

AUTHENTIC MATERIALS – A SOURCE FOR INFORMAL ENGLISH ACQUISITION

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Abstract

Language learning has changed significantly since the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) that focuses on an action-oriented approach and learner-centred teaching. The aim of language learning is to use a target language in real-life situations efficiently, which includes three aspects such as accuracy, appropriacy and naturalness. The coursebooks that are methodologically-modified in order to match the requirements of the curricula (learning objectives) are based on materials that appear to be more formal and neutral rather than informal. Reading contemporary literary prose might enrich informal language acquisition as it provides learners with the language that is used in informal situations. Our study focuses on an analysis of the speeches of characters, focusing on utterance naturalness and context appropriacy.

Keywords: *informal language, informal words and phrases, informal grammar, authentic language*

1. INTRODUCTION

Using authentic materials in EFL classes is still not very frequent as they are considered difficult in terms of the language used in them. Teachers prefer methodologically-modified texts as they reflect a multi-layered syllabus and it is easier to follow what has been prepared for the lesson by the author(s) of the coursebook, supported with a number of activities presented in the teacher's book. This playing safe allows teachers, mainly non-native speaking ones, not to take risks that something will not work properly in the class. However, texts that are methodologically-modified are usually based on the grammatical patterns that are presented in the unit and practised in a number of exercises. The choice of words is limited by the level of proficiency and topics. The spiral syllabus requires the deepening of the topic, with each successive encounter building on the previous one, which broadens learner's vocabulary systematically. This way of teaching any subject is related to the process which is expected to be ended with mastery of connection and a large body of knowledge. Therefore, the topics are readdressed, completed by increasing level of difficulty and new learning is related to previous learning. The learner's competence increases until the final overall objectives are achieved. This way of teaching is followed by coursebook writers and thus teachers do not need to spend a lot of time preparing for their classes, searching for particular materials and producing worksheets.

On the other hand, this way of teaching resembles learning of other subjects, which is usually hinged on facts and data, relations between them and appropriate evidence. Learning languages rest on competence rather than particular knowledge and thus their enhancement is crucially depended on the intensity of being exposed to the language as it enables language learners to express themselves fluently and spontaneously, using a language effectively. Another aspect which seems to be important is to use the language naturally. This objective in language learning is difficult to be achieved through using only coursebooks in ELT classes. Authentic materials seem to be a useful tool to support the aspect of naturalness in the use of English.

The communicative use of English can be underpinned by four factors such as accuracy, fluency, appropriacy and authenticity (Lazaraton, 2014). While accuracy can be characterised by the extent to which a learner uses a target language conforming to the rules of a particular language (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, etc.), fluency is the capacity to be communicative in real-time conditions (Thornbury, 2006). Learners do not need only to be accurate, but they need to know how to use language that is suitable for the context in order to meet the expectations of other communicators. A quality of using language concerns real English as opposed to artificial or traditional classroom English.

The term authentic material is used differently in ELT as it can be used in different teaching contexts. This term covers a text that displays and creatively patterns its discourse in such a way as to invite readers to interpret how it represents the world (Carter and McCarthy, 2013). The authentic materials contain realistic and natural examples of language use. The language used in any of these materials is appropriate to the context in which it is used. Literary texts are authentic and are not written for learning purposes. However, they enable learners to recognise grammatical and lexical choices of the writer and interpret how he/she looks to a believed world or what was left unsaid. These are sometimes the reasons why literary texts do not feature much in ELT materials as teachers consider them difficult in terms of language and their interpretation (Thornbury, 2006).

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (Council of Europe, 2001), language learners who claim themselves B2 learners are expected to understand contemporary literary prose and therefore the aim of our research became the extent into which language learners can acquire real informal English from reading contemporary literary prose.

2. INFORMAL ENGLISH

The concepts of formal and informal forms of language are different in a variety of languages, for example, in some languages the basic difference rests on using two different pronouns for the second person and distinctions are seen in the 'you' forms such as 'tu' and 'vous' in French, 'tu' and 'usted' in Spanish or 'du' and 'Sie' in German.

