Material Critique for Touchstone 3rd Edition: on corpus analysis and spoken grammar

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Abstract

This paper analysed the use of corpus and spoken language features in the English Language Teaching (ELT) coursebook "Touchstone". The corpus analysis was carried out by using the British National Corpus (BNC) which was chosen for its easy and free access. In doing the spoken language analysis, I refer to McCarthy and Carter's (2015, p.5) argument which take the grammar of conversation as 'the benchmark for a grammar of speaking' by considering features such as ellipsis, heads and teailsm lexical bundles, and vagueness. The analysis indicated that the language used in this coursebook signified a certain level of authentic and natural language, although areas of improvement were also found.

Introduction

The sequence I am critiquing is taken from Touchstone second edition. The authors state that Touchstone series 'use corpus research to inform a language syllabus, so that the language being taught is the language people really use' (McCarthy, McCarten and Sandiford, 2014). In addition to 'natural and realistic language', the textbook use inductive approach to promote independent and autonomous learning, and conversation strategy to enhance communication skills. I will first overview how corpus inform grammar teaching, and then briefly discuss the notion of 'natural and authentic' language in ELT before

discussing the grammar lessons and spoken grammar in this sequence. I will also attempt to discuss any criticisms of the use of corpus to inform teaching in this pedagogical sequence.

Literature Review

The notion of natural and authentic language

As the call for the real and authentic model of language to use for teaching increased, Carter (1998) raises three significant questions regarding this issue including whether we should use real but non-standard language, model native speaker language, and modify corpus-based data for teaching material. He suggests that real data from corpus can inform language teaching materials and make balance between language and pedagogic reality. In response to Carter, Cook (1998) claims that the reality corpora offer is only partial; the most common use of language recorded in corpora is one fact about language while what grammarians or material writers produce is also another fact which should not be neglected. Both arguments are plausible as both attempts to give each fact about language their own value. While corpora highlight the most frequent language features to offer patterns, what is less frequent is also a phenomenon exists in the language.

In the reality of ELT, Gilmore (2004) reports that many textbooks still lack features of authentic dialogues although more recent books begin to adopt more natural discourse feature in their dialogues. Similarly, Cullen and Kuo (2007) put forward arguments that ELT textbook need to incorporate spoken grammar more intensively. Dialogue has been the central part of ELT material which serves to provide models of new grammar, vocabulary, and function and for this reason, authors often present a neat and tidy dialog to help learners learn the structures (Timmis, 2016). In his recent article, Timmis (2016, p.146) suggest that instead of being real or authentic, the textbook's dialogue should have 'linguistic and human plausibility factor.'

A corpus-based finding: a closer look at spoken language

The communicative approach has shifted language teaching target from general proficiency to more skill-based and led to a rapid increase demand for oral communication skills (Carter & McCarthy, 1995, 2015). Thus, relying on models developed from written language alone is insufficient, though speech representation is also still debatable (Mauranen, 2006). In a similar vein, Paran (2012) notes that the growing awareness of spoken language has been the most influential issue in regards to what teaching speaking should involve. He further touches on the way scholars see spoken and written language: first, those who view spoken language has a separate grammar system; second, those who view a common grammar for both spoken and written language; and the last who admit the difference but unsure of the significance for both the teachers and learners. Despite the different views, Mauranen (ibid) argue that spoken language deserves primary attention for at least three things: (a) most changes in language occur in speech; (b) English speaking skills is the most challenging skills for foreign speakers given its linguistic and cultural variabilities; and (c) learners need more pedagogical support in understanding spoken language since all this time more emphasis has been put on writing.

The long tradition for grounding grammar in written language is because written language is considered more stable than the spoken language which is often incomplete or has false starts (Derewianka, 2007). While traditional grammar teaching exposes students to isolated grammatical rules largely based on written language, the view of grammar as communicative resources includes among others the following principles: connecting learners' communicative needs with the relevant grammar structures, raising students' awareness of written and spoken grammar, using corpora to explore both written and spoken texts, and using combinations of teaching approaches -both deductive and inductive

(Richards & Reppen, 2014). Previously, McCarthy and Carter (1995) argue that whenever the goal of language pedagogy is to enhance natural conversational skills, then the grammar should be based on the spoken language and not on grammar which mainly based on written norms. Furthermore, to show the current position of spoken grammar in language teaching, McCarty and Carter (2015, pp.1-2) argue that 'many of the arguments against the incorporation of spoken grammar into second language pedagogy have been challenged, and globally successful reference grammars and classroom materials are available.' Having mentioned this, I think it is fair to give more attention to how grammar operates in different text and context and for learners need to know features of spoken language to either understand or use language more naturally.

