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Foreign Language Teacher vs. Language Norm, Usage, and Variation
A Study of Selected Academic Textbooks

A b s t r a c t: With the ongoing processes of globalisation making an invaluable contribution to the development of international integration, the need for effective communication in a language other than one's mother tongue has arisen. These changes have also influenced learning and teaching approaches, causing a shift in focus away from certain language components. The Communicative Approach gives priority to the effective use of language in interaction (achieving particular communication goals by the learner/speaker), thus questioning the nature and significance of language norms as such. Unlike in more traditional approaches, in communication-centred methods the learner's grammatical competence is not perceived as a key element in language education. However, the academic context seems to promote a different approach. In most cases, philology courses cover a separate grammatical module, which frequently constitutes a challenge for the teacher in terms of both content selection and evaluation. The aim of this paper is to reflect on learning/teaching English grammar in the context of higher education, taking into account the questions of norms, usage, and variation. For this purpose, selected academic textbooks shall be analysed from the point of view of the abovementioned notions.
K e y w o r d s: ESL, language norm, foreign language teaching, language use, ESL textbooks

1. Introduction

In the field of foreign language teaching, the last few decades have witnessed a growing trend towards certain communication-oriented approaches. Various factors, such as the prioritisation of spoken language or focusing on interaction and communication goals, have contributed to a number of methodological challenges, related mostly to the notion of language norms: definitions, selections,

scope, and applicability. The topic, already explored by researchers (usually in the context of competing language teaching methods, cf. Galisson 1980; Richards and Rodgers 1999; Cuq and Gruca 2003), calls for re-examination, especially when it comes to university education, as philology courses usually include a separate grammatical module. The notions of grammatical correctness/incorrectness, pertaining also to evaluation in language didactics, already imply the existence of norms, either imposed in advance (e.g. by an institution), or selected by the teacher. The aim of this paper is to review a number of academic grammar textbooks currently used at the University of Silesia (see: the syllabi cited in the references) in order to examine their perspective on the abovementioned methodological inquiries. Due to practical constraints, the study shall not address books used in grammar teaching in other contexts, such as primary school or high school.

2. Norms, usage, and variation in language: towards a definition

In dictionaries and linguistic works, two approaches towards the question of norms seem to prevail: the criterion based on the frequency of use, and the one based on a (frequently socially privileged) group. The *Cambridge Dictionary of the English Language* defines a norm as "an accepted standard or a way of behaving or doing things that most people agree with." This sense of the term puts emphasis on its social component. As stated by Kauhanen (2006: 34), language, as well as other social practices, is controlled by norms, understood as "socially shared concepts of appropriate and expected behaviour" (a definition practically equivalent in meaning to the frequency-based statement found in the previously cited dictionary). However, this approach does not explain the origin of language norms. A possible answer is provided by Léon and Bhatt (2009: 12), who – speaking of French pronunciation – note that:

> […] we acknowledge, especially for the purposes of teaching practice, the existence of a pronunciation norm in French called standard or standardised. One of its possible models could be the one heard on the radio or television, or the common way of speaking of well-educated people coming from large urban centres. Nevertheless, the usages vary depending on the individual, as well as social and regional groups. (translated from French by A. Serwotka)

These authors mention also the other abovementioned component, namely the group criterion, which contains elements of value judgement. In this respect, language norms may be treated as a standard imposed by a (more) powerful

social class. What is more, Léon and Bhatt put emphasis on language use, or usage, which does not always (or, in fact, rarely does) conform with the norm. Therefore, it needs to be stated that it is possible for many norms to exist (it is enough to consider English native speakers' pronunciation in different parts of the world), and language use is a result of many individual and contextual factors. Taking all these remarks into consideration, one can consider a given norm as a variety of a particular language, situated on the almost infinite continuum of variation among many other types and varieties (see: Guerin 2008; Modicom 2015). It is also possible to discern several interrelated continua, functioning within a given variety: formal/informal (the register criterion), written/spoken (the graphic-phonic criterion) or rare/frequent (the usage criterion). All of these constitute the central axis of the analysis that follows.

