

THE PAST PERFECT IN CORPORA AND EFL/ESL MATERIALS

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Abstract

Corpora provide teachers and materials developers with the ability to ensure that the instructions they use in class and in teaching materials correctly reflect natural use. This paper examines the ways in which grammar reference books and two types of EFL/ESL materials present the past perfect aspect and whether they do so accurately. It will be argued that there are several issues concerning how these books present the grammar point. Many of the books surveyed provide incomplete explanations of when and how the form is used and several contain usage guidelines that are not supported by available corpus data. The paper ends with several recommendations to improve how the form is presented to teachers and learners.

Keywords: corpus, ESL, EFL, materials, past, perfect

1. Introduction

The period around the late 1990s and early 2000s saw a great deal of research published on the topic of corpus linguistics. One of the most notable was the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English, largely regarded as the first comprehensive corpus-based grammar. One of the co-authors of that work, in an article entitled ‘Will Corpus Linguistics Revolutionize Grammar Teaching in the 21st Century?’, argues that the use of corpus linguistics had the potential to have a transformative impact on the way grammar is taught in ESL/EFL situations, arguing that the effects would be felt in an increase of focus on analyzing the specific genre in which a form is used, an integration between grammar teaching and associated vocabulary and a “shift from accuracy to the appropriate conditions for use for alternative grammatical constructions” (Conrad 2000: 549). Biber and Conrad (2001) hold that teacher intuition is too unreliable to be used as a basis for creating materials. Liu and Jiang argue that corpus based-materials can give students a better sense of when and why a particular form is used (2009). Conrad (2001) is one of several researchers who argue that textbooks of the time had failed in making use of corpus data to improve teaching materials. Barbieri and Eckhardt (2007: 321) survey several studies and conclude that there is often a “great divide” between how language is presented in textbooks and what corpora data reveals about use in authentic situations. Other authors suggest that while materials

developers seek to include frequency information in textbooks, they often use intuition rather than actual data when making these decisions (Biber and Reppen 2002).

Over ten years have passed since the publication of many of those articles and in that time, accessing corpora has become far easier due to the spread of the internet. It thus seems an appropriate point at which to evaluate if and how corpus data has affected grammar teaching. This study seeks to assess how well grammar reference books and materials designed for EFL/ESL students present the use of the past perfect aspect. The first section will detail general information about the form and how it is represented in grammar reference books primarily used by instructors. The next section describes how the form is dealt with by EFL/ESL books. The following section describes corpora results from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the British National Corpus (BNC). These results are then compared and contrasted to the information from the previous two sections. The final section presents teaching implications and recommendations and suggestions for further research.

2. The Past Perfect Aspect in Grammar Reference Books

2.1. Form and Meaning

The past perfect is formed with the auxiliary verb ‘had’ and a past participle verb. It is used in three main ways. The base function is marking which of two past events occurred first (Swan 2005; Sinclair 2005; Cecle-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1999; Parrot 2000), in which case it is often used in compound sentences containing one clause with the past perfect and a second with the simple past. The past perfect identifies which event occurred first (furthest in the past), functioning as the past of the past, as in “The family had finished their supper when she got home” (Davies 2004). The speaker’s arrival is marked by the simple past and the family finishing the meal with the past perfect, establishing that the meal ended before the speaker arrived. The use of the simple past in both clauses – ‘The family finished their supper when she got home’ – would imply that the actions were essentially concurrent. However, if rephrased as ‘The family finished their supper before she got home,’ the meaning is essentially the same as the original. This use can be described as optional, and various other forms and words can be used to achieve the same meaning.

The second use deals with past states and habits and mirrors the present perfect in that “the state/habit begins in the remote past and lasts up to the past point of orientation” (Jackson 1990: 93). The habits can be completed as in “It began to rain. It had not rained for months” (Davis 2004) or with the potential of continuation as in “The Cardinals had gone 47 consecutive games without losing when they scored at least four runs” (Davies 2008). In these cases, the use of the form is not required as use of time expressions and adverbials can clearly establish

the order of past events. When comparing “After we had lived there for a few years, we wanted to buy it” (Davis 2004) with ‘After we lived there for a few years, we wanted to buy it,’ both carry the same meaning and it is difficult to say which sentence is more natural.

In other cases, the use of the form could obscure the meaning stemming from the multiple meanings of the past perfect to show completed or ongoing actions. For the sake of clarity and comparison, the numbered examples below are those written by the author. In

- (1) I had lived in northern Japan when the tsunami hit in 2011.

it is not absolutely clear whether ‘had lived’ refers to a completed or ongoing state. In spoken English, the contracted form of ‘had’ could be missed and further obscure the meaning. It would more likely, or at least more clearly, be stated as either:

- (2) I lived in northern Japan before the tsunami hit in 2011. (completed)
- (3) I had lived in northern Japan before the tsunami hit in 2011. (completed)
- (4) I had been living in Japan when the tsunami hit in 2011. (ongoing)
- (5) I was living in Japan when the tsunami hit in 2011. (ongoing)

The use of time adverbials here is more effective in establishing order than the grammatical form.

