Preparing to teach spoken grammar

There has been an interesting strand of discussion on spoken grammar in recent years. This article suggests that the time might now be right for ELT professionals to begin selecting and then teaching a range of spoken grammar items themselves. After a brief look at publication in the area over the last twelve years or so, we draw up an exemplary syllabus of spoken grammar items, selected from the relevant sections of the recent Longman and Cambridge corpus-led grammars. Then we suggest how the explicit teaching of these items to appropriate classes may add value to students' learning. And finally, in the second half of the article, we describe, with practical examples, a three-stage approach to teaching spoken grammar in the classroom. The article concludes that the ability to teach in this area in the right circumstances is a useful extension to one's professional skills.

Introduction

The concept of spoken grammar has been around at least since the mid-1990s, when the ELT Journal published *Spoken Grammar: what is it and how can we teach it?* (McCarthy and Carter 1995). A simple definition of the term might be 'grammatical items restricted to or particularly common in spoken English and some types of writing that mimic the spoken style.' The italicized examples below give a flavour:

1 I've done all my emails. ~ *So you're ready to go?* [statements as questions]
2 *More coffee? ~* No, thanks. I've got *a bit of* a stomach ache. [ellipsis, vague language]
3 My Dad's buying a *sort of* artist's studio. ~ *He's what?* [vague language, 'response questions']
4 *Anyway*, I missed the train. ~ *Oh dear*. Were you late, *then*? [linking adverbials, interjections]
5 Where are we eating, *guys*? ~ *Don't know*. They say the Italian place is good. [vocative use, ellipsis]
6 *That white coat*, is it yours? ~ No, mine's pink. ['headers']
7 *Right*, shall we go in? *I mean*, there's no point standing out here all day. ['spoken discourse markers']

It is, however, a problematic area of study. Many examples of spoken grammar have been thrown up by the corpus research of recent years, but their pedagogical usefulness has been questioned: see, for example, *The uses of reality: a reply to Ronald Carter* (Cook 1998). This probably explains why there isn't, as far as I aware, a published syllabus of spoken grammar items - or agreement on terminology: McCarthy and Carter say 'headers' (2006: 192), for example, whereas Biber *et al* say 'noun phrase prefaces' (1999: 1074).

This article would like to argue, from experience in the classroom, that
i)   There *is* an interesting range of pedagogically-viable items;
ii)   These items *could* add value to our teaching in certain contexts;
iii)   Conventional teaching techniques and materials can be used.

In search of a short syllabus of spoken grammar

Mainstream ELT coursebooks do draw attention to some aspects of spoken grammar, normally treating them as lexical chunks - see *Innovations Upper-Intermediate Coursebook*, for example (Dellar, Hocking and Walkley 2004: 9). Some books, such as *Exploring Grammar in Context* (Carter, Hughes and McCarthy 1998: 140-180) and *The Good Grammar Book* (Swan and Walter 2001: 265-274) go further, and have short lists of spoken grammar items named as such, and practice exercises. A recent

article in the ELT Journal, *Towards a framework for teaching spoken grammar* (Timmis 2005) raises the issue of native-speaker hegemony and discusses, with sample material, ways in which students might usefully 'notice' spoken grammar. But for a full treatment of the language in use, you have to turn to the relevant parts of the two recent corpus grammars, *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan 1999: 1038-1125) and *Cambridge Grammar of English* (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 82-122).

These, though, are descriptive studies, and they include everything the authors have observed. They cite examples of 'dysfluent' speech under headings like 'multiple consecutive repeats', and 'retrace-and-repair sequences' (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan 1999: 1052-1066). They analyse 'clausal blends' in conversation such as '*In fact, that's why last year they rented a nice house, in er Spain, was it, is that it was near the airport.'* (Carter and McCarthy 2006: 171). And they examine socially or regionally marked forms like the negative, multi-purpose question tag 'innit'.

But if one rules out these features as being of little or no pedagogic value, one is still left with an interesting clutch of useful and potentially-teachable items. Below is the list that I derived for my own teaching purposes - it makes no claim beyond that - from a reading of the relevant sections of both of these publications. Items are in alphabetical order; the examples in square brackets are made up; and the references are to sections in the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* ('LGSWE') and the *Cambridge Grammar of English* ('CGE') that I found particularly helpful - but most items are covered in both grammars.

