

# A comparison of textbook and authentic interactions

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*This paper reports on an investigation into the discourse features of seven dialogues published in coursebooks between 1981 and 1997, and contrasts them with comparable authentic interactions. It finds that the textbook dialogues differ considerably from their authentic equivalents across a range of discourse features: length and turn-taking patterns, lexical density, number of false starts and repetitions, pausing, frequency of terminal overlap or latching, and the use of hesitation devices and back-channelling. The implications of the inclusion or absence of these features in textbooks are discussed with reference to materials writers, teachers, and learners. Finally, these results are contrasted with figures from more recent coursebooks which suggest that contrived dialogues are beginning to incorporate more natural discourse features.*

## Introduction

Many teachers throughout the world are, no doubt, familiar with the experience of presenting dialogues to their students which have an air of artificiality about them. One example, taken from a Japanese textbook used in secondary schools, is shown below (cited in McCarthy and Carter 1994: 195):

Akiko: Is this your first visit to Japan?  
Miss Fields: Yes, it is.  
Hideo: Do you like Japan?  
Miss Fields: Yes I do. Japan is really clean and safe.  
Takeshi: Where do you live in Canada?  
Miss Fields: I live in Toronto.

At this point, a number of different factors combine to produce an interaction which seems contrived: the turn-taking is neat and tidy; there are no performance errors such as hesitation, repetition, or false starts; the 'interviewers' give no responses to the answers, and therefore seem rather cold, and the topics are not developed as they are in natural discourse, but shift abruptly.

Artificiality in itself is not necessarily a bad thing of course, as Widdowson (1998: 714) points out:

The whole point of language learning tasks is that they are specially contrived for learning. They do not have to replicate or even simulate what goes on in normal uses of language. Indeed, the more they seem to do so, the less effective they are likely to be.

So just how artificial have dialogues in the average textbook been, and what is it exactly that makes them less real? Would inclusion of any missing features make materials less effective, as suggested by Widdowson, or does it depend on the individual characteristics of each one? This investigation aims to go some way towards providing an answer to these questions.

## The investigation

In this investigation, seven ‘service encounter’ dialogues were taken from a variety of textbook sources. These listening exercises were presumably incorporated by the authors to develop learners’ listening skills, or to highlight specific vocabulary and functional language for this genre, rather than any grammatical features. As such, we might hope to see interactions which closely resemble authentic discourse. The sources for the textbook samples are shown below in Figure 1:

Source	Situation
<i>Inside English 1</i> (1985)	Hiring a car from a car rental shop
<i>Task Listening</i> (1981)	Telephone enquiry about a flat for rent
<i>International Express Intermediate</i> (1997)	Telephone enquiry about flights
<i>Making Headway</i> (1992)	Telephone reservation of a hotel room
<i>Fast Forward 1</i> (1986)	Asking for directions in the street
<i>Fast Forward 1</i> (1986)	Asking for help at a tourist information centre
<i>Inside English 1</i> (1985)	Telephone enquiry about train times

FIGURE 1  
Source material and the contexts for the dialogues

It was felt important to limit the research to one genre since, as Carter and McCarthy (1997: 8) point out, ‘different types of talk produce different types of language’.

## Service encounters

Service encounters are instances where two people, normally strangers, come together with one requesting information from the other. For example, a visitor asking for information at a tourist information centre (see Appendices 2 and 3). This particular genre was chosen because it has certain features which make it easy to replicate outside the classroom (an important point if, as in this case, meaningful comparisons are sought). Firstly, only two interlocutors are involved in each interaction, so turn-taking patterns are consistent: A (taking the role of ‘information receiver’) normally asks a question, and B (taking the role of ‘information giver’) answers. Secondly, the participants are strangers meeting for the first time, so the relationship is not complicated by other factors. Lastly, for the purposes of this investigation, the ‘information receiver’ was the author, which meant that control was maintained over the topic of the conversation, and that the authentic interactions could be matched closely with the textbook samples.

## Method

The transcripts from the textbooks were taken, and all questions posed by the 'information receiver' were extracted in note form. These questions were then reformulated and used as the basis of the authentic encounters outside the classroom. The dialogues were recorded, transcribed, and a comparison made of the discourse features of the textbook material versus the 'authentic' material.

