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AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN ESL/EFL TEACHING²

Abstract

Authentic materials are original or genuine materials that can be used for the purpose of helping ESL/EFL learners to acquire language more easily. A set of authentic materials could include a map, a brochure, newspapers, songs, etc. Authentic materials in ESL/EFL classrooms have been used for a long time and they are thought to complement English classes by enlivening the class and create a positive attitude to learning.

Use of authentic materials can be seen from various perspectives, but this paper is concerned with the contribution and incorporation of authentic materials into the foreign languages classroom. More specifically, some consideration will be given to the reasons and the ways (why and how) of using authentic materials effectively. Furthermore, an attempt will be made to highlight the importance of using authentic materials in ESL/EFL classrooms. It will also focus on the types of authentic materials and their role on students' motivation. The last part will briefly describe the advantages and disadvantages of using authentic materials.

***Key words:* authentic materials, ESL, EFL, teaching.**

Introduction

When people first hear of authentic materials they usually assume that we are talking about newspaper and magazine articles. However, the term can also encompass such things as songs, web pages, radio & TV broadcasts, films, leaflets, posters, menus, maps, advertisements, travel brochures, catalogs, phone books, cooking recipes, horoscopes, indeed anything written in the target language and used unedited in the classroom. Of course, there are several points

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to be considered when choosing authentic materials and they are going to be suggested in this work.

Nowadays, we live in a communicative society where people need to have many skills in order to become part of society and to integrate in it successfully. People need to know how to work as a team, since part of the requirements for many jobs is the ability to work together and share ideas. Cooperative learning is one of the major strategies of introducing these communicative skills to pupils of every level. The combination of cooperative learning, task-based learning, and the use of authentic materials can promote communication skills.

Most of the teachers throughout the world agree that authentic texts or materials are beneficial to the language learning process, but what is less agreed is when authentic materials should be introduced and how they should be used in an EFL classroom and this is one of the issues that will be considered in details in the following work.

The definitions for authentic materials differ slightly from one scholar to another but the very common definition found in all texts is that authentic materials are text papers which expose learners to real language and its use in its own community. Authentic texts have been defined as "...real-life texts, not written for pedagogic purposes"³ (Wallace, 1992). They are therefore written for native speakers and contain "real" language.

There are many books that contain explanations of why it should or should not be included in lessons, and how it is to be used or best exploited. Adult educators who assert that it is important to use activities and materials that are drawn from the learners' lives outside of school, which we will refer to as authentic, or learner contextualized, believe that using real life texts for real life purposes provides students with an education that is meaningful and responds better to their individual needs. Educators who take this approach believe that authentic texts do not have to be kept aside until students reach a certain level of proficiency. Many authors are pro and against the use of authentic materials and those who support the use of authentic materials have in common one idea: exposure. In other words, the benefit students get from being exposed to the language in authentic materials. The definition authentic material used in this paper is taken from Peacock (1997): "materials that have been produced to fulfill some social purpose in the language community"⁴. When considering the use of authentic materials, another scholar, Widdowson (1990), wrote:

³ Wallace, C. (1992). *Reading Oxford, O.U.P.* 69

⁴ Peacock, M. (1997). *The Effect of Authentic Materials on the Motivation of EFL Learners in English Language Teaching Journal* 51, pp 2

“It has been traditionally supposed that the language presented to learners should be simplified in some way for easy access and acquisition. Nowadays there are recommendations that the language presented should be authentic”⁵ (Widdowson, 1990). At this stage, a differentiation should be made between the terms “authentic” and “genuine material”. According to Widdowson (1990) authentic would be material designed for native speakers of English used in the classroom in a way similar to the one it was designed for. For example, a radio news report brought into the class so students discuss the report on pollution in the city where learners live.

Most of the time, though, this material is used in a genuine way, in other words, not in the way it was intended, but in a somewhat artificial way. For example, news articles where the paragraphs are cut up and jumbled so students have to put them back together in the correct order.

Harmer (1991) defines authentic texts as materials which are designed for native speakers; they are real text; designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language.

Jordan (1997) refers to authentic texts as texts that are not written for language teaching purposes. Authentic materials is significant since it increases students’ motivation for learning, makes the learner be exposed to the ‘real’ language.

Sources and Choices

Today, with the help of technological developments, we have access to many sources easily and quickly. Almost all the printed materials are on the Internet in electronic forms and we can easily search anything anytime. The sources of authentic materials that can be used in the classroom are infinite, but the most common are newspapers, magazines, TV programs, movies, songs and literature.

One of the most useful is the Internet. Whereas newspapers and any other printed material date very quickly, the Internet is continuously updated, more visually stimulating as well as being interactive, therefore promoting a more active approach to reading rather than a passive one. From a more practical point of view, the Internet is a modern day reality, most students use it and for teachers, there is easier access to endless amounts of many different types of material. Often, by having unlimited access in the work place, looking for materials costs nothing, only time.

