

Working with authentic listening materials

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Abstract

This article is based on a workshop given at the NATECLA conference, Nottingham University, on 9 July 2016 which focused on the need to prepare our students for the listening challenges which they meet in their daily lives. This article suggests that the use of scripted listening materials, which traditionally feature dialogues read by actors, does not prepare language learners for the challenge of having to understand the wide range of accents and speaking styles they encounter in their everyday lives. The author describes features of authentic listening materials and ways that teachers can work with them.

“Even though you think you speak English there are many different accents and some of them are hard to understand for a non-native speaker, e.g. Irish, Scotts (sic), Indians, ...”
(Swiss student)

“Language is the main barrier, although we speak the common English language, the British accent was very difficult for me to understand, and I think vice versa, Brits find it really hard understanding Malaysian English as well”.
(Malaysian student)

Background

My interest in using authentic listening materials dates back over thirty years. I work primarily with international companies to help improve the communication skills of their employees working in the UK and in other countries. In the case of employees working in other countries, even though they need to use English on a daily basis, they have little or often no contact with L1 speakers of English. Those working in the UK are often surprised by the difference between the language spoken by their London, Manchester or Glaswegian colleagues and the ‘BBC/RP’ language which they studied at school. My job is to help employees to use and understand English as it is really spoken and written.

In addition, I also work with medical professionals (medical students, doctors and pharmaceutical liaison personnel) working in the UK who have to work closely with colleagues and patients from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In most cases, they struggle to understand even minor accent differences from the ‘standard’ English they studied before coming to the UK.

Defining ‘authentic’ listening

I define an ‘authentic’ listening exercise as being one based on an audio or video recording which has not been scripted by the author for

actors to read. In such a recording, the interlocutors are not asked to introduce pre-specified grammar, vocabulary and functional language in order to satisfy the demands of a syllabus. I do not deny the value of using 'scripted' recordings in situations where recordings can provide useful 'model' language. Such recordings can be used for listening comprehension practice to boost confidence and to consolidate language; but the focus of this workshop was to explore the value of using authentic listening materials.

During the workshop, I also discussed another category of listening comprehension, that of 'staged' listening. In a 'staged' listening exercise, for example in a dialogue relating to checking into a hotel, the textbook writer will require a 'real' hotel receptionist to check in a 'real' guest. The textbook writer will not put words into the speakers' mouths.

The following examples illustrate the nature of 'authentic', and 'staged' recordings (where there is overlap) and a 'scripted' dialogue.

1 An 'authentic' dialogue (recording of a new patient registering with a UK GP practice with no instructions given to the interlocutors)

R: Could I look at that please? Thank you. I also understand you've got your passport? [Yes, yeah.] Can I take a look at that? Thank you. And I also understand you've got a utility bill—a bill? [Yes.] Wonderful. Do you mind awfully if I go and copy it? [Yes, you can, yes.] Thank you. That's fine, thank you. Everything's in order, everything's fine. Now I need you to complete two registration forms [Yes.] for me. Would you like me to stay and help you?

P: Yes, please.

R: Lovely, there we go, and there is a pen. That's right, that's your surname, your address and I also need your postcode, [Yes.] I need the details of your last GP, your last doctor [Yes.] and where you lived before here. And I also need postcodes.

P: Okay. In UK I was in Rochdale [Okay.] for three years. Before that, I was in Kenya. I came from Kenya.

(Badger 2014)

2 A 'staged' dialogue (Instruction given to the 'real' interlocutors to enquire about phone options in a UK High Street mobile phone shop)

Customer: Yeah okay, and is there a minimum contract period for that phone?

Salesman: Uh, I mean there's two lengths of contract that you can go for, [Okay.] one is eighteen months and one's a twenty-four months. [Okay.] Uh, eighteen months is slightly expensive, [Okay.] ... uh ... so you might be either looking for paying for the phone [Yeah.] or having your tariff a bit more higher than fifteen pound. [Okay.] Or you can go for twenty-four months where your tariff is slightly cheaper – as little as fifteen pounds.

Customer: And is there a pay-as-you-go option if I buy the phone outright?

(Badger, 2012)

3 A 'scripted' dialogue (read by actors)

A Wellington Hotel. Can I help you?

B Yes, I've been trying to book a room on your hotel website but I can't complete the booking.

A Sorry, sir. I can do the booking for you.

B Thank you. I'd like to book a twin room for two nights, the 12th and 13th of June.

A Just one moment. I'll check our availability. Can I have your name please?

B Yes, it's Cook.