Transcriptions of any spoken data should always be viewed critically since as Brown and Yule (1988: 11) remark, 'a great deal of interpretation by the analyst has gone on before the reader encounters this data'.

Obviously, the perceivable differences between any two sets of data are limited by how much detail is recorded. Decisions on just how much detail to transcribe depend on what questions the researcher seeks answers to, and in this case it is based on a prediction of where differences are likely to lie. There is an enormous amount of subjectivity involved; we only get answers to the questions that we ask. Figure 2 summarizes the information recorded in the transcriptions and the relevant research questions:

Information recorded	Research question
Speakers <S1> or <S2>	Is turn-taking between <S1> and <S2> similar between both sets of data?
Pauses in conversation (seconds)	Does frequency of pauses differ between textbook and authentic data?
Terminal overlap and latching	Do participants in both textbook and authentic data make mistakes relating to transition relevance places (TRPs)?
Back-channels	Does back-channelling occur in both sets of data?
Exact words spoken	Is the lexical density in both sets of data similar? How common are repetitions in the two sets of data? Do false starts occur in both sets of data? Are the dialogues similar in length?
Hesitation devices (erm, er, etc.)	Is the frequency of hesitation devices similar through both sets of data?

FIGURE 2  
Information recorded  
in transcribed data and  
relevant research  
questions

## Results and discussion

Nine separate discourse features were isolated from both the textbook dialogues and their matched 'real world' equivalents and compared. The complete samples from the textbooks were analysed, but since, as will be seen later, the authentic interactions were almost twice as long as the contrived ones, the number of instances of each feature from these data were recalculated to take this difference into account. The results of this analysis are shown below:

FIGURE 3  
A comparison of lexical density and frequency of target discourse features in pooled samples of 1,283 words from textbook and authentic data.

Discourse feature	Textbook data	Authentic data
<b>Lexical density</b>	55.64%	48%
<b>False starts</b>	0	6.5
<b>Repetition</b>	1	24.14
<b>Pauses</b>	4	61.3
<b>Terminal overlap</b>	0	6.03
<b>Latching</b>	1	8.82
<b>Hesitation devices</b>	8	54.3
<b>Back-channels</b>	4	30.2

### The length of conversations

On average, conversations in the authentic dialogues were twice as long as those of their textbook equivalents, with a total of 2,764 words for the pooled authentic data compared to 1,283 words in the pooled textbook data. This was despite the fact that in both instances the same number of questions were posed by the ‘information receiver’. Why should this be? One reason is that in the authentic data turns taken by ‘information givers’ were almost twice as long as those taken by ‘information receivers’ (an average of 13.9 versus 6.9 words per turn). Analysis of the transcripts showed that the authentic conversations generally had a more complicated structure, with the simple question-answer pattern disrupted by a number of factors. Problems arise, for example, in ‘Reserving a hotel room by telephone’, there are no rooms available on the ground floor, and a discussion about elevators and executive rooms versus standard rooms ensues. Further details are often requested by the ‘information giver’. For example, in the dialogue ‘Hiring a car from a car hire shop’, the assistant asks whether the car hire period will include the bank holiday. Finally, answers to questions tend to be longer in the authentic data, with ‘information givers’ providing more than one alternative. For example, in ‘Asking for help at the tourist information centre’ (see Appendix 3, lines 8–11), the assistant suggests two different swimming pools to visit, and details the advantages of each. These results are similar to those of Myers-Scotton and Bernstein (1988: 376), who investigated direction-giving, and found that this type of exchange, also, ‘invariably has a much more complex structure than the textbook dialogues’.

Clearly, then, real life is not as simple and straightforward as textbooks often suggest, which is something Carter (1998: 47) also comments on:

The language of some coursebooks represents a ‘can do’ society, in which interaction is generally smooth and problem free, the speakers cooperate with each other politely, the conversation is neat, tidy and predictable ... the questions and answers sequenced rather in the manner of a quiz show or court-room interrogation.

