

---

---

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 13:11 November 2013

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

C. Subburaman, Ph.D. (Economics)

Assistant Managing Editor: Swarna Thirumalai, M.A.

---

---

## Spoken Grammar Isn't Broken Grammar: A Case for Teaching Spoken Grammar in ESL/EFL Contexts

Anindya Syam Choudhury, Ph.D., PGCTE, PGDTE,  
CertTESOL (Trinity, London)

---

---

### Abstract

Spoken language has almost always been neglected by grammatical tradition until the advent in the 1990s of large and varied spoken English corpora which have not only given us a peep into the nature and characteristics of forms which occur primarily in the spoken form of the language but also forced us to reconsider the way we look at language pedagogy, especially grammar pedagogy.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:11 November 2013

Anindya Syam Choudhury, Ph.D., PGCTE, PGDTE, CertTESOL (Trinity, London)

Spoken Grammar Isn't Broken Grammar - A Case for Teaching Spoken Grammar in ESL/EFL Contexts

This article takes up the issue of spoken grammar, beginning with a few introductory remarks on the different ways in which spoken grammar is perceived before moving on to a discussion about the salient features of spoken grammar driving home the fact that there is a systematicity in their occurrence. At the end, the article questions the idea that spoken grammar is wholly distinctive and tries to see the so-called unique features of spoken grammar as part of a speech-writing continuum before concluding with some pedagogical tips for teaching those features of grammar of English which are either restricted to speech or are primarily present in it.

**Keywords:** spoken grammar, fillers, vague language, conversation, ESL/EFL contexts

### **Introduction: The Traditional View of Spoken Language**

A look at the etymological origin of the word “grammar” makes us understand why the notion of grammar has always been associated with writing. The word “grammar” has originated from the Greek word *grámma* which means “something written, a letter of the alphabet” (Leech *et al.*, 2006). The other related Greek forms are *grammatikē* or *grammatikē technē*, meaning “the art of writing” (Palmer, 1984). There is no doubt, therefore, that traditionally grammar did have to do with the written form of language, and the value terms “good” and “bad” have always been used with grammar depending on whether or not language forms fulfilled the norms of grammatical appropriateness. In this context, speech has always been devalued and considered to be belonging to a ‘low’ register as compared to writing, comprising mainly “slurred” and “elliptical” forms and a minimal of structure and vocabulary, as has been expressed by Yungzhong (1985):

In spoken language, grammar and vocabulary are reduced to a minimum. The words used often have special or hidden meaning born of some shared experience which an outsider would fail to grasp. The speaker makes much use of elided and slurred forms in the familiar pattern of their ordinary everyday speech. Utterances

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:11 November 2013

Anindya Syam Choudhury, Ph.D., PGCTE, PGDTE, CertTESOL (Trinity, London)

Spoken Grammar Isn't Broken Grammar - A Case for Teaching Spoken Grammar in ESL/EFL Contexts

are typically short and often elliptical....Constructions that occur commonly in speech are not necessarily acceptable in formal and dignified writing. (15)

This view of speech indicates that it is not something to be considered as a model for correct and acceptable language use and, therefore, the forms which are peculiar to speech are not to be regarded as essential to a learner's structural knowledge. It is mainly for this reason that the teaching of spoken English has traditionally ignored forms which are unique to speech, which here, of course, refers to the informal, conversational speech, rather than spoken discourse in more formal settings, such as university lectures, debates, and so on. Traditionally, it has always been believed that spoken English has no special grammar of its own, and what has been focused upon in the spoken English class is the standard grammar of written English, the 'default' grammar from which all language choices flowed (Thornbury and Slade, 2006). So we can say that ESL/EFL learners have been traditionally, albeit strangely, taught to speak written English! The main reason for spoken English having been considered to be grammatically inchoate is perhaps the presence in it of the phenomenon of 'disfluency', which is realized in the form of hesitations, unintended repetitions, false starts, unfinished sentences, fillers and so on.

