

Using Authentic Business Transcripts in the ESL Classroom

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This article demonstrates how transcripts of authentic business interaction can be downloaded from the web and used for consciousness raising activities in the classroom. Such texts provide the teacher with an interesting supplement to the (largely) non-authentic materials found in mainstream course books.

Introduction

Teachers and materials designers have become increasingly aware of the potential gap between intuitively imagined talk in course books and 'real' business interaction. However, at the same time as being aware of this gap, the use of authentic materials has proved problematic. Firstly, it is especially difficult and time consuming to make and transcribe recordings of real interaction in a business environment. Secondly, the fact that you are using authentic interaction does not necessarily make the materials intrinsically more interesting or effective. The purpose of this article is to present some ideas for using transcripts of authentic business interaction in the classroom as a supplement to existing materials. I shall be concentrating on two areas (presentations and meetings) that currently make up core units of any business English course.

Gaining Access to Authentic Interaction

With the rapid expansion of the web and the drive within certain organisations to greater transparency, it is now possible to find transcripts of real meetings and presentations on the web. If you type meeting or presentation transcripts into google you should be able to find several transcripts with ease. Such transcripts of authentic interaction are thus easily accessible and usable for classroom materials.

The Use of Authentic Materials

Obviously, the potential use of such materials is endless and the final use will depend on your particular learners and circumstances. However, I'd like to suggest the possibility of using transcripts of authentic interaction for consciousness raising (CR) activities and I'd also like to provide a few examples of the kind of authentic materials that we are using with third year business students at the University of Antwerp. Consciousness raising activities basically work on an inductive principle whereby the students are asked to examine an extract of (authentic) talk, preferably in pairs or small groups so that English becomes the medium of classroom communication, in order to discern certain linguistic patterns apparent in the text. The idea being that once they have carried out a linguistic analysis, they will become more aware of how English is used in the 'real world' and consequently more receptive to the acquisition of these points.

Some Examples of Consciousness Raising Activities and Authentic Materials

The Use of Politeness Strategies in Business Meetings

Traditional business English courses have a tendency to ignore the aspect of politeness which is essential to business interaction. A lack of politeness might entail a valued judgement as to the learner's character rather than their proficiency in English. In a business environment, in an extreme case, failure to use politeness strategies may mean that the learner is labelled

as 'difficult to work with' or arrogant and so on. Thus, it is essential that our students develop an awareness of how politeness strategies are employed in the 'real world'. The following exercises are examples of how the use of politeness can be addressed using CR activities and a transcript of a 'real' meeting downloaded from the web.

Exercise 1. Giving Criticism

Sometimes, when the participants feel strongly about an issue, their criticism of others is direct as in the following examples.

- "Personally, I will be voting against that motion for the simple fact that the board is like a sieve. Anything that comes in leaks right out. I have no trust or faith in my fellow board members."
- "I don't agree with you. But one of the other ways, however, to deal with the issue of what's going on is also to read a transcript."

However, criticism and disagreement is often hedged (softened) so as not to offend the persons criticised and to maintain a businesslike relationship with the other participants. Work in pairs, underline and comment on the linguistic techniques used to hedge criticism in the examples below.

- "And my understanding was that the information that you were getting about the staff's concerns was not good enough. And I felt that that was because you lost so many of your management that were capable and in touch with the different individuals involved. So there seems to be a lack of institutional memory which is really challenging."
- "And it seems to me if this is going to be a democratic procedure, it really should be democratic and that everybody should go on record when they vote. I mean many of these votes determine the future of the organisation. So that's just a recommendation."
- "You know, the issue that you raise is one that could be debated and people's views on it could be very different from yours."

Exercise 2. Ways of Modifying Utterances

Look at the following examples taken from a real meeting. They all have one modifying technique, concerning the use of tenses, in common. What is the technique?

- My understanding was, and please correct me if I'm wrong, was that the present executive director was brought on as an acting, or an interim executive director.
- The one thing I wanted to ask, I wanted to ask a question of the Board because I've missed the last two meetings.
- I don't know where else to raise it. I was just wondering if we could get a copy of that employee handbook just to look at?

The Language of Presentations

The teaching of presentations is another core theme for most business English courses. The following three examples show how CR activities can be combined with authentic materials in order to:

- to help the students use English effectively to create a rapport with the audience,
- to help students close their presentations in an appropriate fashion, and
- to make their presentation more powerful.

Exercise 1. Creating a Rapport with your Audience

A presentation is a two-way process and so it is very important to create a rapport with your audience in order to make them feel actively involved in what you are saying. In the following examples underline and comment on the linguistic techniques that the speakers use to establish a link with the audience.