The final use is the past of the present perfect for previous experience without time reference as seen in the following example: “It was exciting when I walked into the court,” Martez said. Martez said at first he was nervous because he'd never seen a judge before” (Davis 2008). This seems to be the only case in which the use of the past perfect is required, i.e. the key meaning of the sentence cannot be conveyed by changing to another verb tense or aspect or through the use of time expressions or adverbials.

The form is said to be used with a variety of time adverbials (after, as soon as, already, etc.) to “emphasize the sequence of events” (Alexander 1988: 175) as in “She didn’t feel the same after her dog had died” and “When I had opened the windows, I sat down and had a cup of tea” (Swan 2005: 398-9). In a reference work based on corpus data, Biber et al. (1999: 470) state that the past perfect is used with a time adverbial in approximately 30% of all cases and several other reference works show connections, implicit or explicit, between time adverbials and the form (Swan 2005; Sinclair 2005; Cecle-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1999; Parrot 2000).

2.2. Functions and Use

As its structure is strongly tied to the ordering of events, the main function of the past perfect is to establish chronological order. Fiction is the area in which the past perfect is used most (see Section 4). Surprisingly, of all the grammar reference books surveyed, only Parrot (2000) and Downing and Locke (1992) make explicit the connection with written fiction and supply an example of the past perfect within a substantive narrative. None contain any examples of the non-standard uses described below.

Along with order, the form can be used for foregrounding and backgrounding information. The following examples show several different uses of the form, starting with the simplest, referring to a time within the narrative timeframe as in “Colonel Quirk had solved the car problem and money (four times the normal rate) had bought two rooms in a scumbox on the outskirts of town” (Thompson 1970). The preceding sentence describes events which take place in the timeframe of the story but are backgrounded, not reported in any detail or as main events. Examples of this type of usage (within one sentence) are common in grammar reference books, yet other authentic examples reveal that the use of the form in natural language is less straightforward such as the following:

The briefcase was smaller than normal and reddish brown with brass hardware, sitting on the closet floor [...] It was here because he’d brought it here. It wasn’t his briefcase but he’d carried it out of the tower and had it with him when he showed up at the door (DeLillo 2008: 35).

The first use (‘It was here because he’d brought it here’) is quite clear, yet the second is much less so. It can be assumed that the third verb phrase is past perfect (elision of the auxiliary ‘had’ to prevent the awkwardness of writing ‘had had’) but from the description of the form from grammar reference books, the final verb phrase should be ‘when he had shown up at the door.’ This novel, which deals with the effects on several characters of the September 11 attacks on New York, is a particularly clear example of foregrounding and backgrounding. The attacks themselves are backgrounded and not described, while the emotional consequences are very much foregrounded.

A further example is less explicit and seems to rely more on the reader’s ability to logically interpret the events.

When they had arrived, on the first day, they had stood huddled with their belongings on the Terpsichoria’s deck, surrounded by guards, and by women and men with checklists and paperwork. The faces of the pirates were hard, made cruel by weather. Through her fear, Bellis watched carefully, and could make no sense of them. They were disparate, a mixture of ethnicities and cultures. Their skins were all different colours (Mieville 2002).

The first sentence acts as something of an anchor, hinting that the subsequent information is also a part of the background even though, like the main narrative, it is expressed in the simple past tense. This usage appears to occur early in a new

paragraph. Without an easy method to determine the numerical frequency of this usage, it is difficult to determine how common it is. It does seem to be worthy of note as the pattern is present in the works of other authors:

Arbeely's late father had come from a family of five brothers, and over the generations their land had been divided and redivided until each brother's parcel was so small it was hardly worth the effort of planting. Arbeely himself made barely a pittance as a tinsmith's apprentice [...] In the general rush to America, Arbeely saw his chance. He bid his family farewell and boarded a steamship bound for New York (Wecker 2013: 14).

In each case, the bulk of the paragraph is background information and the only past perfect constructions occur within the first sentence.

Other uses of the form are even less standard or rule-based. The following example appears to show the past perfect as giving background to background events:

Jack Glenn, her father, did not want to submit to the long course of senile dementia. He made a couple of phone calls from his cabin in northern New Hampshire and then used an old sporting rifle to kill himself. She did not know the details. She was twenty-two when this happened and did not ask the local police for details. What detail might there be that was not unbearable? But she had to wonder if it was the rifle she knew, the one he'd let her grip and aim, but not fire, the time she'd joined him in the woods (DeLillo 2008: 40-41).

Jack's death is a background event outside the scope of the narrative, yet it is still marked by the simple past tense. It is only when the focus turns to the events preceding his suicide that the past perfect is used which in this instance seems to function as the past of the past of the past.

