GRAMMAR TEACHING AND STANDARDS

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INTRODUCTION

Wherever English is taught, either to people who already speak it or to people who do not, Standard English is the dialect that is taught and assessed. Standard English is the dominant dialect of English and is already a global variety. The Standard English that is taught and learned all over the world differs very little from place to place, particularly in the area of grammar. It is a single world-wide variety, but many people think -- wrongly -- that there are large differences in Standard English as it is used in different English-using countries. Paradoxically, because Standard English is so important, it is almost invisible -- until we see something we don't like. As a result, much grammar teaching focuses on relatively rare and unimportant features of grammar about which users of English disagree, rather than on the many more areas on which they all agree.

> **Comment [C1]:** Should we avoid the use of contractions? do not? [It is usual nowadays to use some contractions.]

It is essential for English, everywhere, to be taught in a way that accepts the fact that English is used all over the world, within and between communities. A global perspective is needed whoever the students are, whether they are native speakers or not, and whether or not they live in a place where English is used in daily life. Teachers and students of English need to take a global perspective, because all users of English (to varying degrees)

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experience English in a global context. The particular challenges for teaching Standard English are:

- How can it be established what is correct in Standard English?

- How can teachers help students to learn from the English that they see and hear?

- How can students be made to feel confident in using English and yet be corrected when they make mistakes?

In this paper I will discuss these questions only as they apply to grammar, and will illustrate my answers by using real texts.

DEFINITION OF STANDARD ENGLISH

"Standard English" is usually defined by its contexts of use (see Trudgill, 1999). I will begin with a definition of this sort:

> Standard English is the variety of English normally used in edited written texts. What is and what is not considered correct in Standard English is determined by the general consensus of those of its writers who are in a position to influence it.

Comment [C2]: Is this from Trudgill? If yes, pls provide the page number. [No -- this is my definition. I have reworded]

This is a vague definition for a problematic concept. Standard English is a living dialect: something is standard if Standard English writers around the world more or less agree that it is. It is not pre-defined: usages regarded as

non-standard now may become standard in 20 or 200 years from now (and vice versa).

Definition is not enough. Teachers, students, and writers need to know what the grammatical rules of Standard English are. When we see a text, we see spelling and vocabulary as well as grammar, and the whole can give a quick impression of a text's being targeted on Standard English, even if there are some mistakes -- spellings or grammatical structures that the writer thinks are Standard but which are not. We can say that a text is "in Standard English" as a whole. But if a group of people look at any text closely, each of them is likely to identify some structures that they disapprove of. Different users of English will pick out different things (try it on this paragraph).

Dictionaries and grammar books both include information on grammar. Their guidance is based on the description of how English is used: rules are inferred from the texts. Reliable reference grammars based on this principle are difficult to use, however (for example, Jespersen, 1909 etc.; Quirk et al., 1972; Biber et al., 1999; Carter & McCarthy, 2006). To check whether what we have written (or read) is correct is hard for grammar. The only method that most writers have for checking that their grammar is correct is to give it to someone else to read, ideally someone regarded as especially skilled in Standard English. Many of the grammatical features that an editor changes will be those about which different users of English will disagree. Other

changes will be of mistakes and therefore necessary to make a text correspond with agreed rules of Standard English.

If we compare the written Standard English of writers from around the world, we can see that there is general agreement about most of the grammar of Standard English. And the areas of disagreement vary more from one individual to another than they do from one region to another. There are some features of Standard English grammar that all users should be able to learn to identify. At the heart of Standard English are features of grammar that are clearly defined and easy to identify, which characterize Standard English and about which there is no disagreement. I refer to these features as being "criterial" of Standard English.

Most people seem to think that Standard English is something very remote from their own experience, the most "perfect" and most formal kind of English there is. For me, as for most linguists, the central concept of a standard variety is that it is something that English writers are all, in some circumstances, expected to do, and on which they will accept correction. It is a variety that English users are expected to have some skill in; the most common dialect of English; the only global dialect of English; the dialect taught and examined in all formal education of native and non-native speakers; the dialect that is nearly always used in writing. Far from being remote, it is ordinary English, and seen as ordinary.

Here are the opening words of two well-known texts:

In the light of the moon a little egg lay on a leaf. One Sunday morning the warm sun came up and -- pop! -- out of the egg came a tiny and very hungry caterpillar. He started to look for some food. On Monday he ate through one apple. But he was still hungry.

