

# Can you really trust your intuition?

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A key role of EFL teachers has traditionally been as prescribers of correct language. Indeed, an accurate command of English is seen as a reflection of a teacher's professional competence. According to Owen (1996), hesitation when describing language may be perceived by students as a lack of understanding. Although providing manageable explanations to students on the spot seems central to the teacher's role, an ever-burgeoning body of research indicates that much of our intuition about language is actually unreliable (Sinclair, 1991; Stubbs, 1996; Meijs, 1996; McEnery, Xiao & Tono, 2006), suggesting students' faith in their teachers, and indeed teachers' confidence in their own intuition, may be misplaced. By analysing teachers' intuition-based linguistic explanations to their students against corpus evidence, the results of this study indicate that intuition is in fact remarkably accurate. However, the results also suggest that students are being denied important information about certain aspects of the language.

伝統的にEFL講師の重要な役割の一つは、『正しく言語を規定する者』としているということである。確かに正しい英語の指示は講師の職業的能力の反映として見られる。Owen(1996)によれば、言語を説明する際に躊躇することは生徒に理解不足として見られる可能性があるとのことである。その場で生徒に分かりやすい説明をすることが講師の役割の中心だとしても、急速に拡大する多くの研究によると、我々の言語に対する直感は実は当てにならないものであり(Sinclair, 1991; Stubbs, 1996; Meijs,1996; McEnery, Xiao & Tono, 2006)、生徒の講師に対しての信頼と、さらに講師の自身の直感に対しての信頼が誤ったところに置かれている可能性があることを示している。言語分析データ理論に反する講師の直感に基づいた言語説明を分析してみると、講師の直感が事実非常に正確だということが分かる。しかしながらその研究結果は、生徒が言語のある側面について重要な情報を与えられていないということも示しているのである。

**A** FAMILIAR SCENE in many EFL classrooms is that of native-speaker teachers prescribing intuitive descriptions of language to their students. According to traditional linguistic theory, they are justifiably confident in this advisory role. The Chomskyan view is that native-speakers are intuitively privy to the rules governing their mother tongue. However, contemporary linguistic researchers suggest that our intuition about language is in fact far from accurate. Indeed, Stubbs (1996) claims that many of the rules governing language are completely unavailable to our intuition. Others claim that introspection is particularly inaccurate in the areas of frequency, collocation, connotation, grammar and phraseology. Firstly, intuition about the frequencies of different senses of words seems to be unreliable. For example, lexicographical research on the more common words in English suggests that the first



sense of a word which springs to mind is usually not the most frequent (Sinclair, 1991). Secondly, judgments about collocations are apparently not always straightforward. Although many collocations seem to be available to our intuition, some are not so obvious. In particular, Granger (1998) identifies collocations between some adverbs and adjectives as being potentially elusive. In addition, the connotations of a word may also be out of reach of intuition (Hunston & Laviosa, 2001). Finally, research also suggests that intuition does not yield accurate accounts of grammatical structures or phraseologies (Sinclair, 1991; Hunston & Laviosa, 2001). In light of these claims, it would seem that teachers should tread carefully when giving intuitive accounts of language to their students.

### The focus of this study

Textbook design appears still to be based on intuition and tradition, rather than empirical evidence. Numerous corpus-based studies have identified a mismatch between the prescribed lexical and grammatical items found in course texts, and the features of authentic language use (Biber, Conrad & Reppen, 1994; Grabowski & Mindt, 1995; Kennedy, 1998; O'Keefe, McCarthy & Carter, 2007). Other corpus research suggests that many scripted dialogues found in textbooks differ considerably from their naturally occurring counterparts (Gilmore, 2004). If textbook writers' intuition is failing students in this respect, despite the luxury of time to reflect on what to include, it is easy to imagine errors being made when teachers are pressed to attempt intuitive explanations of language during class. By analysing such accounts against corpus evidence, this study will investigate both the accuracy and comprehensiveness of teachers' spontaneous language explanations. The findings will be useful to help provide students with more accurate and relevant information about the English language. This study is based on two sets of empirical data. The first consists of a corpus analysis of a pair

of linguistically similar items, and the second is derived from a survey of university EFL teachers' intuition about the language properties of these same two items.

