

# Real People Don't Talk Like Books: Teaching Colloquial English

Lucia Pietrusiak Engkent

---

Register is an important feature of language use, but has often been neglected in language teaching. A systematic presentation of register differences and use would help students minimize register errors. The language of the streets must

be brought into the classroom so that students can cope with everyday spoken English. In this paper, different characteristics of conversational English are discussed.

---

## RATIONALE

All speakers control many different register variations of their language. We determine register by the relative status of speakers, the medium of communication, and the degree of formality required within a particular situation. For example, adults have a different manner of speaking to children than to other adults, and a job interview requires more formal English than a conversation. A paper delivered at a conference must have its register changed when it is written up for publication. Register is an essential part of everyday language use.

People appear to be sensitive to errors in register, maybe even more so than to errors in grammar. Even though most native speakers allow for such errors in the speech of non-native speakers, register errors can be as serious as social gaffes. The general rule that it is better to be somewhat too formal than too informal is an oversimplification. Overly formal language can make native speakers uncomfortable. Just as we do not want our students to write sentences like "You can see a lot of kids hanging around the mall," in a formal academic essay, we also do not want them to address classmates with a "Pardon me, sir."

Register, however, is often neglected in language teaching. As a result, errors in register are common in students' speech and writing. Some texts do mark certain vocabulary and expressions as formal and informal but rarely go beyond that to explore differences in register. Many materials smooth over register variations and homogenize the language taught. Teachers would benefit from research in the form of a systematic study of register with more emphasis on teaching the differences between registers and when and how they are used.

Some students, especially those who have studied English as a

foreign language, have studied English very formally. Their teaching situations may have been less than ideal. They may have had out-of-date materials, an over-emphasis on formal grammar, or teachers who are not fluent speakers. As a result, these students can be ill-equipped to converse with native speakers. They are often completely bewildered when they first hear sentences like "What'cha doin' this aft?" Some cannot accept the English they hear as "proper" and they feel more at home dissecting sentences than having a conversation. On the other hand, we also have students who have not studied formally and have picked up their English in conversational situations; they often have trouble dealing with formal varieties of the language.

## FORMAL VS. INFORMAL ENGLISH

While there are many different registers that native speakers use, language learners do not need to master them all. Students are well-equipped if they can handle a basic formal/informal distinction and understand the principles of register use. Colloquial English must be taught so that students understand the characteristics of the language they hear on the street and the proper places to use it. Such instruction should go beyond simply labelling certain expressions as formal or informal.

Gillian Brown (1981, p. 4) distinguishes between hearer-oriented/interactional speech and message-oriented/transactional speech:

Primarily hearer-oriented/*interactive speech* is found in all cultures, literate and non-literate, and among all ages of speaking humans. It differs from primarily message-oriented/transactional speech, very often, in being less clearly articulated, less clearly expressed, often containing a lot of vagueness and modality. . . .

Some conversational interchange, such as small talk, fits this description of hearer-oriented/interactional speech. In conversation, native speakers may start with a ritualistic speech pattern and then move into the intended message.

### A Standard

When dealing with conversational English, we as ESL teachers have to come to terms with our own perceptions of correct and incorrect. English teachers as a group may be overly conservative when it comes to language. We must recognize this tendency and make judgements not only according to our own personal preference, but also according to general acceptability and our intuition and common sense. After all, there will always be speech forms that make us cringe and other

neologisms that we embrace whole-heartedly, consciously or unconsciously.

Still, we must keep in mind that not everything we hear can be considered good, informal English. Native speakers do make errors which they are able to correct. In addition, some forms and expressions are generally considered to be socially unacceptable, and therefore non-standard English. For example, a person who says "ain't" or "irregardless" is outside the bounds of acceptable English. But these limits are flexible. For example, within a peer group, a non-standard form may be acceptable. As well, words and forms can become standard English over time.

When we consider the rights and wrongs of language, or the acceptable and the unacceptable, we should also recognize that language is constantly changing. Today's brash neologisms gradually become more accepted and make their way into even the most conservative dictionaries. Generally, changes start in the colloquial tongue and spread to other registers, gaining acceptance when they become written forms.

Just as vocabulary and pronunciation change, grammar does too. Aitchison (1981) points out the increasing use of the progressive tense and of *going to* for the future. For example, Polonius asks Hamlet "What do you read, my Lord?" instead of "What are you reading?" (Aitchison, 1981, p. 104). We can see another change taking place: verbs of mental state and perception are now used in continuous tenses, as in such sentences as "I'm wondering where I should go on vacation."

