated vocabulary and format of idea presentation. Spoken grammar is often more communicative as it presents ideas at a lower level of engagement, making it more accessible in a way and therefore communicative. It also is capable of more effectively conveying a tone, furthering the assessment of spoken grammar as communicative.

TESOL Aims and Expected Outcomes

The mission of TESOL is “[t]o advance professional expertise in English language teaching and learning for speakers of other languages worldwide” (TESOL, 2007). TESOL generally can be said to be aimed at adult learners that are non-native English speakers. It is aimed at professionally equipping this demographic with competent English skills. Bearing this in mind, it is clear that there is a large element of competency based educational outcomes in TESOL teaching. Competency “ refers to a standard of performance either implicitly or explicitly, the term closely parallels definitions of mastery or criterion levels of performance” (Wong, 2008). This involves a broader inclusion of social, cognitive and communicative skills to allow for effective use of language. Simply stated, competency based outcomes are concentrated on allowing for actual communication in the way that native speakers would use the language, whilst not being overly concerned with the theoretical knowledge that the students have. The essential difference between the various approaches to teaching can be

summarized as different emphasis on ‘real’ English in teaching and this will significantly affect the outcome of the learner’s language skills. Advocates of the use of spoken grammar argue that the use enables learners to have a more real grasp of the language as it is used by native speakers and without this inclusion, the gap between what is learnt and how one must use the language will leave learners unable to communicate in the ‘real world.’ It is evident therefore that the use of spoken grammar may be more aligned to the expected educational outcomes of TESOL as it engages in a competency based approach that will equip students to effectively communicate within their particular needs.

The Debate of Spoken Grammar Inclusion in Learning Generally

The debate surrounding written and spoken grammar essentially boils down to whether it should be included in teaching English as a second language and if so, how. The inclusion of spoken grammar in English comes down to relevant competing considerations all arguably part of a competency based approach to language learning. There seems to be a significant movement towards expression of language in the way that native speakers use the language rather than conforming to strict grammatical standards. This in itself is aligned with the outcomes of TESOL which aims to equip their students with a professional grasp of the language and general consensus as to the aims of second language teaching generally. If one bears these educational goals in mind when evaluating the merits of spoken grammar material inclusion in teaching methods, one can get an overall view of the advantages afforded by their inclusion.

A Lack of Spoken Grammatical Features

McCarthy & Carter (1997) prove that there is a distinct lack of spoken grammar exposure in teaching materials used to teach English as a second language to adult learners. The way that native speakers communicate with one another and therefore the way that they establish relationships is, to a large extent, reliant on the ability to communicate in a meaningful way. This represents more than just written and articulated English grammar in the form of language use that is symptomatic of way that native English speakers communicate. The intrinsic value of spoken grammar is evident as without equipping students with the ability to grasp language in this way, one is overlooking a fundamental aspect of language education – which is to be interculturally communicative. There is much support for the argument that inclusion of spoken grammatical features in English teaching increases skill levels and natural spoken interaction (McCarthy & Carter, 1994). These authors however are quick to point out that there must be a correlation between the use of written grammar resources and those representing spoken grammar uses, as the written grammar will often be a fall-back for students. However, there is a general consensus that in order to allow students to have a natural use of the language taught, there must be introduction of spoken grammar, as there is a distinct lack of these grammatical features in traditional written grammar materials. Research conducted into the usefulness of telephone conversation dialogues in the teaching of English as a second language supported this notion by showing that the interaction that it gave learners with natural spoken grammar was an area that was not covered in any of the traditional textbook materials that

learners typically learn from (Wong, 2002). Increasingly there is a move towards a combination of attributes in second language teaching and the use of spoken grammar materials supports the interaction between language, sequence structure and social action in a way that traditional teaching materials do not. This is highly relevant when considering the competency based educational outcomes that are required in second language English teaching. The specific goals of TESOL also support the inclusion of these materials towards effectively equipping the learners with competent and communicative English skills.

The Needs of Learners

Research conducted (Timmis, 2002) shows that learners and teachers value all aspects of grammar in teaching. That being said, there is a need for learners to be able to communicate in the most appropriate and effective manner in line with their specific educational needs. From the perspective of students involved in this study, there was an expression of the desire to conform to the grammar norms of native-English speakers, which in this case also includes the informal grammatical norms. This concept relates back to the idea of real language use in TESOL teaching environments where there is a need to teach English in relation to a competency based educational outlook. It is necessary therefore from the perspective of the learner to include spoken grammar in English teaching in order to achieve a competent language knowledge. To this extent, the research proved further that there is a general consensus amongst teachers that students should at least be exposed to spoken grammar in the studies (Timmis, 2002).