Finally, an example from a different novel shows another non-standard employment of the past perfect. Though the main narrative is present simple tense, the past perfect is still used in a backgrounding function:

She reaches a point where the Crusade flows around a stationary, drinking knot of Camden's resident, revenant alcoholics. They are why Damien had been able to afford to rent here, years before he'd made any money or bought his house. Somewhere nearby is a Victorian doss house, a vast red brick pile of a hostel for the homeless, purpose-built and hideous, and its inhabitants, however individually transitory, have congregated in the High Street since the day it first opened (Gibson 2003: 89-90).

To be clear, the above examples are those the author noticed (rather than actively sought) during the course of researching this paper and few conclusions should be drawn from them other than the suggestion that the past perfect is used in several different ways and its relation to the chronology of events is not quite as simple as grammar reference books indicate. They at least hint at the possibility that use of the form is not strictly bound or formalized. A proper examination of the use of the past perfect in novels would require a separate, more comprehensive analysis. The preceding examples also make the separate point that the observations and natural examples noticed by teachers can be relevant. While

corpora have the advantage of being large and easily searched, the examples found often lack context and are not easily examined in their role as a part of a larger text.

Moving away from novels, the function of chronological ordering is also found in media texts. As a major role of the media is reporting events that have taken place, the past perfect is used to give background information to recent developments.

Thousands of people have donated money to pay a massive tax bill served on Chinese artist Ai Weiwei. By Monday, there had been donations totalling more than 5m yuan [...] Many people believe he was served the bill because of his outspoken criticism of the government rather than because he had evaded taxes (BBC 2011).

The structure is also found in reported speech and functions in a similar past of the past manner: “Mr Berg said he had received a number of complaints from people who received both leaflets” (Davis 2004). In the above case, if the verb is not backshifted, the overall meaning would not be obscured and is another case in which use of the past perfect is not necessary.

Carter and McCarthy (2006) remark that verbs of perception often precede past perfect constructions to which Swan adds “verbs of saying and thinking” as in “I wondered who had left the door open” and “I thought I had sent the cheque a week before” (Swan 2005: 397).

Left open by most sources, however, is the issue of why and when the past perfect is used in optional cases. As noted above and by various sources (Alexander 1988; Quirk et al. 1991; Hughes and McCarthy 1998; Swan 2005), temporal sequencing can be established by careful use of the simple past and time expressions, making use of the past perfect unnecessary. Only Parrot (2000: 221) explains this tendency, stating that “we generally prefer to provide too much information rather than to risk misunderstanding.”

If, as suggested, the form is not in many cases mandatory to explain the order of events, the choice to use the past perfect may be seen as

stylistic and [...] suggests a broad macrofunction for the tense form at a level beyond the sentence in terms of how clauses narrating events relate to one another, with some being backgrounded and others foregrounded as main events (Hughes and McCarthy 1998: 271).

Carter and McCarthy (2006: 624) add that it is “whether the information is considered background or foreground that determines the choice, not the fact that something happened before something else.” The use of the form as part of reported speech constructions is described as “rarely obligatory” and “quite formal and prescriptive” (Cecle-Murcia 1998: 13). Parrot sums up the issue saying:

Sometimes it is possible to choose more than one tense, and this choice make no perceptible difference to meaning. In the following examples, each author chooses a different tense. We can only speculate about whether the authors wanted to achieve particular effects of style or

emphasis through their respective choice, or whether their choice was unconscious or arbitrary. What is clear is that either tense is possible in either context (Parrot 2000: 226).

As will be argued, despite not achieving absolute clarity, this guidance is nonetheless welcome in that it clearly allows for an open choice.

3. The Past Perfect in EFL/ESL Materials

Given the breadth of material available, it would be impossible for any survey of EFL/ESL materials to be comprehensive. The goal of this section, then, is to examine the ways in which the past perfect is presented in EFL/ESL books from major publishers. Two types of books will be examined. First, those designed for classroom use that mainly contain speaking tasks and activities (hereinafter ‘textbooks’), and second, books primarily containing written grammar tasks (‘grammar books’).

3.1. The Past Perfect in Textbooks

To examine how the past perfect is presented in materials designed to classroom use, six textbooks were examined (Table 1 and 2). The newest editions of titles from major publishing companies were selected. Of the materials assessed, only *Touchstone 4* makes explicit reference to having been based on corpus data. In order to achieve a more in-depth understanding of how a series approaches the form, two levels (Pre-Intermediate and Intermediate) of both *Headway* and *Cutting Edge* were examined (Table 2).