1   Demonstrative pronoun use in spoken English [*This* is nice, isn't it? ~ Yes, but they've put the tables too close together. I hate *that*.] (LGSWE: 349-350)
2   Discourse markers introducing direct speech [Then she said, *look* I'm going home. So I said, *okay* are you taking a taxi?] (LGSWE: 1118-9)
3   Ellipsis [*Want* to share a taxi? ~ I'd love *to*.] [*More tea?* ~ No, thanks.] (CGE: 181-8)
4   Headers [*The broken cups*, did you throw them away?] (CGE: 192-194)
5   Interjections [*Wow*, that's great! ~ *Oh* good. I thought you'd like it.] (LGSWE: 1083)
6   Linking adverbials [*Anyway*, I missed the bus. ~ Were you late, *then*?] (LGSWE: 887)
7   Past Continuous for reporting speech [*Meg was saying* she's sold her car] (CGE: 810)
8   Response questions [I rang the police last night. **~** *You did what?*] (CGE: 99-201; 726)
9   Response words [I'll see you at lunch, then. ~ *Fine. Great.*] (CGE: 188-192)
10   Spoken discourse markers [*Right*, shall we start?] (LGSWE: 1096-7)
11   Stance adverbials [Have you *actually* got a ticket? ~ *Of course*.] (LGSWE: 867-875)
12   Statements as questions [I've done all my emails. **~** *So you're ready to go?*]
13   Tails [It's cheap, *this jacket*. ~ But are you sure it's leather?] (CGE: 194-197)
14   Vague language [Did you see that *thing* on Africa last night?] (CGE: 202-5)
15   Vocative use [*Steve*, come and see this! ~ What is it, *Mike*?] (CGE: 228-235)

Adding value

What are the benefits to the student who learns how to use the items listed above? Do they justify the time taken to teach them in the classroom? I think there are at least six reasons to consider including them in some teaching situations:

1 When they are used together, these items contribute to a personable, almost egalitarian kind of English that is the norm in many informal *and* formal situations these days.

2 Spoken grammar is often an economical grammar. It's quicker to say 'She's probably gone for a walk or something' than 'She's probably gone for a walk or to see a neighbour or buy some milk.' And 'Any messages?' or 'Any luck?' move things along faster than 'Are there any messages?' or 'Did you have any luck?'

3 Spoken grammar is often an easy grammar. It's simpler (and more dramatically satisfying) to say 'I said, look are you sure?' than 'I asked her if she was really sure.' (Easier too, perhaps, to say 'So you would have resigned?' than 'Would you have resigned?')

4 It is sometimes a polite grammar (without being a formal one) because it offers opportunities, in personal conversations, to be less direct. It might be better to say to someone 'What kind of job do you do, then?', for example, than 'What job do you do?'

5 It offers more advanced learners a number of 'buttonholing' or 'framing' techniques - in expressions like 'It's so expensive, London' - that are typical in the interplay of conversational language.

6 Finally, it gives those learners who are ready, and who wish it, a greater number of native-like linguistic choices.

I think that the issue of level, as far as teaching spoken grammar is concerned, is less important than the appropriacy of the learning situation. Students from intermediate level, on speaking courses which aim to improve skills in everyday conversation-making, should be able to cope with all of the language items in the fifteen-point list above.

Methodology and materials

There is a temptation in an area of 'real' English like spoken grammar to present students with actual transcripts of spoken English, available from corpora publications. This should be resisted. The result, if there is one, is nearly always a kind of linguistics lesson: see *Exploring English* (Carter and McCarthy 1997) for an introduction to the complexities of such transcripts. Despite their differences, both Carter (1998) and Cook (1998) agree that teacher intervention in terms of 'compromise' dialogues, language-filtering *etc.* is vital.

I would take this further and argue that there no logical reason why new aspects of language require new methodologies. Spoken grammar awaits the kind of attention that more traditional areas have received, but that doesn't make it intrinsically different. This view is reflected in the techniques and materials below.

