

ESL Textbooks: Reflective of Native Speaker Speech or Protective of Prescriptive Teaching?

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Abstract

College-level English as a Second Language courses are generally specialized, only dealing with one particular aspect of the language such as speaking, reading, writing, or grammar. The content that each class covers largely comes from the textbook that is being used for that particular course. As such, it is imperative that the textbooks being used in class reflect the English language accurately so that students learn language that is relevant and current. One aspect that is frequently ignored is whether the text being used treats language in a prescriptive manner, where there are strict rules that must be adhered to in order to produce a “correct” utterance, or descriptively, with rules that vary depending on how the language is actually used by native speakers. This becomes especially important in courses devoted specifically to speaking. In this study, corpora will be used to determine the frequency of three word pairs that differ in their descriptive use from the prescriptive rules that dictate how they “should” be used. The frequency that these words are spoken by native English speakers will then be compared with how five college-level speaking textbooks treat those same word pairs. From these comparisons, professors will be able to determine the accuracy and effectiveness of these texts, and can reconsider if and how their textbook should be used in class. Recommendations will also be provided to this end in the form of lesson plans and supplemental teaching ideas.

Introduction

In English as a second language (ESL) classes at the university level, the focus is largely centered on the mastery of English for academic purposes. As is generally expected from classes of nearly any academic area in higher education, the department chooses a textbook (or several textbooks) for each course, and the syllabus is more or less expected to mirror the topics covered in the selected text(s). An inherent problem with using texts in a speaking course at all is, of course, that textbooks are written, and are therefore unable to completely capture how a language is actually spoken. This is because written language changes at a much slower pace over time than spoken language does. Spoken language can change very rapidly in a short period of time, but writing is much more standardized and takes a long time to catch up to the changes in speaking. In fact, by the time it does catch up, the spoken language will have undoubtedly changed even further, creating a never ending cycle of change. Even if textbook publishers are careful to adapt their speaking texts from their other editions that may be used for writing, it is unlikely that they will be able to capture every aspect of the way English is spoken simply because it is being written down.

In speaking classes, this becomes problematic in that students are potentially not learning relevant language that will be useful to them outside the classroom. At best, speaking texts may be flawed in that they are simply too academic in nature, and therefore would be useful to prepare students for speaking in situations such as presentations and meetings, but would make students' speech outside the classroom seem awkwardly formal and even pretentious. At worst, such texts may present language from a purely prescriptive point of view, and teach students constructions and grammar rules that are flat out ignored by the general population when

speaking. In such a scenario, students' speech would not only sound too formal, but potentially downright antiquated.

This study will attempt to determine to what extent textbooks designed for use in ESL classes at the university level accurately capture the English that is being spoken in the United States today. In order to do so, word pairs will be targeted that differ in the way they are spoken from the way prescriptive rules state that they should be used. This research will clarify how much of a difference there actually is between how they are spoken and how they are written, as well as how such differences are handled in speaking textbooks. In this way, professors can recognize where their texts may be flawed and adjust the schedule in their syllabus to account for any additional material that should be covered so that their students gain a full understanding of how to speak English like a native speaker. Finally, educators will be provided with ideas as to how to go about supplementing the material provided in their textbooks in order to give their students a more well-rounded and realistic understanding of spoken English.

Literature Review

This research is an extension of a previous study that I conducted that examined two variances of a particular grammatical structure in Spanish, as well as how they were treated in high school Spanish textbooks. In the study, I used Spanish language corpora to determine how often native Spanish speakers used the word *por* versus the word *en* when discussing a mode of transportation, as in the following examples:

(1) Es mejor que vayas por avión.

it is better that you go by plane

'It's better that you go by plane.'

(2) Es mejor que vayas en avión.

it is better that you go in a plane

‘It’s better that you go by plane.’

The data revealed that while native speakers use both constructions to relate the same meaning, the use of the word *en* is much more prevalent. However, not a single textbook so much as mentioned the use of the word *en* as a possibility in such contexts, whereas every text studied provided at least one page devoted to the use of *por* (Badynee 2011). This study led me to believe that prescriptive beliefs abound in textbooks, which teach students that the way that they are learning to speak the language is the only “right” way to speak. This leads to situations where students engage in conversation outside the classroom and are led to believe that they speak “better” than native speakers. This is, of course, false. Native speakers of any given language have an intuitive knowledge of the language as a natural consequence of acquiring the language during childhood, and as such they are able to consistently use the language “correctly.” If a native speaker judges an utterance to be correct, it is an acceptable utterance regardless of what prescriptive rules dictate. This is an important concept for language students to be aware of. If teachers are working to give students the skills to effectively communicate with native speakers (and they certainly should be), students need to be made aware that there is, more often than not, more than one “right” way to get an idea across. If the prescriptively correct speech is no longer used by native speakers, there is very little reason to teach it to language students at all.