While language purists have always bemoaned the deterioration of language, some linguists claim that each language evolves into a more efficient state. The only certainty is that all languages change and stopping the change is impossible. We cannot turn back the hands of time to a period when language was "purer"; there is no such time.

Recognizing different varieties of English does not mean we must adopt an attitude of "anything goes." By keeping registers distinct in our classroom, we can accept the colloquialisms in everyday conversation, but demand precision of language in students' essays. Ignoring register variations only puts us in the position of ostriches with heads in the sand, oblivious to the reality around them.

## FEATURES OF CONVERSATIONAL ENGLISH

Just as native speakers instinctively know the grammatical rules of their language but may not be able to explain them, they are also aware of the differences between registers but may not know what actually makes them different. This same phenomenon occurs for other social "rules": often we are unaware of the presence of a rule until it is broken.

Indeed, ESL teachers often discover the rules of their native language and culture for the first time as they teach them. ESL curricula now include the quirks of our cultural behaviour "discovered" by sociolinguists and anthropologists. For example, their studies in body language made us aware of the importance of teaching gestures and proxemics. As well, becoming conscious of the characteristics of register differences in English can help us explain another facet of English to our students.

### **Pronunciation**

To purists, informal English is sloppy and a victim of "lazy tongues". Spoken English of all registers, however, is characterized by reductions of sounds and ellipses. Vowels drop or reduce to schwa, and other sounds change or blur. We do not pronounce words letter by letter with the written form. A word like "vegetable", for example, would be unrecognizable if all the written vowels were given a full-length pronunciation. Unstress should be taught in pronunciation drills because it is essential to the rhythm of English.

Reduction of sounds is characteristic of informal spoken English. "Gotta", "gonna", and "wanna" look strange to students when they are printed in a dialogue, yet the students hear these forms all the time. An overconcentration on the written forms of English creates a false sense of how English is actually pronounced. For example, one student challenged the North American pronunciation of "butter", claiming that it was "wrong" even though the flap "t" is a natural articulation.

Listening for unstressed elements in a sentence is often a useful exercise. Sometimes it seems that students do not pay enough attention to the function words of a sentence. Prepositions, articles, verb endings, and auxiliary verbs are all unstressed in a sentence and difficult for students to produce correctly in both writing and speaking. Examining stress patterns can help students hear the differences between such forms as *can* and *can't*. Practice in listening for the vowel sound instead of the "t" sound can be useful for distinguishing such sentences as "I can talk now," and "I can't talk now."

### **Ellipsis**

In speech, people take shortcuts. There is not the same danger of misunderstanding as there is in writing. The context is clear and comprehension can be easily verified since the audience is present. A university student saying "I have an eight-thirty tomorrow," is not in danger of being misunderstood. "This afternoon" becomes "this aft" and "an invitation" becomes "an invite".

Sometimes ellipsis results in surface ungrammaticality. We go out

for “a coffee” and get invited to “a wine ‘n cheese”. These forms can prove puzzling to students who have been taught that non-count nouns do not take an indefinite article. Explaining the ellipsis restores a sense of order to the language.

### **Use of “You” as a General Pronoun**

Spoken English is also characterized by a use of “you” as a general pronoun to mean people in general. It is used in many expressions and in proverbs such as, “You should look both ways before you cross the street.” Language learners seem to catch on quickly that such pronouncements do not mean *them* personally. Still, we should point out and explain that “you” is a feature of spoken English that becomes an error when it is used in an academic essay.

### **Hesitation Markers**

“You” also appears in expressions. For instance, the ubiquitous “You know” has various functions in conversational speech. It is used as a hesitation marker: “It’s close to that new restaurant—umm, *you know*—what’s the name of that place again?”; as a request for agreement: “They really are the best team in the league, *you know*.”; and as an introduction to a new fact: “*You know*, I saw Peter yesterday.” In this last instance, it is a contradiction in terms—a case where you really don’t know.

As well as “you know”, there are other hesitation markers we use in speech, and some of the new functional conversation texts, such as *Functions of American English* (Jones & von Baeyer, 1983) actively teach hesitations. Some people may think that hesitation markers show poor language skills. While these hesitations are not the sign of a good public speaker, they are a normal part of everyday conversation. After all, hesitation phenomena serve an important function: they give a person time to think and hold the floor. A silence would not only be confusing to listeners, it would allow interruptions. It can even be embarrassing to the participants in the conversation.

