

Authenticity: the elephant in the language tester's room

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Authenticity in listening materials and tests

Options in choosing listening texts

- **Authentic**: unedited recording of natural speech
- **Scripted**: written by the item writer for the purposes of the test
- **Semi-scripted**: an authentic recording that is transcribed, edited and re-recorded in a studio
- **Improvised**: actor(s) in a recording studio given a task sheet and asked to act out a situation
- The above may be **monologues** or **dialogues**. Broadly, they may be **presentational** or **conversational** in style

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Various recordings

- 1. Rain forest



- 2. Pensioners



- 3. Train station



- 4. Remarrying



Why are authentic texts avoided?

- Permissions
- Variety and interest
- Lack of sufficient information points to target
- Noise (as compared with a studio)

- Lack of control over language (vocabulary and grammar)
- Time and skill needed to transcribe the real-world sources

Semi-scripted materials

- Recorded in conditions with minimal noise
But with the speech patterns (pitch, intonation, speech rate) associated with a read-aloud script
- They permit a text to be edited, so as to enable
 - a) control over the language used
 - b) the insertion of sufficient facts for a set of questions
 - c) the insertion of features that assist the test format (e.g. additional MCQ distractors)

But this takes the text a long way from the original in terms of both language and information density. c) in particular may impose heavy cognitive demands upon the listener.

The semi-scripted fallacy

Examination boards tend to make claims along the lines of ‘Test questions are based on authentic materials sourced from all over the world’ or refer to ‘authentic origins’.

They may be true of reading texts, but, in terms of listening:

- Salisbury’s (2005) study of ten item writers reported only one who regularly used an oral source in preparing scripts. Others based their scripts on ideas generated by (e.g.) magazine interviews.
- When instructing item writers on listening tests, exam board guidelines often propose written sources for ideas (information leaflets, internet sites) and suggest how IWs can revise and adapt them.

Why is authenticity an issue?

- **Context validity:**
- To what extent are the materials used in a test representative of those that a test taker would encounter in the real world?
- **Cognitive validity:**
- To what extent do the materials used in a test elicit from test takers processes in which they might expect to engage in real world circumstances?
- **Ecological validity:**
- To what extent do the materials used in a test resemble those that a teacher or test taker might be already familiar with in classroom, internet or real-world contexts?

Stakeholders' comments on a listening test used to assess medical professionals

- *'It's a good test of listening ability but... it's not listening in the real world and some of it is too artificial and structured'*
- *'It wasn't like natural conversation where it was flowing quickly and you had to pick things up'*
- *'The audio is a lot easier to understand than a lot of hospitals... And people don't speak in such neat sentences'*

[Berry et al. 2013]

Conclusion

In current tests of listening, a great weight of responsibility falls upon the item writer's familiarity with (and ability to reproduce):

- how L1 speakers **assemble speech** (including hesitation, false starts, repetition etc)
- differences between **spoken and written** language
- the way the **argument structure** of natural spoken discourse varies across different genres and contexts
- the way the **rhythm and pace** of natural speech varies across different genres and contexts

Authenticity in ELT materials

Gilmore (2015) on general coursebooks

A review of 44 published sources which compared ELT coursebooks for general study against what we know about natural speech and writing. There was general agreement on the inadequacy of the samples of language used. **The majority of criticisms made related to inaccuracy of spoken rather than written samples.**

- ‘For a wide range of discourse features ..., ELT course books often provide learners with distorted or partial representations of the target language to work from...’(p.10).
- Conclusion on listening dialogues: **‘native speaker intuitions about language and speech behaviour are notoriously unreliable’.**

The special case of academic language

- Deroey (2018) compared examples from 25 EAP lecture listening course-books with samples retrieved from the BASE corpus of 160 authentic lectures. Her focus was on **how a piece of information was signposted as important**.
- The authentic BASE lectures used a much wider and less explicit range of markers (e.g. *remember that ...* widely used instead of transparent markers such as *The key point is... / what I'm stressing is...*
- Martinez et al (2013) investigated how **new terms are defined** in lectures. They too discovered that the discourse markers used in authentic speech are not as explicit as EAP materials sometimes assume.