3. Background to the study

As English is a language spoken worldwide (both as a native and a second language), it appears in different forms and shapes, depending on many social, geographical, and cultural factors. This is why, as it has already been suggested in the previous section, it is more justified to talk about the *many Englishes* instead of the one English language. The global omnipresence of English has naturally given rise to a number of varieties of this language, some of which are preferred in certain educational contexts. This phenomenon results in a number of implications for both the teachers and the learners, as well as for didactic materials (see: McKay 2002). As remarked by Kachru:

> The implications of the internationalization of English have yet to be reflected in the curricula of teacher training programs, in the methodology of teaching, in understanding the sociolinguistic profile of the language, and in cross-cultural awareness. (1992: 355)

Kachru (1985, cited by Manara, 2016: 9) proposes the notion of the so-called Circles of English: a set of three categories associated with different types of English speakers. The inner circle contains those who are referred to as native speakers, English being their first language. The outer circle corresponds to English speakers from the areas where English is used as a second language (L2), such as Singapore or India. Finally, the expanding circle encompasses the countries and regions in which English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). The concept, reflecting only a small part of the internal diversity of English, can be illustrated by the following graph:
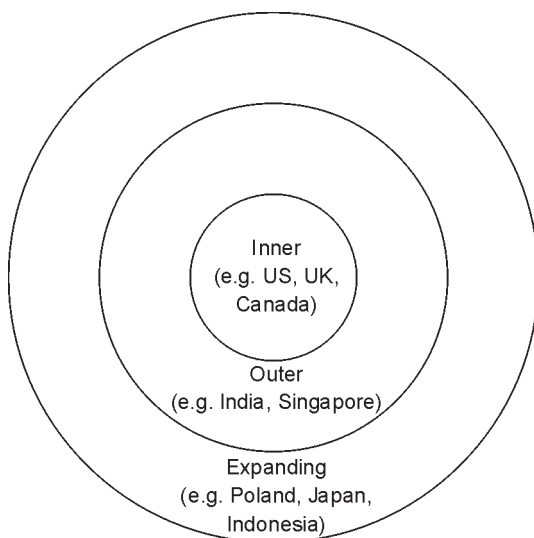
Figure 1. The Circles of English by B.B. Kachru
Source: own work based on Manara (2016: 9)

The Institute of Romance Languages of the University of Silesia offers a BA course called *Applied Languages: English and French* (and recently also *English and Italian*). Both courses contain practical language modules: English is taught starting with upper-intermediate/advanced level, whereas the other language – from scratch. Depending on the semester, the Practical English Module encompasses one or more components, including grammar, composition, speaking and listening comprehension, and phonetics. In most cases, group instructors are free to choose the didactic material they use. Details on didactic materials, textbooks, as well as teaching methods and techniques are included in the syllabi uploaded to the USOS system. The following textbooks, which constitute the subject of our analysis, have been selected from Practical English Grammar syllabi for both *Applied Languages* courses.

Table 1

Corpus selected – metadata

No.	Author(s)	Title	Publishing house + place	Year	Level
1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Martin Hewings	Advanced Grammar in Use	Cambridge University Press, Cambridge	2005	advanced
2.	Martin Hewings	Grammar for CAE and Proficiency	Cambridge University Press, Cambridge	2009	advanced/proficiency

1	2	3	4	5	6
3.	Michael Vince and Peter Sunderland	Advanced Language Practice	Macmillan, Oxford	2003	upper-intermediate/advanced
4.	Mark Foley and Diane Hall	Advanced Learners' Grammar	Pearson Education Limited, Essex	2008	advanced
5.	Virginia Evans	CPE Use of English Examination Practice	Express Publishing, Newbury	2002	proficiency
6.	Elżbieta Mańczak-Wohlfeld and Anna Niżegorodcew	A Practical Grammar of English	Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa	1998	upper-intermediate/advanced
7.	Graver B.D.	Advanced English Practice	Oxford University Press, Oxford	1986	advanced
8.	Jenny Dooley and Virginia Evans	Grammarway 4	Express Publishing, Newbury	1999	upper-intermediate