(Eric Carle, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar.*)

The basic chemical formula of DNA is now fairly well established. It is a very long chain molecule formed by the joining together of complex monomeric units called nucleotides. Four main types of nucleotides are found in DNA, and it is probable that their sequence along a given chain is irregular.

(Crick and Watson (1954))

The children's story has shorter, simpler sentences than the article in the academic journal. In the Carle extract, all but one verb (*to look*) is simple past tense (*lay*, *came*, *started*, *ate*, *was*), while the academic article has a greater variety of types of verbs, including 4 passives (*is ... established, formed, called, are found*). The differences we see here -- and would see more of if we compared the full texts -- are differences of choice within Standard English. It is vital to understand that differences of frequency (such as the proportion of verbs that are passives) have nothing to do with determining whether or not a text is written in Standard English or not. What matters is whether the choices are among those that are possible in Standard English.

Nothing in these extracts indicates the geographical origin of the authors, or the place of publication. Many Standard English texts do give such information, though sparingly, and seldom through grammar. There are almost no categorical grammatical differences among the Standard English writing of different regions of the world. What is Standard English grammar in Nigeria is (almost entirely) Standard English grammar in Canada (and vice versa).

There is, however, considerable variation within Standard English depending on the text type. The most extreme grammatical differences in grammar are found in some written text types that use an abbreviated form of Standard English. These include newspaper headlines, SMS messages, postcards, and small advertisements in which the grammar is very different indeed from what I could call "ordinary Standard English grammar" ("Leaving soon"; "Car for sale"'; "Add asparagus; stir-fry until crisp-tender"). Most users of English are well aware of these abbreviated text types and know how they are related to ordinary Standard English. The most common grammatical features of abbreviated texts are:

- omission of first person subjects;

- omission of articles: *the* and *a(n)* are not used;

- omission of BE from contexts where it is required in other Standard English text types.

There has been a great deal of publicity given to the use of abbreviated English in SMS messages, but abbreviated English is nothing new. It just so happens that SMS is a new text type that uses abbreviated grammar, as telegrams once did. Students need to know that it is appropriate in some contexts but not others. The rest of my discussion is about ordinary Standard English.

REGIONAL VARIATION IN STANDARD ENGLISH GRAMMAR?

Sociolinguists began to study English as a world language in the 1960s, at a time when the United Kingdom of Great Britain and the United States of America were seen as the sources of Standard English. Even Australian and New Zealand English had to fight for legitimacy. Features associated with the English of places like Singapore, India, and Nigeria were seen as "interference" errors. This view is not entirely absent from the world today, but it is now widely accepted that the English of former colonies, where the population are mostly not of European ancestry, has its own legitimacy and a right to its own standards of language use.

Most of the sociolinguists (such as Moag, 1982; Kachru, 1985, 1992) who first considered English as a global language wanted to raise the status of the English of Britain's former colonies. We analyzed texts from various countries and identified what we thought were differences from 'British' or 'American' Standard English (e.g., Gupta, 1986). We often argued for local

acceptance of these features as Standard. We tended to refer to Standard English*es*, and attempted to identify and promote, for example, Nigerian Standard English, New Zealand Standard English, or Indian Standard English. We focused on the differences that we thought existed between the Standard English in one place and that in another. (Gupta [2010] explains why I have rejected this earlier approach.)

Since those days the internet has made available to everyone a wide range of written texts of all types, from most of the world. Two things have become apparent:

(1)   Many of the differences we once thought were categorical are in fact differences of frequency: we were comparing real texts from one place with an imagined ideal grammar from the UK or the USA;

(2)   The differences that are identified in descriptions of, for example, Standard Singapore English, account for a very small proportion of the total text.

When we do make a direct comparison, using a large corpus or database, or using the web as a corpus, we find that the grammar of the Standard English of one place is virtually identical to the grammar of the Standard English of another. There are statistical differences in terms of preferences: for example, the present perfective (e.g. "I have seen her") is more frequent in proportion to the past tense ("I saw her") in UK English and

Australian English than in US English. But it is almost impossible to identify grammatical features that are regarded as correct in one place and incorrect in another (examples of texts taking this approach include Schmied, 1997; Biber et al., 1999, many papers in Modiano, 2002; Gupta, 2006a, 2006b, 2010).