The features of spoken grammar

To avoid confusion between two notions of 'spoken grammar' and 'conversational grammar', I refer to McCarthy and Carter's (2015, p.5) argument which take the grammar of conversation as 'the benchmark for a grammar of speaking' by considering that the general features of real-time conversation mainly shape the grammar of spoken corpora. Following are several features of spoken grammar:

1). Ellipsis.

Ellipsis happens when an element of an utterance is left out. Although ellipsis can happen both in written and spoken English, situational ellipsis is restricted to occur in spoken grammar as what is ellipted can be found from the immediate situation of the conversation as illustrated from in the adjacency pair below:

D: Didn't know you used boiling water

B: Don't have to but it's er…

(Carter &McCarthy, 1995)

2). Heads and tails.

The noun phrase positioned before the noun (Subject or Object referred to) is the head or also called left dislocation (Carter &McCarthy, 1995), while the noun phrase positioned after the main reference is the tail. Here are the examples from Carter and McCharty's:

<u>Helen, her mother,</u> **she** never bakes cakes.

It's very nice, <u>that road up through Skipton to the Dales.</u>

Carter and McCarthy (2006, cited in Mumford, 2009) describe this flexibility of word order in spoken language resulted from real-time processing and allowing speakers to sometimes override grammar rules.

3). Inserts

Biber et al (ibid) define inserts as stand-alone words and categorise these into eight types: interjections (e.g. oh), greetings/farewell (e.g. hello), discourse markers (e.g. well), attention getters (e.g. hey), response-getters (e.g. right?), response forms (e.g. yeah), polite formulas (e.g. please), and expletives (e.g. God).

4). Lexical bundles.

Lexical bundles are as words combination which recurrently used by individual speaker. According to Biber at al (ibid) some of the most common lexical bundles follow these patterns:

• Personal pronoun + verb phrase + (e.g. I don't know what…, I don't want to…)

• Extended verb phrase fragments (e.g. have a look at..., going to have a…)

• Questions fragments (e.g. do you want to… are we going to..)

• Binominal expression (e.g. Verb and Verb: come and help; noun and noun: day and night; adverb and adverb: in and out; adjective and adjective: black and white)

5). Vagueness

De Cock, Granger, Leech, & McEnery (1998 cited in Cullen & Kuo, 2007) are phrases which are frequently used in conversation, especially to end an utterance, e.g. 'and things like that', 'or something', 'and so on'.

6) Dysfluencies

As speaking operates in real-time processing, speaker has less time to plan or process language and this might result in several characteristics such as (Biber et al, 2003). Dysfluencies can be signaled by pauses, hesitators (e.g. er, um), repairs, and repetitions.

Method

This material critique was done by taking a sample unit of the Touchstone series. In critiquing this material, I refer to the Student's Book and the Teacher's Book and look at unit 12 of Touchstone level 1 ("Fabulous Food") and three lessons: Lesson A, B, and C. Each lesson stages and activities in the unit was looked closely to check if the words, phrases, expressions, and language note information are relevant with the information obtained from the corpus analysis. Screenshots of the specific part of the unit and of the corpus query results were presented in the next section.

Results and Discussions

How corpus informs grammar lessons in Touchstone Level 1

a.   Frequency and register information

In Unit 12 of Touchstone level 1, both in the student's book and the teacher's book, authors make use of corpus-based frequency information for particular use of words as illustrated in the figures below.

Corpus information *Or something*
The expression *or something* is one of the top 10 two-word expressions in conversation. About one-third of the uses of *something* are in the expression *or something*.

In conversation
Or is one of the top 50 words.

