1. Describing and Teaching English Grammar with Reference to Written Discourse

Marianne Celce-Murcia

Abstract
This article emphasizes the current need in the ESL/EFL discipline to re-analyze virtually all of English grammar at the discourse level. Short illustrative texts focus on a variety of written English discourse genres to contrast sentence-level description and instruction with discourse-level description and instruction for the following four forms and structures:

- demonstratives
- tense and aspect
- existential *there* sentences
- *it* clefts

At least two paragraph-length discourse-level examples are presented for each grammar feature discussed in the paper to illustrate the workings of grammar in written discourse. The importance of doing data-based analyses of grammar — using corpora and using authentic data — is discussed.

Introduction
Most ESL/EFL teachers tend to view ‘grammar’ as an exclusively sentence-level phenomenon. This perspective is outmoded and has had negative consequences for the way in which grammar is described and taught. A sentence-based view of grammar is also inconsistent with the notion of communicative competence, which includes at least four interacting competencies: linguistic/grammatical competence, socio-linguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence (Canale, 1983).

Since communicative competence is the foundation of communicative language teaching, it is clearly important that we move beyond the sentence level in our conceptions of grammar and understand the relationship between the morphological and syntactic aspects of linguistic competence, and the various sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects of discourse competence. This paper will
attempt to describe the nature of this relationship by examining the discourse function(s) of several grammatical structures in written English; namely, demonstratives, two different tense-aspect patterns, expletive there constructions, and it clefts.

ESL/EFL teachers are not the only professionals who tend to restrict the study of English grammar to the sentence level. The study of morphology and syntax in contemporary linguistics tends to be predominantly sentence level. Moreover, many formal linguists (e.g. Chomsky, 1957, 1965) have a preference for thinking of grammar as an autonomous and context-free system. In contrast to this perspective, functional linguists (e.g., Givon, 1979; Halliday, 1985) argue that very few “rules” of grammar are completely context-free. The following list is fairly comprehensive for context-free rules in English:¹

- subject-verb agreement²
- determiner-noun agreement
- use of gerunds after prepositions
- reflexive pronominalization at the clause level

These are the local agreement rules that operate within sentences in isolation as well as in sentences occurring in context. Gender and number agreement rules that operate in languages such as French, Spanish, and German are also examples of such local operations. In contrast to this small set of local agreement rules, the vast majority of grammatical choices that a writer makes represent “rules” that depend on certain conditions being met in terms of meaning, situational context, and/or discourse context. Such grammatical rules are clearly not context-free. All languages have such context-dependent, pragmatic rules (Levinson, 1983). If one takes English as the language under study, one can easily argue that all of the following rules or structures of English grammar are sensitive—at least in part—to discourse context (the list is far from exhaustive):

- use of passive voice
- indirect object alternation
- pronominalization across clauses
- article/determiner choice
- position of adverbials (phrases, clauses) in sentences
- use of existential there
• tense-aspect-mood choice
• right/left dislocation of constituents
• use of logical connectors & discourse markers
• use of it clefts and wh-clefts

etc.

In all such cases, the writer's ability to produce the form or construction in question accurately is but a part of a much larger process in which the semantic, pragmatic, and discourse appropriateness of the construction itself is also judged with respect to the context in which it is used. One of the earliest accounts of the discourse function of grammatical forms was Halliday and Hasan (1976), in which interclausal cohesive ties (i.e., semantic and syntactic ties that cross clause or sentence boundaries) are proposed and described. Specifically, Halliday and Hasan discuss four types of cohesive ties in English that are related to the grammar of texts:

1. Ties of **reference** (pronouns, possessive forms, demonstratives, etc.):

   \[ Joan bought an apple. She ate it. \]

   Here *Joan* and *she* as well as also *apple* and *it* are coreferential (i.e., both refer to the same entity) and form cohesive ties in the text.

2. Ties of **substitution** (nominal one(s), verbal *do*, clausal *so*):

   \[ I wanted Sarah to wear her blue dress but she wore the red one. \]

   Here *one* replaces *dress*, forming a structural and lexical/semantic tie. *One* and *dress* are co-classificational (i.e., refer to the same class of entities) but not coreferential.

3. Ties of **ellipsis** (or substitution by zero):

   \[ If you asked me who the best candidate is, I would say Amy. \]

   In this context *Amy* functions elliptically to express the entire proposition *Amy is the best candidate.*
4. Ties of conjunction:

Some magazines like to feature the lean and hungry look; however, we believe that this look will not last.