Standard English is so assumed it is almost invisible to most readers. As a result, a single mistake will be highly salient. For instance, in the sentence "As I was watched her in the kitchen, she fried the chicken meat first and set it aside", the mistake ("was watched") will take on more importance than the other 277 words of entirely Standard English in the text from which it comes. Readers will also notice choices within Standard English that differ from the choices they would make themselves, some of which will also loom larger than is warranted.

It is common to read about "American Standard English" and "British Standard English". This refers to little more than a small number of spelling differences (e.g., *colo(u)r*), amounting to less than 0.5% of words in most texts. In grammar, there are almost no real differences. By focusing on features they regard as distinctive, or the small number of things that vary from one place to another, sociolinguists have also given the impression that countries like Nigeria and Singapore use a Standard English that is more different from (for example) British Standard English than it actually is. The intention was to raise the status of former colonies, but in some cases this impression has given both locals and foreigners the impression that the

Comment [C7]: American? [the problem is that this offends people in other countries of America.]

English in such places is far from Standard English, and has created a negative impression (e.g., "he's Indian. So his English will be a bit off".).

Many of the differences identified as being grammatical features of local varieties of Standard English turn out either to be present more widely worldwide (perhaps with varying rates of frequency). The differences in grammar between the (written) Standard English of different countries is not sufficient to justify there being several Standard Englishes: it is better for all teachers and learners to think of Standard English as a single dialect. In the next section I will indicate some of the areas of grammar where Standard English is clearly defined.

CRITERIAL FEATURES OF STANDARD ENGLISH

For teacher and student alike, a sound knowledge of four areas of grammar will help in developing a clear idea of what is and what is not Standard:

1.   Inflectional morphology

2.   The structure of the verb

3.   Interrogatives with DO

4.   Negation

In these areas Standard English is strict and unified across the world.

1. **Inflectional morphology**. Changes in the shape of the word depending on the grammatical role. In English there are such

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changes in form in nouns, pronouns, and verbs. For example: *Cat / cats / cat's / cats'*; *Child / children / child's / children's*; *I / me / my / mine*; *dance / dances / danced   see / /sees / saw / seeing / seen*.

2. **The structure of the complex verb.** The verb is at the heart of every clause. One verb group in Standard English can have from 0 to 4 auxiliaries before the lexical verb. The verbs in the chain must be arranged in a specific order and each of them must have a specific form. For example: *was eaten*; *can swim*; *is finding*; *had seen; might have watched*; *should have been being monitored.*

3. **Interrogatives with DO**. In Standard English the way in which interrogatives are created is unusually complicated, involving changing the order of part of the verb and the subject (inversion) and, in most cases, inserting a particular form of the verb DO. For example: *are you*; *can you swim*; *did you swim*. Note that this is not the only way of forming questions in Standard English.

4. **Negation.** Negation with *not* is complex in Standard English, and also involves inserting a particular form of DO in some types of verb group (for example: *I swim* negates to *I do not swim*). Standard English negation is also linked with a change of *some* to *any*, so that "I want some" negates to "I do not want any". Many languages, and many other dialects of English, use multiple negative words to

emphasize negativity (as in "I don't want none, nohow") but Standard English does not reinforce negativity in this way.

In all of these areas there is almost no variation within Standard English. The only variation of which I am aware is in a few irregular verbs where there is choice in the form of either the past tense or the past participle or both (for example, *learned / learnt; got / gotten; dived / dove*). Both forms can be found in many regions, though particular places may have a preference for one or the other. For example, *dove* is more popular as the past tense of *dive* in the USA than in most other places, but both forms can be found side by side in many single locations.

Comment [C9]: For consistency, change to 'United States'? [I prefer 'USA']

Teachers in areas with a vigorous local dialect need to be aware of the non-standard grammar in their own region and will need to explain to the students what the differences are in these areas. Students should be encouraged to use their local dialect forms in appropriate contexts, such as in dialogue or poetry. Even learners of English living in a place where English is not used will come across examples of non-standard dialects. As soon as they can, most learners, even very young ones, will start using English and will see and hear varieties of English other than Standard English. They need to know that other dialects are not wrong and that creative writers often use non-standard dialects in addition Standard English. Many songs have lyrics and titles that are entirely or partly in dialects other than Standard English. A clear

understanding of what the basic structures of Standard English are will allow students to learn from what they read and hear.