(Badger 2016)

Sources of authentic materials

'Do-it-yourself'

In my experience, the most useful listening materials are those that help our learners to understand the people with whom they most often have to communicate. For many years, I have worked with a large international paper company which has production facilities in countries including the UK, USA, Finland, Germany, France, Austria, China and Uruguay. When a new communication challenge arises, such as the need to work with Indian IT consultants or with new colleagues in Glasgow, I have been able to visit offices and factories to make recordings which form the basis of my course materials. Having a long-term relationship with such a company means having their trust to make confidential recordings of meetings and interviews with staff.

During the Nottingham conference session, there was a lot of discussion on how we can help our learners by recording examples of the English which they need to understand in their everyday lives – with fellow students, lecturers and teachers, shop assistants and so on. Of course, producing such material is time-consuming and in some cases companies or institutions will not allow their employees to be recorded but, if it can be done, it is highly recommended to optimize learner engagement.

Universally available

As mentioned above, it will not always be possible for us to create our own listening materials, but there is an enormous amount of 'authentic' material available on the internet, on TV and on the radio. For example, in my work with Erasmus medical students from France, Spain and Austria and with a Spanish medical liaison specialist from a pharmaceutical company working in the UK, I have made extensive use of video material available on the web, particularly from the NHS (National Health Service) website. My learners who are working in Bristol have had very little or no exposure to local accents in the south west of England or south Wales; working with video materials featuring such speakers has helped them in their everyday interactions with patients, colleagues and the general public.

Published material

Not all teachers have the time or opportunities to make their own video/ audio-based materials and most authentic material found on the internet “doesn’t come in a pedagogical framework” as the following writers comment:

“Most organisations — let alone individuals — would be reluctant to have their meetings, discussions, presentations, phone calls and social events recorded for classroom use by publishers, schools or teachers — and in any case most such recordings would be extremely difficult to use once devoid of context”.

Sweeney (2006)

Although there is an abundance of authentic material on the Internet, most of it doesn’t come in a pedagogical framework (preview questions, comprehension questions, discussion points etc.)

Wilson (2008)

In recent years, publishers have had more confidence in producing materials based on wholly authentic materials which do contain the pedagogical framework described by Wilson. As an author of ELT materials, my publisher, Collins, has given me the opportunity to produce recordings of authentic interactions between speakers from a wide variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Thus I have been able to supply teachers and learners with a rich resource of materials from which they can select those most relevant to their needs. Other notable examples of materials based on or including authentic recordings have been produced by Thorn, Clandfield and Lloyd (see references below). Using authentic materials in published materials allows for authors to put time and effort into developing a ‘pedagogical framework’.

Features of authentic materials

So, what is so special about authentic materials compared with scripted materials? Recordings of ‘real’ English will include features of natural English which are not present in most scripted material. There will be a wide range of ‘non-standard’ accents and patterns of intonation, ‘mistakes’, false beginnings, non-sequiturs, misunderstandings – in fact all of the features of English which our learners will meet in their everyday lives.

In my workshop, I demonstrated this point by showing some features of the recordings made for the Collins Listening books:

Grammar: uses of ‘will’

Occasionally I will take a client out for lunch (USA speaker)

The rear garden is south-facing so you’ll get the sun most of the day
(UK speaker)

You have somebody to cook for you. A lady will come in the morning to wash your clothes. (Indian speaker)

When making the recordings for the Collins Listening materials, we noted that 'will' is very often used to refer to present actions in everyday speech by speakers throughout the English-speaking world, but many teachers may consider this to be 'incorrect'. For many years, textbooks and exam syllabi have driven a grammar agenda which can be at odds with what people actually say.

'Mistakes'

Most speakers of English do not speak with the accuracy demonstrated in the scripted dialogues found in most English language textbooks. We all make 'mistakes'. Whilst I believe that we should help our learners to produce accurate language which is clear and unambiguous, the reality of communication is that they must also understand the vast majority of English speakers who make 'mistakes'. If we base materials on authentic sources, then our learners will hear mistakes being made and we can use these to help them recognise the common errors made and also to help them to compare 'correct' with 'incorrect' forms.

In the workshop, we looked at some examples of mistakes made by fluent non-native speakers:

Italian people is really people with a good fantasy – happy people
(a fluent Italian speaker who has not mastered singular and plural forms)

I explain structure of the building. Then I take them down to canteen.
(a fluent Polish speaker who has not mastered the use of articles in English)

I called a manager in German. Because his English is not very good because he's not English native speaker so his pronunciation is maybe hard for me to understand.
(a fluent Chinese speaker of English. In this case the use of 'German' is a mistake which could cause misunderstandings. Is the manager German? Is he/she based in Germany or did the speaker use German in her discussions with the manager?)

