

Learning, Teaching, and Staying Current in Englishes Using Online Resources

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Abstract

Historical linguists have documented for centuries that languages naturally change through new generations, and sociolinguists have likewise demonstrated that languages vary among speakers, so it is no surprise that English both changes and varies, but as the language has become a global lingua franca, its change and variation have accelerated, causing many challenges for ELT about which English or Englishes to teach at different levels, about which conventions to follow, for example in academic writing or in English for Specific Purposes, and about how to evaluate when teaching materials are outdated. This paper will examine the digital resources, such as corpora and Google Trends, which teachers and students can use to investigate the language appropriate for their context, audience, and purpose. Examples will come from all levels, from vocabulary taught in primary schools to collocations used in scholarly writing.

Keywords: a global lingua franca, corpora, digit resources

บทคัดย่อ

นักภาษาศาสตร์ที่ศึกษาประวัติศาสตร์ของภาษา ได้ค้นพบมานานหลายศตวรรษว่าภาษาต่างๆ มีการเปลี่ยนแปลงไปตามธรรมชาติ โดยเกิดจากผู้ใช้อย่างใหม่ นอกจากนี้นักภาษาศาสตร์เชิงสังคมวิทยา ได้แสดงผลของการศึกษาว่า ภาษามีความแตกต่างตามลักษณะของผู้ใช้ภาษา ดังนั้นจึงไม่ใช่เรื่องแปลกที่ภาษาอังกฤษมีการเปลี่ยนแปลงและความแตกต่างที่หลากหลาย แต่เนื่องจากภาษาอังกฤษได้กลายเป็นภาษาสากลที่ใช้เป็นภาษากลางทั่วโลก ทำให้มีความเปลี่ยนแปลงและความแตกต่างของภาษาเพิ่มมากขึ้น ซึ่งก่อให้เกิดความท้าทายเป็นอย่างยิ่ง สำหรับการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ (ELT) ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการใช้เลือกภาษาอังกฤษให้เหมาะสมกับการสอนในระดับที่แตกต่างกัน หรือการเลือกใช้รูปแบบการเขียนที่เหมาะสม เช่น การเขียนภาษาอังกฤษเชิงวิชาการ การใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อวัตถุประสงค์เฉพาะอย่างใดอย่างหนึ่ง และ วิธีการประเมินในกรณีที่สื่อการสอนล้ำสมัย บทความนี้จะศึกษาทรัพยากรด้านดิจิทัล เช่น คลังข้อมูล และ Google Trends ซึ่งครูและนักเรียนสามารถใช้โปรแกรมเหล่านี้เพื่อตรวจสอบการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษที่เหมาะสมกับบริบท, ผู้ฟัง, และวัตถุประสงค์ของการใช้ภาษา ตัวอย่างที่ได้จากการศึกษา จะมาจากการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษทุกระดับ ตั้งแต่การใช้คำศัพท์ที่สอนในโรงเรียนระดับประถมศึกษา จนถึงหลักการใช้คำรวมที่ใช้ในการเขียนเชิงวิชาการ

คำสำคัญ ภาษาสากลที่ใช้เป็นภาษากลางทั่วโลก คลังข้อมูล ทรัพยากรด้านดิจิทัล

In her plenary at TESOL 2017 in Seattle, Washington, Valdez took a critical look at what linguists consider language and theories of language acquisition. In particular, she pointed out that “language is a species-unique communicative system that is acquired naturally in the process of primary socialization” rather than a “school subject that can be ordered, practiced, learned, and tested in school.”

If we think of the consequences of this truth for language teaching, we can readily understand why the traditional approaches to teaching language as a set of rules have not been effective. I would argue the rule-based approach arose as a method for teaching ancient languages, which was different from teaching living languages in important ways.

Table 1

Current Knowledge of Ancient and Living Languages

Ancient Languages (Sanskrit, Latin, etc.)	Living Languages
The number of known sentences is finite.	The number of possible sentences is infinite.
Meaning is hypothesized.	Meaning is always negotiated.
Use, users, mode, and context can only copy previous forms.	Use, users, mode, and context result in infinitely complex forms.
Teaching as closed communicative systems is unchallenged.	Teaching cannot ignore these are open communicative systems.

The differences on this table are important ones. Ancient languages are no longer used, so we have only written fragments from them. Given limited data, scholars noticed some patterns, and since they had no living speakers, they had nobody to dispute those patterns, so ancient languages were taught as fixed or closed systems. Like current languages, however, these ancient languages had different dialects, and they changed through time. It is quite clear that no languages have ever been closed systems, but when ancient languages are taught, instructors can ignore this fact and teach them as closed. Sanskrit is typically taught as a fixed language, although there are major differences from Vedic (1500) to post-Vedic (500 BCE) as well as between the dialect Panini described and other dialects (Katre, 1987); Latin is likewise taught only as it was in Rome during the 4th century not before, not after, and not in other places.