Although this is by no means a conclusive case for inclusion of spoken grammar into language teaching, it is clear that there is a need for this inclusion based on proposed educational outcomes and teaching objectives. This also may encourage motivation and therefore impact the results of students if they feel they are actively engaging in the language in a way that is tangible. It is necessary therefore to examine how one would go about effectively including spoken grammar in teaching without negatively influencing outcomes, such as the development of culturally dependant language and poor grammatical habits. Essentially there are some parallels to be drawn between the debate surrounding the use of authentic material in language teaching and the inclusion of spoken grammar in language teaching as essentially they are both incorporating elements of real language use and often the grammar used in authentic materials is informal or akin to spoken grammar. The benefits and disadvantages of authentic materials will not be covered, however there are some relevant considerations that are applicable such as the need to be flexible in their approach to communication which can be best taught through the use of spoken grammar in teaching methods.

The Challenges of Kuwait as an Educational System

Until 1966 there was no formal university in the country and it has taken many years since then to make access to higher education possible. Education in Kuwait is free and available to all. There have been significant efforts on the part of the government to improve access to education and educational facilities. Furthermore, there are literacy programs for adult

learners, both male and female to improve the literacy rate, which are currently attended by around 2% of the population. In a recent conference, the minister of education of Kuwait reinforced the international commitment of Kuwait to building an advanced and progressive society based on education with the aid of knowledge achievement and modern methods (Al-Haroun, 2011). As a result of a drive towards improving education in Kuwait, the education sector is by and large doing very well. However, this does mean that it is without challenges. For English teachers teaching English as a second language may present significant challenges, not least of which are the concerns of cultural education that will accompany English education. In order to successfully impart the goals of competency based English outcomes, there has to be a transference of culture to allow Arabic speaking learners, who have been educated in Kuwait to not only speak English effectively, but be culturally appropriate at the same time. With the impact of culture on language use in Kuwait, there are particular challenges faced by English teachers in trying to translate those cultural nuances in English through second language education. An example of how this may be an issue is in business relations traditionally Arabic culture there is a large tradition of respect in greetings and formalities. These well wishes may not be understood or be appropriate in certain Western traditions, therefore in order to be able to communicate effectively in a more global sense there will need to be a cultural education of these appropriate mannerisms in English culture.

Culture

In Kuwait, it is important to note the decisive impact that culture plays in all facets of life. As an Arab nation, Kuwait is very committed to religious based cultural practices and for English teachers in Kuwait, they must be able to convey not only the teaching of English, but the cultural practices as well. It is fundamental for teachers of language to also be able to teach cultural in language studies, and since generally teachers are not trained in social anthropology, they need to adapt their perspectives according to their teaching environment (Byram & Morgan, 1995). Traditionally, there is an emphasis on the native speaker in teaching language, in other words identifying the target language and the appropriate uses thereof in the particular context. This is usually done by studying the speech of native speakers of the language and then emphasizing the use of those aspects of the language (Cook, 1999). From this approach it is clear that there would be a significant benefit for teachers of English as a second language in Kuwait to make use of both written and spoken grammar in teaching. Spoken grammar would therefore be highly important as many authors have noted that there is a real element in the teaching of this spoken grammar as it is the closest representation to how native speakers actually communicate. However, as Cook goes on to explain, the goal of education of a second language student is not to transform them into a native speaker as for second language speakers this is a theoretical impossibility (1999; 186). The aim therefore is to allow them to effectively communicate with other elements that are incidental to native speakers such as social interaction, language skill transference, identification with the target language

community and the ability to produce fluent discourse. Fairly evident in the attainment of these goals is the need for a good practical knowledge of the language being taught, for without this informal communications and identification in the language community would be nearly impossible. This social and cultural aspect of learning English as a second language in Kuwait is highly relevant as there is a vast social, political and cultural divide between native English speakers and Arabic cultures. In order to have a real appreciation and understanding of building social rapport and a level of social interaction with native English speakers, the cultural aspects of learning English will need to be addressed. As already mentioned, the way that people write and speak as native language users is not necessarily always compatible. The importance therefore in the inclusion of spoken grammar into language teaching becomes highly important. It also allows for a certain flexibility in the teaching as it can stay up to date with current language and vocabulary trends. One such example is the use of the word 'fit' in English language. One could conceptualize a situation where a Kuwaiti person uses this word in the formal sense to describe someone with a certain level of physical fitness, however colloquially to British English speaking individuals this word has a slang meaning of referring to a level of attractiveness of an individual. Whilst this is a simplistic example of such a scenario, it is easy to see how the inclusion of spoken grammar in this way would provide valuable insight into the use of the language by native speakers and in the end would end up highly beneficial for the second language learners.