Here however signals a tie between the clause that follows and the clause that precedes it. In this case, it means that the two clauses are related by contrast or counter-expectation, i.e., what magazines are doing now will not, in the opinion of the authors, continue indefinitely into the future—reader expectations to the contrary.

Some Context-sensitive Grammatical Structures in Written English Discourse

Demonstratives

How do most ESL/EFL textbooks teach English demonstratives? The presentation is largely oral in nature and based on the near/far distinction, singular vs. plural number, and the pronominal vs. adjectival form. Thus, in context and in potentially fully meaningful drills (often accompanied by appropriate gestures), students can practice sentences like:

This is a book. Read this book.
That's a door. Open that door.
These are pencils. Sharpen these pencils.
Those are windows. Open those windows.

This type of physically contextualized practice is where most ESL/EFL treatments of demonstratives stop, which is unfortunate because conventions for use of demonstratives differ in extended written discourse and conversation. In expository writing, use of this/these presupposes that the reader has access to the referent; its use signals that the topic will persist or that the topic is something the writer wants to highlight or identify with. On the other hand, the use of that/those, which also presupposes reader access to the referent, can signal the end of a topic/discussion (That's that!), scrupulous objectivity, a temporally past reference, etc.

Demonstrative pronouns and adjectives in written English discourse are the focus of a study by Nishimura (1995). Nishimura compared book reviews (i.e., book notices) and short essays by native English authors published in the

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TESOL Quarterly during the past several years and found that demonstrative usage was far more constrained in the book reviews than in the essays. Almost all the demonstratives used in the reviews were of the form *this* or *these* (with very few tokens of *that/those*). Furthermore, most of the demonstratives were adjectival (i.e., modifying a noun head) and simply referred back to bibliographic information concerning the book under review, as the following excerpt from the final paragraph of one of the reviews illustrates (I have highlighted the demonstratives by putting them in bold and capital letters in the following two texts):

*Focus* is an effective book: through the use of excellent illustrations and examples, it thoroughly covers the grammar appropriate to **THIS** level. Its varied approach and stimulating contexts allow for discussion of topics relevant to the adult international student... Students will likely find **THIS** text interesting and stimulating.

(Wilson, 1989: 691)

The use of demonstratives in the short essays appearing in the same publication followed a different pattern. Demonstratives not only referred back to coreferential noun phrases but to whole clauses and groups of clauses. Although the forms *this/these* still accounted for the majority of tokens, there was a much greater variety of functions and a higher number of *that/those* tokens in the essay data:

In **THESE** comments I have expanded on DuFon’s discussion of the sixth area of the TESOL guidelines. Research has a world view. It can be dishonestly executed to serve the aims of others, although... I believe **THAT** is truly rare. Alternatively, it can be proactive, helping to set odd practices on the right track, as Collier has done. I believe much research is motivated by **THAT** spirit.

(Davidson, 1993, 162)

In the first line of this excerpt (also a final paragraph), the author refers to his own entire essay with the noun phrase *these comments*. In the middle of the excerpt he uses the demonstrative pronoun *that* to refer to an entire proposition, *dishonestly executing research to serve the aims of others*. In the final line he uses *that spirit* to refer back to another proposition *doing proactive research that helps to set odd practices on the right track, as Collier has done*. 

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Nishimura blanked out all of the demonstratives in the book reviews and essays in her database and asked good native writers of English to read the texts and fill in whichever demonstrative they thought was most appropriate (this, that, these, those). In the book reviews there was very little deviation from what the original authors had written; however, in the essays, there was a reasonable amount of deviation from the original. For example, in the passage above by Davidson, some other native speakers selected this spirit instead of that spirit in the final line of the essay. Nishimura speculates that the English writers who opted to write in this spirit were expressing a high degree of affect and were identifying themselves strongly with research that is like Collier’s (in spirit). The original author Davidson probably selected that spirit because it is the last line of his essay and that expresses greater temporal finality than this. In any case, the fact that the book review genre is so highly constrained in its use of demonstratives while the academic essay genre offers much more leeway for rhetorical effect and personal style suggests that demonstrative usage may sometimes be genre specific in written English discourse. This is an area in need of further study.

