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Impressum ForumSprache

Die Online-Zeitschrift für Fremdsprachenforschung und Fremdsprachenunterricht

Herausgeber-Gremium:

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im Hueber Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, Ismaning

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Gestaltung: Sarah-Vanessa Schäfer

Produktmanagement: Astrid Hansen

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ISSN 1868-0852

Artikel – ISBN 978-3-19-356100-8

aus Ausgabe 04 / 2010 ISBN 978-3-19-186100-1

2. Jahrgang, No 2, 2010

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Teaching English through Sitcom: *Yes, Minister*

Richard Dawton

Abstracts

The discussion about data privacy protection has continued over the years and is kept in the public domain by the different breaches of privacy that come up now and then. The problem is not a new one. Back in the 1980s, the BBC picked this issue out as one of the themes of the cult series *Yes, Minister*. In the episode *Big Brother*, a national computer-based data file is to be introduced. Every inhabitant of the British Isles is to be registered. In a humorous way it is shown how the security safeguards announced by the minister are ignored by his bureaucracy. A teaching unit makes suggestions how *Big Brother* may be used in the upper level classes of the *Gymnasium (Sekundarstufe II)*. Current and pertinent relationships between the episode and the politics of the present day, including existing laws, can be worked on. A focus can be the handling of data privacy protection in online forums or social media like *Facebook* or *YouTube*.

Die Diskussion um Datenschutz hält seit Jahren an und rückt immer wieder durch aktuelle Datenschutzverletzungen in die Schlagzeilen der Presse. Diese Problematik ist jedoch nicht so neu, denn bereits in den 1980er Jahren hat sich die BBC dieses Themas in ihrer Kult-Serie „*Yes, Minister*“ angenommen. Die Episode „*Big Brother*“ thematisiert die Einführung einer nationalen Computer-gestützten Datenbank, die persönliche Daten aller Einwohner des Vereinten Königreichs erfassen soll. Auf unterhaltsame Weise wird dargestellt, wie die vom Minister beabsichtigten Sicherheitsauflagen durch den Beamtenapparat unterlaufen werden. Ein Unterrichtsprojekt zeigt auf, wie die Episode im Unterricht der Sekundarstufe II erarbeitet, aktuelle Bezüge hergestellt und der freizügige Umgang mit persönlichen Daten, die zum Beispiel in Foren, *Facebook* oder *YouTube* verfügbar sind, thematisiert werden können.

La question de la protection des données personnelles a fait couler beaucoup d'ancres durant les années passées. Le problème est pourtant bien connu comme l'indique une série télévisée britannique de la BBC, «*Yes, Minister*», datant des années 1980. Un épisode intitulé «*Big Brother*» place la question au centre et met en œuvre l'introduction d'une banque de données nationale, traitant les données relatives à tous les citoyens du Royaume-Uni. Sur un ton moquant, l'épisode démontre les maintes façons qui permettent aux agents de sécurité de ne pas respecter les règles données par l'appareil bureaucratique en place. L'unité d'enseignement présentée ici discute de quelques idées de travail au niveau secondaire supérieur (Gymnasium) en lien avec l'épisode «*Big Brother*». Ainsi, les développements actuels concernant le traitement des données personnelles disponibles dans un Forum, via *Facebook*, via *YouTube* et bien d'autres médias sociaux encore sont placés au centre de l'unité d'enseignement.

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Sitcoms have a long tradition in the English-speaking world – be it on the radio, or on television. In fact, the first television *sitcom* was broadcast by the BBC in the mid-1940s although the US claim that William Asher is the man who invented the *sitcom*. In any case, *sitcoms* present the language of the time, and in a way represent “the people”. So, why not use this virtual reality in the EFL-classroom? This article is intended to bring some fun into the English lesson and at the same time to offer a platform for serious discussions of present-day problems. The list of contents gives an overview of the teaching unit.

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1. Introduction

1.1. *Yes, Minister* – the Series

Yes, Minister is one of the most famous British *comedy sitcoms*. Since it was shown in the 1980s it has remained as popular as ever and in a BBC Poll in 2004 was voted one of the top 10 British comedies of all time.

The *Yes, Minister* series started in 1980 on BBC 2 and consists of three series each of which has seven episodes of approx. 30 minutes length. In 1984 a one-hour long Christmas episode was added, while in 1986 a further series *Yes, Prime Minister* followed. It consists of two series with eight episodes in each. All episodes are available on DVD and Audio-CD and can be purchased from the BBC: www.bbcshop.com/comedy/yes-minister.