Apparent problems (in academic language testing):

1. Source
2. Assumptions about natural spoken discourse
3. Length and information density
4. Prosody
5. Understanding of language processes

1. Sources

Under-used sources of information

Gilmore (2015) argues that evidence for the content of ELT texts should be drawn to a much greater extent from :

- Corpus data
- Discourse analysis (including genre analysis and conversational analysis)

Evidence suggest that these sources remain widely under-consulted for the models of natural language that they provide.

The role of corpora

- Deroey also comments on how rarely writers of EAP courses appear to study corpora.
- She quotes two authors who did so (Campbell & Smith, 2012). Studying the BASE corpus alerted them strongly to the need to reflect ‘a substantial use of informal and idiomatic language by lecturers’ (p.7) – challenging received ideas about the ‘formality’ of lecture-style delivery

2. Assumptions about natural spoken discourse

A sample academic listening text

- PHILIP: ... On the positive side, exposure to such diversity helps encourage creativity, which is generally an asset to a company. But unfortunately individual differences are also the root of conflict between staff and they can lead to difficulties for management, which can sometimes be serious.
- JANICE: Well, currently teamwork is in fashion in the workplace and in my opinion the importance of the individual is generally neglected. What managers should be targeting is those employees who can take the lead in a situation and are not afraid to accept the idea of responsibility.
- TUTOR: That's true Janice but unfortunately many managers think the entire notion of encouraging individuality amongst their staff is far too hard.
- JANICE: Yes that may be true but I think... (*IELTS* 7, 2009: 132-3)

A sample academic listening text: markers

- PHILIP: ... **On the positive side**, exposure to such diversity helps encourage creativity, which is generally an asset to a company. But unfortunately individual differences are also the root of conflict between staff and they can lead to difficulties for management, which can sometimes be serious.
- JANICE: Well, currently teamwork is in fashion in the workplace and **in my opinion** the importance of the individual is generally neglected. What managers should be targeting is those employees who can take the lead in a situation and are not afraid to accept the idea of responsibility.
- TUTOR: **That's true** Janice **but** unfortunately many managers think the entire notion of encouraging individuality amongst their staff is far too hard.
- JANICE: **Yes that may be true but** I think... (*IELTS* 7, 2009: 132-3)

A sample academic listening text: abstraction

- PHILIP: ... On the positive side, **exposure** to such **diversity** helps encourage **creativity**, which is generally an asset to a company. But unfortunately individual differences are also the root of conflict between staff and they can lead to difficulties for management, which can sometimes be serious.
- JANICE: Well, currently teamwork is in fashion in the workplace and in my opinion the **importance** of the individual is generally neglected. What managers should be targeting is those employees who can take the lead in a situation and are not afraid to accept the idea of **responsibility**.
- TUTOR: That's true Janice but unfortunately many managers think the entire notion of encouraging **individuality** amongst their staff is far too hard.
- JANICE: Yes that may be true but I think ... (*IELTS* 7, 2009: 132-3)

A sample academic listening text: idiom

- PHILIP: ... On the positive side, exposure to such diversity helps encourage creativity, which is generally an asset to a company. But unfortunately individual differences are also **the root of conflict** between staff and they can lead to difficulties for management, which can sometimes be serious.
- JANICE: Well, currently teamwork is **in fashion** in **the workplace** and in my opinion the importance of the individual is generally neglected. What managers should be **targeting** is those employees who can **take the lead** in a situation and are not afraid to accept the idea of responsibility.
- TUTOR: That's true Janice but unfortunately many managers think the **entire notion** of encouraging individuality amongst their staff is far too hard.
- JANICE: Yes that may be true but I think ... (*IELTS* 7, 2009: 132-3)

Assumptions about academic speech

- 1. Heavy use of markers to map out lines of argument
- 2. Use of abstract nouns
 - ‘being exposed to diverse points of view helps to encourage staff to be creative’ ->
exposure to such diversity helps encourage creativity
- 3. Assumption that informality (in a tutorial context) takes the form of rather obscure idiom
 - in fashion take the lead the entire notion*
- 4. Forms of expression (lexical and grammatical) that derive from **written** academic style

Characterisations of 'academic discourse'

- A recent collection of papers on academic discourse (Flowerdew 2012) contains ONE chapter on oral discourse.
- In a widely quoted chapter. Snow & Uccelli (2009) characterise 'academic discourse' as:
 - Detached interpersonal stance
 - Concise information load
 - Tight organisation of information
 - Lexical diversity
 - Grammatical embedding and nominalisation

Sources such as these confound academic writing with academic speech.