In English, there used to be the general pattern that a written form of a message is inevitably more formal than its spoken equivalent. Currently, new tools of communication make these differences less sharply shaped as both written and spoken interaction can be formal or informal. Informal can be viewed as conversational in style. According to the Longman Dictionary of Teaching and Applied Linguistics (Richards and Schmidt et al., 2002), informal speech equals colloquial speech, while slang is defined as a very informal speech as it serves as an 'in-group language' for a particular set of people. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Encyclopedic Dictionary (Cowie, 1992: 175) views colloquial as belonging to or suitable for normal conversation but not formal speech or writing while slang is seen as very informal words or phrases commonly used by people from the same social group or who work together (Cowie, 1992: 854).

For the reasons to record examples of informal English, it seems to be very useful to listen to the audio texts and listen and watch audio-visual materials. However, the aim of our research was to find out the ways contemporary English and American writers present informality in the speech of their characters. The choice of informal English is based on our familiarity with the language of both writers, British English represented by J. K. Rowling (nicknamed Robert Galbraith) and her fourth book from the Strike novels called *Lethal White* (2018). American English samples are taken from the book called *The Fallen* written by David Baldacci (2018). The aim of our study was to examine 150 pages from each book to have enough material for analysis. While in the former 150 pages were reached after reading 15 chapters, excerpting the latter ended on page 153, reaching chapter 26.

Traditionally, informal language was viewed as spoken language, though informal language can be used in a written form as well. The aim of our research was to find out enough samples to provide evidence about naturalness of the language used in contemporary literary prose. On the other hand, the focus of the study is not placed on presenting slang, vulgar language or the flow of language while being spoken, which means pauses, interruption, incomprehensibility due to incomplete structures, unfinished sentences, etc. Words such as exclamations, chunks, fillers and expressions functioning to close down one topic or introducing another one were not the bedrock of informal language analysed in the study. Neither was spoken language, characterised as comprising a higher number of function words and lower number of content words, a high use of personal pronouns, relying on verbs to carry meaning and clauses linked by conjunctions (Goh and Burns, 2012).

The idea behind this research was to provide enough evidence for encouraging language learners to read authentic materials, focusing on informal language, yet presented in a written form but more suitable for analysis and easier for recognising a particular context in which such words or grammatical patterns are used.

2.1. Informal English vocabulary

To make a comparison possible, it was necessary to classify the areas of informal English our research, conducted in 2019, was based on. Despite the fact that the first criterion was to exclude slang, regional dialects, argot, etc., it was complicated to characterise some words accurately. While in American theoretical sources words like *buck* were labelled as slang, British sources labelled this word as a US or Australian informal word for 'dollar'. These different approaches are recognisable due to the fact that western European linguists classify words as stylistically marked and unmarked placing formal and informal lexemes on the opposite ends of the formality axis while some British linguists view the words in their historical development. The words of Anglo-Saxon origin are considered informal while different degrees of formality are given to the words borrowed from Norman French and Latin (Russell, 2000). In the American theoretical source, colloquial expressions are defined as words that are usually spoken and are often thought of as being direct, earthy, or quaint (Spears, 1990).

The focus of the presented study is placed on the words that are labelled *infml* in the dictionary. These words are sometimes presented as colloquial and have usually their neutral or formal equivalents. Knowing informal words is very important for non-native speakers. In general, these words cannot be used in the contexts for which they are inappropriate and users of them can be considered impolite and not showing respect. Informal words are often short and monosyllabic.

The second criterion was to find out the same words in both varieties while excerpting them. It was necessary to read the same number of pages in both varieties as some words that enriched our findings in British English did not match the findings from the American source. The differences between British and American English regarding informal vocabulary varied and were not consistent. In Table 1, the information in the brackets emphasises that words were not labelled systematically and some of them were marked with the word *mainly* in the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (McIntosh, 2013).