The theme running through all episodes of the *Yes, Minister* series is the conflict between a Minister in the British Government and the Civil Service. This rivalry between elected politicians and the bureaucrats employed to carry out the business of government is an endearing topic in the U.K.

Politicians of all political parties are generally seen as not being particularly competent or reliable; the Civil Service is generally perceived as inefficient, over-paid and rather elitist.

When *Yes, Minister* was first broadcast in 1980 it was an immediate success since it tapped into these preconceptions and portrayed in a realistic and effective way what the general public has always believed about the workings of Government.

Although the series is nearly 30 years old it is still very relevant today. The intrigue, discussions, compromises and general workings of government can be directly related to modern day politics in all parliamentary democracies. This relevance is perhaps the series greatest strength.

Breaking News

Revival of the most successful political *comedy* ever: Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn, original writers of the *Yes, Minister* / *Yes, Prime Minister* series, have written a new episode of *Yes, Prime Minister* for stage performance at the centre of which is a morally dubious deal with the Foreign Minister of Kumranistan. The *comedy* is on at London's West End Gielgud Theatre from 17th September 2010 to 15th January 2011 (www.thisistheatre.com/londonshows/yesprimeminister.html – visited 17.09.10)

1.2. This episode – *Big Brother*

The internet has become an inherent part of everyday life. It offers great possibilities to communicate without boundaries. But the assumed anonymity invites people to give their data voluntarily wherever it is asked for. Privacy advocates warn against the immediate security vulnerability. This topic is current and explosive for everybody who uses the internet. Everyone should think about what happens to the data he or she gives away.

The level of access to confidential personal details has very much come to the forefront in all societies since the advent of the computer age. There was a time when people were against all kinds of storage of personal information but times have changed a great deal of late.

A topic such as the one highlighted in this episode of *Yes, Minister*, could form the basis for a class discussion of freedoms within societies, both perceived and real, and the future prospects and implications for the world – and for individuals.

The episode is the main element in the teaching unit that is introduced and explained here.

1.3. Target Groups

They are advanced EFL-learners at B1 – B 2 level of the Common European Framework (CEF), such as

- ▶ *Grund- und Leistungskurse* in the *gymnasiale Oberstufe* and similar institutes
- ▶ *Proseminare Anglistik* in universities and colleges
- ▶ conversation classes at adult education institutes

1.4. Materials

The teaching unit is based on the audio version of the episode *Big Brother*; playing time 30:36 minutes. It can be purchased through

- ▶ the book trade / online shops
- ▶ BBC shop: www.bbcshop.com/comedy/yes-minister
- ▶ Hueber Verlag: www.hueber.de

The Hueber package contains a CD, a complete tapescript and a bilingual glossary plus the episode *The Skeleton in the Cupboard*.

This teaching unit includes

- ▶ Notes for teachers and a key to the exercises
- ▶ Exercises, activities and handouts for the students

2. Background Information

2.1. *Yes, Minister* - Websites

- ▶ www.yes-minister.com
- ▶ This website introduces the main characters of the series and their specific interests. There is a brief summary of the episodes and stills from the video version of the series.
- ▶ www.sitcom.co.uk
- ▶ This website provides an overview of all the British *sitcoms*. Click *Comedy – All Comedy – Names* and you will find a description of both series *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*, their main characters and the contents of the episodes. Chat rooms are available, too.

2.2. *Sitcom*

A *situation comedy*, usually shortened to *sitcom*, is a kind of *comedy*. As opposed to *stand up comedy* or *sketch comedy* it has a storyline and features recurring characters that act in common situations such as a family, workplace, or a group of friends. Jokes or running gags are a regular feature of the dialogue. Very often a *sitcom* features laugh tracks. *Sitcoms* originated in radio. However, today they are found mainly on television. The first *sitcom* ever broadcast on television was probably *Pinwright's Progress* produced by the BBC in 1946/47. Today *sitcoms* are a regular feature not just on television in English-speaking countries – even China has joined the *sitcom*-club. For further information please click <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/sitcom>.

Teaching Tip:

A useful adjunct could be to discuss and list the key differences between a *sitcom* and other kinds of *comedy*. And students might want to report on *sitcoms/comedies* they know and/or like best.