Tense and Aspect
In most ESL/EFL teaching materials tense and aspect markers are taught and practiced one form at a time at the sentence level:

*John goes to school every day (simple present)*
*John went to school yesterday (simple past)*

However, teachers often bemoan the fact that even after extended drills practicing the above forms—along with all the other tense-aspect forms, their students cannot control tense and aspect over a sequence of related sentences. They claim that their learners jump from one tense-aspect form to another without any justification when they write. This is not surprising. The functions of many tense-aspect markers at the discourse level are quite different from what students have been taught about these markers at the sentence level. For example, students are taught that the past perfect tense in English signals a time anterior to some other specified time in the past and that it does not make sense without this past time anchor:

*By ten p.m. last night, I had already gone to bed.*
*Before he graduated from college, Joe had published a book.*
There are many examples like the immediately preceding one where the past perfect is not even necessary since the presence of the temporally explicit adverbial subordinator before guarantees that the same meaning can be unambiguously expressed using only the simple past tense:

*Before he graduated from college, Joe published a book.*

If in the above sentence before were changed to temporally less explicit *when*, this would not be true. The meaning of the sentences would change depending on the use of the simple past versus the past perfect tense:

*When he graduated from college, Joe published a book.*
*When he graduated from college, Joe had published a book.*

These are the kinds of things advanced ESL/EFL students learn about the past perfect tense in English. However, it is important to ask how the tense gets used in extended written discourse. It is used rarely but strategically in written narratives to signal the writer’s purpose for relating the narrative. Consider the following two examples:

The students sat in the bleachers of Pauley Pavillion watching the faculty enter in their caps and gowns. Dignitaries continued to arrive while the band played a festive melody for the onlookers. To the cheers of the crowd, President Clinton came in and took his assigned seat on the podium. UCLA’s 75th anniversary celebration *had begun*.

In the 1980’s researchers at Stanford University were trying to teach American sign language to Koko, a gorilla. Koko was well cared for and was surrounded by interesting objects. Her caretakers continually exposed her to signs for the food items and toys in her environment. Koko particularly loved bananas and kittens. One day she was hungry but couldn’t find any bananas. She went to a researcher and made a good approximation of the sign for “banana.” Koko was rewarded with a banana, but even more importantly, the research team knew that Koko *had made* the connection between a sign and the object it represented.
In both these texts and others like them the narrative in the simple past tense is being related so that the writer can make a point. The point is encoded in a sentence with the past perfect tense. The so-called point or gist is not a prior action or state but an important climax or culmination of everything else that has been stated. Writers use the past perfect in this type of written narrative, which one might label “purposeful narrative,” because they have an important point in mind that they then express in the past perfect once the setting has been prepared with the simple past.

Another systematic use of tense shift in written discourse has been noted by Brinton (1994), who prepared grammar exercises to accompany an introductory college-level psychology text by Huffman, Vernoy, and Vernoy (1994). Brinton noticed that these psychology textbook authors frequently present a real-life illustration in the past tense:

In 1848, Phineas Gage suffered a bizarre accident when an explosion happened at his work place. As a result of the explosion, an iron rod entered his skull and pierced his frontal lobe. Phineas recovered physically from this accident, but his personality changed forever.

(Brinton, 1994: 9)

The story or anecdote then becomes the basis for the authors’ discussion of the significance of the anecdote and other similar events. This more general discussion invariably is stated in the present tense:

From the case study of Phineas Gage, it appears that the frontal lobe controls much of our individual personality and defines our ability to make decisions. We now know that the frontal lobe helps us to plan and change actions.

(Brinton, 1994: 9)

Although the above is the preferred order for anecdotes and generalizations in this particular textbook, the real-world anecdote does not always occur before the authors’ generalization; sometimes the reverse order occurs:

The difference between an Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and milder forms of compulsion is that OCD behaviors are much more extreme, appear irrational to almost everyone, and interfere consider-
ably with everyday life. Individuals with OCD sometimes wash their hands hundreds of times a day or spend hours performing senseless rituals of organizing and cleaning. Billionaire Howard Hughes provides an example of obsessive-compulsive behavior.

(Huffman, Vernoy & Vernoy, 1994: 522)

After this general description of OCD, the following paragraph provides the specific case description (i.e., Howard Hughes):

Due to his unreasonable fear of germs, he made people who worked with him wear white gloves, sometimes several pairs, when handling documents he would later touch. When newspapers were brought to him, they had to be in stacks of three so he could slide the middle one out by grasping it with Kleenex. To escape contamination by dust, he ordered that masking tape be put around the doors and windows of his cars and houses.

(Huffman, Vernoy & Vernoy, 1994: 522)

Whichever order occurs, the real-life illustration is in the simple past tense and the authors’ generalization and discussion is in the simple present tense. This is a rhetorical strategy that can be taught quite explicitly to ESL/EFL readers and writers.