Table 1. The informal words in British and American English

British English	American
sort of	kind of
can't	mustn't
Yeah (yes)	Yeah
pee (urine or urinate)	pee (urine or urinate)
I guess (mainly British informal)	I guess (think, believe)
Gee	Gee (exclamation / an expression of surprise) / mainly US
a bunch of	a bunch of (mainly US informal)
dodgy (UK informal)	dodge
freebie	freebie
pricey	pricey
sucker	sucker
OK	Okay

Despite the fact that many theoretical sources introduce that vague words such as *kind of* or *sort of* are used to soften other words or phrases in real-life conversation, presenting the former typical for American colloquial speech, and *sort of* for British colloquial speech, analysing over a hundred and fifty pages from each book, it was not possible to show their use in that particular meaning due to their absence in the texts. The same can be concluded about the use of *can't* and *mustn't*. In negative clauses, *can't* is used when something is certainly not the case in British English, while *mustn't* can occur in this sense in American English (Swan, 2000: 350). However, both texts did not contain such samples.

In British English, *I guess* is an informal expression used 'when people believe that something is sure or likely but are not certain', for example, *You'll want to get off your feet, must be difficult in the heat, I guess?* (Galbraith, 2018:8). The word *guess* is often used in American English in the meaning of 'thinking or believing', for example, *'I guess a storm is coming', observed Decker quickly, looking for any way to change the subject* (Baldacci, 2018: 6). In the American sense, it is not marked as informal.

Some informal words in both varieties were spelled the way they are often spoken, for example, the word *fella* (fellow) in the sentences *'She said "what rumours?" but the fella didn't specify'* (Galbraith, 2018: 148) and *'You're up late, young fella'* (Baldacci, 2018: 123). One lexeme that shows a difference in the form such as the abbreviation *OK* in British English and a word *okay* in American English relates to its informal use in the sense of 'showing that someone is going to take action or start something new' in both varieties, for example, *'OK,' said Strike, matter-of-factly. 'Why don't we go in here?'* (Galbraith, 2018: 41) in British English and *'Okay, take me through step by step'* (Baldacci, 2018: 52) in American English.

According to the CALD (McIntosh, 2013), the expression *a bunch of* was described as used in both varieties, and was found in both books in the speech of characters, e.g. *'I'm in the middle of printing off a bunch of papers to take over to Papa at DCMS....'* (Galbraith, 2018: 131) and *'Maybe it has to do with a bunch of murders'* (Baldacci, 2018: 77). However, in American English it was used more frequently.

Dealing with colloquial words, there were many examples that were marked as British slang and did not exist in American English, for example, *'He's an accountant. And a bit of a tit'* (Galbraith, 2018: 84) in the sense of 'a stupid person' or as regional English (Scottish), e.g. *'What happened to that lassie, though?'* (Galbraith, 2018: 38), using the word *lassie* for 'a girl'.

Despite the fact that some words were labelled informal in the dictionary, it was possible to find them only in the British novel, for example, the word *freebie* in the sense of 'something that is given to you free of charge, especially as a way of attracting your support for or interest in sth', e.g. *There's something funny about them as a couple. She, the blind angel of light, Chinwell's lip curled, 'and he, her potbellied benchman, always scheming and backstabbing and grabbing up every freebie he can get'* (Galbraith, 2018: 101) or another word *dodgy* in the sense of 'dishonest', e.g. *I refuse to believe there isn't anything dodgy about Winn, sneaking little toad that he is* (Galbraith, 2018: 101).

In contrast with these examples, the same was discovered in the American novel, in which the writer uses a number of words that are labelled informal in both varieties but our findings relate only to American English, for example, the word *pretty* in the sense of 'quite, but not extremely' as an adverb or the word *cool* in the sense of 'attractive', e.g. *'My memory's pretty good, yeah,' said Decker* (Baldacci, 2018: 5) or *She broke into a toothy grin. 'That is so cool'* (Baldacci, 2018: 5).

As far as word-formation processes are concerned, both texts include a number of words that have gone through the process of shortening or abbreviating. It was possible to find a lot of words that were marked informal in the dictionary in both varieties, for example, the word *temp*. However, we could find that they were used differently in the books from which the samples were taken. While British authentic material presents this shortened word in the meaning of 'a person that is employed for a short period (especially in an office while another person is absent)', e.g. *The temp had not wanted to leave....* (Galbraith, 2018:55), the American writer used it in the sense of 'temperature', e.g. *'Did you take a core temp?'* (Baldacci, 2018:46). While the former is taken from the speech of a narrator, the latter is taken from the speech of a character. In the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary

(McIntosh, 2013), the word *temp* was marked as an informal one, used in the meaning of ‘a person being employed temporarily’.