This is, of course, intentional on the part of materials writers, and is done for a number of reasons. Firstly, if the main aim of the text is to present new structural or functional language by simplifying the texts, learners are encouraged to focus on the target language presented, to ‘notice’ it, and hopefully acquire the structures more quickly as a result. There is a danger in authentic texts, such as in the example in Appendix 3, that distracting peripheral information such as ‘Lanhydrock Cotehele in

Cornwall' (line 50) or 'it was taken over by Henry the Eighth during the dissolution' (line 53–4) will confuse students and obstruct acquisition of the target language. Or is this underestimating the learners' ability to isolate for themselves structures which will allow them to develop their own interlanguage, and ignore the rest? Another reason for simplifying texts is to make listening comprehension activities easier. If a conversation runs along predictable lines, learners are aware of what might be said next, and can use more 'top-down' processing to decipher the message. The more unpredictable a conversation becomes, the more learners have to rely on 'bottom-up' processing, i.e. listening for individual words, and building them up to arrive at the meaning. However, if we only ever present them with the predictable, they may well be deprived of the opportunity to develop their 'bottom up' processing skills. If our goal in the classroom is to prepare learners for independent language use, then surely we are obliged at some stage to present them with realistic models of discourse, messy and unpredictable as it is. So far I feel that just how much reality learners can cope with at different stages in their learning has not been adequately addressed, and that more research is needed into how exposure to authentic language affects learners' L2 development.

## Lexical density

Lexical density calculations assume that all words fall into two categories; a lexical group made up of words which have an independent sense (for example 'mother'), and a grammatical group consisting of words devoid of independent meaning (for example 'a'). Lexical density is an expression of the percentage of lexical words within a text, following the formula:  $L.D. = 100 \times L/T$ , where L is the number of lexical words and T is the total number of words in the text.

Two hundred-word samples (where possible) were sampled from the beginning of each transcript, and the lexical density calculated following Stubbs' methodology (1986). The results of this can be seen in Figure 3 above.

The higher lexical density found in the coursebook data is more consistent with written texts than spoken texts, and this is not particularly surprising, since that is essentially what it is. A materials developer has sat down at his or her desk and written a dialogue, and although he or she might be trying to mimic a real conversation, the figures suggest that the result falls short of this goal. So what effect might this have on our learners?

A higher lexical density suggests a greater variety of vocabulary in the contrived texts, and therefore a higher vocabulary load for the learners. These denser texts may make higher cognitive demands on students, and therefore increase the difficulty of listening comprehension tasks, although it should be recognized that materials writers are likely to exercise greater control over the choice of vocabulary than is possible with authentic samples, by grading the language to suit the level and cultural background of the target audience, which would simplify the task.

Another possible explanation for the difference in lexical density may be that textbook writers use more explicit language than is normal in natural speech; writing a concrete noun, for example, rather than using a pronoun (a noun would be recorded as a lexical word whereas a pronoun would be recorded as a grammatical word). If this were the explanation, then perhaps the textbook dialogues would be easier to comprehend, but we would be depriving learners of an opportunity to develop their listening skills in terms of identifying the referents of pronouns.

### False starts and repetitions

False starts and repetitions in spoken discourse both represent performance errors by the speaker, which one would imagine are kept to a minimum, since they make the task of comprehension more difficult. Nevertheless, as Figure 3 shows, they both occur frequently in the authentic data but rarely in the textbook dialogues. What effect might this have on learners?

I would argue that learners in the classroom are given the impression that spoken discourse is neat and tidy, with interlocutors who say exactly what they intended to say, and nothing more. It gives a model of language which is both unrealistic and unattainable, and might serve to demoralise students who feel they will never reach the lofty heights of perfect speech. And of course, they would be right, since no-one ever does. This tidying up of language may also slow down learners' acquisition of efficient listening strategies such as focusing on content words. Authentic discourse contains a lot of redundant language, and listeners have to be skilled at extracting a message from the barrage of sounds. If learners are only given dialogues where every word is important, they may develop these skills to a lesser extent.

### Pauses

Pauses in conversation are natural as speakers formulate their ideas or as a new speaker 'takes the floor', but as Figure 3 shows, in general the textbook dialogues in this investigation did not reflect this feature accurately (only pauses of one second or above were noted).