Students should get ample opportunity to create and analyze texts, and, wherever they are from, should be exposed to non-standard grammar too, so that they can learn what is and what is not Standard. The following examples (all real ones) are definitely Standard English:

- I've seen him.

- The engine is turning over.

- She should arrive soon.

- We have been attacked.

- Who did you see?

- I did not have any problem.

- What did you think of it?

- They did not have any bananas.

The following (also real ones) definitely do not follow the grammar of Standard English (the part that does not follow the rules is underlined):

- I have <u>went</u> off on quite a few related tangents.

- You <u>might could</u> have a problem.

- I <u>was watched</u> her.

- He has <u>finish</u>.

- We <u>done</u> it for the kids.

- Where did she <u>went</u>?

- They <u>never</u> had <u>no</u> future.

- Who <u>say</u> <u>mi</u> <u>done</u>?

If you are aiming for Standard English and you do not get the rules right in these four areas, you will have made a mistake. A sentence with "I have went off ..." *might* be a mistake or not. Sometimes writers are not aiming for Standard English. Anyone who writes "Who say mi done?" is *certainly* not aiming for Standard English: Cutty Ranks made a conscious effort to write his song in Jamaican Patwa.

Learning from speech presents even more problems than learning from reading. Speakers have greater freedom than do writers. The grammatical structures of speech are very different from the grammar of writing (more about this in recent accounts of the grammar of English, such as Biber et al., 1999; Carter, 2004; Carter & McCarthy, 2006). Some structures that are used in speech are seldom or never used in writing, and vice versa. For example, in speech there are discourse markers (including expressions like *thank you*, *yes*, *OK*, *you know, isn't it*, *Well, ...*) that are rare in most written text types (except those that represent dialogue). Some grammatical structures are impossible in writing, like this example (collected by Sarah Castell in the UK during research for MA degree):

- the good ones you want to dance and the bad ones you just want to like cut yourself off

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If we translated this into written Standard English grammar it would be something like "You want to dance to the good ones and you just want to cut yourself off from the bad ones" or "When you hear the good ones you want to dance and when you hear the bad ones you just want to cut yourself off". In the spoken version, the two noun phrases ("the good ones"/"the bad ones") have been put in the prominent first position, so that they become the topic of the sentence, functioning almost as a heading – "this is what I'm going to talk about". This kind of topic-comment structure is seldom used in written English, but is common in speech. In speech too, there is more regional variation, including some in grammar, than there is in writing. The freedoms found in speech make it harder for those learning English to learn from what they hear than to learn from what they read. Students need to be warned to expect a wide range of grammar in speech. However, the criterial features discussed above are shared with what we might call Standard English speech.

My focus in this section has been on the criterial structures of Standard English, which do not allow for variation. However, there are areas where there is choice and variation, and also areas where there is disagreement about what is and what is not Standard. It is to these areas I will move on next.

AREAS OF DISPUTE WITHIN STANDARD ENGLISH

Because users of English are so much agreed on the grammar of Standard English, they tend to discuss most those areas where they are not in agreement.

In this section, I outline two areas (not entirely separate from each other) in which there is dispute:

1.   Verb group choice

2.   The purist tradition.

It is my view that in the past we have paid too much attention to these areas at the expense of those areas on which there is agreement.

The form of the verb is strict in Standard English. But there is another issue relating to the verb which is less clear cut, and where there is choice within Standard English. In this area, not all users of Standard English agree on what is right and what is wrong. When does a speaker or writer use a present perfective (*has*/*have*+past participle) rather than a past tense? What about the choice between a present continuous (*am*/*is*/*are* + present participle) and a present tense?

The longest possible verb phrase is of 5 verbs, as in this real example, from a medical journal published in Chicago:

 all patients <u>should have been being managed</u> under SARS precautions

The very long verb group in the example above is not the only one that could have occurred in the same context: another writer might have written *all patients <u>should have been managed</u> under SARS precautions*. The original writers chose to add the progressive aspect (*being managed*), but it is not required. Both choices are probably available to most writers of Standard

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English, and no-one would regard either alternative as wrong. It is essential for all students, and especially for non-native learners of English, to realize that there are areas of choice within Standard English.