The shortened word *vic* was used only in the American text and mostly in the speech of characters, e.g. ‘*And if it’s not the vic’s blood?*’ said *Lassiter* (Baldacci, 2018: 26). So was the abbreviation SVP in the meaning of a Senior Vice President in the speeches of characters as well as in the speech of a narrator, for example, ‘*...Bradley Costa was a SVP in a bank....*’ (Baldacci, 2018: 81).

Informal English vocabulary is very flexible and the abbreviation that relates to one word class in neutral/formal English can be found in another word class in informal English, for example, RSVP, taken from French *répondez, s’il vous plait*, meaning ‘please, answer’ in English, can be informal in the sense ‘to answer an invitation saying whether or not you will attend’, e.g., *Strike had no desire to stay for a meal and speeches: he had not RSVPed the invitation he had received before sacking Robin* (Galbraith, 2018: 6). The similar approach is seen in American English, for example, *Decker turned to see Zoe Mitchell standing in the doorway of the house in her pink PJs* (Baldacci, 2018: 118), in which the abbreviation is used in the plural form representing a full word form (pajamas).

Narrowing our focus only on the words that are labelled as informal and therefore suitable for informal speech, it can be concluded that reading either British or American contemporary prose, a large number of examples concerning a real use of English can be provided.

2.2. Informal English grammar

In general, informal grammar is associated with particular grammatical patterns such as contractions, relative clauses without a relative pronoun and ellipsis. As far as contractions are concerned, most characters’ utterances were written in general contracted forms, the samples of which were extended by contractions such as *d’you* or *d’ye*, for example, ‘*Why d’you think?*’ (Galbraith, 2018: 36) or more complex structures, e.g. ‘*Sian had better’ve taken out Mrs Horridge’s rollers or she’ll be bald*’ (Galbraith, 2018: 155).

With regard to relative clauses without a relative pronoun, relative clauses referring to the subject were numerous as well as those concerning the complement of a preposition, e.g. ‘*Then there’s animal blood at the crime scene we stumbled onto*’ (Baldacci, 2018: 60).

As for headers and tails, it was assumed that speeches of characters would use a lot of headers and tails (in some grammar books called left- and right-dislocation) as spoken language exists in time. However, it is important to mention that speeches of characters are written by an author of the book who has enough time to reconstruct the utterances and therefore the number of these grammatical patterns did not meet the expectations. Nevertheless, this grammatical feature can be supported by an example – *We didn’t have truly a harmonious relationship, my brother and me* (Patterson and Fox, 2017: 146), which was found randomly while reading another book. However, the analysed pages of the books determined for research did not contain any of headers and tails.

Informal language is elliptical and sentences appear to be incomplete. According to Carter and McCarthy (2013), ellipsis is very common, especially in informal conversation, in which language users do not use items that are normally expected to be used in a sentence. In spoken English, ellipsis is a linguistic indicator of informality. Some grammarians distinguish three types of ellipsis: textual, structural and situational, the others prefer only two types of ellipsis such as textual, based on the omission of elements that are recoverable from the linguistic context, and situational, where the omission and interpretation are dependent upon the situational context (Biber et al., 1999).

Analysing both literary texts, it was possible to find many samples for all three kinds of ellipsis. The first type of ellipsis called textual is based on leaving out *that* in that-clauses. Everything in the sentence is easily understood because of the surrounding text. Comparing both varieties, no significant differences in the use of this ellipsis were found.

Table 2. Textual ellipsis

British English	<i>They tell us [that] we should be celebrating, the Olympics, all the glossy press releases the right-wing media gobbles up and regurgitates</i> (Galbraith, 2018: 67).
American English	<i>I really think [that] we're dealing with one killer or one set of killers, Detective</i> (Baldacci, 2018: 60).

Searching through the speech of narrators, it was easier to find a number of textual ellipsis as the speech of the characters is usually shorter and that-clauses are not so frequently used in informal conversation. Mostly, the speeches of narrators encompass longer and more complex sentences, and sentences in which the surrounding text enables readers to easily understand the sentence without recognising that something has been left out are numerous, for example, *They were the first words [that] she had spoken to her husband since they had sat down at the top table* (Galbraith, 2018: 18).

