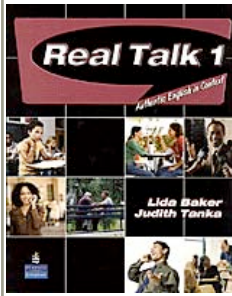


Real Talk 1: Authentic English in Context

Author:	Lida Baker & Judith Tanka (2006)			
Publisher:	White Plains, NY: Pearson Education			
Title	Pages	ISBN	Price	
Student book	Pp. x + 260	0-13-183545-9 (paper)	\$37.27 U.S.	
Audio CDs	Running time: 181min 41secs	0-13-194547-5 (3 CDs)	\$55.33 U.S.	
Teacher's Manual with Answer Key and Tests	Pp. 136	0-13-194554-8 (paper)	\$13.33 U.S.	

How many times have you finished listening to a textbook's recorded dialogue and felt compelled to point out to your students that some of the language used was not really natural English, but, rather, was simply used in order to highlight a particular grammar construction or hypothetical situation students may one day encounter? I imagine that most ESL/EFL teachers have struggled with this dilemma at some point in their teaching career, and many have probably felt that textbook audio recordings were doomed to remain this way forever. Fortunately, Lida Baker and Judith Tanka offer an innovative approach to the speaking/listening textbook genre by including authentic samples of recorded English in genuine contexts. They also provide a host of activities designed to promote speaking and listening skills as well as note-taking skills.

The book is intended for intermediate to high-intermediate learners in both ESL and EFL environments and is organized into themed chapters with authentic samples of English serving as each chapter's base material. Pre-listening activities are designed to activate students' background knowledge of the given theme and preview the key vocabulary of each recorded excerpt. During listening, there are a number of exercises aimed at fostering a range of listening skills from identifying main ideas to focusing on specific details and making inferences. Pronunciation and language and vocabulary for specific functions are also highlighted along with basic academic note-taking strategies. Post-listening activities include a vocabulary review in addition to ample opportunities for student-generated conversation and discussion. The accompanying Audio CDs are essential in order to use this textbook and consist of 3

hours of listening. The Teacher's Manual provides general teaching tips and suggestions, answer keys for all activities, and additional chapter tests.

Real Talk 1 has eight chapters:

1. What's in a Name?
2. Let's Get Away!
3. Looking for Love
4. Music to My Ears
5. Getting the Job Done
6. To Your Health!
7. Shop 'til You Drop
8. Do the Right Thing.

The chapters are not cumulative; therefore it would be possible to change the order for classroom use or skip entire chapters altogether. Each chapter is further divided into four parts which correlate with the four audio recordings for each given chapter. The four parts of each chapter follow a set order chosen to represent the most common contexts of spoken English and are named accordingly: "In Person", "On the Phone", "On the Air", and "In Class". The audio recordings themselves, therefore, are the foundation of each part and are the distinguishing element of this textbook. As implied by the name, "In Person" recordings are face-to-face conversations, surveys or interviews. "On the Phone" recordings consist of phone conversations between a customer and a customer service representative, often following recorded announcements, as is so common today. The recordings for the "On the Air" portions of each chapter are taken directly from radio programs. Finally, the "In Class" recordings include short, four- to six-minute, academic lectures related to the chapter theme.

While *Real Talk 1*'s use of authentic recordings in various contexts sounds highly appealing, the real question is how well it works with its intended audience of students. To find out, I tried several chapters with my undergraduate, intermediate-level EFL communication classes at a large Japanese university. These communication classes are focused primarily on speaking and listening and traditionally include a fair amount of listening practice via recorded conversations and lectures as well as related opportunities for student conversation. In that sense, the overall format of *Real Talk 1* was not new to my students, and it was relatively easy to integrate into the course syllabi.

Despite such familiarity and ease of integration, the book's usefulness proved to be quite limited for this specific learning context. Foremost, the textbook's level is significantly higher than advertised. The note to the teacher prefacing the student textbook claims that "the book is designed for students at the intermediate to high-intermediate level in both second- and foreign-language environments" (p. viii), while this claim is contradicted by the accompanying Teacher's Manual which states that "the text is designed for students at the high intermediate level . . ." (p. 1). Perhaps the description in the Teacher's Manual is accurate, though I would go so far as to classify the level as high-intermediate to advanced. Given that all the recordings are labeled authentic, it makes sense that the level approximates that of native speakers. In my classes, the pre-listening activities were not enough support to prepare my students to listen to this level of English effectively and many students

were noticeably discouraged while listening.

Another major concern that arose when using *Real Talk 1* with my classes was how poorly suited the textbook is for the EFL student audience. Although the textbook is billed as appropriate for both "second- and foreign-language environments" as noted previously (p. viii), there are several issues which make it incompatible with most EFL classes. First, a number of the speaking opportunities throughout the text center around students discussing national or cultural viewpoints. As my classes are completely homogeneous, as a good portion of EFL classes are, these discussions did not work as written and demanded either significant adaptation or a more teacher-centered discussion.

Furthermore, a distinctive attribute of the book, the authentic recordings from four contexts, are also not entirely applicable to EFL settings. Though most of the "In Person" chapter parts could be used in advanced EFL classes, the other chapter parts ("On the Phone", "On the Air", and "In Class") would be irrelevant to most EFL students who do not plan on studying or living in an English-speaking country. Since the "On the Phone" segments feature a customer connected with a customer service agent in a distinctly North American context, they were largely unrelated to my EFL students' experiences using English and decidedly not of interest. To a lesser degree both the "On the Air" and "In Class" selections were hard for my students to relate to, though they would likely be much more meaningful to ESL students studying and living in an English-speaking country. While the authors claim that the recordings represent "the four contexts in which spoken English normally occurs" (Teacher's Manual, p. 1), it seems that these contexts may be more in line with what ESL speakers will encounter. In the case of EFL students, perhaps contexts like television shows and movies or online audio- and video-conferences would be more pertinent and, therefore, more meaningful to such students.

On the whole, Baker and Tanka do provide a wealth of authentic English recordings in the four contexts targeted. Teachers and students alike will find the natural style of the recordings, including all of the "false starts, fillers, hesitations, repetitions, and errors" (p. viii), extremely refreshing, especially in contrast with typical stilted speaking and listening textbook recordings. The authentic recordings and interesting chapter themes also serve as a sturdy base for the designed activities or any number of opportunities for expansion either in class or out. While EFL teachers will probably find this textbook limited by its difficulty, its frequent use of cultural differences between students to generate discussion, and recording contexts that demand a degree of familiarity not yet held by most EFL students, ESL teachers should find *Real Talk 1* an innovative option for high-intermediate to advanced speaking and listening classes--definitely worth a look and listen.

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