I will give just a few examples of some of the contexts where many users of English have a choice in the type of verb group. All the verb groups here are constructed following the criterial rules for form. In some cases, some individuals may be able to use all the alternatives. In other cases, different people may regard one or more as impossible for them. Some people will disapprove of the use of some of the alternatives in particular contexts. All seem to be present to lesser or greater extents across the English-using world. I supply them in what seems to be the order of frequency on the web, using the precise words that I have supplied in quotation marks in Google searches: Note that different sentences may give different frequencies for the same grammatical alternatives. I would urge all readers to try out a few alternatives of this sort and reflect on the validity of the findings.

- I have a cold. [clearly the most common]

- I have got a cold

- I am having a cold.

- Did they give you a map? [the most common]

- Have they given you a map? [a strong runner up]

- This is the first time I am wearing it. [the most common world wide, probably because of the high frequency of captions on photographs]
- This is the first time I have worn it. [good runner up and most common alternative in some places]
- This is the first time I wear it. [rare]
- This is the first time I wore it. [rare -- occasionally used when describing a photograph]

- I go there tomorrow. [all alternatives very common: patterns differ in main and dependent clauses]
- I'll go there tomorrow.
- I'm going to go there tomorrow.
- I'll be going there tomorrow.
- I'm going there tomorrow.

- Can I watch television? [the most common]
- May I watch television? [a strong second]
- Could I watch television? [also common]
- Might I watch television? [rare]

In a situation where there is choice, the differences in meaning (if any) between alternatives can be subtle. These choices are paid a lot of attention in language learning where, in some curricula, the rules for using them are made to seem much clearer than they are in real use. This can lead to students being surprised when they see real texts that appear to violate the grammar they have been taught at school. For instance, many learners of English are taught that the past tense must be used after "since" in sentences like "It is a long time since I saw her". Using the past tense in this context will seldom result in an incorrect sentence, but the present perfect ("It is a long time since I have seen her") is frequent and equally standard. Other students may (wrongly) be taught that "Did you bring a map?" is incorrect in British English. This is an area where teaching needs to come up to speed with reality.

There are some choices that are more frequent in the English of South Asia than in other regions (e.g. "I am having a cold"). I see no reason to reject such choices as part of Standard English. Notice that the grammar of the verb is the same as it is all over the world: the only difference is the context in which that structure might be used.

The purist tradition in English has caused a good deal of confusion in classrooms and has been criticized by many linguists (such as Wardaugh, 1999). All over the world in English classrooms, too much attention is paid to a few usages that are regarded as incorrect by some users. The rules are linked to the normative or purist tradition of English, which is an effort (going back

to the 1700s) to give Standard English a stricter grammar than it actually has. For many native speakers of English, this is what "grammar" is. A great deal of attention is paid to invented rules such as "A sentence must not begin with *but*" and "do not split an infinitive". Sentences beginning with *but* can be found in the most formal and carefully written texts all over the world as can sentences with so-called "split infinitives", such as "We need to slowly decrease the amount". Purists may not like them, but they are Standard English, and students should not be told they are incorrect. A 14 year old British pupil may be able to repeat "You should not start a sentence with 'but'" yet be unable to articulate the rule for choosing between "forget" and "forgets". But in Standard English sentences can begin with "but", while the choice between "forget" and "forgets" is a strong rule. Advanced students should discuss the purist tradition and need to know that it exists, but when it comes to teaching and marking, the focus should be on Standard English as it is, not as some people think it ought to be.

All teachers of English need to pay the greatest attention to areas of grammar where the rules are clear and the same across the world. They also need to tell their students that there are many areas of choice within Standard English. At an advanced level, they need to make their students aware of the nature of some of the disputes within Standard English.

IN THE CLASSROOM

In all formal education, Standard English is taught and examined. English is not unusual in this: standard dialects emerge when languages are written. Standard dialects are functional in that they help communication over wide areas and neutralize many social features that we cannot help but convey in speech (especially regional origin). The tradition is that children who come to school knowing English (speakers of English) must learn to read and write Standard English, whatever dialect(s) they speak, and that those who do not yet know English (learners of English) are taught to speak Standard English as well as to read and write it. I am not aware of any serious suggestion from either political or academic sources to cease teaching Standard English. Many sociolinguists (including myself) have called for non-standard dialects to have a place in education, and to be respected. This is not to suggest that they would replace Standard English in schools. Standard English has wide currency and prestige and a student who was denied access to it would be being cheated.