This research will extend what I have discovered about prescriptivism in Spanish textbooks to see if the same phenomenon is occurring with English. ESL textbook publishers have even more reason to write their texts from a descriptive rather than a prescriptive

perspective, because ESL classes are explicitly designed to provide students with language skills to use outside the classroom. This differs from foreign language classes, where the extent to which students should learn academic versus colloquial language is debatable. Foreign language students do not come into regular contact with native speakers, and indeed may never find themselves in a situation where their language skills become necessary, so some argue that academic language is the only necessity in such classes. Such a debate would be absurd regarding ESL classes, however, given that ESL students use the knowledge they gain constantly in their daily life.

A similar study was undertaken in 1992 with research that concluded that although there is a substantial amount of explanations in textbooks describing the differences between the simple past tense and the present perfect tense in English, such explanations are largely unnecessary because the simple past encompasses most of the functions of the present perfect, and can therefore be used with a much higher frequency to simplify the amount of grammar rules that students must learn (Sheen 1992). Both tenses are certainly used by native speakers, but the simple past was both more common and more inclusive in the ways it could be used, and so was determined to be a more efficient topic to spend time on during language instruction. ESL classes, however, devote more or less equal class time to each structure, and spend even further time reviewing the differences between the two and the numerous situations in which each form is appropriate. This is an area that could certainly be revised in future editions of textbooks, simplifying this particular grammar point so that students become more proficient in the past tense, which is both more common and more versatile. Even if teachers decide that spending time differentiating between the two tenses is valuable, it would be important for them to also spend time explaining in which situations either tense would work. This would minimize

confusion when students inevitably heard a native speaker use the simple past in a context that the student's class had taught was only reserved for the present perfect. Otherwise, students will either assume that they had learned the tense incorrectly, or that the native speaker was simply wrong.

Yet another study was done on the usage of the phrase *there is* (or its contraction, *there's*) when used before a plural noun (Tsuchida, 2011). An example of this can be seen in the following sentence:

(3) There's so many mosquitos that I'm going to need more bug spray.

Although *there are* was determined to still be much more commonly used in such sentences, its prevalence has increased in recent years, particularly in British English. It seems that it would be wise, then, to at least introduce ESL students to the concept of its existence so that they are not confused when they inevitably hear it outside of the classroom. With structures such as this one, students may not need to even learn how to construct and produce such utterances because they occur relatively infrequently. However, students should be made aware of them in order to be as effective of speakers and listeners as possible. Textbooks do not need to devote substantial amounts of text to every possible way native speakers use each structure; indeed, textbooks would end up increasing in size exponentially, and students would end up not being able to learn as much material in each class due to the length of time that would need to be spent on each individual aspect of the language. Instead, it is critical that students simply be exposed to the idea that language changes, and native speakers may use forms that have not been taught in class or use forms that have been taught in new ways. In addition, it is important that students learn at least several examples of differences in language use, so that they can recognize them when they come across them and still understand what is being said.

Curzan stresses that while prescriptive rules certainly need to be communicated to students, they must be accompanied with an explanation as to when they need to be adhered to. “The teaching of grammar and usage conventions should follow an additive model-- an expansion of students’ repertoires-- rather than a replacement model” (Curzan 2009: 873). Curzan calls attention to those who are partially in charge of creating and upholding the prescriptive rules of English-- The American Heritage College Dictionary Usage Panel. This panel consists of approximately two hundred writers and scholars. Essentially, these two hundred people use their own personal preferences and beliefs to dictate how the English language should be used. It would be much more logical to teach English as a reflection of how the language is used by native speakers than it is to teach it according to how two hundred people say it should be taught, which is exactly what the results of this study advocate for.

Methodology

There are three proposed word pairs to be studied regarding their prevalence in speaking textbooks compared to their actual prevalence in spoken American English. All three are commonly considered to differ considerably depending on whether they are written or spoken. The first pair that will be studied are the words *further* and *farther*. Prescriptively, *further* is used to state degree, and *farther* is used to relate distance. Examples of each word used in a sentence in a prescriptively grammatically correct way would be:

(4) The lawyer had no further questions after the first cross-examination.