2.3. The British Parliament, Government and the Civil Service

The *Yes, Minister* series is a very well-written *sitcom*. It employs sophisticated techniques of writing and complex plots. Much of the comedy and satire is reliant on the relationship and interplay between the characters so students need to understand their relative positions and characteristics. To assist them in this task it is advisable to provide some background information about the nature of the British Parliament and Government and the Civil Service. Useful websites are the following:

- ▶ www.parliament.uk
- ▶ This is the official government website offering detailed commentary on the workings of the British Parliament – including details on the House of Commons, House of Lords, Members of Parliament.
- ▶ www.civilservice.gov.uk
- ▶ This website provides information about the structure of the organisations and how it goes about advising the government.

Teaching Tip:

To introduce the topic of Government and Civil Service to the students the task could be set for them to research the theme themselves and to bring their findings to class. This could then be done in the form of small group presentations. Part of this research could be to compare the structure and workings of the Parliamentary Structure and State Administrations of Great Britain and Germany.

3. Teaching Yes, Minister: Big Brother

A brief summary of the episode *Big Brother* is given below, along with a summary of the main characters. It is not advisable to make these available to the students before they listen to the CD but they should be used as back-up information and as assistance for some of the activities later on. It is suggested, however, that the names and the functions of the characters could be mentioned before listening to the CD.

3.1. Episode Summary

The central theme of the episode is the introduction of a computerised National Integrated Database that will hold personal information on all of the inhabitants of the UK. The Minister (Jim Hacker) is being interviewed by the BBC who are concerned that not enough safeguards are in place to stop unauthorised access by Civil Servants. The Minister assures the interviewer that there will be and on return to his office sets this in motion, although his Permanent Secretary (Sir Humphrey) says this would involve all sorts of problems and difficulties. The Minister later meets Tom Sargent his predecessor, who informs him that all the work on setting up such a Database was done when he was in power and that the Permanent Secretary will employ a variety of delaying tactics to ensure these safeguards are not put in place. The Minister (Jim Hacker) notes these down and decides to force the issue by announcing on television that safeguard legislation will be in place the following week and that his Permanent Secretary (Sir Humphrey) has staked his reputation on it! Sir Humphrey is outraged by this action but has no alternative other than to produce a series of draft proposals which, not surprisingly, are exactly the same ones as were written for Tom Sargent.

3.2. Key Characters Summary

James (Jim) Hacker MP: The Minister for Administrative Affairs.

Not the most intelligent politician, rather weak and easily influenced by others, especially the Civil Service. He is very keen to be seen as a popular person and a man of the people. Tries to avoid conflict by both agreeing and disagreeing at the same time!

Sir Humphrey Appleby: The Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Administrative Affairs.

Sir Humphrey is the top Civil Servant in the Ministry. He is intelligent, rather pompous and verbose and will do anything to protect the Civil Service and those who work in his bureaucracy. His overriding aim is to ensure that the Civil Service, and not the Government, runs the country!

Bernard Woolley: Principal Private Secretary.

Usually finds himself in a dilemma as he has to navigate a path between the Minister (Jim Hacker) and The Permanent Secretary (Sir Humphrey). This often leads into a series of conflicts of interest and confusion!

Frank Weisel: Political Advisor.

His job is to advise the Minister (Jim Hacker) about the political angle of his actions and decisions as well as to offer support.

Annie Hacker: The Minister's wife.

She is a strong, no-nonsense woman who is clearly more intelligent than her husband and often criticises him for his weak actions. Despite this, she remains a loving and loyal partner.

Tom Sargent: The Minister for Administrative Affairs in the previous government.

3.3. Level and Structure of Activities

1. Level of Activities

The *Yes Minister* series is B1 Level (CEF). This does not necessarily exclude students who are either at A2 or B2 Level. It is entirely feasible to use this series for these students but the teaching style and choice of provided questions would need to be carefully selected. It is for this reason that the level of each question is provided: EASY; MEDIUM; DIFFICULT. No mention of the level of difficulty is

- made in the student material, suffice it to say that the first questions are easy and they progressively become more difficult.
2. **Teaching Time Required**
In addition, a suggestion of the time required for the Pre-Listening and Post-Listening activities is given (e.g. 10 min). The time required for completion of the While-listening questions will depend on the level of the students, the aim of your lesson and the method used to complete the questions, be it as individual work, group work or answering as a whole class exercise.
 3. **Pre-listening activities**
The intention of providing such activities is to set the scene and to ascertain the level of current knowledge of the students. In addition, it is hoped that such activities interest and enthuse the participants and develop a sense of expectation.
 4. **While-listening activities (by scene)**
Each scene should be played through completely. It is important to give the activity before commencing the listening and students should be encouraged to take notes whilst the CD is being played.
 5. **Post-listening activities**
The aim of this section of activities is to move from the fictional story of the CD and to relate it directly to the real world with a series of relevant activities. In this case the serious topic of data protection and usage is now confronted which could culminate in a formal debate as detailed under **4.3.3. Projects**.
 6. **Further episodes**
There are many further episodes in the *Yes, Minister* series. With some careful preparation it would be possible to use them in a similar way as with *Big Brother*.