The main focus of formal teaching of Standard English grammar, even to learners, is generally on the written language, which is understandable given the very different grammar of speech. It is appropriate that learners of English in places where English is not locally used are taught a plain Standard English style for both writing and speech. Where a learner is in an educational setting alongside speakers, that learner will acquire local forms of English from

schoolmates. As long as there is adequate opportunity for such a learner to socialize with speakers of English, it should not be the responsibility of formal instruction to teach the grammar of any local dialect.

Many speakers of English are exposed to both Standard and non-standard dialects. For example, I studied Singaporean children acquiring English as a native language (Gupta, 1994), who were initially exposed mainly to a non-standard dialect of English, commonly called Singlish. But their parents and other family members knew Standard English as well as Singlish, and were in the habit of reading aloud to them in Standard English. As their children began formal schooling (from the age of three years) the parents began to use more Standard English in the home, especially in contexts they saw as educational. The children clearly demonstrated that they distinguished the non-standard dialect from the standard dialect in their own usage by the age of four years. Other studies of children growing up in other societies where a non-standard dialect of English operates alongside Standard English have shown a similar early awareness and use of Standard English. In Trinidad, Youssef's subjects demonstrated this kind of switching before their third birthday (Youssef, 1991, 1993). Children can be bidialectal, and it is likely that virtually all children who are exposed to a non-standard dialect are also exposed to Standard English, because Standard English is so pervasive that it is a part of every community of English speakers, and every home where English is spoken. I know of no English-using community from which

Standard English is absent: such a community would have to have no-one in it who was literate in English, no books, no visual, or sound media. Speakers acquire skills in English from formal and informal teaching and from exposure to the Standard English in ordinary life.

Where pupils are either native speakers of English or live in a community where English is widely used, they do not seem to find it hard to separate the grammar of Standard English from that of their local dialect, if there is one. Children are also learning the very different text types associated with writing, and seem to associate the written forms with the text type. The written forms of the local dialect seldom appear as errors in children's writing. For example, a child (or adult) in Leeds (UK) may always say "He were" rather than the Standard English "He was"; the same child will almost always write "He was". Similarly, in Singapore, children who use the very different grammar of Singlish in much of their speech ("kena flu") almost never write with its distinctive grammar when targeting Standard English ("I caught flu"). Speakers of other dialects should not be told that their grammar is "bad". Even young children can understand local dialects have their own grammar which is different from that of Standard English and can learn to discriminate them.

Students need to know what is a hard and fast rule for Standard English and what is not. The reason English is so successfully learnt today is that learners want to use it. Most learners (especially if they have access to a

Comment [C14]: 'United Kingdom'? [same as USA -- everone knows 'UK' surely? 'United Kingdom of Great Britain over the top and too long.]

computer) have the opportunity to use English in a real situation once they have the basics. Even very young children outside the Anglophone world rapidly gain access to the world of English-use. Learners are often able to access books, online activities, and entertainment media that use English.

This is to be encouraged. But once learners are in the real world of English use, they will be exposed to a range of usages and they need to be navigated through the complexities of usage. They may find it hard to understand that what is appropriate in one context is not appropriate in another. Students need to be encouraged towards a confident use of English, so that they can use English without feeling that they have to write perfectly. On the other hand, the teacher is responsible for correcting their errors, and for guiding them to write in styles appropriate for context.

Students should not experience a gap between situated and social learning and the learning of the classroom. The classroom must be flexible enough to cope. Students cannot and should not be protected from real English. Having an opportunity to speak and write in a context where the focus is not on correctness, but on getting the message across, will stretch students to produce more quantity and to experiment with language. Their English will improve as a result of use and adventure. Wherever English is taught, there should be some classroom opportunity to use English in a context where effort rather than correctness will be rewarded. Students can also

reflect on what they have written and compare what they have written to the writing of others.