(5) There is a farmer’s market farther down the road.

However, most native American English speakers would find it grammatical to use *further* in either context. For example, the sentence in (5) would be equally acceptable to most speakers with the word *further*.

(6) There is a farmer's market further down the road.

The second set of words to be studied is *fewer* and *less*. According to prescriptive rules of English, *fewer* is used with quantifiable amounts, whereas *less* is only used with abstract quantities.

(7) Lindsay never travels with fewer than four pairs of shoes in her suitcase.

(8) Jane studies less often than Sarah, and is consequently less successful.

Native speakers, however, would generally agree that *less* can be used in either context, and is interchangeable with *fewer* in sentences such as (7).

(9) Lindsay never travels with less than four pairs of shoes in her suitcase.

Finally, the third word pair to be studied is *who* and *whom*. Prescriptively, *who* is used to refer to the subject of a sentence, whereas *whom* refers to the object, as demonstrated in the following examples:

(10) Who is that man over there?

(11) Last week I had lunch with a friend whom I met in college.

In this case, native speakers would state that *who* is appropriate in both cases.

(12) Last week I had lunch with a friend who I met in college.

These three word pairs will first be studied in several corpora to determine their frequency in spoken English in the United States. In order to minimize the possibility of skewed data, three corpora will be used. The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) was developed at Brigham Young University, and will be used to measure the frequency of each word in spoken English only. COCA consists of over 95 million words taken from unscripted television and radio shows in the United States from the years 1990 through 2012. Corpuseye will also be used to cross-reference with the data collected from COCA through studying the

frequency of each word in UCLA CSA television news from the years 2005 through 2012. This section of Corpuseye consists of 23 million words. Finally, a third corpus will be used, the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE), which contains nearly two million words. Because this corpus consists of data from speakers of a variety of languages, the data collected from it will be narrowed down to only native speakers of American English. This will provide data to show whether the prevalence of each word varies in an academic context as opposed to a more colloquial context. In this way, it will become clear whether or not the word pairs differ in colloquial speech, in academic contexts only, or not at all.

Finally, five textbooks that are commonly used in college-level ESL speaking classes will be studied in order to see how the three targeted word pairs are treated. This study will compare the frequency that each word is taught in the textbooks with how common the word actually is in spoken American English, potentially uncovering discrepancies and a tendency for textbooks to present prescriptive English rules as the only “correct” way to speak English. The textbooks studied are from a variety of publishers, and all have been published within the past fifteen years. It should be noted that even the older textbooks in this study are still considered to be “current” because content in such textbooks rarely changes in any significant way from one edition to another, and also because all of the selected books are recent enough to still currently be in use in classrooms. The following table provides details for each textbook studied.

Table 1

Studied Textbooks and Related Information

<u>Title</u>	<u>Author</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Publisher</u>
<i>Fundamentals of English Grammar</i>	Azar, B.S., & Hagen, S.A.	2011	Pearson Education
<i>Q: Skills for Success Listening and Speaking 5</i>	Earle-Carlin, S.	2011	Oxford University Press
<i>Grammar in Context 2</i>	Elbaum, S.N.	2010	Heinle- Cengage Learning
<i>Stand Out Grammar Challenge 2</i>	Jenkins, R., Johnson, S., & Sabbagh, S.L.	2002	Heinle- Thomson Learning, Inc.
<i>Stand Out Grammar Challenge 3</i>	Jenkins, R., & Johnson, S.	2002	Heinle- Thomson Learning, Inc.

Results

First, corpora were used to analyze each word pair to see how frequently each word is used by native speakers of American English. The first word pair to be studied was *further* and *farther*. Although prescriptively, *further* is used to state degree and *farther* is used to relate distance, it is hypothesized that *further* is gaining in use, while *farther* is becoming more obsolete. Most native speakers use *further* in both contexts, pushing *farther* more and more out of use over time. Before this shift in use, it can be assumed that the two words were produced at a somewhat equal frequency. Now, however, it can certainly be seen that *further* is used much more frequently than *farther*. Given that *further* now can be used in two contexts, while *farther* can only be used in one (and even that context is slowly being taken over by *further*), it makes sense that *further* would be produced increasingly more often, and *farther* increasingly less so, as speech undergoes this shift.

Table 2

Further v. Farther Corpus Data

<u>Corpus Used</u>	<u>Frequency of <i>farther</i></u>	<u>Frequency of <i>further</i></u>
COCA	782	7,863
Corpuseye	87	2,656
MICASE	18	108

Upon viewing the specific transcriptions of the surrounding context, it becomes clear that *further* is being used in a way that prescriptively is only appropriate for the word *farther*.