4. The Teaching Unit

4.1. Pre-listening Activities

Here are a few questions (Q) that might help set the scene:

Q: (EASY) Ask the students what the term '*Big Brother*' means. They will probably mention the TV series and/or George Orwell's *1984*. (5 min)

Q: (EASY) In pairs, or small groups, ask the students to brainstorm words that come to their mind linked to the TV programme *Big Brother* or *1984* respectively. After 5 minutes ask the students to stop and then collect their words on the board. Use their response to find out if they understand why the episode was given this name and then ask them how they feel about the programme and the idea of somebody watching them. (10 min)

Q: (MEDIUM) If you have not already done so, now explain to the students that they are going to listen to a British *comedy* that is set in the Houses of Parliament in London. Now that they understand the meaning of *Big Brother*, ask them in pairs, or small groups, to think of two possible scenarios that could follow in this episode involving the government and *Big Brother*. The students then report back to the class. (10 min)

4.2. While-listening Activities

4.2.1. Character Summaries (see appendix: Handout A)

To assist the students in building up a picture of the main characters, distribute Handout A to the students and ask them to regularly add their own views as they listen to the episode. Once this chart is completed the information can be used in a number of ways, some suggestions are set out in **4.3. Post-listening Activities**.

4.2.2. Listening recommendations

The following exercises are questions about each of the scenes that the students should be encouraged to answer. For less-able students you may wish to make the script (refer

to booklet in the Hueber audio package) available to them so that they can follow it as they listen. More able groups could simply listen to the CD and take notes as each scene is played. For this reason it is advisable to allow the students time to check their understanding of the questions prior to listening. You may wish to play each scene twice, the first time for the students to become familiar with the characters involved and to follow the plot, the second time to allow them to focus on the questions provided. The decision to do so or not, should be based on your students' level of competence. Some of the questions require simple factual recall; many, however, need opinions and ideas and these should form the basis of a more detailed discussion either as a full class or in smaller groups. Further ideas for this are provided in **4.3. Post-listening Activities**. There is also a 'Prediction Exercise' after **Scene 7: Jim's Bedroom**. Once everything has been explained to the students and they all fully understand what is required of them, ask them to now concentrate on listening to the CD and answering the questions.

4.2.3. Episode Questions (see appendix: Handout B)

The handout provides the while-listening questions for the students. The following list of questions is identical but includes the key to the exercises.

Questions	Answers
<p>Scene 1 (track 2): TV Studio (4:08)</p> <p>1. EASY How many people are speaking in the scene?</p> <p>2. EASY Where does the interview take place?</p> <p>3. MEDIUM Why do you think Jim Hacker (The Minister) wants to avoid discussing the National Integrated Data Base?</p> <p>4. MEDIUM Jim Hacker uses a variety of phrases and expressions to avoid answering the questions. Write down some of these phrases.</p> <p>5. MEDIUM How effective is Jim Hacker in avoiding answering the questions? Explain your answer.</p> <p>6. MEDIUM From this scene what are your general impressions of Jim Hacker? How would you describe his personality? Note down your ideas on Handout A.</p>	<p>1. Three</p> <p>2. TV studio</p> <p>3. People are worried that the country is turning into a police state where the government has access to a wide variety of personal details and data.</p> <p>4. They are: <i>You know, I'm glad you asked that question.</i> <i>As I was saying</i> <i>A lot of people want to have the answer.</i> <i>And let's be quite clear about this</i> <i>Without beating about the bush</i> <i>The plain fact to the matter is</i> <i>It's a very important question.</i> <i>It's a very interesting question.</i></p> <p>5. He is not very effective. It's clear from the language he uses that he's trying to avoid the questions and to explain that "safeguards are in place" and it's "under review" etc</p> <p>6. Rather evasive and doesn't like being asked direct questions; a weak character who always wants to be liked by others around him.</p>