### **Subject-Verb Agreement**

Native speakers make errors in subject-verb agreement constantly in their everyday speech. The singular verb with a compound subject is moving into acceptability: “The salt and pepper is on the table.” Yet the frequently heard singular verb with “here” and “there” is still considered ungrammatical: “There’s lots of books on the table,” and “Where’s my boots?” This surface ungrammaticality results partly from ease of pronunciation. “There are” is difficult to pronounce, and the contraction, “there’re,” is almost impossible.

Rather than just giving our students the rule for subject-verb agreement and ignoring the "errors" in native speakers' speech, we should explain these exceptions and their use in conversation. After all, subject-verb agreement is difficult enough for most students to handle. We should not ignore such forms or dismiss them as exceptions, but instead demonstrate this process at work in informal speech.

### **Pronoun Agreement**

Other grammatical errors commonly found in conversational speech include pronoun agreement: "Everybody take out their books," and "Each person brought their own lunch." This results from the effort made to avoid the masculine pronoun as a generic pronoun. In writing, pronoun usage can become very awkward, as we try to avoid using both the masculine pronoun and the ungrammatical plural forms that surface in speech. But in our everyday speech, we are more relaxed and pay less attention to traditional grammar rules. In time, perhaps, English will evolve a more efficient system of pronoun use.

### **To Get**

The verb "to get" tends to be over-used in informal English. It has several basic meanings: to obtain, to become, to arrive at or reach, and to have. As well, it is used in many two-word verb combinations. In expressions with prepositions and adverbs it can replace many different verbs. We can tell our whole life story using "get":

This morning I got up late (since I got in late the night before), got washed and dressed quickly, and got a quick breakfast of coffee and a muffin. I got out of the door by 8:30, got the express bus on the corner, and got to work in the nick of time. I got to work before the boss got in. . . .

The form "have got" is colloquial and is a result of the contraction of "have". The redundancy is considered unnecessary and, indeed, incorrect in formal, written English.

### **Verbs with "Up"**

More verbs are modified with the addition of the adverb *up* to add the meaning of "completely". For example, "cut up" means to cut something into small pieces, whereas "cut" can signify a single cut. The list of such verbs includes "dress up, tear up, speak up, read up, burn up, and clean up." A recent addition is, of course, "listen up".

### **Modifiers**

Conversational English is also marked by certain qualifiers that are

not found in other registers. “Pretty” and “real” used as adverbs are two common examples. With these, we should point out the meaning of the modifiers by contrasting relative strength. For example, “I’m pretty tired,” is weaker than “I’m really tired.” “Real” used as an adverb is heard more frequently today (“I’m real tired.”) but is still generally considered to be non-standard in Canada.

Other modifiers, such as “a lot” and “a bit”, find their way into the speech of non-native speakers quite easily; they also occur incorrectly in their formal writing. In fact, native speakers are also guilty of committing such errors in formal essays.

## **Comparisons**

A few years ago, a well-known cigarette company asked “What do you want, good grammar or good taste,” in answer to the public outcry following the use of its claim that its cigarette “tastes good like a cigarette should.” “Like” in such comparisons is a common feature of conversational English. The “as” form, although considered correct, sounds overly formal, as in the phrase “tastes just *as if* mother made it herself.”

## **Euphemism**

Euphemism is another characteristic of conversational speech. As Aitchison (1981) points out, a scientific or medical paper might contain references to “urination”, but in everyday speech, people go to “the little girls’ (or boys’) room”, or to “the washroom” or “powder room”. Everyday conversation includes euphemisms for swear words and body parts and functions.

## **Idioms**

Many ESL students love to study idioms. Idioms are an integral part of conversational English but they are difficult to learn. Some idioms can be grouped together by theme or similar form. Others can only be taught within context. Teachers can always mention the idioms appropriate to a situation discussed in class. We can introduce our students to as many idioms as possible, but we should not require them to memorize long lists. Students will remember idioms they find particularly useful or particularly interesting.

## **Slang**

Slang is impossible to teach systematically in the classroom. By its very nature, it is transitory and linked to peer groups. Probably the best way to deal with slang is simply to define and classify any terms that might come up in class from students’ questions.