Existential “there” sentences

In first-language composition instruction, English writers are often advised to avoid the existential *there* construction because prescriptivists feel that it creates wordy and weak prose (Baker, 1979; Heath Handbook, 1986). In ESL/EFL instruction, oral use of sentences with existential *there* subjects (much like the demonstratives) are taught with reference to what is visible in the physical context, and their presentation is sentence-level with little or no consideration given to discourse function:

*There is a book on the table.*

*There are two pencils on the desk.*

In analyzing a corpus of written and spoken English, Lloyd-Jones (1987) found that
such locative use of the construction accounted for only about ten percent of all tokens. What, then, are the primary functions of this construction in written discourse?

Ahlers (1991) assembled a database of expository written English and found that of 100 tokens of existential there sentences selected for analysis, only one was a sentence-level token; all the others had a discourse function. In Ahlers' corpus the major discourse function of the there construction was to present a major topic or sub-topic for subsequent development (as in the following example from Halliday and Resnick's (1988) introductory physics textbook:

**MODES OF NATURAL SELECTION**

**There are three major modes of natural selection**, as shown in Fig. 35.4 and defined by the following list:

1. “Stabilizing selection” favors intermediate forms of a trait and operates against extreme forms; hence the frequencies of alleles representing the extreme forms decrease.
2. “Directional selection” shifts the phenotypic character of the population as a whole, either in response to a directional change in the environment or in response to a new environment; hence the allelic frequencies underlying the range of phenotypes move in a steady, consistent direction.
3. “Disruptive selection” favors extreme forms of a trait and operates against intermediate forms; hence the frequencies of alleles representing the extreme forms increase.

(Ahlers, 1991: 12-13)

The above prototypic case follows a deductive presentation and reasoning style. Another salient but less frequent pattern that Ahlers found was the reverse of this (i.e., inductive organization where the details and specifics come first and the generalization with existential there concludes the topic and often states an important generalization. This is what occurs in the following excerpt from an economics textbook by Alchain and Allen (1972):

The establishment of a uniform price of a good in the international market is illustrated in Fig. 36-2. In the left half of the Figure, we have the US demand for and supply of the commodity in question; on the
right are the UK demand and supply schedules for the same commodity. With no foreign trade of the good, the US equilibrium price would be OP, with the quantity OM exchanged; and in the UK, equilibrium price would be OP" and quantity OM'. But with trade—and with neither costs of transportation nor tariffs or other restrictions on trade—then the US and the UK become a consolidated market. In this larger single market, there is an equilibrium price at which total (US plus UK) quantity demanded is equal to total quantity supplied.

(Ahlers, 1991: 15-16)

The one other discourse function of some importance that Ahlers found for existential there sentences was a more local listing function where very specific items on a list are often marked by existential there. Such an example occurs in the same economics textbook cited above (all instances of the there construction are in bold for reader convenience):

We have illustrated a case of complete factor-price equalization consistent with our assumptions. But we would never satisfy all of the assumptions required to achieve full factor-price equalization—and in some instances none of them—in the real world. These assumptions include:

1. There are only two productive factors, labor and capital, each of which is "homogeneous" throughout the world.
2. A given commodity has a single production function.
3. There are only two commodities, both produced with constant returns to scale. [note: this list has five more items—2 with "there" and three without.]

(Ahlers, 1991: 20-21)

The only ESL/EFL textbook that Ahlers was able to find that taught the existential there construction in a manner consistent with her analysis was Byrd and Benson (1989). All other sources she examined presented the construction strictly at the sentence level, which gives the learner an extremely incomplete picture of this construction in written discourse.
**IT Cleft sentences**

Prince (1978) distinguishes two types of *it* cleft sentences in English—stressed focus (SF) and informative-presupposition (IP). The former contains known information in its presupposed part (i.e., the relative clause) and the latter contains new information in its presupposed part:

*SF:* It isn't higher prices but changed expectations that have caused people to buy more at the present time.

*IP:* It was in 1979 that Piet Kornhof rather boldly announced, "Apartheid is dead."

Kim (1988) used a corpus to demonstrate that such *it* clefts, though rare in English, occur much more frequently in written than in spoken discourse and that they occur most frequently in genres such as historical narrative, persuasive discourse, and journalistic writing. In his corpus, about three-quarters of the clefts were of the SF variety, i.e., were used to express the author's emphasis or focus rather than to provide a backdrop for new information.

Kim found that ESL/EFL texts rarely present *it* clefts. When they do, the exercises tend to be sentence-level and highly mechanical:

The boy can play the flute.

