What's up with the accents of English?
Accents as a teaching opportunity in the EFL classroom

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Abstract

This paper deals with the importance of using authentic or real English in the classroom in order to help students improve their listening comprehension skills. Fifty undergraduate students were surveyed to hear about their perceptions regarding several issues, such as: understanding real English, their own accents, the materials used in class and so on. Based on their answers, I could conclude that most of them had difficulties to understand authentic English. Therefore, I decided to address the issue by, first, creating an online English Accent Database and using it in class and secondly, I began to include more authentic materials in my lessons taken from online sources, e.g. online radio stations and YouTube videos. The objective of this project was to help students realize the importance of being exposed to authentic real English in order to improve their listening comprehension skills.
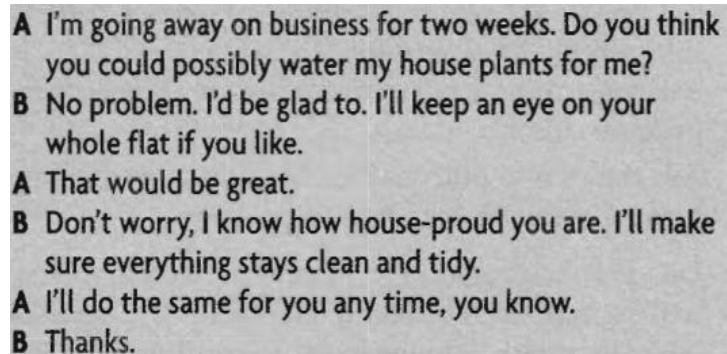
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English learners, at all levels, often state that "Native speakers speak too fast" or that sometimes it is really difficult for them to understand what both native (NS) and non-native speakers of English (NNS) are saying. This may indicate that learners are unable to recognize some aspects of connected speech, for instance, the use of contractions (that'll do), some grammar signals such as past tense verbs (worked) or the importance of stress in pronunciation (SEparable). Can we use accents of English and some online resources to help our students improve both their pronunciation and especially, their listening comprehension skills? How can we, as teachers of English make our listening activities more meaningful for our students to face real life situations?

In the past, it has been challenging to obtain and access samples of different varieties of English. The main source was (and it still might be for some people) J.C. Wells' book called "Accents of English," which was published in 1982. However, nowadays it is much easier to find

and to be exposed to virtually almost any accent of English thanks to the Internet. We can go to YouTube and search for any variety of English and we'll certainly find it or we can just go to the National Public Radio webpage (www.npr.org) and we'll be able to listen to an interview and then download it for free without any restrictions. Then the question remains for us: why do we continue using the materials, particularly for our listening activities, that most of the time, do not provide us, as teachers, and students with authentic "real life" spoken English?

An American teacher and author, Kevin McCaughey, states that: "many students of English eventually travel abroad, where they're shocked to discover how unprepared they are for understanding real speech – whether native or non-native English" (p. 12). However, it is not always necessary to travel abroad to realize how unprepared some of our students are, regardless of their level of English, to understand authentic English, the kind of English they are going to encounter in their daily lives, in a radio interview or simply, in a movie. For example, during class and examinations, I could see some of my students struggling with the listening sections, even though they could understand my accent perfectly. They would still complain about the fact it was more difficult for them to understand what some speakers were saying, especially because they thought that those people were speaking too fast or because their accent was simply harder to grasp. Similarly, some other students mentioned the fact that they felt that the textbooks we were using in class usually contained inauthentic English, i.e. even though, textbooks feature/use native speakers, what they say, does not resemble what happens in real life. For example, some of my students have the chance to talk to native speakers of English and they tell me: "teacher, but no one talks like the people in the book we use" or because they watch TV shows or movies in English.

> **A** I'm going away on business for two weeks. Do you think you could possibly water my house plants for me?
> **B** No problem. I'd be glad to. I'll keep an eye on your whole flat if you like.
> **A** That would be great.
> **B** Don't worry, I know how house-proud you are. I'll make sure everything stays clean and tidy.
> **A** I'll do the same for you any time, you know.
> **B** Thanks.