4. Analysis

4.1. Study description

Throughout the analysis performed by the authors of this paper, several variables pertaining to the questions of language norms, usage, and variation were taken into consideration in order to determine whether contemporary ESL grammar textbooks allow the students to properly develop their knowledge of the abovementioned aspects. Although the factors analysed play an important role in successful communication, they tend to be neglected during language lessons, as some of them can only be explored throughout continuous contact with native speakers of a given language, which tends to be difficult in the Polish context (taking into account the relative cultural and linguistic homogeneity of Poland).

The study was founded on five major criteria. First of all, the textbooks were examined from the point of view of language norms, that is, in this case references to and specification of standards (e.g. British English, Standard American English). The next step was focused on language registers: whether the books include any notice of the level of formality represented by specific constructions or expressions. The third criterion referred to the frequency of use: whether certain elements are marked as often or rarely used, etc. Subsequently, the analysis touched upon the comments and remarks on differences

between spoken and written language. Finally, the answer key was inspected so as to evaluate its preciseness. Observations, comments, and examples for every position shall be included in tables, each being accompanied by an overall summarising conclusion. Due to practical constraints, regular references (i.e. appearing in practically every chapter) in a given position will be marked by a check mark (✓). If the abovementioned criteria are only addressed on rare occasions, the cross symbol (✕) will be used.

4.2. Data analysis and discussion

4.2.1. Standards

The first criterion of the analysis concerned references to language standards. Explicit mentions were taken into consideration. The purpose was to verify whether the authors identify clearly and definitely the corpus from which the examples were taken, as well as to attempt to find grammatical comparisons between two (or more) varieties of the English language.

Table 2

The standard criterion

No.	Regular references	Comments	Examples
1	2	3	4
1.	✕	– some references to British English in the answer key – no references in the main part of the book	
2.	✕	– no explicit references – the CAE exam is mentioned	
3.	✕	– only one reference to British English – no explicit references	p. 8 "The use of *shall* for first person in future references is generally considered to be restricted to British English […]."
4.	✓	– in the introduction, the authors specify that the textbook relies on the British National Corpus – they mention the CAE exam – certain differences between British and American English	p. 63 "It is possible in US English to use the Past Simple with these adverbs: *We **already saw** the film but they **didn't see** it **yet**.*"

1	2	3	4
5.	✕	– CPE (it may be assumed that the content derives mostly from British English) – no explicit references	
6.	✓	– frequent (mostly to British and American English, but also – in one case – to a dialect)	p. 134 "*Have* is both a main verb and an auxiliary . . . As a main verb (= possess) it sometimes (especially in British English) has the forms of the auxiliary. In American English it takes the do-construction, e.g. *I haven't any time* (esp. BrEng) *I don't have any time* (AmEng and BrEng)"
7.	✕	– a reference to British English in the introduction	
8.	✕	The book does not specify the language norm/standard on which it is based. Perhaps, the spelling used suggests some variety of British English (e.g. *apologise*, and not *apologize*), but the latter is also used in certain British publications. The book was printed in England.	

Taking into account all the statements included above, it is evident that annotations of the language standard applied are practically absent in most textbooks. There are individual cases of mentioning *British English*, but no precise information can be found. This may create a false impression in learners about the presence of one, supranational variety of English. Although the authors' nationality or the location of the editing house might be considered as some kind of indicator of the underlying variety of English, mentioning the standards used in the introduction would be advisable. When a particular textbook is claimed to be based on *General English*, differences between, for instance, American and British English should be specified. Unfortunately, notes of this kind hardly ever appear.

4.2.2. Registers

In the lines that follow, the study proceeds to the formal/informal criterion. References to registers were analysed, with a particular focus on the level of

formality and the contexts of use of particular constructions, as well as informal equivalents of formal items (and vice versa).