→ It is the boy who can play the flute.

→ It is the flute that the boy can play.

The most enlightened textbooks presentations that Kim found provide a minimal context and bring out the contrastive function that such clefts often entail:

A: Are you concerned about the money?
B: No, it's the people that I'm concerned about.

Learners are not shown how to use the construction in written discourse, which is where it most often occurs. A good source of data for written examples is *Time* magazine. The May 22, 1995 U.S. edition had several tokens of *it* clefts. The following one occurred on p. 4 in the fourth paragraph of a short five-paragraph article titled "To our readers," which discussed two *Time* correspondents, Michael Duffy and Wendy Cole. The article is clearly more about Cole than Duffy since she
is the topic of four of the paragraphs, including this one (The it-clefts are in bold for reader convenience):

**It was Cole who chose Fargo as the microcosm for the debate on federal benevolence and intrusion.** Says Duffy, who wrote the story, "She saw it as a fascinating mix of frontier and front page. Then she dissected the town until she knew more about it than a lot of Fargoans. Late last week, needing an anecdote, she ran down to a local bowling alley, did three interviews and delivered a freshly minted kicker for the story inside of an hour."

The placement of Cole in the information focus in the opening *it* cleft sentence signals that Cole will be the topic of the paragraph. It also provides stylistic variation in that the other three paragraphs about Cole begin: *Cole has..., Wendy has..., Cole found...*

Another example of this construction in the same issue of *Time* occurs on p. 52 as part of an eleven-paragraph story entitled "Untrue Confessions" by Jill Smolowe. The *it* cleft occurs in the last sentence of the last paragraph:

Only a few become causes célèbres. Playwright Arthur Miller, who previously came to the aid of a Connecticut teenager convicted of killing his mother, is now involved in the appeal of Richard Lapointe, a brain-damaged dishwasher who was convicted of raping and killing his wife’s 88-year-old grandmother after a nine-hour interrogation in which he made three contradictory confessions. "This is a great problem," says Miller. "It ought to interest people that when they get a confession from an innocent man, a murderer gets a passport to freedom."

By placing shocking or surprising information in the part of the cleft where known or presupposed information normally occurs, the authors highlight the fact that the injustice of the existing situation is usually taken for granted. In effect, by saving this quoted *it* cleft from Miller for the last sentence in the article, the writer is able to use someone else’s words to express her own stance on the topic. In this case, it is a very powerful rhetorical device.
Conclusion
The above examples were cited to illustrate something that has become increasingly clear to me and many of my graduate students during the past several years: in ESL/EFL, we need to re-analyze virtually all of English grammar at the discourse level in order to be able to teach our students rules of grammar that will serve them when they read and write English for academic and communicative purposes. Sentence-level knowledge and production of a structure are but an elementary prerequisite to knowing how to use or interpret a structure in written discourse. When to use the structure and for what purpose one might use it constitute critical knowledge for the learner. Our reference grammars and teaching materials must begin to supply teachers and learners with this kind of information. But this will happen only if enough data-based analyses of authentic materials are carried out and properly disseminated. The sooner, the better.

Marianne Celce-Murcia is Professor of TESL/Applied Linguistics at UCLA. She is the author, co-author or editor of Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language (1991), The Grammar Book (1983), Beyond Basics: Issues and Research in TESOL (1985), Techniques and Resources in Teaching Grammar (1988), and is presently completing Teaching Pronunciation: a Course for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages and Discourse as Framework for Language Teaching as well as a second edition of the Grammar Book. She has also published articles in many professional journals and contributed chapters to many anthologies. Dr. Celce-Murcia was on the Executive Board of TESOL and is now on the Executive Board of AAAL.

Notes:
1. Perhaps the reader can add a few more examples.
2. Reid (1991) argues cogently that English subject-verb agreement is much less automatic and much more semantically driven and more subject to speaker-writer intention than most linguists have assumed.
3. Lexical cohesion, i.e., the use of vocabulary choices to establish semantic links in a text, is also discussed by Halliday and Hasan (1976), but it is excluded from this list since it is not a grammatical cohesive device.
4. Halliday and Hasan (1976) acknowledge that “conjunction” is a slippery area of cohesion given that conjunctions display both lexical and grammatical behavior.
5. This typology of cohesive devices was extended in Halliday and Hasan (1989) to include other discourse phenomena such as structural parallelism, theme-rheme development, given-new information, and adjacency pairs (e.g., a question followed by an answer).
6. This is more or less in line with Huckin and Pesante’s (1988) earlier findings.