Consider the following examples from COCA, of which the first was taken from CNN and the others from CBS, all in 2012:

(13) "...and that, of course, leads them further down the path..."

(14) "Flight attendants and passengers worked together to subdue Osbon and assure passengers seated further back in the plane that it was not being hijacked."

(15) "Was there a sense that you could go so far but not further?" (Davies).

All of these sentences use *further* in a way that prescriptive grammarians would consider to be "wrong." That is, they are all describing distance, when *further* should prescriptively only be used to relate degree. Particularly interesting is (15), where the speaker actually uses the word *far*, but immediately afterwards modifies it to the comparative form *further*. This example in particular demonstrates the way that *further* is pushing *farther* out of use and is taking its place as the only comparative for the word *far* that native speakers actually use. The same usage can be seen in the results produced by Corpuseye and MICASE:

(16) "And then as you go further inland some of the most toxic production facilities..." (Bick).

(17) "...in this moving light clock, the light has to travel further, to reach the second mirror..."

(The University of Michigan English Language Institute).

Given the enormous disparity between the frequencies of these two words, it is clear that the context in which it is appropriate to use the word *further* is much broader than when the word *farther* can be used. All three corpora have utterance after utterance of a native speaker using *further* in a context that was previously only relegated to *farther*. Therefore, this does not seem to be a topic that needs to be included in ESL texts; only teaching the word *further* as the comparative would be sufficient. However, if there are such units, clearly this shift in usage is an aspect that needs to be mentioned.

The next studied set of words is *fewer* versus *less*. Prescriptive rules dictate that *fewer* is only to be used with concrete numbers, and *less* with abstract amounts. However, in this case it is *less* that is becoming used in both contexts, while *fewer* is becoming obsolete as time goes on. As in the previous data, it is assumed that when both words had an equal number of contexts they could be used in (that is, one), they had a fairly equal prevalence in speech. Now, however, it can be predicted that *less* will be used much more often than *fewer*.

Table 3

Fewer v. Less Corpus Data

<u>Corpus Used</u>	<u>Frequency of fewer</u>	<u>Frequency of less</u>
COCA	2,312	21,265
Corpuseye	356	2,564
MICASE	35	460

In COCA, both of the very first two results demonstrate a shift in the usage of the word *less*:

(18) “After a three-week trial, it took the jury less than five hours to convict him on all counts.”

(19) “So, tell us in 200 words or less what we should do next.”

Both of these examples are taken from ABC; (18) is from *20/20*, while (19) is from *Primetime: What Would You Do?* (Davies). Once again, the results from COCA agree with those from the other two corpora:

(20) "...in the Kurdistan region we have three hours or less of electricity per day..." (Bick).

(21) "...if they have less than eight, they will attempt to gain electrons to get eight if they're a nonmetal." (The University of Michigan English Language Institute).

In all of these examples, the word *less* is used in a context involving quantifiable amounts (*200 words or less, less than eight*, etc.), which is prescriptively only an appropriate usage for the word *fewer*. However, all of them are grammatical utterances that a native speaker would see nothing wrong with.

The last set of words that is being studied is *who* and *whom*. The prescriptive rules for these words dictate that *who* is used as the subject of a sentence, whereas *whom* is used as the object. Like the other word pairs, one of these words is growing in usage and becoming more versatile while the other falls out of use. This time it is *whom* that is becoming obsolete, while *who* is being used regardless of whether it refers to an object or the subject of a sentence.

Table 4

Who v. Whom Corpus Data

<u>Corpus Used</u>	<u>Frequency of whom</u>	<u>Frequency of who</u>
COCA	5,062	282,392
Corpuseye	1,081	70,439
MICASE	38	2,533

As with the other words that have been studied, it is apparent that *who* is, in fact, used much more frequently than *whom*, which indicates that it is more versatile in its functions as a

word, and can therefore be used in more contexts. Once again, there is plenty of evidence to support that *who* is being used in the place of *whom* when referring to the object of a sentence:

(22) “Whether it’s gay or straight, it’s who you love.” (Davies).

(23) “I’m a huge fan of Vice President Cheney who I worked with when he was Secretary of Defense...” (Bick).

(24) “...a question of who shall our daughter marry...” (The University of Michigan English Language Institute).