Table 3

The register criterion

No.	Regular references	Comments	Examples
1.	✓	– "more formal," "less formal," "formal contexts/rules/language" – numerous cases when literary, academic, and informal styles are indicated	p. 28 "Note, however, that in less formal contexts we would often more naturally use *be supposed to* . . . and that *was/were to + infinitive* can be used informally to talk about things that didn't happen."
2.	✓	– more often: formal expressions – (in)formal equivalents	p. 26 "*Might* is sometimes used in questions, but is rather formal."
3.	✓	– the authors put emphasis on registers in the introduction	p. 8 "*Is/are to be* – This is used to describe formal arrangements. *All students are to assemble in the hall at 9.00.*"
4.	✓		p. 90 "To be more formal, we can use *not*."
5.	✕	– register transfer exercises – distinction between formal and informal expressions provided in some of the "fixed phrases" sections – very few references in the theoretical part	p. 70 "Conversational and informal English often replaces the passive form with an active form with *get*. The *get*-passive is normally used in constructions without an agent. *Mary got hit.*"
6.	✓	– distinction: formal vs. spoken	p. 74 "*Many* and *much* are used in affirmative sentences only in formal English."
7.	✓	– the importance of registers is emphasised in the introduction	p. 25 "In this sentence, *can* and *may* are fully interchangeable, *may* being a little more formal."
8.	✓	– references to formal language	p. 170 "*Elsewhere* is formal and means 'somewhere else.'"

It can be observed that indications referring to the register/the level of formality are frequent. They usually appear to inform that a given construction or expression is more likely to be found in formal contexts. This is most probably caused by the very nature of the books analysed, as their purpose is to prepare the learners for formal (usually written) exams. Moreover, there are numerous cases in which highly formal structures (e.g. stylistic inversion) are not marked as formal, which may lead to their excessive and unnatural use in everyday communication. References to informal structures can also be found, but they are less likely to appear.

It needs to be stated that the register criterion is strongly linked with the following two (frequency and differences between spoken and written language). For instance, although certain references to "formal spoken language" can be found, the mark "spoken English" is usually used when mentioning informal expressions, which sometimes is incorrect from a grammatical standpoint. Similarly, "rarely heard" structures tend to belong to formal or written registers. This is why several examples cited in sections 4.2.3 and 4.2.4 may as well be considered as indications of the formality level, as the three criteria are highly mutually dependent. This factor was taken into consideration in the process of analysis.

4.2.3. Frequency

The next criterion touched upon the frequency of use. The emphasis was put on whether the authors mention the fact that given expressions are falling into disuse, are no longer used, or – on the contrary – are used more and more often, even though they are considered incorrect from a strictly grammatical point of view. The results present as follows:

Table 4

The frequency criterion

No.	Regular references	Comments	Examples
1.	✓		p. 26 "Some people use *shall* (and *shan't*) instead of *will* (and *won't*) in statements about the future with *I* and *we*. However, it is more common to use *will* (particularly its contracted form *'ll*) and *won't*."
2.	✕	– references of this type are occasional – some references to incorrect structures being in use – more frequent equivalents marked	p. 175 "*Had to* is more natural in speech."
3.	✕	– references of this type are occasional – some references to incorrect structures being in use	p. 8 "[…] and possibly declining in use."

Table 4 continued

No.	Regular references	Comments	Examples
4.	✕	– references of this type are occasional	p. 89 "English rarely uses double negative, i.e. two words with a negative meaning in the same clause, as most people consider it to be incorrect […]."
5.	✕	– hardly any references	p. 115 "*Little*, *old* and *young* are often used in fixed adjective-noun combinations . . ."
6.	✓		p. 68 "However, in comparison to *two*, *both* is often used for emphasis."
7.	✕	– occasional remarks on the frequency of use in the theory sections	p. 22 "In all the examples so far, we could substitute a form of *be able to* for *can* or *could*, but we tend to use the latter (shorter) forms where possible."
8.	✕	– hardly any references	p. 75 "*Might* is formal and is not often used."