### Corpus analysis

The first step was to identify words and phrases which cause problems for students. According to Tsui (2005), difficulties often arise with partly interchangeable pairs of semi-grammatical words. Partington (1998) points out that while learner dictionaries usually provide accurate descriptions of the differences in use between common lexical items with clearly definable meanings, pairs of less common, semi-grammatical words are considerably more difficult to pin down. The two items "actually" and "in fact" are an example of such a pair, displaying similar meanings, belonging to the same lexico-grammatical category and yet not being interchangeable in all contexts. These two items were therefore selected to be the focus of this study.

Leech explains that modern corpora are widely acknowledged as an effective "test-bed of linguistic hypothesis" (1991, p.9). In the same way, this study uses corpus data as a benchmark by which to measure the quality of teachers' intuitive explanations. The Bank of English (B of E) corpus, based at Birmingham University and containing over 450 million words was used for this purpose. It is compiled from a number of minimally-tagged sub-corpora of written and spoken texts from a range of different sources, including both UK and US English varieties. A comprehensive word-based analysis of "in fact" and "actually" was undertaken, involving the examination of concordance and frequency data. Information relating to meaning, use, frequency, grammatical patterning and connotation was obtained and analysed. Random samples of 100 concordance lines were obtained from the corpus. Although concordance data represents instances of genuine language use, it still remains for the analyst to use intuition to identify various meanings and uses (Hunston



& Laviosa, 2001). Like uses were grouped together in categories formed on an *a priori* basis with new categories being generated as and when subsequent concordance examples did not fit existing ones. Meijs (1996) points out that during this process of categorisation, the analyst needs to be open to the discovery of patterns from the data which may be counter-intuitive. While some of the semantic categories had been foreseen, for instance that *in fact* is used to contradict or contrast, some were not, for example the use of *actually* to express incredulity. The end result of this process was a categorisation of the different senses for each of the two items (see Table 2 below).

### Teacher intuition survey

In order to obtain teachers' intuitive accounts of the linguistic properties of "in fact" and "actually", an email-based survey was deemed the most effective approach since it would allow for a larger sample. In total, 23 responses were received from EFL teaching professionals from a variety of educational institutions and teaching contexts. Respondents included native English speaking Japanese, Canadian, British, American and Irish men and women aged between 28 and 55. At the time of the survey, they all had a minimum of five years EFL teaching experience. The teachers were required to describe how they would explain the differences between "actually" and "in fact" to their students if they were suddenly asked to do so in class. Respondents were asked to consult only their intuition. In order to discourage over-simplified responses, teachers were also required to grade their answers for upper-intermediate level students within the TOEIC reading and writing test range of between 730 and 855 points. The question was deliberately broad in scope to allow teachers the freedom to include any information that they saw fit, and as a result a large amount of qualitative information was generated. The responses were examined and broken down into component linguistic points, for example

that "in fact" is used to give additional information. Responses from the teachers covered a range of linguistic categories, and related linguistic points were grouped together accordingly. For example, giving additional information was categorised with other linguistic points relating to function.

### Results

A total of 68 linguistic points were raised in the survey, covering five linguistic categories. The categories are shown in the table below, along with the frequency of linguistic points made by teachers for each category.

Table 1. Categories and frequencies of linguistic features identified by teachers in the survey

Linguistic categories	Frequency (linguistic points made)	
	"in fact"	"actually"
Function	14	18
Frequency	9	11
Register	6	8
Use with statistics	1	0
Sentence position	1	0
Total linguistic points raised in the survey	31	37

### Function

A preliminary glance at the concordance data showed that "actually" and "in fact" have a large degree of shared function. In a general sense they have a shared meaning of "in truth" and the items seem to add authority and credibility to the information presented, encouraging particular attention to be paid to it.



A more rigorous examination of the concordances revealed five distinct and functionally specific subcategories of use.

**Table 2. The various functions found in the corpus data for “in fact” and “actually”**

“in fact”	“actually”
highlighting contrast	highlighting contrast
giving additional information	giving additional information
-	introducing bad news
giving factual information	giving factual information
	expressing incredulity

Teacher intuition also identifies a range of functions for the two items. Partington (1998) and Sinclair (1991) both point out that it is difficult to assign meaning to semi-grammatical words and as a result, descriptions must be largely given in terms of how they behave rather than what they mean. It is not surprising then that the majority of information given by teachers about “in fact” and “actually” related to how they are used.

**Table 3. The various functions identified by teachers’ intuition for “in fact” and “actually”**

“in fact”	“actually”
highlighting contrast	highlighting contrast
giving additional information	giving additional information
not used with bad news	introducing bad news
introducing unexpected news	introducing unexpected news

By comparing Tables 2 and 3, it can be seen that the functional categories identified by the teachers closely match those found

in the corpus data, indicating that teachers’ intuition is largely accurate in respect to function.