<p>Scene 2 (track 3): Jim’s Office (2:06)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. EASY Who is the first person who speaks in this scene? 2. EASY Why should Jim Hacker meet Bernard (Principal Private Secretary) at 8 am at Paddington Station the following day? 3. EASY Where is the by-election meeting? 4. MEDIUM Jim Hacker is double-booked. How did this happen? 5. MEDIUM How is this crisis resolved? Which meeting(s) does he decide to go to? 6. EASY At the end of the scene Frank Weisel (Political Advisor) says that if The Minister is a good boy his nanny will give him a ...? 7. MEDIUM Why do you think Frank Weisel said this? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jim Hacker 2. To go to Swansea (addressing the Conference of Municipal Treasurers at the Vehicle License Centre) 3. Newcastle 4. Because Bernard (Principal Private Secretary) and Frank (Political Advisor) had not spoken to each other and checked The Minister’s diary. 5. Frank and Bernard are told to find a way that he can travel to both Swansea and Newcastle on the same day. 6. Sweetie 7. If The Minister is a good boy (in other words, does as he is instructed by Bernard), then he will get a reward: a sweetie!
<p>Scene 3 (track 4): Hall – Jim’s House (3:04)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. EASY Why is the trip to Paris important? 2. EASY Who does Jim Hacker phone up to sort out the problem? 3. EASY How is the situation resolved? 4. MEDIUM What does the Minister’s wife think of her husband? Does she see him in a positive or negative way? Add your thoughts to the chart. 5. MEDIUM How does Annie Hacker (The Minister’s wife) think he’s changed since becoming a Minister? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It’s Jim and Annie Hacker’s wedding anniversary. 2. Bernard 3. Jim Hacker is going to Swansea and Newcastle and the Paris trip is cancelled. 4. Weak individual, influenced and controlled by others. 5. He used to tell people what he wanted, what others should do and he got what he wanted.
<p>Scene 4 (track 5): Jim’s Office (3:00)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. MEDIUM Jim Hacker decides that the National Data Base is to be organised differently with built-in safeguards. How does Sir Humphrey (Permanent Secretary) react to this statement? 2. EASY Who is Tom Sargent? 3. EASY Bernard informs the Minister that another TV programme wants to interview him. What is the Minister’s final decision? 4. MEDIUM Why do you think that Jim Hacker is unsure what to decide? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. He tries to tell him that it can’t be done quickly, that it would be difficult to organise and that any previous work done on this matter is secret. 2. Jim Hacker’s predecessor 3. He decides to accept. 4. Because of the adverse reaction from his previous TV performance.

Scene 5 (track 6): House of Commons Smoking Room (3:14)

1. EASY Tom Sargent and Jim Hacker are from opposing political parties. How do they get on with each other?
2. MEDIUM Why might some people find this surprising?
3. MEDIUM Tom Sargent provides Jim Hacker with the five stalling techniques that Sir Humphrey uses. Complete the spaces in this list.

*The administration is in its **early months** and there are a lot of things to do.*

*Something certainly ought to be done, but is this the **right time** to achieve it?*

*This is not the time, for all sorts of **reasons**.*

*The policy has run into difficulties – technical, political, **legal**.*

*We are getting rather near the run up to the next **general election**.*

4. MEDIUM Why has Jim Hacker been given five red boxes to deal with in the evening?

1. They are very friendly towards each other.
2. If they are from different sides of the political fence, one might assume that they have nothing in common with each other.
3. See Question.
4. To keep him busy so that he doesn't find the important Data Base memo hidden at the bottom of the 5th box.

Scene 6 (track 7): Jim's Bedroom (2:15)

1. EASY Who is the real opposition to the government according to Jim Hacker?
2. EASY What did Tom Sargent give to Jim Hacker?
3. MEDIUM How and why do you think the Minister will use this information?
4. EASY Why did the Minister phone Sir Humphrey at 2 am?
5. EASY What was Sir Humphrey's reaction when the Minister told him he had found the Data Base document?
6. EASY What do you think about the personality of Annie Hacker? What additional information does this scene provide? Write this information down on Handout A.

Prediction Exercise

What do you think might happen in the rest of this story?

Ask the students to work in pairs, or small groups, and write a brief prediction of how they think this story might end. Tell them to think about all the information they have listened to so far and to be creative! Then ask the students to read out their suggestions. Maybe a small prize will be handed over at the end for the group who comes closest to the actual storyline?

1. The Civil Service
2. Three years of this own National Data Base papers.
3. To show Sir Humphrey that much of the work has already been done and that the new safeguards can quickly be put in place.
4. To annoy Sir Humphrey and to get his own back for being given so many papers to read.
5. Surprise and irritation
6. Hard, forceful woman who doesn't like her husband being made a fool of. She's much more decisive and intelligent than her husband.

Prediction Exercise

Various answers are possible.