All three of the corpora that were analyzed have demonstrated that in all three of these word pairs, the definitions and uses of the words are changing. Native speakers in the United States are not differentiating between the two as in the past, and in each set, one of the words is falling out of use while the other takes over and retains its prescriptive definition while encompassing the definition of the other as well.

Upon reading the aforementioned textbooks, it becomes clear that they each deal with each of the studied word pairs in different ways. Some are very good at handling language in a descriptive manner, while others are much more rigid and prescriptive and therefore less helpful for students. None of the texts mention all three of the word pairs, indicating that each publisher and set of authors have a varying opinion regarding the importance of each, along with how they should be taught, if brought up at all.

Table 5

Explanations of Further/Farther

<u>Title</u>	<u>Explanation</u>	<u>Example</u>	<u>Page #</u>
<i>Fundamentals of English Grammar</i>	Both <i>farther</i> and <i>further</i> are used to compare physical distances. <i>Further</i> also means “additional.” NOTE: <i>Farther</i> cannot be used when the meaning is “additional.”	I walked <i>farther</i> than my friend did. OR I walked <i>further</i> than my friend did. I need <i>further</i> information.	235
<i>Q: Skills for Success Listening and Speaking 5</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>Grammar in Context 2</i>	Irregular adjectives and verbs: <i>far</i> → <i>farther</i> → <i>the farthest</i>	N/A	382
<i>Stand Out Grammar Challenge 2</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>Stand Out Grammar Challenge 3</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A

Fundamentals of English Grammar deals with this word pair in a very appropriate manner. It contains a concise explanation that is perfect for English language learners. Without going into too much detail, it simply mentions that *further* and *farther* mean the same thing, but there is also an additional meaning attributed to *further*. In the exercises that follow the definitions, sentences where either word can be used contain both words as acceptable answers in the answer key. *Q: Skills for Success Listening and Speaking 5* and both *Stand Out Grammar Challenge* books do not even address this word pair (and neither do any of the other levels in the series). Considering the relatively small importance of these words as an English language learner, this is a fair position for a textbook to take. *Grammar in Context 2* also does not address the conflict in usage between the two words; it simply includes *farther* in a lesson on comparatives and superlatives without mentioning that *further* even exists as a word in the

English language. As this is a low-level text, this also seems an appropriate way to handle the situation, although based on the frequency of use data, it would actually be more useful for the text to simply use *further* instead of *farther* as the only comparative that is taught for the word *far*.

Table 6

Explanations of Less/Fewer

Title	Explanation	Example	Page #
<i>Fundamentals of English Grammar</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>Q: Skills for Success Listening and Speaking 5</i>	N/A	<i>Fewer</i> exhibits than <i>Less</i> time than	66
<i>Grammar in Context 2</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>Stand Out Grammar Challenge 2</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>Stand Out Grammar Challenge 3</i>	Use <i>more</i> or <i>fewer</i> to compare count nouns. Use <i>more</i> or <i>less</i> to compare non-count nouns.	That building has <i>fewer</i> balconies than this one. Our old house used <i>less</i> heat than our new one. Our old apartment had <i>fewer</i> bedrooms than our new one. Pablo's apartment gets <i>less</i> light than Rachel's apartment.	20, A-4

In the case of *less* versus *fewer*, *Stand Out Grammar Challenge 2* does not address the issue, but their level three book does. *Stand Out Grammar Challenge 3* teaches *less* and *fewer* from a purely prescriptive standpoint. There is no mention of the fact that *less* is, in fact, frequently used by native speakers with count nouns just as often as it is with non-count nouns. *Grammar in Context 2* does not mention this issue at all. It does, however, provide an exercise

in the unit on comparatives where students need to circle the correct comparative word in a given sentence. In this exercise, several of the sentences offer the possible answers as *more/less* and *more/fewer* (p. 388). There is simply no mention in the text as to why some of the sentences use *less* as the opposite of *more* and why some use *fewer*. *Fundamentals of English Grammar* only teaches the word *less* in the phrase *less than*, without the option of adding a quantity in between the two words (p. 241).

Q: Skills for Success Listening and Speaking 5 handles the words in a particularly poor manner; they are both given in an example in a table of comparative structures as acceptable word choices when comparing nouns with absolutely no explanation. In a level five text, there should be enough information so that students do not make the mistake of thinking that the two words are completely interchangeable. While *less* can be used in both contexts, *fewer* cannot, as evidenced in the following example:

(25) *She got to the airport in fewer time than she had expected.