Authentic materials should be the kind of material that students will need and

⁵ Widdowson, H.G. (1990). *Aspects of Language Teaching Oxford, O.U.P.*

want to be able to read when traveling, studying abroad, or using the language in other contexts outside the classroom. Authentic materials enable learners to interact with the real language and content rather than the form. Learners feel that they are learning a target language as it is used outside the classroom. At times, students may have texts such as job applications on hand, but teachers often have to be quite resourceful to get the materials they need. Sometimes it is easier to identify the texts students wish to use than it is to get them.

Important Factors in Choosing Authentic Materials

Nunan (1999) uses the acronym SAVE⁶ for choosing materials:

S – Short

A – Appealing

V – Varied

E – Easy

Selective: according to students' current language proficiency and their preferences, especially when choosing authentic materials from international websites.

Authentic texts should not be limited to more advanced students, as they can play an important role in the education of students with lower level. When selecting an authentic text for use in the classroom, teachers must keep in mind the different purposes for using that text.

The primary purpose for using the text should be the same as it would be outside of the classroom. This can be called the "*real world purpose*." For example, if students are working with the Yellow Pages, they should be looking for information that they need, rather than for a list of spelling words chosen by the teacher.

The second purpose for using the text is the *instructional purpose*, which is typically the concern of the teacher. Many students do not have a lot of experience using the Yellow Pages on their own, and may not understand the structure. Teachers using them in their classrooms must be prepared to help students become more comfortable with the format of the text. Words in the text may illustrate a point the teacher has been trying to make (such as a spelling rule), and these can be highlighted.

However, in choosing to work with authentic materials, the "students' real world purpose" always comes first. While a certain brochure may have vocabulary in it that a teacher wants to introduce to the class, the text's pedagogical function

⁶ Nunan, D. (1999). *Second Language Teaching and Learning*.

must not replace the student's own reasons for wanting to work with the text, such as answering a question students have about health.

Nunan gives three main criteria when choosing texts to be used in the classroom: suitability of content, exploitability and readability.

Suitability of content can be considered to be the most important of the three, in that the reading material should interest the students as well as be relevant to their needs. The texts should also motivate the students.

Exploitability refers to how the text can be used to develop the students' competence as readers. A text that cannot be exploited for teaching purposes has no use in the classroom. Just because it is in English does not mean that it can be useful.

Readability is used to describe the combination of structural and lexical difficulty of a text, as well as referring to the amount of new vocabulary and any new grammatical forms present. It is important to assess the right level for the right students.

Variety and presentation also influence the choice of authentic materials. A reading course can be made more interesting if a variety of texts is used. Students very often find it very boring when dealing with only one subject area, as can be the case when dealing with English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

One of the advantages of using texts dealing with the same subject area is that they use the same vocabulary, with the student having to make very little effort to learn it. While on the contrary, the student becomes highly specialized in that particular area and not in others. Whether the text looks authentic or not, is also very important when presenting it to the student. The "authentic" presentation, through the use of pictures, diagrams, photographs, helps put the text into a context. This helps the reader not only understand the meaning of the text better but also how it would be used. A more "attractive" text will appeal to the student and motivate them into reading. It may seem to be a very unimportant aspect but the appearance of any article is the first thing that the students notice. An "attractive" looking article is more likely to attract the reader's attention rather than a page full of type.

Very often it is so easy to just download an article from the Internet and present the student a page full of impersonal print, without taking any of these factors into consideration.

Other factors worth taking into consideration when choosing authentic material for the classroom can include whether the text challenges the students' intelligence without making unreasonable linguistic demands, does the language reflect written or spoken usage is the language in the text natural or has it been distorted in order to try and include examples of a particular teaching point? It is

also important that the text lends itself to being studied; can good questions be asked about it or can tasks based on it be created? Above all does the text make the students want to read for themselves, tell themselves something they don't know as well as introduce new and relevant ideas?

Also, you should make sure that you have enough copies of the materials that you are going to use, so that each student or pair of students can have a copy to use. It is best not to use materials with too many pages. If you have to use the same materials in more than one class, it is important that they be hard enough to withstand a lot of handling and they be easily refolded and put back together.

Also, keep in mind that some materials are more easily dated than others. For example, last season's catalog does not have the same impact as a current one which is filled with items which the student could actually order. A menu, on the other hand, can be used as long as the prices remain contemporary. Students are generally uninterested in events that have already passed. Teaching methods that emphasize language in context and meaningful communication naturally lead to the extensive use of authentic language and culturally appropriate materials that play a major role in developing students' abilities.