In contrast, living languages cannot be similarly taught as closed systems with set rules. Living languages have living speakers, so teachers and learners are forced to notice that living languages are open systems with infinite variation and that they change through time. An excellent example of such variation occurs with the set rule for the English past perfect. According to the set rule in Brown (2016), the past perfect is used for what happened before another point in the past, which is probably similar to the rule most ESL and EFL learners have

been taught. But what do English speakers actually use? Barratt (2016) investigated actual usage using the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA).

The following two literature examples from 1886 and 2002 demonstrate that speakers use simple past for both verbs even in publications, and they have for over a century:

Simple Past for Both Verbs

“So glad was he to get away, that **he left before Charlotte came down** in the morning.” Barr (1887, p. 272)

“Although **he left before I started**, he probably helped me get my first job here.” Lundy (2002)

In the examples above, a simple past *left* is used in both sentences combined with another simple past, *came* or *started*. The use of two simple past verbs is quite common and rather well known. Linguists have noticed for decades that US speakers do not follow this pattern, many assuming, therefore, that the US has recently lost the rule, but corpus research unveiled a more complex picture as the pattern below illustrates.

Past Perfect for Later Verb

“By whom, then, was the outrage perpetrated? Conte, her employer, had accompanied her to the monastery, and testified that he **left before** she **had delivered** the parcel, and that while he was there he saw near to her two of the brothers, - Jubrien and Leotade.”

“The howling crowds had swept through before us. Since they were well equipped they **did not** have to wait underneath a rooftop **until** the rain **had gotten** lighter.” Matesic (2016)

In the first of these two examples, the two verbs are *left* (simple past) and *had delivered* (past perfect), but the oddness of this pattern is that the verb describing the later action is past perfect. This is the opposite of the rule that the earlier action should be in the perfect. According to the rule, the sentence should be *he had left before she delivered the parcel*. Notice also that this example was published in 1870, so it is not a new alternative. The second example from 2016 illustrates that the past perfect continues to be used today to describe a later action as well as an earlier action.

An obvious question is whether both verbs can be in the past perfect (he had left before his stenographer had begun to show signs of impatience). A very limited corpus search produces some examples:

“In these photographs, **while she had lived**, I **had not noticed** her age. Now I saw ...” (Kumar, 2013, p. 249).

“—he **had delivered** one train and was back for another **before I had** fairly **collected** my thoughts”

Thus, we find four possible patterns of usage for past sequences (simple past for both verbs, past perfect for the earlier verb, past perfect for the later verb, and past perfect for both verbs), and all four patterns exist in U.S. English even in writing.

We can say then that the past perfect rule in Brown (2016) and elsewhere is not a reflection of English usage. It is someone’s invention and not a description of the way English works. Further, this example is not unique. We can take any other aspect of English or probably any living language and find similar disparity between the rules people have envisioned and the reality of language use because speakers do not speak or write by rules. Babies don’t acquire languages by learning rules. Humans acquire and use language by negotiating meaning with other speakers and writers, and so every so-called rule can only be viewed as a pattern that someone once noticed of what sometimes occurs in the language. These are mini patterns, and to call them rules is to vastly over-generalize them.

In examining English Language Teaching, then, we can return to Valdez (2017) but also to Kohn (2012); we need to change focus from rules to functions and language use. We must understand that meaning making is different in each context, depending on the users, the use, the mode, and the context. In all cases, however, the priority must be on making ourselves understood – meaning making not rule following. In most cases, that means simpler is better because it is clearer. Fortunately, we can employ online resources to find the language appropriate for each context, audience, and purpose.

The most well-known use of online language resources is what is known as corpus pedagogy (See Bednarek, 2010 and Bennett, 2010 for examples.), which involves learners using corpora to study language. Corpus research is not new, but it has changed drastically since the invention of the Internet. Those working with corpora before the digital age manually searched through documents or tape recordings and recorded on paper. Today, scholars can search through online corpora for many languages including one for Thai by SEALang Library.

Corpus research is immensely useful for language study. Literature scholars use corpora when they compare the phrases used by two different authors or when they attempt to determine authorship based on the language used. Corpus studies can be used to test usage and debunk myths about English that are taught as rules, such as the incorrect past perfect rule discussed above. Barratt (2012a) demonstrated that for at least 300 years one- and two-syllable adjectives have used both *-er* and *more* for comparison, as in *fairer* or *more fair*. Similarly, Barratt (2012b) showed that *they*, *their*, and *them* have been used in academic writing as singular pronouns, as in

the following example: “**the student** transforms the inert information passed to **them**.” Dewey (1916, p).