If simplification was the goal, it would have been more accurate for the text to have only used the word *less* in its comparisons, since it can be used in all of the appropriate contexts. There were also no practice exercises for students to practice using those comparatives, so this textbook inspires very little discussion on the topic in a classroom.

Table 7

Explanations of Who/Whom

<u>Title</u>	<u>Explanation</u>	<u>Example</u>	<u>Page #</u>
<i>Fundamentals of English Grammar</i>	<i>Whom</i> is used in very formal English. In everyday spoken English, <i>who</i> is usually used instead of <i>whom</i> .	Uncommon: <i>Whom</i> did you see? Common: <i>Who</i> did you see?	119
<i>Q: Skills for Success Listening and Speaking 5</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>Grammar in Context 2</i>	Putting the preposition before a question word is very formal. When the preposition comes at the beginning, we use <i>whom</i> , not <i>who</i> . In a question about the object, <i>whom</i> is very formal. Informally, many Americans say <i>who</i> .	Formal: With <i>whom</i> does the dog sleep? Informal: <i>Who</i> does the dog sleep with? Formal: <i>Whom</i> did your brother marry? Informal: <i>Who</i> did your brother marry?	21, 137
<i>Stand Out Grammar Challenge 2</i>	Use <i>whom</i> in formal questions that ask about the object of the verb.	<i>Who (whom)</i> do I ask about the apartment? <i>Who (whom)</i> am I taking to the house?	25, 26
<i>Stand Out Grammar Challenge 3</i>	<i>Who</i> and <i>whom</i> are used for people	I talked to the woman <i>who</i> (that) works in the store.	16

Once again, *Fundamentals of English Grammar* covers the word pair appropriately. It mentions that both are English words, but that *whom* is not actually used by native speakers. *Grammar in Context 2* uses very similar explanations. In both books, practice exercises allow either word as a correct response. *Stand Out Grammar Challenge 2* does an adequate job of providing a simple explanation for beginners; it mentions that *whom* is more formal, and implies that the two words are more or less interchangeable, although it does not explain this explicitly. This can be problematic, since *who* can be used in the place of *whom*, but not vice versa. Students could, therefore, be led to believe that *whom* is appropriate in all formal questions,

which is not the case. *Stand Out Grammar Challenge 3* does not provide any explanation, presumably because it had already been (somewhat) covered in the previous level. Finally, *Q: Skills for Success Listening and Speaking 5* does not mention either word, nor does it contain a section on *wh-* question words at all.

Overall, it is clear that ESL textbooks are divided as to how to approach such topics, which do not follow the same rules descriptively as they do prescriptively. Some texts handled them very well, providing explanations that clarify this difference, while others only teach the prescriptive rules, or simply ignore the topics altogether. The following table summarizes how each textbook treats each word pair.

Table 8

Textbook Explanation Summary

Title	<u>Further/Farther</u>	<u>Less/Fewer</u>	<u>Who/Whom</u>
<i>Fundamentals of English Grammar</i>	✓	N/A	✓
<i>Q: Skills for Success Listening and Speaking 5</i>	N/A	X	N/A
<i>Grammar in Context 2</i>	N/A	N/A	✓
<i>Stand Out Grammar Challenge 2</i>	N/A	N/A	✓
<i>Stand Out Grammar Challenge 3</i>	N/A	X	✓

✓ Descriptive explanation

X Prescriptive explanation

N/A No explanation

It appears that, in general, contemporary ESL textbook make a decision to either present prescriptive/descriptive use discrepancies using a very basic explanation that is limited to

presenting one form as simply more “formal” than the other, or they omit the issue entirely. Neither decision is uncalled for, as both are preferable to presenting language only as a set of fixed, prescriptive rules that one should never break while speaking. Although textbooks certainly seem to be trending away from such explanations, they do still persist in some texts (especially with regards to *less* versus *fewer*, in this case), and even the descriptive accounts can be perceived as rigid, prescriptive rules when presented in an overly simplified manner (such as “formal” versus “informal”).

Discussion

It is clear that for these three word pairs, usage is changing among native English speakers. Where there was once equal use of two words and they simply each had their own context where they could be used grammatically, there is now one word that is taking over all of the contexts so that the other falls out of use. All in all, this is good news for ESL students-- it means that there are a few less rules they need to memorize in order to sound like a native speaker. However, in order for that to happen, ESL textbooks (especially those dedicated to speaking classes) need to teach the language the way it is actually being used, not the way that grammarians say it should be used. If language such as this is to be taught, it should only occur in the most advanced levels. Beginning and intermediate students have enough language they still need to master just to be able to function in a predominantly English-speaking area; spending time on prescriptive minutiae only takes away time that could be spent learning language that they will actually use on a day-to-day basis. In very advanced levels, topics such as these could be useful purely for the purpose of writing academic papers, but even then spending time on them is rather questionable, given their extremely low rate of use.