It is appropriate for textbooks for learners of English to teach rules similar to the one about verb choice after "since". Such rules can help learners to avoid errors. It is appropriate too to drill students in correct sentences and to ask them to select between correct and incorrect choices in an assessment. But in these pedagogic contexts, it is essential that Standard and disputed alternatives should never be marked "wrong", even if they are not the structure that has been taught. If alternatives are supplied, only one should be Standard English, such as:

Complete the sentence with the verb that is correct:

It is a long time since I _____ her.

is seeing

have saw

saw

seen

If learners of English are too inhibited by a focus on correctness, they may be afraid of using the language. This applies to all kinds of learners, from monolingual native speakers of English in (for example) Sydney, through bilingual English and Tamil speakers in Chennai, to learners of English outside Anglophony in Sao Paulo. They must learn from their experience in the ocean of English. If the "school English" is different (more purist,

perhaps) than the real English that they see, students will be confused. They may reject their teaching.

There should be some scope in the classroom for analyzing real texts, and especially for discussing the grammatical differences between different text types. One thing speakers and learners alike need to learn is that correctness matters more in some contexts than in others. The tools of grammatical analysis should be used to identify patterns in texts and differences between different kinds of text types. It is vital to know that there are choices for all speakers.

Educators and older students can explore alternatives (not just those in verb choice) in order to try to discover the patterns of use. Students can be guided in their exploration, the aim being to show them where variation within Standard English is possible and where it is not. The analysis of abbreviated Standard English can be valuable because the insertion of elements to convert an abbreviated text into ordinary Standard English helps develop analytic skills.

The texts that are analyzed should be situated in the real world of English. Children should be exposed to literature for children and to factual writing. They should be encouraged to interact socially in the international world of English. It is pointless to require students to follow rules that they see violated all around them, and is damaging to "correct" students when they

write sentences that they see in use in Standard English texts. It is also unnecessary and unhelpful to teach learners English in a way that suggests that they will use English only in specific restricted contexts or places. No-one can predict where and to whom a learner will use English now or in the future. For many learners the global world of English is right there on their phones.

CONCLUSION

All teachers should have a clear focus on the criterial areas of Standard English grammar. lt is important to know from an early stage of learning that there are also zones of choice within Standard English. Every time a teacher marks as incorrect a usage which is actually Standard English, that teacher has failed the student. Students can be helped to learn from what they read and hear by the guided analysis of texts. They should be taught basic grammatical analysis and then shown how to analyze texts of different types in order to identify differences and similarities. They should be told that writers and speakers are often playful, and that this playfulness includes the deliberate use of non-standard English. Understanding the areas of choice and having some analytic tools to identify Standard English grammar will help them to produce texts appropriate for their context.

Discussion questions

1. What dialects of English other than Standard English are your students likely to see or hear? Where? How does the grammar of these dialects differ in the 4 criterial areas of grammar discussed in this chapter?

2. Would you wish to show your students Standard English texts from a variety of regions? What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of doing this?

3. To what extent have your students mastered the 4 criterial areas of grammar discussed in this chapter? What mistakes do they make? What other areas of grammar do you consider need close attention?

Comment [C15]: The editors would like this section to come in two parts – 'Exploring the ideas' and 'Applying the ideas'. Would you be able to segment these questions under those two headings? [I really don't understand the difference....]

Sample exercise

The aim of this exercise is to encourage the students to write texts that require a different kind of grammar. The text types chosen will vary with the experience of the students: with the 14-year-olds to whom I have this workshop, the most successful texts types were the text message and the letter to the Head Teacher(1) and (3).

This is what you saw on the way to school....

This is the result...

Write about what you saw as if:
1. You are writing a text message to your friend.
2. You are writing your witness report for the police investigation.
3. You are explaining to the Head why you were late to school that day.
4. You are writing a letter to a local newspaper.
5. You are writing about what you saw for Facebook / Bebo / Myspace.

Worked Example

This exercise is for students with some skills in grammatical analysis. In a question where the teacher supplies a text, questions should always be specific and directed, and should relate to what has been taught.