The textbooks differ significantly when taking into account the frequency criterion. In some of them (see no. 1), references appear on a regular basis, indicating whether a given expression is often used or tends to disappear in everyday speech. In other cases (cf. no. 8), remarks on frequency are scarce and not very extensive. The latter case may create confusion so as to whether a given expression is used at all (not to mention the contexts of its possible use). Information of this kind would appear useful, as the selected textbooks touch upon high levels of language competence (i.e. upper-intermediate, and most often advanced or proficiency), which require from the learners a comprehensive knowledge, both theoretical and practical, of the abovementioned subject (see also the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages published in 2003).

4.2.4. Differences between spoken and written language

The spoken-written or phonic-graphic criterion is strongly associated with the two previous axes of analysis. This is why a number of examples cited both above and below may suit more than one criterion of analysis. The emphasis was, however, laid upon the items which are likely to appear in conversation and not in written forms, and vice versa.

Table 5

The graphic-phonic (written-spoken) criterion

No.	Regular references	Comments	Examples
1.	✓		p. 36 "In spoken English we often use *must* and *mustn't . . .*"
2.	✓	– *written* and *formal* treated as quasi-synonyms	p. 113 "Reduced relative clauses can also be used instead of non-defining relative clauses, particularly in written English […]."
3.	✓	– specific examples of use	p. 40 "*Get* can be used instead of *be* to form the passive in spoken language. *Martin **got arrested** at a football match.*"
4.	✗	– occasional references	p. 56 "We often use the contracted form of *had* ('*d*) in spoken English […]."
5.	✗	– hardly any references	p. 70 "Conversational and informal English often replaces the passive form with an active form with *get*. The *get*-passive is normally used in constructions without an agent. *Mary got hit.*"
6.	✓		p. 85 "In formal English *which* is used, whereas in spoken language *that* or nothing occurs in the objective case."
7.	✓	– mentioned in the introduction	p. 117 "It is advisable that students should treat this as a 'rule,' although they will sometimes find that used in non-defining clauses in modern written English."
8.	✗	– hardly any references – written = formal	p. 78 "*You may park your car in this area.* (formal – usually written)."

In most cases, the authors include certain remarks on the differences between spoken and written English. These usually concern the expressions or structures which are mostly (if not only) specifically found in speech or writing. As it has already been mentioned, in the corpus analysed the term *written English* is often associated with a higher level of formality, which is, obviously, a well-founded conviction. Although the textbooks are exam-oriented, they also include occasional references to everyday speech, which is a very useful feature for a number of practical (communicative) reasons.

4.2.5. Answer key

The final criterion concerned the form and content of the answer key included in the textbooks. The number of proposed answers was taken into account, and the study aimed at seeking explanations for the sample solutions listed (concerning the differences from the point of view of the abovementioned criteria: standards, registers, and differences between written and spoken language).

Table 6

The answer key criterion

No.	Remarks
1.	The answer key is threefold, it comprises the "Key to exercises," "Key to additional exercises," and "Key to Study guide." The first part includes more than one acceptable answer, sometimes even providing learners with further explanations.
2.	When two or more alternatives are mentioned, sometimes the difference in meaning between them is described. There are also certain references to the level of formality (e.g. p. 235 "*I shall* is rather formal)."
3.	The key is not well-developed. Rarely does it include more than two acceptable answers. The key contains no explanations so as to any differences between two correct options.
4.	Sometimes more than one alternative is mentioned. There are no additional explanations.
5.	Rarely does the key include more than one acceptable answer.
6.	The key includes more than one acceptable answer, however, it does not specify the difference between the forms.
7.	Occasionally the key includes more than one acceptable answer, however, it does not specify the difference between the forms.
8.	In reference to a number of examples, the key includes more than one acceptable answer. Nevertheless, it does not specify the difference between the forms. Neither semantic differences, nor differences in the aspects such as register, frequency of use or language type are described.

In all cases, the answer key should be referred to as a *sample answer key*, for it does not take into consideration all the possible solutions (which would be, in fact, very difficult). An excessive reliance on the key responses may again lead to false convictions on the nature of the language, which in turn may cause, for instance, an unnaturally high level of formality in everyday speech or the use of rare, strange-sounding expressions. Rare are the situations where the authors specify the difference (in meaning, register, use…) between several correct answers. This is why the teacher's role is of huge importance in the process of shaping the learners' language competence. Due to the schematic design of textbook answer keys, contact with *living* structures is necessary, and so is additional information which may be provided by the teacher.