In the authentic data, pauses are common as speakers consider their responses, consult maps, check their computer screens, and so on. Isolated pauses can be quite long; up to 42 seconds in the 'Train times' recording. In contrast, pauses in the textbook transcripts are rare, and where they do occur they are short. Although it would seem to be unnecessary for coursebook writers to include long pauses in their dialogues in the interests of being authentic-like, the smooth, regular turn-taking exhibited does not accurately reflect the tempo and unpredictable nature of natural conversation.

### Terminal overlap and latching

Terminal overlap occurs when two interlocutors try to speak at the same time, and latching refers to a point in conversation where there is no pause between turns, and even a slight overlap. Both are a natural feature of conversation, and demonstrate our sensitivity to transition relevance places (T.R.P.s); as we listen to others speak, we predict when turns are about to finish, and we can take the floor. If our predictions are correct, latching occurs, but if they are wrong, we get terminal overlap, and one

speaker is obliged to relinquish the floor (see Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974).

As Figure 3 shows, the differences between the authentic and textbook transcripts are once more considerable, with the textbooks representing a world of clean, distinct, exchanges that rarely occur in real life. Again, there are pedagogical justifications for this smoothing out of turn-taking, with learners trying to get to grips with other aspects of spoken English, but how far is this an argument for depriving learners of the opportunity to see conversation as it naturally occurs?

## Hesitation devices

Hesitation devices such as ‘erm’ or ‘er’ are extremely frequent in natural spoken discourse, as speakers attempt to keep the floor while formulating their next utterance; a pause by itself may give another interlocutor the chance to take over, but by saying ‘erm’ the speaker indicates that he or she is not yet ready to relinquish the floor.

Figure 3 shows that there is a relative scarcity of hesitation devices in the textbook dialogues, which is somewhat puzzling, since there seems to be little pedagogic justification for omitting them. They add little to the cognitive load of the learners, and may actually aid the task of comprehension by breaking up utterances into smaller ‘meaning chunks’. They are also important in terms of production, and in helping learners hold the floor while they struggle with what to say next, as I know very well from my own language learning experiences. In the early nineties I moved to Mexico, where some of the first expressions in Spanish I acquired were the hesitation devices ‘lo que pasa es que ...’ and ‘este ...’ which I sprinkled liberally throughout my conversations. ‘How good your Spanish is!’ people would say to me; little did they know that with these few expressions my language resources were all but exhausted! Despite the prevalence of hesitation devices in natural discourse, in my experience it is rare to see learners using the English variety; if they do have to pause they tend to opt for their L1 equivalents, which sound very unnatural embedded in English conversation. If textbook dialogues included hesitation devices more often, learners would probably quickly adopt them too, and there seems to me to be little reason not to include them from very early on.

## Back-channels

Carter and McCarthy (1997: 12) refer to back-channels as ‘noises (which are not full words) and short verbal responses made by listeners which acknowledge the incoming talk and react to it, without wishing to take over the speaking turn’. As such, they have an important affective role to play in conversation, indicating a responsive and sympathetic listener. Carter and McCarthy (ibid.) list ‘mm’, ‘uhum’, ‘yeah’, ‘no’, ‘right’, and ‘oh’, as typical back-channels, and these were also the most commonly occurring examples in my authentic data, used either individually or in combination.

Bearing in mind the important affective role back-channelling plays in conversation, it is disturbing to see in Figure 3 that this feature is all but absent from the textbook dialogues. The interlocutors in these conversations risk being perceived as rather cold and unsympathetic, or

bored, and our learners risk the same if they follow this model of interaction outside the classroom. With only a handful of back-channels to master, and given the fact that their inclusion in dialogues has little effect on the difficulty, it is hard to see why they have not been included more often in textbooks. Perhaps, if they were, we would see more students incorporating them into their own language repertoire.