That is why I decided to ask my students about their views on a couple of issues, e.g. accents of English, their textbooks, how they felt about their pronunciation skills and accent, and their listening comprehension, among others. I created a survey using the webpage SurveyMonkey.com, which allows you to send the survey easily and quickly and it also allows students to answer the survey anonymously.

Participants

I sent the survey to several classes I have been teaching during the last 2 years, which include students from mainly two undergraduate programs: the English Pedagogy Program and the Translation and Interpretation Program. Fifty students completed the survey and after that, I analyzed their answers in order to organize and understand what their views were. Based on what I usually see in class and what students tell me about the textbooks we use, I came to the realization

that we, English teachers, tend to expose our students to mostly 2 varieties on English: RP and GA. Although, there are many more accents of English, both Native and Non-native, that may happen because of the syllabus we have to cover or because we may have the idea that those two varieties are more prestigious than other accents. As pointed out by Levis: "most currently published pronunciation materials are consistent with the nativeness principle. These materials hold that prestige native speaker versions of English are the proper models for pronunciation learning. Although most native speakers of English speak neither General American nor Received Pronunciation, published materials rely on these accents for examples, giving a skewed view of pronunciation that may not serve learners' communicative needs" (p. 371).

Therefore, one of the key questions, for me, was to find out whether students believed they had problems understanding authentic English or not. After analyzing their answers, I could conclude that: 29% of the students said that it was difficult for them to understand authentic English because native speakers talk too fast. A second reason was that for 27% of the students who completed the survey, it was hard to understand real English due to the use of inauthentic English in class since it gave them the wrong idea of what usually happens in real life situations. For 24% of the students, it was difficult for them to understand authentic English because of the speaker's accent since they were not really used to hearing that particular accent and according to the rest of the students (20%) it was not difficult to understand authentic English (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
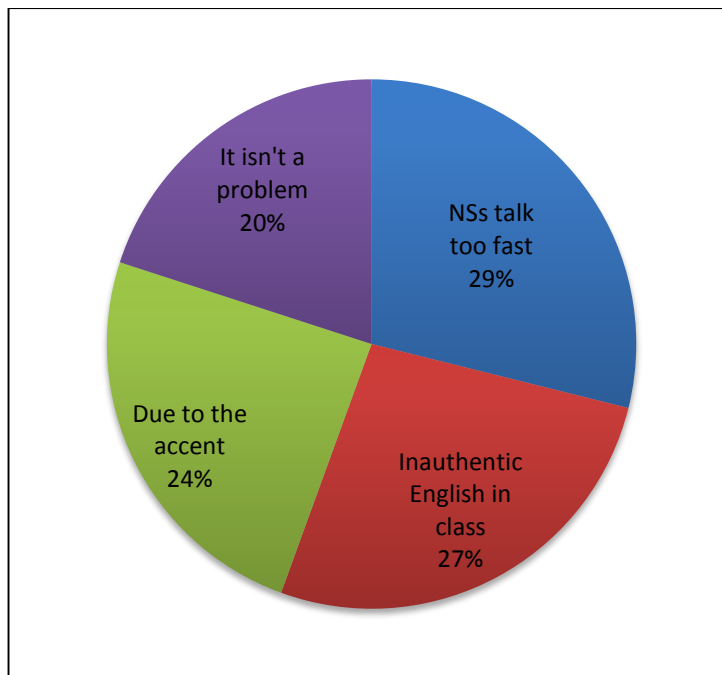
The Project

Last year, I came up with the idea of creating a personal "English accent database" and for that, I asked friends, colleagues and other people, who are mostly native speakers of English, to record two things for me:

1) A text:

> The North Wind and the Sun were arguing one day about which of them was stronger, when a traveler came along wrapped up in an overcoat. They agreed that the one who could make the traveler take his coat off would be considered stronger than the other one. Then the North Wind blew as hard as he could, but the harder he blew, the tighter the traveler wrapped his coat around him; and at last the North Wind gave up trying. Then the Sun began to shine hot, and right away the traveler took his coat off. And so the North Wind had to admit that the Sun was stronger than he was.