Table 1. Initial presentation textbooks

Series	Series Level	CEFR level	Authors
Cutting Edge	Pre-Intermediate	A2/B1	Cunningham, Moor and Bygrave
New Headway	Pre-Intermediate	A2/B1	Soars and Soars
Four Corners	4	B1+	Richards and Bohlke
Touchstone	4	B1	McCarthy, McCarten and Sadiford

Table 2. Review presentation textbooks

Series	Series Level	CEFR level	Authors
Cutting Edge	Intermediate	B1/B1+	Cunningham, Moor and Crace
New Headway	Intermediate	B1	Soars and Soars

The past perfect is introduced to students at roughly the same level (A2/B1 of the CEFR) in all initial presentation books. There are several similarities in the way in which all books surveyed (initial and review) approach the form. First, as shown in Tables 3 and 4, all but one present the grammar as part of a written text (not a transcribed conversation). The texts themselves are almost exclusively non-fiction. The only book that initially presents the form in a fictional story is *Headway Pre-Intermediate*. There is also substantial overlap in the themes used to present the form across both initial and review presentations. Both *New Headway Intermediate* and *Four Corners 4* use biographies of famous people. *Cutting Edge Intermediate* and *Touchstone 4* both use the theme of coincidence and indeed the same story, that of two identical twins separated at birth.

Production tasks for students is another area where the books follow a similar format. The balance between fiction and non-fiction changes greatly from the presentation texts, with eight of the twelve tasks requiring fictional production. Only *Four Corners 4* and *Touchstone 4* rely on non-fiction production.

Two of these books (*Headway Pre-Intermediate* and *Cutting Edge Pre-Intermediate*) present the form alongside other past or narrative tenses with the former in particular doing a good job of asking students to explain how the meaning of compound sentences changes when one clause is either past perfect, past simple or past progressive. *Four Corners 4* presents the 3rd conditional (which uses the same 'had' + past participle form in one clause) in a subsequent lesson.

Moving to the way in which the form is explained in subsequent books (Table 4), neither book substantively expands the explanations given in the initial presentation. *Cutting Edge Intermediate* adds the use of past perfect in reported speech while *Headway Intermediate* again presents the form alongside other narrative tenses. *Cutting Edge Intermediate* notes the use of time adverbials with the form and shows an implicit connection between the form and 'because' (used in four of eight practice sentences in one activity).

What is generally missing from all six books is guidance on when the use of the past perfect is necessary or advisable. None of the books explicitly state cases in which the form is mandatory and some seem deliberately vague. *Touchstone 4* states that present simple or past perfect are acceptable answers for some questions but provides no guidance as to why or which is preferred. A great deal of the examples in the books contain time adverbials that are crucial to showing the order of events and thus appear to make the past perfect optional. For example, *Headway Pre-Intermediate* includes the following passage in the grammar explanation:

If it is clear that one action was complete before, it isn't necessary to use the Past Perfect.

I tidied up after everyone went home.

I tidied up after everyone had gone home. (Soars and Soars 2012: 144)

Table 3. Initial past perfect presentation

Series	Unit theme	Presentation	Production tasks	Other grammar in unit
Cutting Edge Pre-Intermediate	Money	Jokes (audio)	1) Write a story from a supplied first sentence prompt, fiction 2) Tell a story from pictures, fiction	Narrative tenses
New Headway Pre-Intermediate	Time for a Story	Short story, fiction (fable)	1) Writing about a book or film, fiction 2) Retell a story from pictures, fiction	Narrative tenses
Four Corners	Awkward Situations	Lesson A- Two short texts about a mistake/regret, implied non-fiction Lesson D- Long text, non-fiction excerpt from an autobiography	Lesson A- Speaking about a mistake/ misjudgement you have made, implied non-fiction Lesson D- Writing about a memorable day, implied non-fiction	3rd conditional
Touchstone	Strange Events	Lesson A- Two short texts about coincidences, implied non-fiction Lesson D- Long text, non-fiction, human interest story	Lesson A- Speaking about coincidences, implied non-fiction Lesson D- Writing about interesting family story, implied non-fiction	

Table 4. Review past perfect presentation

Series	Unit theme	Presentation	Production task	Other Grammar in unit
Cutting Edge Intermediate	True Stories	Medium length text, non-fiction, human interest story	1) Retell a story from memory, fiction 2) Write a ghost story or rewrite provided story from another character's point of view, fiction	Reported Speech
New Headway Intermediate	Good Times, Bad Times	Long text, non-fiction biography, Long text, Romeo and Juliet in modern English	1) Write a folk or fairy tale, fiction 2) Retell a story from pictures, fiction	Past tenses

In this case, the use of 'after', rather than the verb phrase, contains the temporal meaning. *Cutting Edge Pre-Intermediate* has a similar explanation but with the example "A robber appeared and pointed the gun at him" (Cunningham, Moor and Crace 2013: 164). In this case 'and' functions as a quasi-time adverbial to show sequence. *Four Corners 4* is particularly prone to this. The grammar explanation states that 'yet' and 'already' are often used with the form and all five questions from the practice activity contain either time adverbials or actual times.

Another missing point is that of comprehension questions based on the sequence of events in a story. Only *Four Corners 4* and *Cutting Edge Intermediate* include these, but the sequencing tasks in both cases rely far more on general comprehension than an understanding of tense, time and aspect.

Cutting Edge Intermediate is the only book surveyed that describes the past perfect as having a relation to the present perfect, showing a past experience before a separate past event- "It wasn't my first visit to Australia; I'd been there twice before" (Cunningham, Moor and Bygrave 2013: 147).