### **An Alternative View of Spoken Grammar**

There is another viewpoint which does not regard the spoken form of a language to be a 'low' form but rather as one having a rich systematic grammar of its own, a grammar offering numerous language choices to the user, a grammar in which 'disfluency' is not considered to be an aberration but is normal, and results from the speaker trying to cope with the pressures of producing speech in real time. This viewpoint, bolstered in the 1990s by the availability of the large computer corpora brought into existence by major British dictionary publishers (Longman:

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:11 November 2013

Anindya Syam Choudhury, Ph.D., PGCTE, PGDTE, CertTESOL (Trinity, London)

Spoken Grammar Isn't Broken Grammar - A Case for Teaching Spoken Grammar in ESL/EFL Contexts

the British National Corpus, Collins COBUILD: the Bank of English corpus, Cambridge University Press: the CANCODE corpus), is expressed eloquently by McCarthy and Carter (2001):

... [S]poken grammars have uniquely special qualities that distinguish them from written ones, wherever we look in our corpus, at whatever level of grammatical category. In our work, too, we have expressed the view that language pedagogy that claims to support the teaching and learning of speaking skills does itself a disservice if it ignores what we know about the spoken language. Whatever else may be the result of imaginative methodologies for eliciting spoken language in the second-language classroom, there can be little hope for a natural spoken output on the part of language learners if the input is stubbornly rooted in models that owe their origin and shape to the written languages. (1)

The “uniquely special qualities” that differentiate spoken grammars from written ones are features like fillers, repetition, rephrasing, vague language, colloquial vocabulary, discourse markers, ellipses, context dependent language, etc. (Pridham, 2001). Carter and McCarthy (1995: 142) contend that these features are excluded by written-based grammars but they occur with such a frequency and distribution in the conversation of native speakers of English that they “simply cannot be dismissed as aberration.” For instance, it is common to find in spoken English fillers like ‘er’ and ‘erm’ in both first language and ESL/EFL contexts. These forms, of course, give the impression of untidiness to spoken language, but then they are natural because speakers are simultaneously working out what they intend to say and producing language. This dual job is very taxing since whereas we require time to gather our thoughts and express ourselves, we

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:11 November 2013

Anindya Syam Choudhury, Ph.D., PGCTE, PGDTE, CertTESOL (Trinity, London)

Spoken Grammar Isn't Broken Grammar - A Case for Teaching Spoken Grammar in ESL/EFL Contexts

cannot possibly pause for a very long time lest there should be a breakdown in communication. In situations like this, the fillers allow people to buy time as they gather their thoughts. These forms are usually thought to be devoid of any meaning. However, this is far from the truth.

As Willis (2003: 87-88) points out, the fillers ‘er’ and ‘erm’ could be considered to have the following meanings:

(i) Especially when used at the end of clauses, ‘er/erm’ often means “Please let me continue.

I haven’t finished what I want to say, and I’d like a little time to gather my thoughts.”

(ii) At the beginning of a turn in response to a question, ‘er/erm’ may mean “Yes, I have heard your question and I intend to answer it. Please allow me a moment to work out my response.”

### **Vague Language and Other Distinctive Spoken Forms**

Similarly, spoken language abounds in the use of structures like ‘sort of’, ‘kind of’, ‘or something’, ‘or anything’, ‘or whatever’, and so on. These structures, which are often referred to as vague language, allow speakers to compensate for not being able to find the correct word. In such situations, instead of groping for words, they make do with vague language. Of course, in this process, precision, a hallowed aim of the grammar of written English, takes a beating. But then, precision and orderliness in the matter of vocabulary and structure are difficult, if not impossible, to adhere to in the spoken form of a language. Vague language has another very important function in spoken discourse. The use of vague language softens expressions and helps in toning down the unnecessary authoritativeness and assertiveness that may creep in to our language use. To avoid being too direct and authoritative, we may, for instance, say something

like *I think I would **kind of** have a word with her*. However, we should be a little cautious in the use of vague language since a profusion of such expressions in one's language use may give the impression of careless thinking and sloppy expression on the part of the speaker. In addition, there are some other distinctive spoken forms such as

- (i) the discourse markers like *right, okay, well, I mean, etc.*,
- (ii) heads, which occur at the beginning of clauses and help listeners orient to a topic, as in

*That boy, Sumit, his brother, Sunil, he works in our department.*

- (iii) tails, which occur at the end of clauses and help to reinforce the meaning of what we are saying, as in *It's very difficult to eat, isn't it, **noodles?***

### **The Notion of the Sentence in Spoken Grammar**

The very notion of the well-structured sentence, which is an integral part of the traditional notion of written grammar, is incongruent with the structure of spoken discourse which usually comprises a lot of non-sentences. These non-sentences do not hinder communication, and they cannot be called ungrammatical as such. In fact, as Willis (2003) points out, "when we are speaking we are not thinking of producing sentences at all; we are thinking of putting together units of meaning. Many of these units will be in the form of sentences. Some of them will not" (189).