3. Length and information density

Constraints upon the item writer

- A five-minute recording cannot emulate the experience of listening to a 45 minute presentation. So an item writer is often constrained to include a great deal of information in this small space - partly as an attempt to replicate the coverage of a real-world lecture, partly to provide sufficient material for ten items and sometimes to include MCQ distractors.
- It is not the duration of the recording that affects difficulty **but the density of the information that it contains.**
- A short passage with tightly-packed information can place heavy cognitive demands upon a learner because of the speed at which the information has to be integrated into an overall picture. This is very different from the case of reading, where a test taker can look back to check understanding and build a line of argument.

Information density in an EAP test

- (1) Anyway, his team measured the hands, feet and eyes (2) of 2611 players and (3) found that there were really three main types of laterality: (4) mixed – you work equally well on both sides – (5) both hand and eye – (6) single – you tend to favour one side but (7) both hand and eye favour the same side - and (8) cross-laterality – (9) a player's hands and eyes favour only one side (10) but they are opposite sides.

[*IELTS* 7, 2009]

An authentic extract (Lynch 2004: 149)

- Our second problem is obesity / obesity brought about by **an overindulgence in certain foods / especially saturated fats** /and a lack of exercise / our Victorian ancestors had few of the labour saving devices that we enjoy today / *that we that we profit from today* / of which the car is the perhaps the chief offender / lack of exercise / overindulgence in saturated fats / bringing about obesity / and obesity leads to heart disease/ back problems and so on...

4. Prosody

Speech rhythms

- Experienced lecturers use intonational signals to put across their points. These cues reflect the existence in the speaker's mind of 'a coherent cognitive map which he/she wishes learners to recreate as they listen' (Lynch (2011:81). Lynch remarks that they are often absent in ELT materials and tests

Speech assembly

- Gilmore (2004) demonstrates the absence in many ELT materials of: **false starts – repetitions – overlaps – back-channelling – fillers – pauses.**
- A scripted or semi-scripted recording of an actor in a studio thus often differs quite radically in rhythm and pace from a real-world presentation.

A solution for semi-scripted texts (Field, 2018)

- M: The first time + I realised I'd got a **problem** + was when I went along to a **college** ++ At that time I wanted to be a **plumber** + and they **said** to me + you need to go to **night** school + and they gave me a **pen** + and a **form** to fill in ++ That's when I **realised** + I went **what** does it say? + hey I **can't** + is there anybody that can **help** me? + they said **no** ++ so I said **no** I don't want to **do** this + I said I'm a man who works with his **hands** + I don't need this **night** school
- *B2 level semi-scripted.*

5. Awareness of processes

Listening processes

Far too often, item writers base scripted listening material on their experience of writing reading texts. They need to understand that listening demands very different processes. Listening

- is **time-constrained** – no opportunity to look back
- has to make sense of a **highly variable signal**, including:
 - the forms of words, which change in connected speech
 - the voices and speech rates that a listener has to adjust to

Item design is not just about the text; it is also about the behaviour of the test taker.

The consequence (as any good teacher recognises) is that spoken material should not be information dense. Information has to be delivered in relatively short units and the links between the points must be as transparent as possible.

A degree of repetition and exemplification should be factored in.

Conclusions

Some recommendations for IW training

- 1. Reduce the **emphasis on written sources** in IWGs
- 2. Include **extracts from speech corpora** in IWGs
- 3. Encourage greater use of **semi-scripted** texts.
- 4. Use **discourse analysis conventions** in scripts to ensure more natural studio recordings
- 5. Encourage item writers to tune in to **speech characteristics** which they might ignore when listening to L1 speakers
- 6. Challenge the easy assumption of parallels between items that test listening and those that test reading
 - a. Draw attention to **differences in discourse structure**
 - b. Draw attention to **the way speech is produced** (resulting in pauses, fillers, back-channelling etc)
 - c. Draw attention to differences in the way in **which a listener processes incoming text** – hence the need to avoid information overload and complex inter-clausal links.

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- Thanks for listening

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