Stage 1: invented dialogues show meaning and grammar

Example item: headers
Begin by asking students to compare the grammar and function of a pair of sentences like:

This DVD player, is it the cheapest in the shop?
Is this DVD player the cheapest in the shop?

Students will quickly spot (or can be nudged towards spotting) the extra word 'it' in the first question, the emphatic 'finger-pointing' purpose of the header 'This DVD player', and perhaps also the usefulness - in the heat of spoken English - of breaking the question into two parts. Afterwards, a written or recorded dialogue such as the following can be used, and students asked to note or underline further examples:

Amy: Thank goodness they've finally gone! It's two in the morning.
Tom: What a mess! That red bag in the corner, is it yours?
Amy: Oh no! Someone's left it. The girl with the tall boyfriend, do you know her
          name? I think it's her bag. They left at midnight.
Tom: I hope she didn't have her keys in it.
Amy: Anyway, we'd better start clearing up. Those bottles on the table, are they
          empty?
Tom: Yeah, they're finished. I'll take them to the bottle bank tomorrow.
Amy: And these coke cans, could you take them as well?
Tom: Let's put all the re-cycling stuff in that box, shall we?
Amy: I might get in the box myself. I think *I* need re-cycling after that party.

(Answers: 1. That red bag in the corner, is it yours? 2. The girl with the tall boyfriend, do you know her name? 3. Those bottles on the table, are they empty? 4. And these coke cans, could you take them as well?)

Further work on the grammar of headers can then be undertaken by asking students to rewrite these answers in more conventional syntax, e.g.:

That red bag in the corner, is it yours? → *Is that red bag in the corner yours?*

or to fill the gaps in the sentences below with these co-referential pronouns: *she/them/that/it*

1. *The new French restaurant on Park Street, does* ………[1] *look good?*
2. *My new trainers, I can't find* ………[2] *anywhere.*
3. *My mum,* ………[3] *'s always shouting at me!*
4. *The house opposite the cinema, is* ………[4] *where you live?*

(Answers: 1. it 2. them 3. she 4. that)

Students will become aware that you can separate the subject *or* the object of a sentence, and put it at the front.
SUBJECT: **Denise**, *she's the person you need to speak to.*
OBJECT: **Those two old computers**, *Tom's sold them, you know.*

and, at more advanced level, that sometimes the header can be a relative clause or a prepositional phrase:
Are the people you work with nice? → *The people you work with, are they nice?*
Did the woman in the corner tell you her name? → *The woman in the corner, did she tell you her name?*

Example item: incorporating direct speech
Similarly, one could introduce students to the dynamic use of discourse markers and direct speech to report conversations by asking them to look at a dialogue like the one below, and try to answer the questions:
1. What do you notice about the way Joe and Anne 'report' yesterday's speech?
2. What do you think is the function of the words in italics?

Joe and Anne are talking about things that their friends said to them yesterday.

Joe: Then Steve said, I'm from America, and I said, but you haven't got an American accent. So he said, *listen* we don't all speak like Tom Cruise!
Anne: That's interesting because Mike said there are six American exchange students in our class this year.
Joe: You spoke to Mike! I thought you didn't like him any more.
Anne: I know, but he looked ill and I said, *hey* are you OK? And he went no, I've got a really bad cold. I said, you'd better go home then and go to bed.
Joe: Good advice. Anyway, did you manage to speak to Kate about going to the theatre?
Anne: Sure. She said, *oh* I can't come, I'm afraid. So I said *well* I think Joe's already got the tickets. She said, *look* I'm really sorry but my boyfriend's parents are visiting.
Joe: Don't worry. We'll find someone else. Why don't we ask this new guy Steve?

(Answers: 1. They don't actually change the words they heard at all. 2. The words in italics have two functions, and may not actually have been used by the speakers at all. Firstly, they can signal that someone is about to use the actual words spoken (so they act like speech marks), and secondly, they give an impression of the speaker's attitude. In the context of this dialogue, 'listen' suggests that Steve was a little impatient when he spoke;' hey' suggests Anne was surprised to see Mike looking ill; 'oh' suggests Kate sounded sorry (or perhaps was surprised and had forgotten); 'well' suggests Anne was critical of Kate; and 'look' might suggest Kate was a bit defensive about her behaviour.)