Headway Intermediate is the only book examined which notes that the past perfect can have a stylistic or discursive function. The grammar explanation states that "The Past Perfect can be used to tell a story in a different order" (Soars and Soars 2009: 136). This is an important difference from all other descriptions which define the form's function as purely that of establishing chronological order.

3.2. The Past Perfect in Grammar Books

The presentation of the past perfect was surveyed in four grammar books (Table 5). Both Collins Cobuild books are based in part on the Bank of English, a 5-million-word corpus. Perhaps unsurprisingly, all contain more in-depth discussions of how and when the form is used.

Table 5. Grammar Books

Title	Level	Authors
Grammar in Use	Intermediate	Murphy and Smalzer
Collins Cobuild English Grammar	Elementary	Willis and Wright
Collins Cobuild English Grammar	Intermediate	Willis
Understanding and Using English Grammar	-	Azar and Hagen

The most marked feature of grammar books is comparison, both explicit and implicit, between the past perfect and the present perfect. *English Grammar in Use Intermediate* does so directly, with clear examples of how the past perfect is used for stating previous experience in the unspecified past, a recent action which has an impact on the present and an ongoing situation that started in the past and continues up to the point of reference. *Collins Cobuild Elementary English Grammar* contains examples of the same usage. While it does not explicitly link these to the present perfect, the unit starts with the instruction to review previous units on the present perfect. Murphy and Smalzer (2009: 28) provide several examples of cases in which the past perfect has a definite link, presented explicitly, to the present perfect and in which the use of the past perfect conveys the intended meaning better than any other alternative:

I didn't know who she was. I'd never seen her before.
 We weren't hungry. We'd just had lunch.
 The house was dirty. They hadn't cleaned it for weeks.

Understanding and Using English Grammar contains several key points not found in the other grammar books or textbooks. Like others, it provides several instances in which time adverbials make the past perfect unnecessary but specifically notes the use of time adverbials as being the reason why it is not utilized. The second notable point is the clear reference to the use of the form in writing and fiction. The explanation states that the form is "often found in more formal writing such as fiction" (Azar and Hagen 2009: 50). As will be seen, this is a very important point.

4. The Past Perfect in Corpora

Corpora results from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the British National Corpus (BNC) provide valuable data regarding the use and distribution of the past perfect. It should be stated that broad searches of this type can include examples of other forms. For instance, the key past perfect structure of 'had' preceding a past participle verb is the same as in the 3rd conditional and past perfect progressive, though the vast majority of these constructions are purely past perfect. Searching for 'if' within 4 spaces left of a had/'d + past participle combination suggests that 5.2% of the uses in the COCA and 6.2% in the BNC are part of a 3rd conditional structure. Past perfect progressive constructions form 6.6% and 2.7% of matches in the COCA and BNC respectively (Davies 2004; Davies 2008-). As this study is an attempt to understand the broad usage patterns of the form, the overall trends discovered can be considered sound.

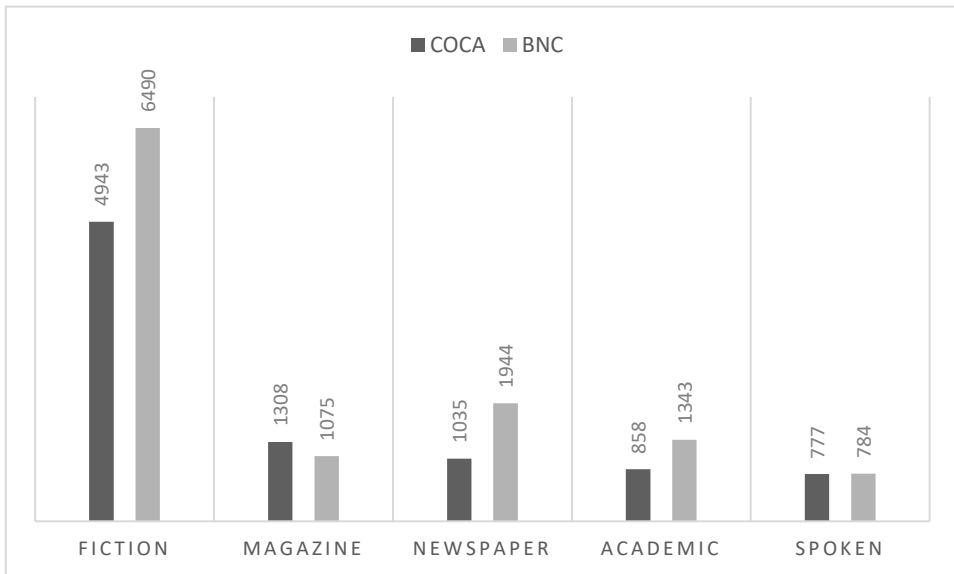


Figure 1. Frequency of [had/'d + past participle] per million words (Davies 2004; Davies 2008-)

Results reveal several interesting findings. The results clearly indicate that the past perfect is strongly related to written work, particularly fiction. Conrad (2001) argues that even with corpus data, there are few situations for which a strong link between purpose and grammatical form can be established, but the past perfect seems an exception to this notion as the link between it and written work is very strong indeed. Distribution by section (Figure 1) shows the structure is strongly linked to works of fiction and used over three times more often in that sub-corpora than any other section. The very clear implication is that the structure is tied to written fiction. The structure is found less frequently in the spoken sections of

both the BNC and the COCA than any other section. Within the fiction section of the COCA, detailed results show that while the structure occurs 4715 times per million words in books, the same frequency for movies is 110, further suggesting that learners are far less likely to encounter it aurally (Davies 2008). Overall use is higher in the BNC, particularly in the newspaper section in which the structure is found twice as often as in the COCA.