<p>Scene 7 (track 8): Jim’s Office (3:34)</p> <p>1. EASY What time does The Minister have the Cabinet meeting?</p> <p>2. MEDIUM Why does Jim Hacker call out “one, two, three, four ...” during his conversation with Sir Humphrey?</p> <p>3. MEDIUM What do you notice about the character and mood of the Minister in this scene? How does it differ from previous scenes?</p> <p>4. MEDIUM What’s your reaction to the “it is, it isn’t, it is, it ...” in the dialogue between Jim Hacker and Sir Humphrey?</p> <p>5. MEDIUM Why is the Minister so thankful to Bernard when he says “I said we can’t get out of it, Minister. It’s been announced, it’s in the programme.”</p>	<p>1. At 10 am</p> <p>2. He’s ticking off the reasons that Tom Sargent gave him that Sir Humphrey would use as excuses / reasons for not progressing at a faster pace with the Data Base safeguards.</p> <p>3. He’s much more positive and decisive than in other scenes. He sees he’s at an advantage due to his possession of his predecessor’s documents.</p> <p>4. Rather child-like. The sort of argument you usually hear taking place between children.</p> <p>5. He realises that the forthcoming TV interview will be the perfect opportunity to announce his new proposals and therefore once announced on TV, they will have to be carried out by Sir Humphrey and the Civil Service.</p>
<p>Scene 8 (track 9): TV Studio (2:03)</p> <p>1. EASY What words does Jim Hacker use to describe the Civil Service?</p> <p>2. MEDIUM What are Jim Hacker’s feelings in general about the Civil Service?</p> <p>3. EASY From what date will all citizens of the UK have the right to inspect their personal files?</p> <p>4. MEDIUM Why won’t Sir Humphrey be happy with this interview?</p>	<p>1. Marvellous, efficient, professional organisation, capable of tremendous effort and speed, full of talented, dedicated people</p> <p>2. The opposite to the words described above.</p> <p>3. September 1st</p> <p>4. Because he said that his Permanent Secretary (Sir Humphrey) is staking his reputation on meeting this deadline for the new legislation.</p>
<p>Scene 9 (track 10): Check-mate (1:36)</p> <p>1. EASY What alternative word did the Minister use for a television?</p> <p>2. EASY How did Jim Hacker feel after the TV interview?</p> <p>3. MEDIUM Why did The Minister ask Sir Humphrey to read out his Draft Proposals for safeguards and then interrupt him and complete the sentences?</p> <p>4. EASY What are the final words spoken by Sir Humphrey?</p>	<p>1. The box</p> <p>2. Very happy, elated</p> <p>3. He had the same document as Sir Humphrey. It was the document that Tom Sargent gave him earlier, and so he was able to complete the sentences.</p> <p>4. Yes, Minister.</p>

4.3. Post-listening Activities

This section rounds up the episode that has just been listened to and it suggests ideas that could form the basis for homework or for extended classroom activities. By their very nature there are no correct answers to these activities.

4.3.1. Personality Chart

- Activity 1 (EASY): Personality Chart (see appendix: **Handout C**)
Ask the students to complete their personal key characters summary chart (**Handout A**) and to get into pairs to compare their results (10 min). Together, they should then complete **Handout C** providing as much information about each of the main characters (10 min)
- Activity 2 (EASY): Discussion

On the board collect a selection of the descriptions the students have written down. As a class, discuss the similarities and difference in the descriptions of the main characters in the episode (10 min).

3. Activity 3 (MEDIUM): Mini-Project

In groups of three or four, ask your students to write a short scene using two or more of these characters by using their character descriptions as a basis for the dialogue. It could be an additional scene to the *Big Brother* episode, or it could be something completely different (30 min). You may want to copy the following (“avoiding”) phrases Jim Hacker used in the TV studio scene (Track 1) for your students:

You know, I'm glad you asked that question.

As I was saying

a lot of people want to have the answer

and let's be quite clear about this

without beating about the bush

the plain fact of the matter is

it's a very important question

it's a very interesting question

4.3.2. What Do You Think?

The following questions invite students to comment on the episode *Big Brother* as a whole.

Q: (EASY) *Who won 'the battle'? Did The Minister get his way or did Sir Humphrey win? Give reasons for your answer. (10min)*

Q: (MEDIUM) *What are your thoughts about this episode? Were there any parts you particularly liked, maybe some of the lines that were spoken? (10min)*

Q: (MEDIUM) *The title of the episode was *Big Brother*. How realistic a scenario was it? Do you know of any similar situations in your country? (15min)*

4.3.3. Projects

The theme of this episode lends itself to Debate Forums. Below is a list of topics that could be used by more able students. Individually, or in small groups, they could be invited to carry out a debate on some aspect of data protection.