2) Some information about information themselves (where they were born, where they live, what they do, etc.)

Mainly, people recorded their voices using their cell phones, laptops or with any other device with a built-in microphone. However, whenever I had the chance, particularly with the people who live in Santiago and during my own trips abroad, I recorded their voices using an I-pod and a microphone.

The samples

Up to this point, I have collected, edited and uploaded 43 samples (and the number keeps growing). The samples contain accents from many different countries and regions: Australia, Canada, England, Ireland, Jamaica, Northern Ireland, Scotland, The Bahamas and United States, (you can find them at https://soundcloud.com/jose-luis-poblete). The idea is that everybody can access the samples, download them or just use them in class.

We can find two different types of language in the samples that could be used in the classroom:

1) **Scripted authentic**: since people just have to read and record the text I provide.
2) **Unscripted spontaneous:** when people talk about their own lives in an unplanned manner.

We, as teachers, should try to use authentic or spontaneous language (both native and non-native) in order to help our students develop their listening comprehension skills since that is type of language they are going to encounter in their daily lives. As McCaughey points out: "unscripted language develops spontaneously, like the conversations you have ever day with friends and family (…) It is unscripted language where we find the most examples of reduced speech, and so it is important that we provide our students the opportunity to experience and decipher these potential points of frustration" (p. 11).

Teaching Suggestions

Teachers can use the samples for a variety of activities. For example, make students guess where a particular speaker is from, based on their perception of the accent or they can also try to the find some examples of reduced speech, e.g., the way a person may say "going to" or some contractions in spontaneous speech. The main objective should be to include more materials with authentic English in our lessons, regardless of the level. A 30-second authentic English sample can provide us with more valuable aspects of the pronunciation of English than the listening exercises that accompany the textbooks we use in class. Likewise, teachers should help students realize that notions such as Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA) are just useful reference

models, but not the truth. The correct or the only way to teach, learn or that those are the only varieties students are going to find in real life. Peter Roach, the renowned English phonetician, stated in an e-mail interview: "you just need to record some authentic unscripted native-speaker talk (…), select some sections and turn them into comprehension and practice material". Nowadays, finding authentic English materials has become really simple thanks to the Internet, we can just to go to YouTube.com and find footage from movies, interviews, TV shows and so on. Also, we can go to other web pages if we would like to find other types of authentic listening materials. For example: the English Language Listening Lab Online (elllo.org), Ireland's Radio Broadcaster (rte.ie/radio), National Public Radio (npr.org), among an endless list of international radio stations we can find online.

Future of the Project

The idea is to keep collecting samples, publish them online (https://soundcloud.com/jose-luis-poblete) and certainly, share them with all the teachers and students who would like to use the samples either in the classroom or for personal study (if you would like to participate, you can reach me at: jose.poblete.b@usach.cl). Similarly, I would like to extend the project to non-native speakers of English (for instance, Chilean teachers and students) and ask them to record another text or simply, to talk about their own lives. Finally, I have been working, together with some colleagues, on some podcasts that we hope to publish online soon.

Conclusions

Even though it has been a challenging task, mainly because students were not used to listening to authentic English in class, they have really appreciated the fact that I have been including authentic listening activities and the samples I have collected throughout my project. Furthermore, teachers should help students realize that the problem is not that "native speakers talk too fast" as usually stated by many students of English. The real issue that some students are not really exposed to authentic English to notice the use and the importance of reduced speech, especially in our Chilean EFL context since both students and teachers are not surrounded by an English-speaking environment. Therefore, our goal, as teachers, should be to include more authentic materials and also to encourage our students to use the tools available on the Internet, such as the ones I mentioned above, in order to improve their listening comprehension skills.

"Give students variety. Expose them to a wide range of English. Let them understand that English does not have one single correct form" (McCaughey, p.11).

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