### **General frequency**

Three teachers said that “in fact” is generally less common than “actually”. In the B of E, the frequency of “actually” is 3,834 words per million, almost double that of “in fact” at only 2,118 words per million. This suggests that “actually” is indeed more common in the English language and that the teachers’ intuition on general frequency is therefore reliable.

### **General frequency: written and spoken English**

In the teacher-intuition data, six teachers reported that “in fact” is more common in written texts, while 8 respondents said that “actually” is more common in spoken texts. The frequency of occurrence of “actually” and “in fact” in the spoken and written sections of the B of E is shown in the table below.

**Table 4. The frequencies of “in fact” and “actually” across written and spoken sub-corpora**

	“in fact”	“actually”
	frequency per million words	frequency per million words
spoken sub-corpora	973	2593
written sub-corpora	1145	1241

As can be seen, “actually” is about twice as frequent in the spoken part of the corpus as it is in the written part. In addition, the occurrence of “in fact” in the written part of the corpus is higher than it is in the spoken section. The data also shows



us that “actually” is about two and a half times more frequent than “in fact” in the spoken section of the corpus, but only slightly more common in the written section. Therefore, teacher intuition regarding the relative frequencies of the two items in written and spoken texts is strongly supported by the corpus evidence.

### **Use with statistics or figures**

One of the survey respondents said that “in fact” is often used with statistics. Of the 100 sample concordance lines for “in fact”, 7 of them contained statistics, whereas there were no instances of numerical information in the sample concordances for “actually”. Once again the teachers’ intuition in the survey is supported by the corpus data.

### **Sentence position**

Another respondent in the survey claimed that “in fact” is more common at the beginning of a sentence than “actually”. Fifty-four percent of the sample concordance lines for “in fact” show the item positioned at the head of a sentence, compared to just two percent of those for “actually”. Therefore the corpus data overwhelmingly supports the teacher’s supposition.

### **Grammatical patterning**

Although an examination of the concordances failed to identify any patterns associated with “in fact”, four patterns connected to “actually” were found in the corpus. These are presented in Table 5 using a coding system adapted from Hunston and Francis (2000). Each pattern is accompanied with an example from the corpus, and the pattern’s frequency in the B of E.

**Table 5. Grammatical patterns for “actually” identified in sample concordances**

Pattern / Example from corpus	Frequency
few n ADV v	198
Few Americans actually thought Mr. Bush won the debate.	
be adj to ADV v	171
Can you imagine being able to actually read Pushkin in Russian?	
without ADV v- ing	580
The Chancellor can mention this without actually doing anything about it.	
ADV turned out	26
Brief though my visit was, it actually turned out slightly longer than anticipated.	

Despite the obvious usefulness of these patterns for students, none of them were mentioned by the teachers, suggesting that such patterns are not available to teachers’ intuition.

### **Conclusions**

The table below provides a summary of the results, including the extent to which teachers’ accounts matched the results of the corpus analysis.

Firstly, the majority of teachers’ explanations were shown to be accurate according to the corpus data. Most teachers only provided information for those areas which are thought, in the literature, to be available to intuition. Indeed, the majority of teachers’ responses were taken up describing the functions of the two items, the linguistic area believed to be most accessible to introspection. These function-related explanations were both



thorough and closely matched the corpus findings. It seems then that teachers might be aware of the limits of their intuition.

**Table 6. Summary of results**

Linguistic category		Number of teacher-responses	Degree of intuition/corpus match
Function		32	high
Frequency	general	20	high
	detailed	0	-
Register		14	high
Collocation	General (semantic preference)	1	high
	specific	0	-
Sentence position		1	high
Grammatical patterns		0	-

None of the teachers talked about specific frequencies, such as the comparative frequencies for different senses of the items, or for a particular shared function, or for different grammatical patterns. This suggests that such frequency information is beyond the bounds of teachers' intuition. Interestingly though, a number of teachers commented on the relative frequencies of the items in a general sense, and most of these ideas were supported by the corpus. However, these responses said nothing about the magnitude of relative frequencies, indicating that while specific details of frequency are not available to intuition, general notions of relative frequency could be.