There are many other ways scholars and learners can likewise use online tools to find language appropriate for their work, for example, in terms of meaning, register, or variety. One basic tool that even young children can employ is a Google image search. Entering a word and selecting images yields pictures, graphs, and figures of a word or phrase. Hence, a person can discover the distinction between *rooster* and *chicken* or between *mouse* and *rat* by looking at the images for each.

Although Google is useful, corpora like COCA are much more appropriate for finding formal meaning for academic writing. As reported in Barratt (2015), two phrases that are often confusing are *in contrast* and *on the contrary*. The most common error is to use *on the contrary* where *in contrast* is needed, scholars writing in academic English can search COCA (as in Table 2) to determine how they differ.

Table 2

In Contrast and on the Contrary in COCA

Phrase	COCA Total
<i>in contrast</i>	10,410
<i>on the contrary</i>	2,361

A search of COCA in Barratt (2015) indicates that *in contrast* is about four times more common than *on the contrary*. We can view the meaning differences by examining two examples of each phrase starting with the more common one, *in contrast*:

1. After all, the countries most committed to the traditional family, such as Germany, Italy, and Japan, have the lowest birthrates. Countries with high birthrates, **in contrast**, usually also have large numbers of children born out of wedlock.
2. Turkish women have lost ground in economic life: Only 22 percent sought employment in 2009, down from more than 34 percent in 1988. **In contrast**, 54 percent of South Korean women work.

In #1, birth rates are different in countries with traditional families from countries with non-traditional families. In #2, Turkish women are contrasted with Korean women in whether they work. From these examples, we can see that *in contrast* signals a difference between two entities, such as countries or women from two different places.

Examples of *on the contrary* demonstrate that this phrase has quite a different meaning:

1. Unlike the Neurosurgery offices, it wasn't lavishly decorated. **On the contrary**, the carpet was worn in spots, and some of the seats creaked...
2. Your teeth also yellow with age but that doesn't mean they're not healthy. **On the contrary**, ultra white teeth could be bad...

In #1, *on the contrary* dismisses the idea that the office was extravagant by saying how old it was. #2 contradicts the idea that yellow teeth are not healthy by stating that white teeth can likewise be unhealthy. Both of these sentences begin with a negative clause: "it wasn't lavishly decorated" and "that doesn't mean that they're not healthy." *On the contrary* often has this pattern of a negative clause followed by a strong counter-claim that the opposite is true.

From this comparison of *in contrast* and *on the contrary*, we can see that the former simply notes a difference between two referents while the latter contradicts a claim by first rejecting it and then claiming or arguing for the opposite point of view.

Table 2 above indicated that *in contrast* is far more common, which is true because it only signals a difference, so *in contrast* is the phrase writers should employ more often. *On the contrary* refutes a statement, so it is rare, and misusing it is a noticeable error.

In addition to using corpora to examine meaning, corpora are also useful to ascertain formality or other usage, such as appropriateness for scholarship and publication. Academic writing is difficult in one's first language, which is why universities in many countries offer freshman writing classes, but second language writing is a greater challenge, so there is a global need for resources to help scholars write in English. Anyone can employ COCA's search of academic texts to see if a word or expression is formal.

A simple illustration can be made by examining the words *unusual* and *weird* in COCA's full list of entries and by comparing these totals to a search limited to its academic entries (Barratt, 2015).

Table 3

Unusual and Weird in COCA

Word	COCA Total Entries	COCA Academic Entries
<i>unusual</i>	18,245	4,770 (26%)
<i>weird</i>	9,000	612 (6.8%)

Table 3 shows us that while *unusual* appears only twice as much as *weird* in total entries (18,245 to 9,000), *unusual* appears almost eight times more often (7.79) in academic entries. Further, about one fourth (26%) of the entries for *unusual* were from academic sources as compared to only 6.8% for *weird*. Clearly, *unusual* is preferred in academic writing, and using *weird* would be weird or unusual.

Another online tool that is extremely useful for examining current usage and language variation is Google Trends as it provides data on changes through time as well as maps with locations. Another advantage Google Trends has is that it is easy enough for children to use. For example, children could compare the two spellings of *color-colour*, which would show them that, while *color* is more common worldwide, *colour* is found only in a few countries, which are not geographically close to one another. By looking up which countries those are, children will learn some history and geography as well as information about English, specifically, that *colour* with *our* is found only in the UK and a few of its former colonies.

Most scholars today rely on Google, Google Scholar, and other Internet searches in their work. The examples provided here illustrate that in this digital age teachers cannot pretend to know everything about a language. Online resources allow linguists, language teachers and language learners to search for their own answers to create their own appropriate English.

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