The distribution of the structure within the spoken sections of the corpora is another finding with interesting results. The structure is found less frequently in the spoken sections of both the BNC and the COCA than any other section. An analysis of the BNC spoken section (Figure 2) shows that its use varies greatly depending on context (the spoken component of the COCA is mainly television interviews and cannot be analysed in the same manner). Usage in sermons or oral interviews, for example, is between two and three times as high as in general conversation. This suggests that usage of the structure (in very broad terms) declines with formality.

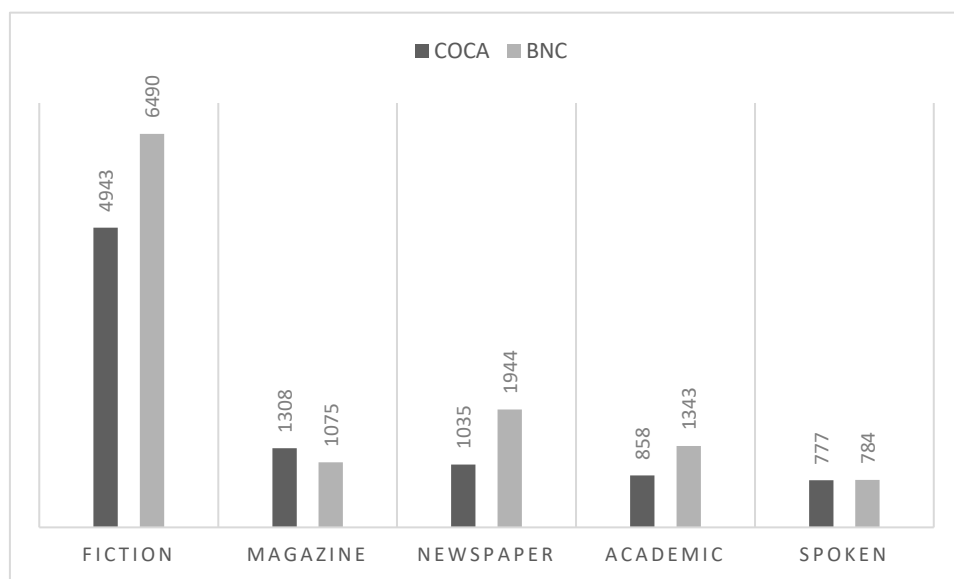


Figure 2. Frequency of [had/'d + past participle] in select spoken sections of the BNC (Davies 2004)

The final trend is lexical. As seen in Table 6, results from both the COCA and BNC show that 'had been' is by far the most common use of past perfect, occurring far more frequently than any other verb. These findings largely mirror those of Biber et al. (1999: 469), with seven of the eight most common verbs in that study appearing in the 10 most common verbs in the BNC and COCA.

Table 6. Most common verbs in past perfect constructions

COCA				BNC			
Rank	Verb	Amount	%	Rank	Verb	Amount	%
1	been	186 916	36.5	1	been	67 011	27.9
2	come	14 376	2.8	2	gone	4013	1.7
3	gone	11 168	2.2	3	come	3949	1.6
4	made	10 996	2.1	4	taken	3675	1.5
5	taken	10 847	2.1	5	made	3606	1.5
6	become	10 310	2.0	6	become	3266	1.4
7	done	9582	1.9	7	done	2844	1.2
8	seen	9444	1.8	8	had	2745	1.1
9	said	8311	1.6	9	seen	2723	1.1
10	left	7577	1.5	10	said	2441	1.0

Corpus results do not show a strong relation between the form and passive constructions. BNC results show three verbs among the 10 most common collocations with ‘had been’ which total 3.3% of all uses, while COCA results show only one (Davies 2004; Davies 2008).

5. Comparison and Discussion

5.1. Overall Comparisons

Several points concerning the use of the past perfect found in grammar reference books, textbooks and grammar books can be compared to corpora data to evaluate their accuracy. As noted, only two grammar references make the link between written fiction and the use of the past perfect. From the EFL/ESL materials, the link is only made clear in *Understanding and Using English Grammar*. This makes it the one of the least common claims in any of the books surveyed, but the most strongly linked to empirical data. The corpus data is unequivocal- the form appears with far greater frequency in written fiction than any other genre. Given that an intuitive connection can be made between the two, regardless of the availability of corpus data, it seems an obvious oversight. This also raises the issue of the choice of text in which the form is introduced and the types of task used for

student production. As noted, the presentation of the form appears most frequently in non-fiction texts and two of the textbooks surveyed (*Touchstone 4* and *Four Corners 4*) contain neither a fictional text nor a fictional production task, despite the former being based on corpus data.