Until such a time as textbooks catch up to these changes in use, it is integral that language teachers think critically about the language they are teaching. While these three word pairs are a good start, they are by no means the only aspects of English that are potentially being taught differently than how they are actually used. It is critical that teachers alter and add lessons as necessary to compensate for textbooks that may be too prescriptive and therefore not very realistic.

What is especially interesting is that all three corpora that were studied provided results that were exactly in line with each other. While it would be expected for COCA and Corpuseye to generate similar results, given that both pull their data from television broadcasts in the United States, it was not necessarily expected that MICASE would show the same pattern in its results. This is because MICASE is a corpus that consists solely of academic language. This means that even the textbooks that present some of these word pairs, but write off the lesser-used word as simply “more formal,” are largely inaccurate. Academic language is the most formal language of all, and these changes in use are even persisting in that context. If *farther*, *fewer*, and *whom* are hardly being used even in the most formal of occasions, what use is there to spend time teaching them to ESL students?

Recommendations

Clearly, there are variations from textbook to textbook and publisher to publisher, regardless of the subject matter. All teachers need to be aware of what their textbook is teaching to their students, and when selecting a textbook to use, a textbook that portrays the English language the way it is actually used is ideal. Out of the textbooks studied, it appears that *Fundamentals of English Grammar* is the most accurate. This book did mention two out of the three studied word pairs, but explained them in such a way that students would understand how

they are used by native speakers (or how they are not used, as the case may be). No matter the textbook, though, language teachers should be teaching their students the general concept that language is varied and changing. Although textbooks such as *Fundamentals of English Grammar* may call attention to specific language that is not used by the majority of English speakers and explain what speakers actually do, none seem to explicitly state that what they are teaching is not necessarily the only right way to speak, or that there is simply more than one right way to say most of what the book contains. Included is a sample lesson plan that professors or other ESL teachers can use to supplement their materials so that students have a better understanding of the varying nature of language. This lesson plan can be adapted and used with any class, although class time at the lowest of levels would be better spent learning basic communication first before tackling more abstract ideas such as this.

- Objectives:
- Students will be able to explain what language variation is.
 - Students will be able to give examples of language variation in their native language.
 - Students will be able to give examples of lexical and grammatical variation in English.
- Materials:
- Appendix A worksheet
 - Appendix B, cut into separate paragraphs
- Anticipatory Set:
- Ask students to think about their native language. Many times, is there more than one way to say the same thing? Do different people speak in different ways, even if they're speaking the same language? Does the language vary among different ages, genders, or locations? Have students write down in English a few times that they have noticed their native

language being used in a different (but still correct) way. After a few minutes of writing, have them share with the class.

Instructional Input: Mention that every student was able to come up with examples of language variation. This is because all languages are constantly changing, and that means that there are many different ways to say the same thing. English is the same way. Bring up the three word pairs (*further/farther*, *less/fewer*, *who/whom*) or any other relevant grammar or vocabulary from your curriculum and explain that the way the words are being used now is changing from how they were in the past, which means that there are now two different ways to use them. If the class is more advanced, explain that there are two ways to decide if language is “correct.” One way is to adhere to the rules that have been established for that language and to treat anything else as wrong (prescriptivism). The other way is to go off of what native speakers do; if a native speaker thinks something is right, it must be (descriptivism)... after all, the goal of this class is to sound like a native speaker!

Guided Practice: Pass out the worksheet in Appendix A and complete it as a class, discussing each answer and why it is correct or incorrect. Feel free to add additional questions that are more relevant to your class’ level and curriculum.

Activity: Cut out each paragraph in Appendix B and give each student one paragraph (make enough copies so that each student gets a paragraph). Have students rewrite their paragraph using different words, but keeping

the same meaning. Put students into groups so that each group has one person with each paragraph.

Assessment: Have each group read their rewritten story to the class. Discuss how each group told the same story, even though each story was different. Collect each student's rewritten paragraph.