1. Topic 1

This House argues that chips that store personal data in identity cards, passports or *Krankenkassen-Karten* etc. should be forbidden.

(Background: From 1/9/2010 the new German identity card includes a chip with personal data. It is planned that health insurance chip cards should include a person's personal history of illnesses.)

2. Topic 2

This House would abolish CCTV and other surveillance cameras.

(Background: Britain is the country with the biggest density of CCTV cameras in the world: “Big brother is watching you!”. Surveillance cameras are installed at airports, railway stations, shopping centres and supermarkets. And Google is mapping the world, and your home.)

3. Topic 3

This House believes that access to *Facebook*, *StudiVz* etc. should be restricted to people with an IQ of over 125.

(Background: The internet offers everybody the opportunity to become a member of a global community, to make new friends and to communicate with the world. What about privacy?)

For such a debate to be effective some care has to be taken in the setting up and priming of the students. The first action should be the formation of the pro and con groups – students can be invited to choose which side of the argument they wish to represent.

Suggesting to students that they sometimes take up the contrary position to their own real opinion can be an interesting departure in that it challenges their own perceptions. In addition to the main speakers, it is essential that some form of chairperson(s) is/are organised and clear guidelines on procedure are discussed and agreed before commencing the debate. It might be a profitable idea to look at the German and British Parliament websites to watch examples from debates. *YouTube* could also be a source of such information.

Some assistance on the format of speeches and phrases on agreeing/disagreeing, interrupting, clarifying, checking for understanding could also be made available:

- ▶ www.eslgold.com

5. Beyond this Episode

The following ideas could be used for any episode of the *Yes, Minister* series.

Q: (EASY) *Ask the students to summarise the plot of the episode that has just been listened to.*

Q: (EASY) *Bring in a variety of photographs from adverts in magazines. Spread them out in front of the students and ask them to 'find' the people from the episode. This can be done in pairs, groups or as a whole class exercise. The students can then be asked to explain their choices. This can lead to an interesting discussion as to perceptions we hold about people, their character, their appearance etc.*

Q: (EASY) *Ask the students to say which character they would like to be and to explain why.*

Q: (MEDIUM) *What advice could the students give to the characters in the episode? Tell your students they should pretend to be 'agony aunts' and offer some personal advice using the structure:*

If I were.....I would.....

Q: (MEDIUM) *Take some lines of dialogue from the episode. Write each extract on a piece of paper. Distribute a selection of these to the students. Ask them to try to identify who they think said these lines and why they think so.*

Q: (DIFFICULT) *Ask students to work in pairs, one is an interviewer, the other is a character from the episode. Choose a topic for the interview and ask each pair to write and then perform a short interview telling the students to try to ensure that the people stay 'in character' in what they say.*

Q: (DIFFICULT) *It is often said by others that the British sense of humour is a very special form of humour. This may or may not be true, but what is certainly true is that it contains a large portion of irony, sarcasm, understatement and self-mockery.*

Ask your students to do some research on the nature of the British Sense of Humour. They could try to find out 'typical' examples of British humour, be it in books, film or TV series. They could then report their findings to the rest of the class.

Suggested websites:

- ▶ www.screenonline.org.uk
- ▶ www.bbc.co.uk
- ▶ www.guardian.co.uk
- ▶ www.sitcom.co.uk

6. Appendix

- ▶ **Handout A**
Key Characters Summary
- ▶ **Handout B**
While-listening Questionnaire
- ▶ **Handout C**
Personality Chart

Yes, Minister *Big Brother*

Handout A Key Characters Summary

As you listen to *Big Brother* collect your thoughts on the personalities of the main people in this episode on the chart below. Just write key words. You will need your ideas for some questions later on.

Key Characters	Positive Characteristics	Negative Characteristics
Jim Hacker		
Sir Humphrey Appleby		
Bernard Woolley		
Annie Hacker		
Frank Weisel		
Tom Sargent		

Yes, Minister *Big Brother*

Handout B While-listening Questionnaire

The following questionnaire lists comprehension questions and a few questions that require your opinion. It helps you to take notes while you are listening to the scenes of the episode *Big Brother*.

