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IF I WERE AN ESL STUDENT, WOULD I NEED TO LEARN THE SUBJUNCTIVE?
AN ANALYSIS OF TEACHING THE SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD

REBECCA BASTIEN AND SARAH VINZ

ABSTRACT

In most languages, including English, there are four main grammatical moods: the declarative (also known as the indicative mood), the imperative mood, the conditional mood, and the subjunctive mood. The first three moods occur frequently in speech and in writing. However, the subjunctive is hardly used in English, even though one cannot avoid it when one studies French, Spanish, and other Romance languages. In this paper, we describe the subjunctive, its functions, and its place an ESL curriculum. We examine textbooks and offer suggestions for how, when, and why to include the subjunctive in lesson plans.

1.0 Introduction

The use of the subjunctive mood in modern English is very limited; some grammarians have even gone so far as to argue that it is on its deathbed, apart from a few very specific usages. A cursory glance at this topic might lead teachers of English to speakers of other languages (ESL) to decide that it is unnecessary and inefficient to devote any of the restricted classroom time available to them to this area of grammar. In this paper we examine the topic more closely, with the goal of gaining insight into whether or not this is truly the best decision, particularly in the setting of an English for academic purposes (EAP) program.

2.0 What is the subjunctive?

Mood is a verb feature used to show the attitude of a speaker toward an utterance. The subjunctive mood (hereinafter referred to as "the subjunctive") is selected to express desire, supposition, contingency, and possibility (Partridge, 1949). Although it was more heavily used in older forms of English, in modern times it has become the least commonly used mood in the language (Koffi, 2010). It is most commonly employed today in the following three forms:

1. The mandative subjunctive. When a main clause contains a request, demand or requirement (as expressed by a verb phrase such as <insist>, <suggest>, or <be necessary>), the dependent <that> clause which follows (and acts as the object) is in the subjunctive (Pooley, 1974; Leech & Svartik, 1975). This is indicated by the main verb of that clause being left in its uninflected bare-infinitive form (Sedley, 1990):

   <It is necessary that every student *study* grammar.>
   <The teacher demanded that the subjunctive *be* learned.>

2. The formulaic subjunctive, which is found in set expressions that have their roots in older forms of the English language, such as <Long *live* the queen> and <God

bless you>. This form is used to express a wish of the speaker, and not a statement of fact (as in <I wish that the queen *live* long>, and not <The queen lives long>). Here, the main verb is also left in its uninflected form (Berk, 1999).

      3. The *<were>*-subjunctive, which is used in clauses that express condition or contrast and in clauses following verbs such as <wish>. In these clauses, *<were>* is used regardless of person (Leech & Svartik, 1975):

> <If she *were* rich, she would travel the world.>
> <I wish I *were* taller.>

The current status of the subjunctive in English remains a topic of debate among grammarians. Some have adopted the extreme position that the subjunctive has completely died out and no longer exists within the language (Hirtle, 2007). At the other end of the spectrum are those who argue that while the subjunctive may be rapidly disappearing from spoken English, it continues to be firmly entrenched in formal written English (Kaixin, 1996; Sedley, 1990). In the middle are grammarians who posit that use of the subjunctive is becoming more of a "taste" or stylistic choice than a grammatical necessity (Pooley, 1974). So, what is an English teacher to do?

3.0 Pedagogical implications
      ESL/EAP teachers have one primary goal: to help their learners develop the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (Koffi, 2010) required to succeed in a formal educational setting. All decisions these teachers make with regards to topics to cover in their classrooms are taken against this overarching goal. Choices these teachers must make regarding how to handle the subjunctive may be particularly challenging, given the contentious state of the topic. To assist them, we would like to offer a number of recommendations made on the basis of the above findings.

First, ESL/EAP teachers should note that usage of the subjunctive is not widespread enough within English to merit introducing learners to the concept of a "Subjunctive Mood." While this mood did exist in a more full-fledged state in older forms of the language, we are now only using remnants.[1] Trying to explain the entire mood to the learners is likely to be confusing and may lead them to try to apply the mood in broader circumstances (particularly if a learner's L1 has a very prominent subjunctive mood, such as Spanish). In essence, teachers should not tell the learners about a forest that once existed when what they want is for them to focus on the few remaining trees.

Second, teachers should focus their efforts on usage of subjunctive forms in written work (as opposed to in oral communication). It appears that learners will generally be expected to observe the conventions in their written academic work, with standards being much looser for oral communication (Sedley, 1990).

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[1] This is further supported by the fact that in reviewing sixty to eighty scholarly English grammar reference books, only a handful were found to contain mention of the "Subjunctive Mood" -- and most of these were published over forty years ago.

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Third, teachers may wish to place particular emphasis on proper construction of the *<were>*-subjunctive. It appears that usage of the mandative and formulaic subjunctives is increasingly being viewed as extremely formal and literary – possibly even archaic. Correct usage of *<were>* in conditionals, however, still seems to be a sociolinguistic marker. Indeed, research as late as the 1970s indicated that professors believed that stating conditionals in anything other than the subjunctive form was simply unacceptable (Pooley, 1974).[2]

Fourth, teachers may find it easier to treat formulaic subjunctive constructions as idiomatic expressions. The "background" grammar may overwhelm learners and does not seem to be a perquisite for appropriate and effective usage of these fixed phrases.

4.0 Case Study

After determining the status of the subjunctive within the English language and analyzing the implications for ESL/EAP teachers, we were interested in finding out how the subjunctive is actually being handled within an ESL/EAP program. St. Cloud State University's (SCSU) Intensive English Center (IEC) was chosen as a case study.

