

Keep it real: authenticity is the secret of success

Melanie Butler asks author Ian Badger about incorporating real-life recordings into his material and why listening is a key business skill

How did you first get involved with business English and what were the biggest challenges you faced at the beginning of your career?

I started my career working in adult education in southern Finland. I was straight out of university with a modern languages degree and was recruited by the British Council to work in an adult education institute in a small town with a pulp mill and many kilometres of ski tracks. At the time I did not speak any Finnish; I knew little about teaching languages (although I knew something about learning them), and yet I was suddenly responsible for enrolment, timetabling and teaching a full timetable including general, exam and special purposes classes. I had to learn my craft very quickly.

My first in-company business English experience happened soon after I arrived in Finland when I was asked to teach English to employees at the Iittala glass-works. Later, I was to be fully challenged by teaching business and technical English in the forest-products industry, which involved becoming familiar with a wide range of technical processes and products in English as well as the language used in everyday international business transactions.

You still work as a trainer. How does what you do in the classroom affect what you do and what you choose to put in your books?

The language difficulties faced by my learners in their everyday business lives always inform the material which I include in my books. For example, I have



Courtesy Ian Badger

BUILDING CONFIDENCE Ian Badger uses authentic materials

included recordings of telephone conferences and voicemail messages in *English for Business: Listening*. In these recordings the sound quality is not perfect, accents may be unfamiliar, and colloquial and non-standard language is used. This is a reflection of today's business world and the material helps learners to feel more confident in dealing with real-life situations. I have just spent two weeks working in France helping with the communication needs of sales teams and customer service. Next week I will be in Poland running a course for IT applications/helpdesk staff, who have to communicate with contacts and colleagues worldwide. Such work keeps me in constant contact with changing business communication needs.

You have been a strong

advocate of authentic material for as long as I have known you – which must be at least twenty years. Why do you think it is so important?

At least twenty years, yes! The ability to understand English however it is spoken is a core business skill; learners of English have to understand speakers from all over the world, many of whom do not speak with the pronunciation, grammar and clarity which have traditionally been taught in schools and colleges. Throughout my career, my client companies have operated on all continents and one of the main areas where their personnel have struggled has been in their ability to understand different English accents. I have been fortunate in that I have been trusted by the companies I have worked for to record meet-

ings, presentations, interviews, tours of the shop floor, telephone conferences, etc. involving speakers from many countries. This is exactly the language my learners need to understand and respond to; it is also target language for learning. Such authentic recordings and materials based on them respect the cultures and personalities of the recorded speakers. Use of such authentic material is still a mainstay of the training I provide.

Your recent titles, *English for Business: Listening* and *English for Life: Listening*, of course concentrate on listening. Why do you think this is such an important skill in the business context?

I believe strongly that listening is a core business skill. The customer service personnel I have been working with in France are at a C1/C2 level of competence, but they struggle to understand their colleagues in Yorkshire and Poland, their IT support in Delhi, and agents with unfamiliar accents worldwide. My core brief for the training was to develop listening skills in order to improve communicative performance at work. My two recent titles have allowed me to focus specifically on helping learners to understand the varieties of English they will come across in their everyday working and social lives. As they become more competent listeners, they gain confidence in their overall ability to communicate. In my experience they also become more aware of features of their own language which may be difficult for others to understand. ■

NZ medical English testing under scrutiny

Matt Salusbury looks at the debate over Pacific Island health workers

New Zealand's regime for testing the English language competence of foreign health workers applying to work there has come under scrutiny by a parliamentary committee, making New Zealand the latest country where medical English testing is impacting on politics.

In the US, Filipino health workers recently won a court case against the state of California's 'English only' rule. The British Medical Association has questioned the UK government's proposal for appointing regional 'responsible officials' for testing the English proficiency of doctors from other EU countries, while in Ireland – the only EU country without any internationally recognised examinations for doctors – there is increasing concern at recent statistics showing it has the highest proportion of foreign doctors in the developed world.

Sensitivity around the recruitment of foreign doctors has, of course, increased the demand for medical English training – even though most of the language

tests used are not specific to medicine.

New Zealand's Medical Council has defended testing requirements that have been described by one MP as discriminatory towards the high proportion of New Zealand's health workers from the Pacific Islands.

Currently, health workers from overseas have to satisfy the Medical Council they have a sufficient score in IELTS – to register to practice in New Zealand, doctors need a minimum 7.5 for listening and speaking, and 7.0 in other skills. There are exemptions for health workers who can prove they have lived in an English-speaking country. But the *Policy on English Language Requirements* lists English-speaking countries for the purposes of such exemptions as Australia, the UK, Ireland, the US, Canada (excluding Quebec) and South Africa. Exemptions from English tests do not apply to health workers who are citizens of the Pacific Islands – about half of New Zealand's Pacific Islanders are from

Samoa, while others are from Fiji, Tonga, Cook Islands, Papua New Guinea and other smaller island states of Micronesia. All these nations have English as an official language, and expatriates will generally be fluent in English while speaking an indigenous language at home.

Parliamentary health committee member Jackie Blue MP was reported by Radio New Zealand as saying that, as the test contained formal not colloquial English, it could discriminate against Pacific Island health workers. Some Pacific Islanders' use of English is complicated by their mother tongues having different grammar for formal and informal settings. And Maryan Street MP asked if all health workers, including laboratory technicians, really needed IELTS to work in New Zealand.

Questioned in September by the parliamentary committee on English language proficiency tests with reference to non-English-speaking health professionals seeking registration in New Zealand, Medical Council chair Dr John Adams

insisted IELTS was the best way of assessing if doctors and nurses can communicate with and understand their patients. 'It's a measure of, is somebody able to come and get registered in New Zealand? We need to know, for safe medical practice, is this person's ability up to scratch?' he told MPs.

The proportion of New Zealand's population who are of Pacific Island origin – 6.5 per cent in 2001 – is growing. The Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs predicts that one in ten of the country's population will belong to that demographic by 2026. A 2008 University of Sydney survey found '652 Pacific-Island-born doctors and 3,467 Pacific-Island-born nurses and midwives are working in Australia and New Zealand'.

Both New Zealand and Australia are concerned at the 'brain drain' of Pacific Island health workers coming to their countries, and their aid agencies run programmes to provide 'incentives for retaining' health workers in the workforce of their home Pacific Island nations. ■

The English Language Centre
Brighton

Tel: +44 1273 721771
info@elc-brighton.co.uk
www.elc-brighton.co.uk

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