Working with authentic materials

When selected carefully, authentic listening materials are highly engaging. Our learners want to understand what is being said and how it is being expressed. As a result, apart from helping with developing listening skills, we can use the material as a springboard for many other language learning activities. These include work which focuses on:

- The topic of the recording
- The speakers' accents
- The cultural background of the speakers
- The functional language used
- The grammar used
- The active listening techniques used by the speakers to negotiate meaning

- An analysis of which speakers communicate most clearly and the features of clear communication

Some examples of how materials can be used

- 1 Listen to a recording. Identify and practise structures which occur naturally in the discussion. In this example, two friends are discussing a pony and there are some interesting revelations about animal passports and animal emotions. The recording (Badger 2014) demonstrates the use of humour, banter and irony as well as a wide and natural use of non-prescriptive grammar and vocabulary in everyday social interactions. From a two-minute section of the recording learners can identify the following uses of tenses:

<p>Simple past</p> <p>I went to America for a month I left him for over four weeks and when I got back...</p>	<p>Present perfect</p> <p>I've had him for twelve years The longest I've been away is two weeks</p>
<p>'Would' for habitual past</p> <p>He wouldn't look at me</p>	<p>Past continuous</p> <p>The vet reckons he was pining for me</p>
	<p>Past perfect</p> <p>He had lost two stone in weight We had built up that kind of relationship</p>

- 2 Anticipate the language which learners expect to hear, underline it, and then compare it with the language that occurs in the recordings.
 - 1 Occasionally I *take/will take* a client out for lunch.
 - 2 The rear garden is south-facing so *you get/you'll get* the sun most of the day.
 - 3 You have somebody to cook for you. A lady *comes/will come* in the morning to wash your clothes.
- 3 Build vocabulary by discussing a range of possible language to fill the gaps and then compare this with what is said in the recordings. All of the speakers below are from the UK and their original words are given in italics.
 - 1 I put up with the _____ of the day-to-day commute. (hassle)
 - 2 "Where are you?" "I'm _____ on the motorway."
(sat – UK variation)
 - 3 "What does he do?" "He looks after _____."
(the nitty gritty – UK idiom)
 - 4 I may have been ___ or forwarded. I need to check my inbox.
(cc'd – business English slang)

Conclusions

Authentic recordings enrich the learner's language learning experience in ways that scripted recordings do not. They reflect the real world in which learners have to communicate and thus represent a motivating language learning challenge. Additionally, using authentic listening materials helps to build awareness of what constitutes clear and unclear communication which helps learners to improve the clarity of their own communicative ability.

I will leave the final words in this article to others.

In a review of Badger 2014, Sanchez 2016 describes concisely the value of using authentic listening as a vital part of language learning.

Students are exposed to a world of English that sounds very different from the standard, concise, perfectly-executed, studio-isolated, and never-digressing material found in most English audio exercises.

They hear speech in everyday situations, complete with authentic background noise, slang, idioms, incomplete sentences, interruptions and sometimes ... terrible phone connections (oh, the horror!).

In addition, the speakers range from native to non-native, giving the listener insight into common mistakes or shortcuts made by the speakers.

Field, in his highly-recommended book, emphasizes the vital importance of understanding English however it is spoken and the key role of listening in language learning.

"... acquiring the ability to understand what L2 speakers say is not an optional extra."

"...listening is the principal means by which learners expand their knowledge of the spoken forms of the target language".

"It is also.... a much more effective channel for picking up grammar and vocabulary than a lesson delivered by a teacher to a group of learners in a session of some forty minutes."

Materials containing authentic listening recordings and references

Badger, I. *Collins English for Life Listening B2+*, Collins ELT 2014

Badger, I. *Collins English for Life Listening B1*, Collins ELT 2012

Badger, I. *Collins English for Business Listening*, Collins ELT 2011 + App for Ipad 2012

Badger, I. *Flash on English for Business Conversations*, Eli Publishing 2016

Clandfield, L. *Global*, Macmillan 2011

Field, J. *Listening in the Language Classroom*, CUP 2008

Lloyd, A. *Simply Business*, Cornelson 2014-2016

Sanchez, D. A. Review of *Collins English for Life: Listening B2* in ETAS Journal Volume 33 No. 3 Summer 2016

Thorn, S. *Real Lives, Real Listening*, Collins ELT 2013

On-line resources

www.collins.co.uk

Additional authentic recordings + learner/trainer resources to accompany “Collin English for Business” and “Collins English for Life” Listening materials

http://accent.gmu.edu

People from around the world recording the same paragraph in English

http://sounds.bl.uk/Accents-and-dialects

Examples of regional UK accents and dialect

www.dialectsarchive.com/united-states-of-america

Examples of American accents and dialects

www.languagebyvideo.com

English accents around the world

www.nhs.co.uk

A wide range of medical videos available ranging from patient discussions to advice from medical consultants

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