Submitted by	Comments:	
Lutz Alfred Beier From: Germany Arrival date at Aconcagua Park: december 2th 2004 E-mail: alvred@t-online.de	hallo- thats my story of the summit. I started from camp "berlin"in december 18th.it was sunny day but the storm was much strong above the "indepedencia".my friend was fallen behind in"berlin". I reached the top at 6pm.the view was impressing.but I couldnt reached our tend in "berlin" never.I left the normal route because I was followed the way of polish glaciar behind indepedencia in ths darkness possibly. I spent the night near a rock. in the next morning I ve seen thats my stay was near the east side .my barometer showed 5700m high.the weather was beautifull fortunately and my power good. the frostbites I couldnt felt.but my water was finish.I started at 6a.m. and reached the "nido" at 11a.m.and "plaza de mulas" at 1p.m. I had any frostbites on fingers, toes and nose.the doctor and his teammade a very commited and professional medical work. they were so much friendly and diligent.special thanks ! best wishes lutz alfred	1 5 10 15

Added: February 12, 2005   ❌

The text (from <www.aconcagua.com/>) is a posting in a discussion room about Aconcagua, in Argentina, which is the world's highest mountain outside the Himalaya. The writer is from Germany. He is writing in Standard English, but makes a number of mistakes.

(a)   Correct all verbs that are wrongly constructed.

(b)   Identify a mistake in negation.

(c)   Does Alfred get his message across?

30

Suggested answers

(a) The following verbs are wrongly constructed for Standard English. They are also not correct for any dialect of English and are the type of construction associated with learners of English who have either not mastered basic verb construction or have made a slip up.

  i.   was fallen > had fallen (line 4); was followed > had followed (line 6) [these would be correctly constructed passives, but these cannot be passives]

  ii. couldnt reached > couldn't reach (line 5); couldnt felt > couldn't feel (line 11) [don't worry about the apostrophe – it's the –ed that is the crucial issue]

  iii. was finish > was finished (line 11)

Some students might correct "I ve seen" to "I saw". If so, discuss the difference between a wrongly constructed verb that could not be standard in any context, compared to one, like "have seen", which is standard in itself,   but   not   necessarily   standard   in   this   context.

(b) There are two negators in one clause in line 5-6 (*not* and *never*): "I couldnt reached ... never".

(c) Yes. He makes some very basic grammatical mistakes (of a sort typical of learners of English) but these do not prevent us from understanding his

terrifying story. English does not have to be perfect to get the message across.

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Comment [C17]: Is this to be included? [yes, but with literary style reference in text incl first name]

Comment [C18]: Is this to be included? [yes]

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Comment [C19]: Is this 1949 – library references state 1949. [it has a complicated publication history. My copy is unavailable to me at the moment to check, so 1949 might be right, but this is the reference I have always used in the past, so I can't be sure. Your choice..]

Comment [C20]: Pls check – I have reformatted here.

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Discussion questions

1. What dialects of English other than Standard English are your students likely to see or hear? Where? How does the grammar of these dialects differ in the 4 criterial areas of grammar discussed in this chapter?

2. Would you wish to show your students Standard English texts from a variety of regions? What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of doing this?

3. To what extent have your students mastered the 4 criterial areas of grammar discussed in this chapter? What mistakes do they make? What other areas of grammar do you consider need close attention?

Suggestions for exercises

1. **Different styles for different text types.** Select a picture or a very short sequence of pictures that tell a story. Students imagine that they experienced the events portrayed and then have to write about what they saw -- for two different readershps. For example, in a workshop with 14-year olds I presented a picture of a man falling of a bicycle and an x-ray image of a broken arm. The students had to imagine that they had seen the incident on the way to school. They were told to write (a) a text message to a friend and (b) a letter to the school principal explaining why they were late to school that day. The class then discussed the differences in the language used in the two text types.

2. **Developing analytic skills and identifying non-standard features.**. In a question where the teacher supplies a text, questions should always be specific and directed, and should relate to what has been taught. The focus should always be on specific features. Select a text that includes a large number of categorical non-standard features. There are many such texts on line, which you can find by targetted online searches. Some of them are texts caefully written in a specific dialect. To find these either try a search for 'dialect poetry', or search for words or phrases that you know to be used in a specific dialect, such as (for Singlish) *kiasu* and *kena*. Others are texts written by learners of English in international

online forums. It is important to emphasise to students that communication by learners can be good even if the English is not perfect. It is easy to come across these either by seaching for subjects of international interest (such as travel, gardening, dog-breeding, motorbikes) or by searching for errors of the kind commonly made by learners of English, such as "didn't came" or "was finish soon": where one of these errors is made, a text will usually have several. In both kinds of texts, ask the student to (a) identify and classify the non-standard features, and (b) explain why these non-standard features are used.