According to Conrad (2000) frequency information benefits teacher with items to focus and in particularly with lower level learners to allow them to notice the items that will be highly likely to encounter outside class. Similarly, Barbieri and Eckhardt (2007) argue that using frequency information will inform the decision about which features to prioritise. However, Conrad precautioned that teachers should not rely only on the frequency information and assume that less frequent items need not be discussed. She suggests combining functional description and frequency information with the students' needs analysis. Another point to note about frequency information is that patterns in frequency can also be used to inform characteristics of particular registers. For instance, in this pedagogical sequence, the use of the word 'or' is considered common in conversation which will raise students' awareness in appropriating their language use based on the context.

However, Cook (1998: p. 58) contends that frequency is not the same as salience for learners. As he wrote 'Some phrases pass unnoticed precisely because of their frequency, others strike and stay in mind, even though only occur once. Because different individual notices different things, such saliency can never be included in a corpus'. He further stated that only because something occurs frequently then it certainly becomes a good representation of language. This argument is plausible as for instance, the corpus information about 'frequent words people use with the verb eat' might represent a particular culture but not the others. As in some cultures, words like 'rice, noodle, or cassava' might be more salient than 'pasta, or pizza'. Different corpus might also result in a different list of words. Below is the result of my queries using BNC and COCA to find out the most frequent nouns which follow the verb 'eat', and it turns out that both corpora show quite different results compare to the list from Touchstone.

In conversation

Talk about food

The top food words people use with the verb *eat* are:

1. meat
2. beef
3. popcorn
4. eggs
5. fish
6. steak
7. vegetables
8. seafood
9. cheese
10. cookies
11. pizza
12. bread

Frequency breakdown of lexical items for position "node" (58 types and 112 tokens)

No.	Lexical items	No. of occurrences	Percent
1	eat fish	22	19.64%
2	eat fruit	14	12.5%
3	eat the fruit	5	4.46%
4	eat small fish	5	4.46%
5	eat more fruit	3	2.68%
6	eat people	3	2.68%
7	eat fresh fruit	3	2.68%
8	eat certain species	2	1.79%
9	eat the duck	2	1.79%
10	eat smaller fish	2	1.79%
11	eat other people	2	1.79%
12	eat the fish	2	1.79%
13	eat more fish	2	1.79%
14	eat the fry	1	0.89%
15	eat . Fruit	1	0.89%
16	eat grouse	1	0.89%
17	eat 4.7kg	1	0.89%
18	eat much fruit	1	0.89%

Corpus of Contemporary American English

		CONTEXT	FREQ	
1	☐	FOOD	1960	
2	☐	PEOPLE	1334	
3	☐	FOODS	786	
4	☐	LUNCH	720	
5	☐	DINNER	678	
6	☐	MEAT	667	
7	☐	DAY	646	
8	☐	FISH	615	
9	☐	TIME	606	
10	☐	BREAKFAST	595	
11	☐	WAY	499	
12	☐	THINGS	427	
13	☐	MEALS	407	
14	☐	VEGETABLES	390	
15	☐	LOT	381	
16	☐	MEAL	378	
17	☐	KIDS	370	

SEARCH   FREQUENCY   CONTEXT   ACCOUNT

SEE CONTEXT: CLICK ON WORD OR SELECT WORDS + [CONTEXT]   [HELP...]   COMPARE

In this case, I would agree with Conrad's argument that teachers should not only consider frequency information as the most important information in deciding what to teach, rather need analysis based on the students' background must be taken into account.

Furthermore, Hinkel (cited from her website) makes a good point by arguing what is common and frequent might lead to two situations: first, it would not be efficient to cover in grammar lesson (e.g. the 12 most common English verbs from Biber and Reppen, 2002), and second, it would still become difficult to teach and to learn (e.g. the article 'the'). Touchstone, however, appears to realise that since there are common problems with the use of article 'the', they provide students with error information highlighting this. This will explicitly draw students' attention to the incorrect form and learn the correct from and this is in line with the concept of 'noticing' (Schmidt, 1990).