## Are textbooks improving?

What about the latest textbooks to be released by publishers? Do they show a greater sensitivity towards the range of discourse features analysed above? To try to answer this question, I looked at the occurrence of the same features in three service encounters from *New Headway Intermediate* (1996), *Getting Ahead* (1999), and *Cutting Edge* (2001), and compared their frequencies with those expected for textbook data and authentic data, based on the previous findings. Figure 4 below shows the results of this comparison on samples of equal length:

FIGURE 4  
A comparison of lexical density and frequency of target discourse features in pooled samples of 1,283 words from (a) recent publications, (b) authentic dialogues, and (c) older publications.

Discourse feature	Recent publications	Authentic data	Older publications
<b>Lexical density</b>	47.51%	48%	55.64%
<b>False starts</b>	2.49	6.5	0
<b>Repetition</b>	2.49	24.14	1
<b>Pauses</b>	2.49	61.3	4
<b>Terminal overlap</b>	0	6.03	0
<b>Latching</b>	7.47	8.82	1
<b>Hesitation devices</b>	17.44	54.3	8
<b>Back-channels</b>	24.9	30.2	4

Although it is difficult to come to any firm conclusions based on the small number of texts analysed here, the results do seem to indicate that the most recent textbooks have begun to incorporate more of the discourse features found in authentic data. The instances of false starts, repetition, latching, hesitation devices, and back-channelling have all increased when compared with the previous textbook data, and the average lexical density has dropped to a figure very similar to that found in the authentic service encounters. Having said that, the number of instances of false starts, repetition, pauses, and hesitation devices are still well below those expected.

## Conclusion

From this study it seems clear that there have been substantial differences in the past between coursebook dialogues and their authentic equivalents. However, there is some evidence that material writers are beginning to acknowledge the existence of some of these discourse features in their dialogues. The fact that textbooks have not accurately reflected authentic interactions in the past is understandable when we bear in mind that materials writers have traditionally tended to use dialogues as a medium to reinforce particular grammar points or to present vocabulary and functional language. They have also had structural/functional pedagogic aims, and it is these that they have focused on rather than any issues of authenticity. Few people, beyond discourse analysts, are even aware of just how messy conversation actually is, filled with interruptions, repetitions, false starts, and so on.



It is an illuminating experience to transcribe a few minutes of your own conversation to get a feel for its true nature.

Perhaps materials writers have deliberately chosen not to make their dialogues authentic-like, but it is more likely that the issue has not, in the past, been given a lot of thought one way or the other. Certainly it has not been tackled in any systematic way; some features, such as hesitation and back-channelling devices, can usefully be included from a very early stage without affecting the difficulty of the texts. With other features, such as terminal overlap or false starts, there is more justification for omission until higher levels, but to what extent should we deprive students of exposure to natural language? I would argue that if our learners' goal is to be able to operate independently in the L2 outside the classroom, then at some point they have to be shown the true nature of conversation. Pedagogic artifice is perfectly justified in materials as a stage in the process of becoming a competent user of another language, but as Carter and McCarthy (1996: 370) argue, it cannot end there:

We know from our own knowledge of our first language that in most textbook discourse we are getting something which is concocted for us and may therefore rightly resent being disempowered by teachers or materials writers who, on apparently laudable grounds, appear to know better. Information or knowledge about language should never be held back; the task is to make it available, without artificial restrictions, in ways which most answer learners' needs.

*Final revised version received October 2003*

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## The author

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## Appendix 1

### Sources for textbook dialogues

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## Appendix 2

### Transcript of textbook dialogue from *Fast Forward 1* (1986): 'Asking for help at a tourist information centre'.

<S1> Tourist guide

<S2> Visitor

1<S1> Hello can I help you?

2<S2> Yes I'm staying in Plymouth for a few days for a conference can I ask you

3 a few questions about the town?

4<S1> Yes of course

5<S2> Well first about the sports facilities is there a swimming pool in Plymouth?

6<S1> Yes there is there's one near the sea on the other side of the Hoe and another

7 at the sports centre but most visitors prefer to swim in the sea

8<S2> I see are there any good beaches?

9<S1> Yes there are there's one on the other side of the Hoe it's called Pebbleside Beach

10<S2> Mm good what about old buildings has Plymouth got a castle?

11<S1> No I'm afraid it hasn't but there are some fine old houses and there's also the Citadel

12 that's quite interesting erm here's a brochure about it

13<S2> Thanks very much have you got any more brochures?