Let us have a look at the following exchange between two friends talking about a freak accident that one of them met with while travelling in a bus:

Sushmita: Erm, so what happened next?

Sumit: Er, I kind of just managed to hold on to the door of the bus, somehow,...  
absolutely horrified

Sushmita: That's terrifying.

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:11 November 2013

Anindya Syam Choudhury, Ph.D., PGCTE, PGDTE, CertTESOL (Trinity, London)

Spoken Grammar Isn't Broken Grammar - A Case for Teaching Spoken Grammar in ESL/EFL Contexts

Sumit: Yes, it was. **Absolutely terrifying, that.**

*Absolutely terrifying, that* cannot be considered to be a sentence according to the rules of written grammar, with the verb ‘was’ elided and the normal word order altered with ‘that’ occurring at the end instead of the beginning. Hence the tidy sentence of written grammar, *That was absolutely frightening*, is turned topsy-turvy. However, in the context in which this utterance occurs, the foregrounding of ‘absolutely terrifying’ is stylistically very effective. What appears to be apparently ungrammatical (when we apply the norms of written English to this structure, of course!), is perfectly alright in speech. Hence, we should urgently reconsider the traditional method of assessing the correctness of spoken English with regard to writing as the ‘standard’.

Another feature of spoken discourse that strikes us immediately is the chaining of clauses linked by both coordinating conjunctions like ‘and’ and subordinating conjunctions like ‘cos’ and ‘so’, which, instead of subordinating information, often function to coordinate. In this context, Luoma (2004) has the following to say:

speech can be considered to consist of **idea units**, which are short phrases and clauses connected with *and, or, but* or *that*, or not joined by conjunctions at all but simply spoken next to each other, with possibly a short pause between them. The grammar of these strings of idea units is simpler than that of the written language with its long sentences and dependent and subordinate clauses. (12)

If we analyse written and spoken discourses, we will notice that unlike the elaborate patterns of main and subordinate clauses that we find in written discourse, in spoken discourse we often come across chains of clauses as in the following example taken from Carter (2004):

“Well, no, Melanie’s actually still a student **and** she still has ten hours of lectures a week, **so** she works in McDonald’s in her spare time, **cos** she needs the money, **and** she works in McDonald’s in Hatfield...” (33)

Moreover, subordinate clauses often stand alone in spoken discourse, quite unlike the way they function in written discourse, as can be seen in the conversational exchange below:

Tanushree: Well, actually, only one other student has turned up.

Panna: Mm.

Tanushree: **Which is sad.**

The subordinate clause (in bold) here stands alone and functions like a main clause, and helps to reinforce the topic.

### **Is Spoken Grammar Absolutely Distinctive?**

It is the presence of features like the ones mentioned above in spoken English that has made us recognize the distinctive and systematic nature of spoken grammar. In fact, there have been researchers like Biber *et al.* (1999) who have gone further to argue for the primacy of spoken grammar:

Conversation is the most commonplace, everyday variety of language, from which, if anything, the written variety, acquired through painstaking and largely institutional processes of education, is to be regarded as a departure. (1038)

However, instead of pondering too much on the ‘same grammar/different grammar’ controversy, it is perhaps better and more profitable to take note of the following remark of Leech (1998):

I prefer to think of English grammar as made of a rubbery substance that enables it to be squashed or inflated in one part or another according to circumstances.



The circumstances of conversation lead to a reduction of the repertoire in certain areas and an enlargement of the repertoire in others – but this is in terms of likelihood rather than in terms of all-or-nothing rules. So, in the end, this image enables me to keep to the view that English grammar is common to both written and spoken language – but its shape can be moulded to the constraints and freedoms of each. In this sense, there *is* a special grammar of conversation. (emphasis in original) (9)

Since there are a lot of overlaps between spoken and written forms of language, it is better to avoid taking a strong view with regard to the difference between the written and spoken forms in order not to make ESL/EFL learners believe that when it comes to teaching the speaking skills of English, they have to learn everything from scratch. I believe that in the ESL/EFL classroom, it is better to make a thorough, systematic examination of the spoken corpus juxtaposed with the written one and show the relevant differences between the highly formal and literary written forms on the one extreme and the highly conversational ones at the other extreme of the cline of English usage. In other words, it is important in ESL/EFL contexts to talk in terms of a speech-writing continuum rather than taking these two to be altogether different. It is more sensible to take the view that Cullen and Kuo (2007) take when they say that “speech and writing draw on the same underlying grammatical system (rather than on two separate systems) but that the system is adapted in various dynamic and often ingenious ways to meet the particular circumstances in which each medium is used” (363).