5. Conclusions and possible didactic implications

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from the study described in this article. All of them can (or even should) result in practical didactic implications, shaping the teacher's role in the process of shaping the learners' multimodal language competence. It can therefore be stated that:
– rarely do authors of grammar textbooks specify the standards on which their work is based;
– in contrast, differences in register are often pinpointed: formal and informal expressions are marked in most (but not all) cases;
– frequency of use is often associated with the formality of a given expression or structure: the rarer it is, the more formal its nature;
– it is parallel in the case of the written-spoken division: constructions typical of written language are usually more formal; there are only a few cases in which the authors refer to *informal written texts* or *formal oral texts*;
– finally, the answer keys included in the books are cursory and by no means should they be treated as the only source of correct solutions.

Considering all of the above, it needs to be stressed that in the academic context, the grammar teacher's role is not limited to using selected textbooks and supervising the students' work. On the contrary, it is necessary to make the learners aware of the number of variations existing within the English language. Most of the textbooks analysed explain thoroughly the formality and informality of certain expressions, which can also be linked with the division between written and oral structures. However, factors such as the frequency of use and – above all – language standards are not always sufficiently taken into account in the textbooks. This may, in turn, create a false belief in the existence of *one English*, hence reducing the understanding of many more and less frequently used varieties which may be encountered by the students in their future professional and private lives. Therefore, this aspect still remains the responsibility of the teachers.

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Nauczyciel języka obcego wobec normy językowej oraz użycia i odmiany języka
Analiza wybranych podręczników akademickich

S t r e s z c z e n i e : Na przestrzeni kilku ostatnich dekad postępujące procesy globalizacyjne przyczyniły się do wzrostu integracji międzynarodowej społeczeństw, co z kolei w wielu przypadkach pociąga za sobą konieczność sprawnego porozumiewania się w języku innym niż ojczysty. Zaistniałe zmiany nie pozostały bez wpływu na podejścia stosowane w nauczaniu języków obcych, niejednokrotnie powodując wzmożenie nacisku na niektóre kwestie kosztem innych. Podejście komunikacyjne nadaje priorytet skutecznemu użyciu języka w interakcji (a więc osiągnięciu określonych celów komunikacyjnych przez ucznia-użytkownika), tym samym podając w wątpliwość kształt i znaczenie normy językowej jako takiej. W odróżnieniu od zwolenników bardziej tradycyjnych stanowisk, adepci metody komunikacyjnej nie traktują kompetencji gramatycznej jako nadrzędnej. Inaczej jednak sprawy mają się w kontekście edukacji uniwersyteckiej. W większości przypadków studia filologiczne obejmują odrębny moduł gramatyczny, co niejednokrotnie stawia nauczyciela akademickiego w obliczu wyzwania, zarówno w kwestii starannego doboru treści nauczania, jak i późniejszej ewaluacji studentów. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest refleksja nad zagadnieniami normy, użycia i odmiany języka w obliczu nauczania gramatyki na poziomie uniwersyteckim. Przedstawiono analizę wybranych podręczników wykorzystywanych podczas zajęć z gramatyki w ramach modułu praktyczna nauka języka angielskiego na specjalnościach filologia – języki stosowane (francuski i angielski oraz angielski i włoski). Zestawiono zaproponowane przez autorów omawianych pozycji podejścia do kwestii normy językowej i użycia języka, z uwzględnieniem zaobserwowanych rozbieżności pomiędzy różnymi ujęciami niektórych problemów gramatycznych. Wskazano także możliwe rozwiązania, które mogą zostać zastosowane przez nauczycieli w obliczu wyżej wspomnianych wyzwań.

S ł o w a   k l u c z e : ESL, norma językowa, glottodydaktyka, użycie języka, podręczniki