It is wise, however, to discourage language learners from using slang. The use of slang depends on the degree of integration within a society. Just as it seems odd for a middle-aged business executive to use current teenage slang, it is equally inappropriate for many non-native speakers. Young ESL students, however, will use the slang of their peer group as they become a part of the group.

Slang words such as "kids" and "bucks" are readily picked up by ESL students, especially as the words move from the realm of slang into that of colloquialisms. Here again, we should inform our students that such words are unacceptable in formal academic essays and in formal speaking situations such as job interviews.

### **Phatic/Ritualistic Expressions**

Much of everyday conversation is routine. People use ritualistic expressions for greetings and partings. Some of these expressions take on a function that seems separate from the literal meaning. For example, "How do you do?" is used to acknowledge an introduction and not to ask about someone's welfare. "How are you?" is also losing its literal meaning; the expression functions as a greeting. For example, people call out "Hi. How are you?" to acquaintances and do not even wait for a response. Other ritualistic expressions include "Take it easy," and "Take care," for conversation closings.

## **TEACHING CONVERSATIONAL ENGLISH**

By recognizing the features of colloquial English and by explaining them to our students, we prepare them for life outside the classroom. Not everyone they speak to will have the precise diction of an English teacher, and the language they hear will not be the sanitized version found in textbooks. Language learners should be aware that colloquial English is a different variety and is "correct" as such. A common-sense approach to colloquial English and its place among different registers should be fostered in students, teachers, and textbook writers.

In addition to teaching the forms of informal and formal English, we must teach our students when certain registers are appropriate. An academic writing class should focus on formal English, with a clear explanation of what is not acceptable. Conversation classes, on the other hand, should focus on informal English. Teachers of multi-skill classes should make it clear which register is required for each task.

As well as teaching the language of conversation, we must teach the social parameters. Conversational strategies include knowing when to speak, what topic to speak about, and other cultural rules. The sociolin-

guistic aspects of language can be difficult to teach because the rules are subtle and not explicitly explained in any rule book of conversation.

The features of informal English can be taught within the context of dialogues. While Brown and Yule (1983) favour transcripts of actual conversation over scripted dialogues, the latter have the advantage of being focused and readable. They do not have to sound stilted and unnatural. While tape recordings are an invaluable tool for bringing real speech into class, students should also have the opportunity to read the dialogue aloud. Dialogues such as those used in *Functions of American English* (Jones & von Baeyer, 1983) are natural but difficult to read in class. Textbook dialogues should not, however, be practiced to the point of memorization; rather, they provide a jumping-off point for role plays and discussions.

One question each teacher must deal with is how much colloquial English students should be asked to actually produce. Do we really want our students saying, "Gotta go now, catch ya later?" Some colloquial expressions sound out of place when spoken by students struggling with the language. Also, the relaxed pronunciations characteristic of informal English could ever make it more difficult for students to be understood. It is easier to follow speech that is precise and explicit, especially if the speech is heavily accented.

Because the features of colloquial English are more important to comprehension skills than to production skills, they tend to be neglected in curricula. However, we cannot assume our students will understand everyday speech without some explanation of its features. Teaching colloquial English is a decoding process, an explanation of the way the language works and what can be expected of it. This instruction helps students improve comprehension and increase self-confidence. In time, their use of language will become less formal in conversation.

We must explain the principle of register and the features of formal and informal English. Some students have trouble accepting more than one "right" answer and see language in black and white terms. Working within the framework of register variations allows us to deal with conversational English in its rightful place and to reduce register errors in our students' work.

---

## REFERENCES

- Aitchison, J. (1981). *Language change: progress or decay?* Britain: Fontana Paperbacks.
- Brown, G. (1982). Teaching and assessing spoken language. *TESL Talk: Conference Proceedings TESL 81, II*, 3-13.
- Brown, G. & Yule, G. (1983). *Teaching the spoken language: An approach*

- based on the analysis of conversational English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dubois, B.L. & Crouch I. (1975). The question of tag questions in women's speech: they don't really use more of them, do they? *Language in Society*, 4, 289-294.
- Jones, L. & von Baeyer, C. (1983). *Functions of American English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lakoff, R. (1975). *Language and woman's place*. New York: Harper Colophon Books.

#### **THE AUTHOR**

Author of *Take Part: Speaking Canadian English* (Prentice-Hall Canada, 1986), Lucia Engkent has taught conversational English at the University of Alberta. She is currently teaching EAP for the York University English Language Institute, Toronto.