The exploration of culture involves learners evaluating their own culture as well as that of the target language group (Corbett, 2003). The point is essentially to bridge an information gap between the learner and the target language group. Despite the plethora of information highlighting the importance of inclusion of culture in language learning, there is still a huge underrate of this inclusion which has been markedly difficult in practice (Stern, 1992). The improvement in this incorporation into the language teaching methodologies can be related back to the emergence of the communicative or competence theory of learning becoming the dominant ideology in teaching theory (Corbett, 2003). A language course that is so influenced is one that attempts to educate the learners in all facets of language education: reading, writing, speaking and listening. In order to gain a deeper understanding of how the target language community functions, the students will need to assess their own language and community functions as they relate to language use. Therefore, the inclusion of spoken and written grammar will need to be used in order for the students to have a culturally specific language education where they can interact with the target language group. Byram (1995) argues that the goal of second language English education is not to acquire a native language competence but rather to acquire an intercultural communicative competence. Learning language in a formal vacuum therefore will not be adequate to effectively equip TESOL learners with this intercultural communicative competence without the inclusion of social or cultural content. Therefore, the most effective way of including this content is through the exposure to spoken grammar through authentic material use. This way there is the opportunity for students to engage with the culture of

the target language group as well as with their own culture in relation to this target group. Through this interaction there will be the formation of mutual respect and understanding for culture leading to a competent educational outcome.

Motivation

Student motivation has been identified as a general challenge to English learning in Arab Gulf countries (Syed, 2003). One may argue that this is a by-product of the vast difference in language use and syntactical differences between Arabic and English. The use of spoken grammar in teaching exposes learners to ‘real’ language, which has the effect of motivating them, because there is the opportunity for the students to see their progress tangibly (Hastings & Murphy, 2002). Psychologically, this is an important aspect as it increases the confidence of the students. A student that is able to read a newspaper article in a learning environment is far more likely to attempt to read further articles outside of the classroom. As an newspaper article, being authentic material, is use of spoken grammar in teaching, one can see the benefit of using this spoken grammar in teaching. Having exposure to reading these articles will also improve the chance that they will understand these articles as they will be familiar to a certain extent with the grammar and vocabulary used. This is a kind of knock-on effect of using spoken grammar in teaching with vast benefit for listening and speaking language skills of the learners. A key example of this is using television as spoken grammar literature, as the influence of media on learning is undoubtedly strong. By exposing students to television that they can understand, it is more likely that they will seek out further programming in

English, because they will be confident that they will be able to understand it to a certain extent and as these programs are meant for native English speakers, the vocabulary and grammar used will be varied and therefore challenging, increasing the learning potential. It is therefore highly beneficial to learner motivation and confidence to use authentic materials demonstrating spoken grammar. However teachers must also be aware of the careful selection of these materials as spoken grammar can be detrimental to learning outcomes if there is little correlation between written and spoken grammar due to an extensive informal nature of the materials provided. An example of this would be the use of comics in learning. These do not have much relation to written grammar due to the short sentence structure and colloquial use grammar and punctuation.

Recommendations & Conclusion

The two major challenges facing English second language teachers in Kuwait are largely confined to the motivation of the learners and the structure of the courses being inclusive of all relevant factors relating to the language. It is clear that there is consensus amongst the teaching community that there should be inclusion of or exposure to spoken grammar in teaching. The effects of this inclusion have had positive effects, not only on the attainment of educational outcomes based on competency, but also on tackling of the challenges faced by teachers in Kuwait. Like with all teaching materials, there are positive and negative elements to this inclusion, however with careful monitoring of the material selection and the kinds of materials that the learners are exposed to, these negative elements may be mitigated. If

one takes an outcome based approach to education, competency is the most relevant consideration. The specific needs of a competent learner are to be able to communicate effectively across language and cultural barriers. In order to do this, academics have argued that there needs to be an inclusion of real language use in teaching materials as this will be the most effective means of including this kind of socio-cultural content. These materials will make use of spoken grammar as well as written grammar and through careful material selection by educators, the pitfalls of spoken grammar use can be effectively managed if not altogether eliminated. This will have positive effects on learner confidence and motivation leading to a better overall outcome in line with the expected teaching outcomes seeking to be achieved by TESOL language teaching.

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