Corpus Information

Common errors with *the* before nouns

Ss sometimes use *the* before nouns to talk about things in general. (*I don't like meat, but I eat eggs.* NOT ~~I don't like the meat, but I eat the eggs.~~)

On the other hand, explaining about the fact of how language is used by native speaker is sometimes not easy. I will take an example provided in the Teacher's book regarding countable and uncountable nouns. It is indicated several nouns can be both countable and uncountable, and I will focus on the word 'fruit'.

Nouns that can be either countable or uncountable
- Some nouns can be both countable and uncountable with little difference in meaning (e.g., *fruit, food, cheese*). Many of these are food words. In conversation, the uncountable or singular forms of these words are much more frequent than the plural forms.

The next part of the teacher's book consistently shows the word 'fruit' in singular forms as illustrated below.

Much is not usually used in affirmative statements like the following:
not: *I eat much fruit.*
instead: *I eat a lot of fruit.*

How much fruit do you eat every day?

- However, both *many* and *much* are used in negative statements.
  I don't eat many eggs.
  I don't eat much fruit.
Note: *A lot of* can also be used in negative statements (e.g., *I don't eat a lot of eggs. I don't eat a lot of fruit.*).

However, in the student's book the word fruit appear as a plural noun 'fruits' as can be seen from the figure below:

Amy's a vegetarian, so she doesn't eat meat, fish, cheese, or eggs. I guess she just eats a lot of fruits and vegetables, and maybe rice.

This might be a challenge for students, as in this lesson, first, they are asked to refer to Ellen's message and put the food words into the singular/plural charts and will likely put the word 'fruits' under the plural chart. However, in exercise A, where they are asked to choose one of two words provided, the word 'fruit' is expected to be used in singular form. Students might question when the word 'fruit' is used as a singular (as in exercise A in page 119) or as plural (as in the message box earlier in page 118). In this case, teachers may suggest that both sentence forms 'I eat a lot of fruits' and 'I eat a lot of fruit' are acceptable, with different sense of meaning between both forms, and mentioning the fact that the native speakers more frequently use the singular form of 'fruit'.

A Circle the correct words in these conversations. Then practice ⱱ

1. A How **much / many** fruit do you eat a day?
   B Well, I have **banana / a banana** every day for breakfast, and I eat **much / a lot of** fruit after dinner for dessert.

The spoken grammar in Touchstone Level 1

a.   Lesson A

In lesson A, students are presented a telephone message (in form of a monologue) in which Ellen called her parents to consult her problem in deciding what to cook for her friends. Before looking at the spoken text, the naturality of the situation in this text is worth asking. Referring to Timmis' concept on 'human plausibility', there is little chance that someone would call her parents about what to cook for friends given the resource that internet provides, where one can simply find tips, advice, recipes or anything she might need to solve the problem. Another thing is the fact that she needs a fast response while her parents is out of reach.

The language use in this part is very well planned and structured and it is not until the last part that the authors display the features of spoken language i.e. 'I mean' to specify what the speaker meant by 'picky' and 'Oh' which functions as an insert to add up one last item of information given previously. Although the use of greeting 'Hi' and endearment 'Mom and Dad' function nicely in this context, the structure of most sentences sounds too perfect for a text of spoken with hardly any pause, repetition, or repairs.

The interesting part, and I think this make this text sound 'spoken' than 'written' is shown from the following:

And David is picky.

But He likes potatoes.

Oh, and bananas. *(Ellipsis of subject and verb)*

These types of sentence often occur in conversation when speakers do not always convey all his/her ideas in one complete sentence rather they use several sentences with some ellipsis, too. Starting a sentence with 'but' and 'and' are also common in spoken text (Carter and McCarthy, 2006 cited in Mumford, 2009) as in written text both conjunctions will be

more acceptable to use in the middle of two clauses or two phrases. This also corresponds to the flexibility of structure in spoken text discussed previously (ibid).

b.   Lesson B

A ◀)) 3.32 **Listen. What do Ted and Phil have to do before dinner? Practice the conversation.**

Ted   I guess it's my turn to cook dinner. So what would you like?
Phil   Um, I'd like some chicken. Do we have any?
Ted   Um, no, we need to get some. We don't have any vegetables, either. Would you like to go out for pizza?
Phil   Again? No, I think I'd like to stay home tonight.
Ted   OK. Then we have to go to the grocery store.
Phil   Well, I went grocery shopping last week. I think it's your turn.