One of the most common claims is the guidance regarding the use of time adverbials, a claim found in all types of books surveyed. Searching corpora for these words within five places of a past perfect construction reveal that a time adverbial is used in approximately 15% of cases (Table 7). This is notably lower than the roughly 30% stated by Biber et al. in their corpus-based grammar, though without knowing the exact search keys and terms, any direct comparison should be treated with some caution. That

Table 7. Time adverbials used with the past perfect +/- five places of [had/'d + past participle]

COCA			BNC		
Word/Phrase	Matches	% of Total	Word/Phrase	Matches	% of Total
when	23697	4.6	when	7764	4.8
before	18945	3.7	after	6757	4.2
after	18754	3.7	before	4986	3.1
just	8149	1.6	just	1789	1.1
already	2220	0.4	yet	614	0.4
yet	1902	0.4	already	446	0.3
recently	1219	0.2	recently	287	0.2

notwithstanding, this does not seem to be a particularly strong association and even at 30%, is still a clear minority of usage. This raises the question of why textbooks instruct students that these words are 'often used with the past perfect' (same quote in Cunningham, Moor and Bygrave 2013: 147; Richards and Bohlke 2012: 75). The link is made stronger by a majority of examples in other books containing time adverbials.

All three types of books note that the past perfect is commonly used in reported speech and two reference books associate it with verbs of perception. These claims seem to be supported by data from the corpora as evidenced in Table 8. The lexical verb which most frequently precedes a past perfect structure is 'said' in both corpora, occurring more than twice as regularly as the next item. Both corpora show a link to reporting verbs (told, said, asked, claimed) and verbs of perception (thought, wondered, knew).

Table 8. Past tense verbs within four spaces left of [had/'d + past participle]

COCA		BNC	
Verb	Total Matches	Verb	Total Matches
was/were	20928	was/were	5942
said	11983	said	3862
had	5271	had	1827
knew	4885	thought	1252
thought	4128	knew	1064
told	3419	told	785
felt	2574	felt	684
realized	2119	claimed	480
did	1537	did	405
found	1475	wondered	389

Several textbooks link the past perfect and ‘because.’ This is another case in which the corpus data does not seem to show any strong association. As seen in Table 9, ‘because’ is not regularly found with past perfect constructions.

Table 9. ‘Because’ within five spaces left/right of [had/'d + past participle]

COCA		BNC	
Matches	% of Total	Matches	% of Total
14538	2.43	3366	2.07

6. Recommendations and Suggestions for Further Research

6.1. Specific Recommendations

Recalling Conrad’s (2000: 549) predictions concerning the effects of corpus data on grammar teaching- genre specificity, integrated vocabulary and ‘appropriate conditions of use for alternative grammatical constructions’- it is difficult, given the data presented in this paper, to argue that instruction of the past perfect has benefited from corpus-derived data. Descriptions of the form largely fail to link it to the genre (written fiction) in which it is most often found, the links between the structure and vocabulary (time adverbials and ‘because’) is debatable at best and practical instructions on when and why the structure should or must be used are largely missing.

There seem to be several areas in which the books surveyed do not provide a fully adequate description of how or when the past perfect is used or present it in a way consistent with its occurrence in natural language. This is not to say that any one book is so flawed that it is inappropriate for use by instructors or learners. Few books, particularly those meant for students, can provide all the necessary information concerning an aspect as complex as the past perfect. Materials

developers and publishers surely face a litany of restraints such as space and brevity as well as the prior knowledge and capabilities of the instructors and learners who use commercial materials. In the same way that no single book should be singled out for its perceived shortcomings, none can be highlighted as comprehensively dealing with the form. If one were to pick and choose the guidance, presentation texts and production tasks from the surveyed books, a very strong lesson could be created, but as that information is spread across several books, if a student or teacher were to use only one book, their knowledge of the form may be incomplete.

No corpora can perfectly reflect actual use, particularly as they examine language in a limited context and, as has been seen, the past perfect is clearly related to longer pieces of text rather than sentence-level exchanges. That notwithstanding, several of the claims in the surveyed books concerning sentence-level usage (particularly time adverbials and ‘because’) appear flawed when examined in these corpora. The data presented above leads to several recommendations concerning how the past perfect is presented in grammar reference books and EFL/ESL materials.

(1) State a clear link between the past perfect and written fiction

The area in which almost all books can improve is in explicitly stating in which situations the structure is most often employed. Given that the corpora data presented shows that it is overwhelming associated with written fiction, it seems a very strange omission from grammar explanations. Explicitly noting the link between narratives, fiction and the past perfect as well as its relative frequency as a feature of written English would appear to be minor additions that better reflect its use in authentic contexts which could assist both learners and teachers. As grammar references for teachers seem to have less restrictions in terms of space or level of analysis, there is no obvious reason for this information to be excluded from descriptions of the form.