### **Spoken Grammar and ESL/EFL Pedagogy**

In ESL/EFL contexts, our pedagogical practices have been influenced mainly by debates around whether the forms of spoken grammar are to be taught at all, and if they are to be taught,

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:11 November 2013

Anindya Syam Choudhury, Ph.D., PGCTE, PGDTE, CertTESOL (Trinity, London)

Spoken Grammar Isn't Broken Grammar - A Case for Teaching Spoken Grammar in ESL/EFL Contexts

which forms we need to focus upon. We have not given much impetus to the ‘how’ question. With regard to this question, I think we should first make students aware of the nature and characteristics of the spoken language and give them opportunities to analyse and produce spontaneous language. Initially, we may be required to use tidied-up conversational exchanges before exposing students to spontaneously produced data. In the selection of texts for the teaching of spoken language features, it is important for us to take note of the following “two overriding criteria” that Timmis (2005) mentions:

- (i) The texts should have the potential to engage the students’ interest
- (ii) The texts should be plausible as natural interaction.

Moreover, we should ensure that the chosen texts are not so dense in lexis and obscure cultural references that they become incomprehensible to the learners and the latter lose interest altogether.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be said with assertion that while the speaking skill has been foregrounded in English language teaching now in a way that was not so some decades ago, we still have the propensity not to “take on board some interesting features of the grammar of informal, interactive talk” (Carter and McCarthy, 1995: 141). This propensity needs to be controlled, and what needs to be realized is the fact that although there is no absolute distinction between spoken English grammar and written English grammar, there are significant points of difference. These have to be shown and taught to learners in the ESL/EFL contexts lest they should be under the misconception that spoken English does not have any grammar at all, and that the correctness or otherwise of spoken discourse has to be assessed from the perspective of

writing. In addition, we should give more attention to the inclusion of spoken forms in materials for ESL/EFL teaching and learning.

---

---

### Works Cited

- Biber, D., S. Johansson, G. Leech and S. Conrad. *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Harlow: Longman, 1999. Print.
- Carter, Ronald. "Grammar and Spoken English." *Applying English Grammar: Functional and Corpus Approaches*. Ed. Caroline Coffin, Ann Hewings and Kieran O'Halloran. London: Hodder-Arnold, 2004. 25-39. Print.
- Carter, R. and M. McCarthy. "Grammar and the Spoken Language." *Applied Linguistics* 16.2 (1995): 141-158. Print.
- Cullen, Richard, and I-Chun (Vicky) Kuo. "Spoken Grammar and ELT Course Materials: A Missing Link?" *TESOL Quarterly* 41.2 (2007): 361-386. Web. 4 September 2013.
- Leech, G. "English grammar in conversation." *Language Learning and Computers: Proceedings of the Chemnitz Symposium 20-21 February 1998*. Ed. A. Wilson and J. Schmied. 1998. 1-10. Print.
- Leech, Geoffrey, Margaret Deuchar and Robert Hoogenraad. *English Grammar for Today: A New Introduction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Print.
- Luoma, Sari. *Assessing Speaking*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.
- McCarthy, M. and R. Carter. "Ten criteria for a spoken grammar." *New Perspectives on Grammar Teaching in Second Language Classrooms*. Ed. E. Hinkel and S. Fotos. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001. 51-75. Print.

Palmer, Frank. *Grammar*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1984. Print.

Pridham, Francesca. *The Language of Conversation*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:11 November 2013

Anindya Syam Choudhury, Ph.D., PGCTE, PGDTE, CertTESOL (Trinity, London)

Spoken Grammar Isn't Broken Grammar - A Case for Teaching Spoken Grammar in ESL/EFL Contexts

Thornbury, Scott and Diana Slade. *Conversation: From Description to Pedagogy*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2006. Print.

Timmis, Ivor. "Towards a framework for teaching spoken grammar." *ELT Journal* 59.2 (2005): 117-125. Web. 5 September 2013.

Willis, Dave. *Rules, Patterns and Words: Grammar and Lexis in English Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. Print.

Yungzhong, L. "Writing Versus Speech in Foreign Language Teaching." *Wai Guo Yu* 3.37 (1985): 12-15. Print.

---

Anindya Syam Choudhury  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Assam University  
Silchar – 788011  
Assam  
India  
[anindyasyam@yahoo.com](mailto:anindyasyam@yahoo.com)