Structural ellipsis is based on leaving out an item which either seems to be redundant such as:

- a) repeating words in clauses connected with coordinators such as *and*, *but* and *or*
- b) the complement of a verb when it is obvious what a complement is.

As far as these aspects are concerned, both varieties rendered examples in the speeches of characters. Regarding the second one, it was possible to complete the omitted complement of a verb from the context that was provided.

Table 3. Structural ellipsis

Clauses connected with coordinators	
British	<i>Nobody's got the right to intercept my...calls and delete my messages, Matthew!</i> (Galbraith, 2018: 19).
American	<i>...and then I go home and never leave until I come back here...</i> (Baldacci, 2018:77).
The complement of a verb	
British	<i>'S'pose you already knew?' said Martin, taking it for granted that she must</i> (Galbraith, 2018: 9).
American	<i>Decker said, 'I asked Baron if he knew any of the vics and he said he didn't</i> (Baldacci, 2018: 83).

As mentioned before, longer and more complex sentences are more frequently used in the speech of narrators, for example, *He had finally called Amber back on the way home and been filled in about the murders* (Baldacci, 2018: 33). The approach taken in this study – focusing on conversation between characters – did not enable us to find out samples of ellipsis such as a contrast in tense or modality that can prompt it or when a full interrogative clause is followed by a more specific question which is elliptic in form (spoken by the same person) as both writers write their speeches of characters according to a planned scenario while real-life conversation is based on an unplanned scenario and needs immediate response.

Situational ellipsis is the most frequent type of leaving out an item as it is obvious from the immediate situation whether someone or something has not been mentioned. According to Carter et al. (2011), there are several examples typical for informal conversation, in which different elements of a sentence can be omitted.

Table 4. Situational ellipsis

Subject	[I] <i>Just wanted to let you know</i> (Galbraith, 2018: 54).
Pronouns	[It] <i>'Might have been an animal'</i> (Baldacci, 2018: 94).
Subjects and auxiliary verbs	[It is] <i>'Worth it if you're coming back'</i> (Galbraith, 2018:24). [Are you] <i>'Still checking on that but I don't think so'</i> (Baldacci, 2018: 44).
Operators and subjects	[Don't you] <i>Want her back, do you?'</i> Stephen fired at him (Galbraith, 2018: 14). <i>'Why [did he] come to Baronville and work in a bank?'</i> (Baldacci, 2018: 150).
Questions with question tags	<i>'Sticking with it, then, are you?'</i> he had said roughly, after a glance at her ring finger (Galbraith, 2018: 54). <i>'Just itching to get back inside there, aren't you? she said</i> (Baldacci, 2018: 129).
Articles	[The] <i>'Last thing you'd want to do'</i> (Galbraith, 2018: 22). [The] <i>'Place looks pretty tidy'</i> noted Jamison, gazing around (Baldacci, 2018: 86).

Many examples of initial ellipsis are comprised of everyday fixed expressions as they seem to be known by all participants and natural for real-life conversation, e.g. [It is a/It was a] *'Good thing we went over that before it disappeared'* (Baldacci, 2018: 101).

Both texts are comprised of other examples of ellipsis, for example, omitting *there is/there are* or particularly, only *there*, e.g. [There] *ain't enough jobs to bring the town back* (Baldacci, 2018: 125) or the omission of prepositions, e.g. *'Should be sometime Sunday'* (Galbraith, 2018: 114). However, it was difficult to distinguish between ellipsis and substitution, since some forms such as *some, any, much* can perform both functions. While ellipsis is leaving something out that is obvious, e.g. *'...Isabella runs Chiswell's Parliamentary office...'. 'Does she?'* said Strike, *sounding vaguely surprised...* (Galbraith, 2018: 126), substitution involves using words such as *do* and *so* and *not* instead of a clause, e.g. *'...he talks well, you know,' said Dawn. 'He does,' agreed Strike, 'I've heard him'* (Galbraith, 2018: 153) or *'Does that mean you can't remember them?'* said Zoe, *the disappointment clear on her freckled face. 'No, it means that I already did'* (Baldacci, 2018: 5).