This knowledge should also be utilized to improve the ways in which the material is handled in textbooks and thus provide learners with the opportunity to notice and produce the form in more authentic situations as well as ensure they comprehend it in the texts in which it is most likely to be encountered. The books surveyed rely to a large degree on non-fiction texts to present the form and while there is nothing inherently problematic with that, using a fictional text could create a stronger link in the minds of the learners between the form and fictional narratives.

The production tasks in the textbooks surveyed do a better job of requiring fictional, written output and are generally worthy of praise. Retelling a story based on pictures is a common speaking task that could be easily improved by having students start the story at its midpoint but including all the key points of the story, thus making a clear necessity to use the past perfect to tell a story out of chronological order.

Suggestions for improving practice or production activities in grammar books are more limited. *English Grammar in Use* contains a good practice activity of writing events out of chronological order. The task only requires three sentences, but this seems like a good compromise given the restrictions of the medium and similar activities should be included in other titles.

- (2) Make usage guidelines easier to understand and establish a clear link to the present perfect

Various books give examples of when the past perfect is not used but fail to explain why and few explicitly note the times when it is mandatory. Most teachers would want their students to show flexibility and adaptability in their use of language and a working knowledge of time adverbials is likely to be as effective as the past perfect in establishing the order in which events happened in many cases. Given the relative infrequency of the form in spoken English (and the possible link to formality) it seems at least possible that this is something native speakers may do as a matter of routine.

Many of the works reviewed give example sentences in which the context rather than the grammar provides the chronology then go on to somewhat unhelpfully explain that the form is not needed when the sequence of events is obvious. Others say that both the past perfect or the past simple can be used in practice activities but provide no guidance as to which is preferred or in which cases there is not an option. Because its use in many cases can be argued as being stylistic, the exact rules of when to employ the form are somewhat vague. This should be made clear to students and alternate ways of saying the same thing (using time adverbials rather than the past perfect) and the fact that the form is relatively infrequent in spoken English should be highlighted in subsequent editions of learner materials.

However, there is one case in which use is required, which is the past of the present perfect for experiences in the unspecified past. There is essentially no other way to state this information in a natural way and should thus be considered mandatory use and highlighted as such in all materials aimed at teachers and learners.

- (3) Receptive grammar teaching and practice

Data from corpora suggests that learners are much more likely to read the form than hear it in conversation. As such there would seem to be methodological issues relating to how the topic is handled in textbooks, as many appear to focus more on accuracy than testing the learner's receptive understanding of the form. As the main function of the form is establishing chronological order, student ability to receptively understand how it is used within a text (rather than a single sentence) should be a main learning goal and also be evaluated. In the few examples in which students are asked to order events from the materials examined, the texts

themselves are largely in chronological order and knowledge of how the past perfect works in a longer piece of written work is not the focus of the practice or checked in a meaningful way.

A variety of simple activities such as ordering or mapping events on a timeline are relatively simple to design, but the texts they are based on must be chosen with this in mind, i.e. they need to have better examples of how the past perfect can be used to tell a story in a non-chronological order. More advanced books could possibly include some of the non-standard uses from novels found in Section 2.

- (4) Check claims against corpora and remove those that cannot be supported by empirical data

Though no single corpus or group of corpora can be expected to perfectly reflect the use of the English language in all its contexts, the corpus data examined in this study call into question several claims made in various surveyed materials. In the absence of access to the proprietary data used to make some of these claims or the rationale behind them, it would appear that at a minimum, these claims should be re-examined and possibly removed from future editions of the books in which they appear. As argued, teacher intuition and noticing are valuable tools in grammar teaching, but instructions given in materials designed for students produced by major publishers should be supported on some kind of empirical basis. The examples of use provided in the textbooks do not appear unnatural per se, but if they are not based on strong empirical data, it is unclear why they should be included.

6.2. Suggestions for Further Research

There are several areas of further research which could benefit learners, instructors and materials designers. First, a thorough corpus examination of the functions of the past perfect is needed, particularly the cases in which its use is optional. The question of when or why writers or speakers use the form when it is optional remains open. Even if no clear answer is found (as suggested by some grammars surveyed), that finding in and of itself could be valuable as an open choice may be more meaningful than the current vague usage guidelines. Numerical data on the frequency of each type of use (past of past perfect, reported speech, etc.) would also be instructive. The use of the form in fiction appears to show several patterns of use which go undescribed in the books surveyed. This is another area requiring a more comprehensive examination. A cursory examination in the 155 billion word Google Book Corpus (Davis 2011-) shows that use of the form in fiction has steadily dropped from the 1860s to the most recent period for which data is present (2000s-) and other valuable findings can surely be discovered. A final area worthy of attention is the possible link between the form and more formal speech.

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