Stage 2: controlled practice gives students time to manipulate the new language

Again, rather than being inappropriate, traditional exercise types may in fact add a measure of security to one's teaching.

Example item: headers
One could use a transformational activity like this:

0 Is that blue scarf Peter's? (it)
   That blue *scarf, is it Peter's?*
1 Does the big bookshop on Cambridge Street sell French books? (it)
   The big…………………………………………………………………………………..
2 My little brother is always borrowing my clothes. (he)
   My little………………………………………………………………………………….
3 I bought these three new shirts for £5 each! (them)
   These……………………………………………………………………………………….
4 Did the man who rang this morning give you his name? (he)
   The man………………………………………………………………………………………

(Answers: 1. The big bookshop on Cambridge Street, does it sell French books? 2. My little brother, he's always borrowing my clothes. 3. These three new shirts, I bought them for £5 each! 4. The man who rang this morning, did he give you his name?)

Example item: vague language
Or, if one was teaching the vague language set of 'and things', 'and stuff', 'and everything', and 'or something', one could, at this stage, distribute a simple discrimination exercise of this type:

Mel: Have a seat. Would you like a coffee *or something*? [0] (and everything/~~or something~~)
Jo: No thanks, I've just had one. Listen, have you heard the news about Paula? She's left her flat and her job ………. [1] (and everything/and things like that), and she's going to Australia to work as a tour guide!
Mel: Really? What about her boyfriend and family ………. [2]? (or something/and stuff)
Jo: Her boyfriend's not here at the moment. He's working in Scotland ………. [3] (or something/ and things like that). Maybe he can get a job in Australia too.
Mel: I suppose so. But I'm sure she hasn't even emailed him………. [4] (or anything/or something) yet. You know what she's like.
Jo: Her Mum won't be happy. She plays tennis with Paula and they go shopping together ………. [5]! (or something/and everything)

(Answers: 1. and everything (preferred) 2. and stuff 3. or something 4. or anything 5. and everything)

In this stage, the Stage 1 dialogue can also be gapped or jumbled *etc.* and re-used. Or students can be asked to write dialogues themselves that incorporate certain language items.

Stage 3: freer practice and reformulation

Freer forms of practice (conversations, role plays, simulations *etc.*) are the only satisfactory way to check language use, but it is also notoriously difficult in ELT to get students to use taught language items naturally on demand! One solution is not to focus on a specific item at all, but to set up conventional speaking activities, and then to reformulate student-produced language on the hoof (and on the whiteboard), against on the *full range* of your chosen spoken grammar syllabus. (In a circular way, the need to supply students with as yet 'untaught' items may determine priorities for Stage 1 and Stage 2 teaching.)

But at its simplest, students circulating and asking each other everyday questions like 'Did you have a good weekend?', 'What sort of things do you do in your spare time?', 'Are you going anywhere at Christmas/Easter/in the summer?' and 'What kind of food do you like?' *etc.* can be productive. Reformulated language can be recorded and recycled later, for example in short OHP exercises, where gaps draw students' attention to target language:

People put too much food on their plates. I don't like _____ . *(that)*
So I said to her, _____ , I want to go home now. *(listen* or *look)*
Xu _____ _____ that Scotland is nice in May. *(was saying)*
You can't do it anywhere these days, _____ . *(smoking etc.!)*
It's a _____ of root that you can eat. *(sort* or *kind)*
…and then we took a night bus. _____, we got home in the end. *(Anyway)*
etc.

Using these three stages in relatively short speaking skills courses, or in the speaking components of longer general courses can certainly sensitize students to spoken grammar, and some will go on to incorporate items in their linguistic repertoire.

Conclusion

Corpus research over the last twelve years has confirmed and elaborated on the presence of aspects of the grammar of spoken English that are not fully covered in mainstream ELT publications. Some of this 'spoken grammar' is useful and teachable to our students. The resources now exist for teachers to select items for their classroom, and the writer of this article sees no reason why such items should not be taught conventionally, in appropriate contexts. When a greater range of materials exists, the choice to do so will be a valuable addition to our professional range.

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