Common forms of spoken grammar such as accusative personal pronoun as subject, for example, *'That's him'* (Galbraith, 2018: 87) or *'Is she older than me?'* (Baldacci, 2018: 119), *ain't* as a negative contraction *Ross said, 'Eyes ain't too good, so I don't see much at all no more'* (Baldacci, 2018: 125) or in a question tag *'You that dude John Baron, ain't you?'* (Baldacci, 2018: 72), double and multiple negation *'Nobody builds nothing no more'* (Baldacci, 2018: 125) or patterns with past and -ed participle verb forms, e.g. *'I seen a kid killed,' said the stranger* (Galbraith, 2018: 41) were sporadically represented in both varieties.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The idea behind our research was to emphasise that English coursebooks present a lot of useful material for language learning but the language used in texts is mostly neutral rather than informal. Therefore, learners do not distinguish between a variety of situations, in which using either too formal or informal language might cause disappointment or at least a surprise. Language learners need to understand that using a target language means using it effectively with respect to the context. The language learnt from English classes, using only coursebooks, appears not to be always natural hence it is important to enhance learners' exposure to authentic language.

In our study, authentic material is represented by contemporary literary prose, namely two contemporary books written in both British and American varieties. This selection is founded on the idea of comparing both varieties and their development that might be either parallel or different, as far as informal English is concerned. The focus was placed on particular features of informal language referring to both vocabulary and grammar, having in mind the usefulness of presented material for language learners. There might be an underlying bias towards written language as samples were taken from the speeches of characters presented in a written form and not from audio-recording. In spoken language, the production of adequate communicative units rather than building up structurally accurate sentences is important. On the other hand, the main purpose of this article was to introduce the richness of contemporary literary prose for informal language development. The theoretical insight into the topic was supported by samples taken from the speeches of characters to make informality as close as possible to its real context. However, the typical features of spoken language were purposefully ignored because spoken language is unplanned, face-to-face, reflecting social and interpersonal situation, while speeches of characters can be re-written and premeditated.

Focusing on informal language in both texts, it was recognisable that the tendency towards informality is reinforcing and the speeches of narrators included a number of words that belong to informal vocabulary. This trend seems to be influenced by real-life communication that is becoming more and more personal and immediate as the length of exchanging ideas through computer-mediated tools can be done in several seconds, which resembles face-to-face communication.

In terms of informal words, the findings of this study are comprised of different categories: one that accounts for words that are informal in both variants and one in which a word is considered neutral in one variant and informal in another one, for example, *'A guy had a death mark on his forehead,' said Green. 'I guess that counts as weird'* (Baldacci, 2018: 60). On the other hand, it was possible to find out that words can have more meanings, including an informal one, for example, the word *fancy* is neutral in the meaning 'to want to have or do something', whereas it has an informal meaning 'to be sexually attracted to someone' (McIntosh, 2013).

With regard to informal grammar, the study is aimed at presenting the most frequently used grammatical structures occurring in informal conversation. However, the idea was to focus on standard spoken grammar as literary texts are considered one of the typical sources of evidence for standard usage. Thus, this article does not include grammatical items and structures that represent the speech of uneducated native speakers but those that are typical for the speech of people whose language use can be considered natural for non-native speakers.

The four concepts introduced in the beginning are intertwined as appropriacy tries to capture a notion of naturalness, for example, using informal language in the speech of characters seems to be appropriate as it does not draw attention to itself and the structures do not get in the way of the meaning they are trying to convey. All the expressions and structures that deviated from the norms of language were excluded as the aim of this article was not to focus on regional, personal and other rule-breaking varieties.

To conclude, there might be some limitations due to unclear definitions referring to informal English provided by British and American applied linguists and the reality that authenticity is influenced by a writer who writes a novel and has enough time for reformulating messages and ideas produced by their characters. Despite the fact that characters' speeches were written to sound as natural as possible, it is not certain how they would have sounded in face-to-face communication. However, contemporary literary prose is an important source of informal language, presented naturally, and therefore can serve as an essential stimulation for language development.

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