Conclusion

This research can be helpful to ESL professors in several ways. It provides them with an analysis of several textbooks and relates which may be better suited for a speaking class that will prepare students for speech that they will actually use outside the classroom. Furthermore, it also shows where textbooks are teaching from a purely prescriptive standpoint, which will enable professors to make decisions regarding supplemental lessons and exercises to help teach students that there is not one way to speak English that is inherently better than all others. Finally, it provides teachers with actual suggestions as to how they might go about broadening their lessons to teach in a more descriptive manner, which can be utilized in and of themselves or simply as a base to develop their own lessons off of.

Of course, there are several limitations that are likely to affect this research. The corpora being used gathered their data from television and radio broadcasts, and even with unscripted television and radio shows, the language will undoubtedly differ from purely natural speech. The mere knowledge that they are being recorded would likely affect the speech patterns of those whose language is included in the corpora. In addition, the speech used in radio and television is a highly standardized language variety, and may consequently still vary from the language that Americans use in everyday life. This study also only deals with only a select few ESL textbooks, which although selected to be a representative sample, are still limiting because there

certainly may be textbooks in existence that already treat language from a descriptive perspective and showcase the English language as it is being used by native speakers. Future research could be done to stabilize these results by studying more textbooks, only using the most recent editions in case there was change in the way language is portrayed, and gaining access to corpora that are comprised of more natural speech samples.

This is an area that will require much more research to be done in the future. The more textbooks that are studied, and the more that corpora are used to determine how American English speakers really use the language, the more information professors will have as to what needs to be taught in their speaking classes and how. Furthermore, the more data that is collected, the more likely it is that textbook publishers may be convinced to update their materials and provide a more descriptive, real life approach to exposing their readers to the most authentic English possible. This study was designed to be a starting point from which further research can extend in order to gain a more complete view of the portrayal of spoken English in the classroom, and further study will be necessary in order to fully achieve the goal of having ESL speaking classes teach the language in an authentic, meaningful way.

This study was designed to raise awareness of the way that native English speakers in the United States are using certain structures in the language, and compare that with how those structures are being treated in ESL textbooks. It can be difficult for language teachers to let go of all of the prescriptivism they may have learned in school, but doing so is in the best interest of their students. With data to back up the decision to not teach prescriptive language rules that have nothing to do with the way native speakers actually talk, teachers can be prepared to design a class that will really prepare their students for life in an English-speaking country. Because none of the textbooks studied actually included an explanation that what they contain is not the

only way to speak, it is essential that teachers either use the sample lesson plan provided or develop their own to teach the concept of language variation. If ESL students do not learn that in the real world they will encounter language that varies in every way from what they learned, they will be confused and end up doubting their education when they do, eventually, encounter such variations. The goal of this research was to prevent that element of surprise, and help teachers to help their students be as prepared as possible for life outside the ESL classroom.

Appendix A

Language Variation

Directions: Circle the two words that can correctly complete the sentence, and draw an X over the one that does not make sense.

1. The grocery store is three blocks _____ than the post office is from here.

further farther far

2. Taylor has three _____ apples than Nick.

some less fewer

3. I'm going to see a movie with Amy, the girl _____ you met last week.

who she whom

4. In some countries people eat _____ much later than we do in the United States.

dinner coffee supper

5. When the weather is _____, it's a good idea to wear a coat.

cold chilly wind

6. The boy _____ all the way home because a dog was chasing him.

run ran was running

7. That _____ over there is next in line at the cash register.

guy he man

8. It's amazing that some people can paint on a grain of rice, because they're so _____.

tiny gigantic miniscule

Appendix B (Carroll)

1. One day a hare was bragging about how fast he could run. He bragged and bragged and even laughed at the tortoise, who was so slow. The tortoise stretched out his long neck and challenged the hare to a race, which, of course, made the hare laugh.

2. "What a joke!" thought the hare. "A race, indeed! What fun! Of course, Mr. Tortoise, we shall race!" said the hare.

3. The forest animals met and mapped out the course. The race began, and the hare, being such a swift runner, soon left the tortoise far behind. About halfway through the course, it occurred to the hare that he had plenty of time to beat the slow tortoise.

4. "Oh, my!" thought the hare, "I have plenty of time to play in the meadow here." And so he did. After the hare finished playing, he decided that he had time to take a little nap. "I have plenty of time to beat that tortoise," he thought. And he cuddled up against a tree and dozed.

5. The tortoise, in the meantime, continued to plod on, albeit it ever so slowly. He never stopped, but took one good step after another.

6. The hare finally woke from his nap. "Time to get going," he thought. And off he went faster than he had ever run before! He dashed as quickly as anyone ever could up to the finish line, where he met the tortoise, who was patiently awaiting his arrival.

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