A further observation is that although there were no responses in the survey which identified specific collocates of "in fact" or "actually", one teacher accurately predicted that "in fact" is

often found with statistics. It could be that teachers are intuitively aware of the 'semantic preferences' of an item for members of a lexical group. However, there was only one response in the survey raising this issue, so further research may be required in this area.

One teacher's claim about sentence position was strongly supported by the corpus. While this research confirmed views held in the literature about grammatical patterning and phraseology being unavailable to our intuition, it could be that sentence position is something which teachers are intuitively aware of. Again this conclusion is made with caution since only one respondent referred to sentence position in the survey. Finally, the results of the present study suggest that teachers' intuition is capable of identifying the register associated with a particular word or phrase.

### Implications for teachers

It is clear from the literature that the use of intuition on its own for language description is generally viewed negatively by researchers. However the results of this study suggest that in the context of EFL, this view needs to be refined. The results of this research indicate that teachers' intuitive linguistic accounts are in fact rather accurate. It would appear that for certain types of linguistic information, teachers can provide accurate answers for students. From the data, it also appears that experienced teachers, such as those sampled in the present study, are aware of the kinds of information for which they can provide accurate accounts, and so restrict the scope of their answers accordingly. However this also implies that although students are not being presented with erroneous information, they are nevertheless being denied useful details about the language such as frequency or grammar patterns. One way to address this problem would be to include access to corpus data in class. Tried and tested corpus-based teaching approaches such as Data-Driven Learn-



ing (DDL) have been gaining support in recent years. In DDL classes, learners need not rely on teachers for intuitive language description because they are required to draw their own conclusions about language patterns based on corpus data (Johns, 1991). Using corpus data to produce consciousness-raising materials, or even having a corpus on hand to consult during class, compensates for the teacher's intuition blind-spots and thereby reduces the chance of erroneous description. It also allows for the transfer of students' reliance from their teachers onto corpus evidence and indeed their own deductive skills.

The results of this study imply that teachers should be encouraged to use their intuition to describe the different uses and senses of words, since intuition seems accurate and detailed in this area. Teachers should also feel confident when providing intuitive accounts of semantic preferences for sets of items, typical sentence positioning of words, register and general comparative frequencies. Based on the findings of this study, these areas may be open to accurate descriptive accounts from well-informed teacher intuition. On the other hand, this research indicates that teachers should take care if describing relative frequencies of various functions or patterns, as this type of information could be unavailable to intuition. For the same reason, teachers should also exercise caution when describing grammatical patterns and grammatical structures. Teachers would benefit from guidance on which aspects of their intuition can be relied upon and such information could be included in teacher-training programs for those new to the field.

Although the exploitation of corpora in language classrooms still remains something of a novelty, further technological advances combined with increasing investment in Information Technology by educational institutions should mean greater access to corpus information in the future for teachers and students alike. Considering the rapid rate of development in computing technology, it is not difficult to imagine million-

word corpora, along with simple concordancing software, being included in electronic dictionaries in the not-to-distant future. These developments represent an exciting opportunity, but one which can only be realised by raising teachers' and learners' awareness of the pitfalls of intuition and the potential benefits of corpora as a pedagogic resource. Making more accurate and comprehensive information about language available to students will help them realise their language learning goals.

### Limitations

The results of this research are to be treated with a degree of caution for a number of reasons. Firstly, the non-random sampling in the survey makes it difficult to claim that results will be representative. The survey also uses a relatively small sample of only 23 teachers, so conclusions are made in light of this limitation. In addition, by conducting the survey via email, a disadvantage was the lack of control over the time taken for subjects to consider the question. Respondents were also free to consult resources other than their own experience and intuition, such as a textbook or colleague. This would result in a distortion of the procured data, since the goal was to elicit spontaneous teacher responses. The problem was addressed by explaining to respondents that answers should be intuitive, of the kind normally offered in class. Ultimately of course, there was no control over the degree of pondering or resources employed. Secondly, an advantage of the word-based approach to corpus analysis is that it is largely free of intuitive prejudice; however, at some stage of the analysis, intuition must be brought to bear on the data. Therefore a degree of subjectivity inevitably remains. It should also be stressed that corpus analysis produces results which apply to the corpus employed, and do not necessarily represent the English language as a whole. Finally, this research focuses on only two linguistic items so conclusions drawn about teachers' intuition regarding all similar word pairs must



also be made with caution. Since this study is designed to be exploratory in nature, the limitations described above in no way invalidate my conclusions or recommendations. Indeed, more detailed and representative research could be conducted on the basis of these findings.

## Bio data

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