14<S1> Yes there are some on the table and lots more in the display over there

15<S2> Good I'll have a look at them thank you very much

16<S1> You're welcome goodbye

## Appendix 3

### Transcript of authentic interaction: 'Asking for help at a tourist information centre'.

<S1> Tourist guide

<S2> Visitor (author)

1<S1> Can I help?

2<S2> Yes erm I'm gonna stay in Plymouth for a couple of days erm I was wondering if I

3 could get some information off you erm is there a swimming pool or in Plymouth

4<S1> \Yes erm the

5 one in the city centre where are you staying first of all?

6<S2> Er haven't decided yet but somewhere in the city

7<S1> /You'll be central [<S2> Yeah] OK well

8 there's a fun pool in the city centre that's The Pavillions but if you want some serious

9 sort of exercise swimming then the [<S2> Yeah] it's Central Park that you need that

10 has 33 metre pool that has lane swimming early in the morning [<S2> Right] and

11 there's a separate diving pit as well there

12<S2> /Right and where where's that?

13<S1> It's at Central Park (6 seconds) right you're here at the moment [<S2> Yes] and Central

14 Park is up here the swimming pool's [<S2> Oh right] up here

15<S2> /Lovely thanks erm there

16 any good beaches (1 second) around here?

17<S1> Sandy beaches do you mean?

18<S2> Yeah yeah

19<S1> Sandiest beaches are erm either Whitesand Bay which is over to the right vaguely as

20 you're looking out of Plymouth Sound it's around sort of the corner and out along the

21 bay there

22<S2> Yeah

23<S1> Erm Bovey Sand has quite a bit of sandy beach that is on Plymouth Sound as you're

24 looking out to sea on the left hand-side that'd be just a bit further on out here that's

25 quite easy to get to

26<S2> /Right

27<S1> Got your own transport?

28<S2> Er yeah

29<S1> Yeah well either of erm Bovey Sand's easier because you haven't got the river to

30 (2 seconds) tackle you know getting back and forth up like on the ferry

31<S2> /Eh he I see yeah

32<S1> On the car ferry

33<S2> \So it's cheaper as well then yeah?

34<S1> \Yes cos you well it's a pound when you come back from

35 Cornwall they charge you on the ferry

36<S2> Right eh he

37<S1> But erm certainly you know at low tide it's a lovely sandy beach [<S2> Oh right] very

38 shallow

39<S2> /Mm mm lovely thanks erm are there any old buildings and things in Plymouth

40 like a castle or anything?

41<S1> Not castles [<S2> No?] no erm the only things in the centre are  
 really the museum  
 42 houses  
 43<S2> /Mm eh hm right er the nearest is?  
 44<S1> The nearest erm (2 seconds) er (2 seconds) National Trust  
 properties that are around Plymouth there's one just on the  
 outskirts of the city Saltram House that's a Georgian  
 46 building there's nothing sort of [<S2> Mm] of great age [<S2>  
 Mm] other than that not  
 47 sort of like Warwick Castle size [<S2> Right] or anything like  
 that no  
 48<S2> All bombed during the war was it or?  
 49<S1> Erm I don't know just not that them I mean there are older  
 houses around than that  
 50 that's not the oldest by any means and Lanhydrock Cotehele in  
 Cornwall [<S2> Eh he]  
 51 those are the other ones [<S2> Right] er Buckland Abbey just to  
 the North of Plymouth  
 52 12 miles North of Plymouth that was the home of Sir Frances  
 Drake now that  
 53 [<S2> Mm] was a former monastery as its name suggests [<S2>  
 Eh hm] and er it was  
 54 taken over by Henry the Eighth during the dissolution [<S2>  
 Mm] erm so that is a lot  
 55 older yes  
 56<S2> /Mm mm that's lovely er is it OK if I take these away  
 with me?  
 57<S1> \Yes sure that's free  
 58<S2> /Right that's great thank  
 59 you very much for your help  
 60<S1> OK then  
 61<S2> Cheers bye

**Notes on transcription:**

(...) author's comments  
 [...] back-channels  
 / latching  
 \ terminal overlap