There are two grammatical functions presented in this dialogue: first, the use of 'would like' for offer and suggestions; and second, the use of 'some' and 'any' as both determiners and pronouns. Here are several features of spoken grammar from the dialogue:

- 'I guess' and 'I think' are discourse markers commonly used by speakers of English. A query on BNC shows its frequency is 15.47 instances per million words and 2481.69 instances per million words respectively.

- Um, I'd like some chicken. 'um' is as an insert signaling a pause in which the speaker is taking some time to answer.

- Do we have any? The word 'any' serves as a pronoun to omit 'some chicken'.

- 'Again?' serves as a response form to indicate that the speaker object to the offer.

- The use of 'OK' and 'Well' function as a response form and a discourse marker.

Despite having these features, the sentences which illustrate the grammatical points create a formal sense. In a more natural conversation between friends, it is likely to sound more informal with first, some ellipsis to make the first sentence will be: 'Guess it's my turn

to cook dinner', second, words choice variation for 'would like' with 'want' or 'Would you like' with 'fancy for', and third, some shorter response for example instead of saying 'Um, I'd like some chicken' one can simply say 'Um, chicken'. This is indeed a challenge for material writers who intend to provide a natural text while at the same time present some grammatical structures.

c.   Lesson C

Part C is headed 'Conversation Strategy' to introduce example of vague language (i.e. 'or something', 'or anything', 'or'). Compared to the two previous texts, the dialogue presented here sounds the most natural with a lot of response forms (Well, OK, Great) and the vague language itself. The conversation strategy and language function has made the dialogue sounds natural, although one can argue that in real dialogue, most dialogues are not problem-free and often need repetition, clarification and misunderstanding (Timmis, 2015) which are all absent from this dialogue.

Conclusion

Corpus has clearly offered both teachers and learners access to actual and natural use of language. Nevertheless, Widdowson (2000) argue that since it is contrary to speaker's intuition then it cannot represent the reality of first person awareness. Corpus can only capture the reality of what the person say, and not the reason nor the context of speaking and this makes description provided is only partial and may not be applicable to classroom teaching. In response to Widdowson's argument, Stubbs (2001, p.151) attempts to show the real potential of corpus linguistics by indicating that first, regarding common deviance between intuition and use of language, there has been studies investigated this area and second, related to partiality corpus method is looking at the bigger notion of what 'frequently and typically occurs' which represent language behaviour.

Cook (1998, p. 61) argue that foreign language learners might not have the desire 'to learn just any English because it occurs in a corpus, and it is patronising to overrule them'. However, Timmis (2002) found a quite significant number of learners show desire to conform to native speaker model. A study by Goh (2009) brings perspectives of local teachers in China and Singapore which show various attitude towards spoken grammar. Some teachers admit that spoken grammar is useful to promote students' language awareness and skills to speak naturally, yet do not feel it is crucial, and some even worry that it will result in poor written grammar for students. Mumford (2009) suggests that spoken grammar provide information on appropriacy and fluency. While appropriacy is more culturally dependent, fluency knowledge will potentially help learners and without which might cause difficulty for learners in understanding communication appropriately.

Both teacher and student would benefit from corpus analysis to inform them with the language Native Speaker of English use without making any generalisation or judgment that it is the only model to follow. Even with the doubts of its usefulness for learners who only

use English with Non-native speakers, learners will still benefit when doing both academic activities and non-academic activities. Students deserve to be exposed to the actual language, however, the choice of whether or not they want to imitate the native speaker language is open. Thus, I agree with Carter (1998) that learners need to know there are various forms they can explore in different contexts which are made possible with the data from Corpus and with Timmis (2005, p 124) that 'at least for some purposes, the native speaker can be an interesting point of reference.'

Touchstone has offered an insightful way in bridging research to classroom, and despite any flaw it may have, most of the contents of the pedagogical sequence under discussion is relevant to current pedagogical thinking.

About the Writer

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