Questions	Answers
<p>Scene 1 (track 2): TV Studio (4:08)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How many people are speaking in the scene? 2. Where does the interview take place? 3. Why do you think Jim Hacker (The Minister) wants to avoid discussing the National Integrated Data Base? 4. Jim Hacker uses a variety of phrases and expressions to avoid answering the questions. Write down some of these phrases. 5. How effective is Jim Hacker in avoiding answering the questions? Explain your answer. 6. From this scene what are your general impressions of Jim Hacker? How would you describe his personality? Note down your ideas on Handout A. 	
<p>Scene 2 (track 3): Jim's Office (2:06)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Who is the first person who speaks in this scene? 2. Why should Jim Hacker meet Bernard (Principal Private Secretary) at 8 am at Paddington Station the following day? 3. Where is the by-election meeting? 4. Jim Hacker is double-booked. How did this happen? 5. How is this crisis resolved? Which meeting(s) does he decide to go to? 6. At the end of the scene Frank Weisel (Political Advisor) says that if The Minister is a good boy his nanny will give him a ...? 7. Why do you think Frank Weisel said this? 	

Scene 3 (track 4): Hall – Jim’s House (3:04)

1. Why is the trip to Paris important?
2. Who does Jim Hacker phone up to sort out the problem?
3. How is the situation resolved?
4. What does the Minister’s wife think of her husband? Does she see him in a positive or negative way? Add your thoughts to the chart.
5. How does Annie Hacker (The Minister’s wife) think he’s changed since becoming a Minister?

Scene 4 (track 5): Jim’s Office (3:00)

1. Jim Hacker decides that the National Data Base is to be organised differently with built-in safeguards. How does Sir Humphrey (Permanent Secretary) react to this statement?
2. Who is Tom Sargent?
3. Bernard informs the Minister that another TV programme wants to interview him. What is the Minister’s final decision?
4. Why do you think that Jim Hacker is unsure what to decide?

Scene 5 (track 6): House of Commons Smoking Room (3:14)

1. Tom Sargent and Jim Hacker are from opposing political parties. How do they get on with each other?
2. Why might some people find this surprising?
3. Tom Sargent provides Jim Hacker with the five stalling techniques that Sir Humphrey uses. Complete the spaces in this list.

The administration is in its

_____ *and there are a lot of things to do.*

Something certainly ought to be done, but is this the
_____ *to achieve it?*

This is not the time, for all sorts of

_____.

The policy has run into difficulties – technical, political, _____.

We are getting rather near the run up to the next

_____.

4. Why has Jim Hacker been given five red boxes to deal with in the evening?

Scene 6 (track 7): Jim's Bedroom (2:15)

1. Who is the real opposition to the government according to Jim Hacker?
2. What did Tom Sargent give to Jim Hacker?
3. How and why do you think the Minister will use this information?
4. Why did the Minister phone Sir Humphrey at 2 am?
5. What was Sir Humphrey's reaction when the Minister told him he had found the Data Base document?
6. What do you think about the personality of Annie Hacker? What additional information does this scene provide? Write this information down on Handout A.

Prediction Exercise

What do you think might happen in the rest of this story?

Scene 7 (track 8): Jim's Office (3:34)

1. What time does The Minister have the Cabinet meeting?
2. Why does Jim Hacker call out "one, two, three, four ..." during his conversation with Sir Humphrey?
3. What do you notice about the character and mood of the Minister in this scene? How does it differ from previous scenes?
4. What's your reaction to the "it is, it isn't, it is, it ..." in the dialogue between Jim Hacker and Sir Humphrey?
5. Why is the Minister so thankful to Bernard when he says "I said we can't get out of it, Minister. It's been announced, it's in the programme."

Scene 8 (track 9): TV Studio (2:03)

1. What words does Jim Hacker use to describe the Civil Service?
2. What are Jim Hacker's feelings in general about the Civil Service?
3. From what date will all citizens of the UK have the right to inspect their personal files?
4. Why won't Sir Humphrey be happy with this interview?

Scene 9 (track 10): Check-mate (1:36)

1. What alternative word did the Minister use for a television?
2. How did Jim Hacker feel after the TV interview?
3. Why did The Minister ask Sir Humphrey to read out his Draft Proposals for safeguards and then interrupt him and complete the sentences?
4. What are the final words spoken by Sir Humphrey?

Yes, Minister *Big Brother*

Handout C Personality Chart

When you have finished your own Key Characters Chart get into pairs and talk about your results. Together, complete the following chart, providing as much information about each of the main characters of *Big Brother*.

Key Characters	Job Description	Personality
Jim Hacker		
Sir Humphrey Appleby		
Bernard Woolley		
Annie Hacker		
Frank Weisel		
Tom Sargent		