- I had a chance to talk to some of our shareholders earlier this afternoon and I look out in the audience here and I'm convinced of what I have been convinced of all afternoon. We're not transforming your life much at all. Just hold your hand up if you are right now in this meeting either using a PC or a PDA. If you're not using a PC or PDA right this minute, keep your hand down.
- Let's take a look at world coal supply so that we can discuss the changes occurring.
- How national are we? The answer may surprise you. Nearly half of all Gazette readers of both our weekday and Sunday editions live outside the Birmingham market. The quality and loyalty of Gazette readers nationwide is unparalleled in our industry

Exercise 2. Conclusions

Read the following conclusions to business presentations. Work in pairs. Discuss the following questions:

- What do you notice about the content of the following two concluding sections of native speaker business presentations?
- How do the speakers begin the conclusion?
- In the first line of the second example "our" is repeated three times. What effect does this have?
- In the final sentence of the second example, what do you notice about the verb forms?
- Comment on the speaker's use of the expression "and go for it like the devil himself is on your tail".

Conclusions for Discussion

- **In conclusion**, I want to re-emphasise some elements that we really should not take for granted. I believe that these elements were important in the early 1980s; however, 20 years of overcapacity mad these long forgotten. Elements such as supply elasticity, security, productivity plans, and diversity need to be evaluated.
- **In summary**, our past was chaos, our present is disarray, and our future is flux. Some day the Internet will just be another industry with predictable revenue streams where the 5th year revenue plan will be useful for something other than scrap paper. In the meantime, the AOL-type game plan is one that has worked and needs to be considered. So commit, set up your e-business, develop your strategies based on your best projections, and go for it like the devil himself is on your tail, because you never know who just may be getting on the net next. I hope you have a good conference.

Exercise 2 Making your Speech More Powerful

In this section you will see a number of linguistic devices that the speakers use to get their message across more effectively. For each extract, try to give a label to the device exemplified and then comment on its effectiveness.

Examples

- Never have we relied more on the power and experience of our news gathering forces than during the past six months.
- Such dramatic events place a particular burden on the poor. Some question that - clinging on to the belief that the weather is the only thing that treats all people equally. As the saying goes: no matter whether you are rich or poor, everybody gets wet when it rains. But that gives a false picture. Even when it comes to weather, the poor are worse off. Much worse.
- The numbers are staggering, by the way. 3.7 trillion email messages were sent last year. There are expected to be 40 million children on the web by the year 2004.
- Victor Hugo said, "You can resist an invasion of armies, but you cannot resist an idea whose time has come." This is bigger than any of us - myself, any of you. This is happening because society wants to make it happen.
- We also have a technique where you can play the meeting back at about twice the speed that it really took place, and so you'll have this huge incentive not to go to the meeting -- (laughter) -- because it's much faster in retrospect than it was in reality. And, you know, people will think twice about going to a meeting. Okay, so meetings are about collaboration and information-sharing but if all you want to do is listen, then maybe you don't need to attend.

Conclusion

It is not my suggestion that current text books should be abandoned because the texts used to teach meetings and presentations are not authentic. That fact that materials are not authentic does not disqualify them as 'good' teaching materials and nobody would argue that many of the materials currently available fail to equip our students with key lexis, expressions, listening skills and so on that could be employed in professional situations where English is used. However, the use of authentic materials outlined above could be a useful supplement to your teaching repertoire and students (and teachers) might appreciate the contact with 'real' business language in use.

Suggested Answers and Points for Discussion

Meetings

Exercise One

The following expressions are hedges;

my understanding was, it seems to me, I felt, there seems to be, just, and the use of modals should and could.

They act to minimise any possible criticism of other participants.

Exercise Two

The technique is the use of the unreal past. The use of the unreal past can be seen as a politeness strategy to make the utterances seem more hypothetical.

Business Presentations

Exercise One

- Asking the audience to do something.
- The use of 'let's' and 'we' are inclusive forms that link the speaker with the audience.
- The use of a rhetorical question addresses the audience directly and invites them to engage with the speech.

Exercise Two

The speakers sum up the key message they want to convey.

- Both speakers begin with a simple introductory phrase ('in conclusion' and 'in summary') which is used to signal the fact that they are ending.
- Repetition can be used as a simple rhetorical device to make the language more powerful. Also, the 'our' is inclusive which thus stresses solidarity between the speaker and the audience.
- The speaker makes use of the imperative thus giving a sense of urgency.
- A vivid colloquial idiom can make the language more powerful.

Exercise Three

- Inversion
 - The use of a saying and the juxtaposition of 'worse' with 'much worse'
 - The use of staggering figures
 - Quoting from a famous person
 - Joking – but worth drawing the students' attention to the difficulties of making a joke work in a foreign language
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