The IEC offers an immersion EAP program designed to prepare ESL students for undertaking university studies. Its current enrolment is approximately ninety-four students representing thirteen countries and six L1s (Arabic, Chinese, French, Korean, Spanish, and Turkish). At the beginning of the semester students are given a placement exam, the results of which serve as the basis for dividing the learners into six levels (pre-Level One through Level Five). Learners who wish to enrol as an undergraduate student at SCSU must successfully complete Level Four; those wishing to be admitted to an SCSU graduate program must pass Level Five.

In order to ascertain what aspects of the subjunctive (if any) are being taught to the learners at the IEC, we decided to focus primarily on the composition and grammar/structure classes being taught at Levels Three, Four and Five (L3, L4, L5). These subjects were chosen as we felt that on the basis of our findings, these were the courses where we were most likely to encounter forms of the subjunctive being taught. The levels were selected given on the assumption that the above-outlined instances of the subjunctive would be considered intermediate to advanced-level topics.

Our case study consisted of two parts. First, we conducted a review of the textbooks currently being used in the six courses under consideration.[3] This involved determining if each book includes explanations or exercises pertaining to the three main categories of the subjunctive still deemed to be in use (namely, the mandative subjunctive, the formulaic subjunctive, and the *<were>*-subjunctive). The results of this review were that usage of the subjunctive in any form was only included in two textbooks, namely those used for the L4 and L5 grammar/structure courses. In the L4 textbook, the mandative-subjunctive is incorporated into a brief lesson on "Noun clauses after expressions of

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[2] Unfortunately, it has proven difficult to obtain more recent data. This would be an interesting area for future research.

[3] A full list of these textbooks is included in the references section of this paper

importance". The *<were>*-subjunctive is dealt with more extensively, within a chapter covering unreal conditions and wishes. In the L5 textbook, the only form addressed is the *<were>*-subjunctive, which is again considered in the context of conditional sentences. We also looked to see if the books made any mention at all of the term "subjunctive", and found that none of them did. These results are summarized in Table 1 below.

	Mandative subjunctive	Formulaic subjunctive	*Were*-subjunctive	General mention of "subjunctive"
L3 composition	--	--	--	--
L3 grammar/structure	--	--	--	--
L4 composition	--	--	--	--
L4 grammar/structure	Yes	--	Yes	--
L5 composition	--	--	--	--
L5 grammar/structure	--	--	Yes	--

Table 1. Appearance of the subjunctive in L3/L4/L5 composition and grammar/structure textbooks within the IEC.

The second step of our review included interviewing all seven of the instructors currently assigned to teach the aforementioned classes. All three of the instructors using the textbooks which include subjunctive-related material reported that they have not introduced these topics to their learners. There appear to be several reasons for this. One is rather circumstantial: teachers noted that the material is simply included in chapters that they have not been able to get to this semester. More interestingly, however, was the teachers' assessment that they feel these constructions are relatively low priority for the learners to master, and that lack of the formal instruction in the subjunctive will not hinder the learners in their university studies. Indeed, it is even noted within one of the textbooks that "Careful speakers usually use *were*…however, many people use *was* [in unreal situations]." (Broukal 2004, 419) Teachers also expressed strong concern that their learners may not have the language skills necessary to grasp what the teachers feel to be very advanced and refined topics. The instructors using textbooks *not* addressing any issues related to the subjunctive noted that they do not supplement the materials to introduce any subjunctive on their own.

Overall, we found that what is happening at the IEC is somewhat in line with the recommendations we have put forward in this paper. We found that teachers are not introducing learners to the overall concept of the "subjunctive", which adheres to our conclusion that doing so is unnecessary and may lead to confusion. Contrary to our recommendation, we found that subjunctive forms are not being looked at in composition classes, which is where – if anywhere– it would be important for them to be discussed. We would therefore encourage L3/L4/L5 composition teachers to consider supplementing their textbooks and introducing learners at least to the *<were>*-subjunctive, given that usage of this form still appears to be expected in academic writing. Finally, although we did not encounter any instances of the formulaic subjunctive within our review, we would encourage IEC instructors coming across expressions in this form to present them to their learners as idioms.

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As noted at the outset of this paper, the expected usage of the subjunctive in the English language continues to be a widely disputed topic. There is, therefore, no truly right or wrong way for ESL/EAP teachers to handle these concepts within their classrooms. Be that as it may, we hope that the ideas we have presented here will help them in their quest to make the best teaching decisions possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS
Rebecca Bastien received her MA TESL/Applied Linguistics Program degree from SCSU.

Sarah Vinz received her MA/TESOL in May 2012. Prior to coming to SCSU she ran an English department at a high school in Thailand and spent a number of years working for the United Nations in Europe and Africa. Vinz also holds a Master of International Affairs degree (Columbia University) and a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science (University of Minnesota –Moorhead).

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L3 Grammar/structure: Elbaum, S.N. (2010). *Grammar in context 2, Fifth edition.* Boston, MA: Heinle Cengage Learning.

L4 Composition: Folse, K.S., Mahnke, K.M., Solomon, E.V., & Williams, L. (2003). *Blueprints 2. Composition skills for academic writing.* Boston, MA: Heinle Cengage Learning.

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L5 Composition: Winkler, A.C. & McCuen-Metherell, J.R. (2008). *Writing the research paper, Seventh edition*. Boston, MA: Thomson Wadsworth.

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