When choosing materials from different websites, two major points need to be faced to arrive at a safe usage of such materials in the FL classroom. First, materials should be selected on the basis of their appropriateness to the goals of the FL curriculum. This means that teachers require techniques for locating and selecting the right materials among the seemingly infinite sea of WebPages available.

Second, safe activities are required to allow students to benefit from exposure to these materials. Bringing Web pages into the classroom for students to read simply because we find them on the net is not enough. Remember to choose material that is appropriate for the students' level. However, a certain amount of adjustment can be made depending on the type and level of questions used in the accompanying question handout. Choose an activity that you have found to be particularly effective in meeting an objective you have for a lesson. You need to be selective about what you use, but we also can be more successful in finding quality materials if we explore a broad range of sites.

Authentic materials can be used for the students of various levels: beginners, intermediate and advanced level. Authentic materials are selected according to the language of the materials, and the needs interests and age of the students. The tasks of authentic materials should be learner centered. The materials should give clear and simple instructions so that learners do not get confused and they can understand what they are supposed to do.

The teacher should select such materials that give more learning and need

less effort. The teacher should select such materials that have variety of subjects. The teacher may need to transform the materials and change it according to the culture of the learners. Thus, the materials should be culturally appropriate for the learners.

Apart from these, the materials should be error free. If there is an error in the authentic materials, it must not be selected for self-directed learning. Otherwise, it will give wrong exposure to the learners.

Advantages of Using Authentic Materials in the Classroom

Using authentic materials has several advantages. Brinton, Gebhard and Melvin (Brinton, 1991 cit. in Oura 2003; Gebhard, 1996; Melvin and Stout, 1987) discuss these advantages in the context of the benefit it gives students in the real world. The first advantage is that authentic materials and media reinforce for students the direct relationship between the language classroom and the outside world. The second advantage is that authentic materials can be seen as a way to contextualize the language by offering the students ways of exposure to the material through the content and meaning rather than the language itself. The third advantage is that it increases the motivation to learn in students and it increases the interest in the subject matter. As a result, the students become more confident when they work with authentic materials, and they increase their understanding in the practical side of this use in the real world..

Using authentic materials simply means using examples of language produced by native speakers for some real purpose of their own rather than using language produced and designed solely for the classroom. Anybody who takes into the classroom a newspaper article, an advertisement, a pop song, a strip cartoon, or even a bus ticket, is using authentic materials. Teachers have always introduced such realia into their classrooms, and always will. The question really is whether it is helpful to their students.

Disadvantages of Using Authentic Materials in the Classroom

The main disadvantage of these materials of course, is that sometimes they are not teacher-friendly, and you may need to spend several hours reading or watching videos until you finally find what you need in order to use in your class.

Authentic materials are beneficial for the language learning process. It is, however, sometimes difficult to find authentic texts in a country where English is a foreign language. There are some English newspapers or magazines but they are basically written by the citizens whose English is also counted as a foreign

language. A lot of texts are written using wrong tenses and seem to contain a direct translation, unfortunately.

Richards (2001, p. 253) points out that alongside with these advantages, authentic materials often contain difficult language, unneeded vocabulary items and complex language structures, which causes a burden for the teacher in lower-level classes.

Martinez (2002) mentions that authentic materials may be too culturally biased and too many structures are mixed, causing lower levels have a hard time decoding the texts.

Using Authentic Materials: At Which Level?

Using authentic materials is one of the mainstays of an imaginative and motivating higher level course, but rarely features at levels lower than intermediate. There are several reasons for this, primarily a kind of fear that students will panic when faced with language that is largely unfamiliar, and a feeling that to prevent this the language should be edited to the students' level. This is an unnecessary fear, as using authentic materials can be rewarding and stimulating for both teacher and students. There comes the question of when authentic materials should be introduced and used in a classroom; in other words, can we use authentic materials regardless of our students' level?

Highly authentic and interesting texts may be beyond students' current reading abilities. Although informational brochures about medical issues, for example, are designed for lay readers, the language and literacy skills required are often still fairly high. Guariento & Morley (2001) claim that at post-intermediate level the use of authentic materials is available for use in classroom. This might be attributed to the fact that at this level, most students master a wide range of vocabulary in the target language and all of the structures. They also note that at lower levels, the use of authentic materials may cause students to feel de-motivated and frustrated since they lack many lexical items and structures used in the target language. Matsuata (2004) states that the use of authentic materials is a burden for the instructors teaching beginning students as they have to spend a lot of time to prepare for authentic materials regarding the ability level of the students. Do all these mean we are not able to use authentic materials in lower-level classes apart from post-intermediate and advanced levels?

According to the findings of the survey carried out by Chavez (1998), learners enjoy dealing with authentic materials since they enable them to interact with the real language and its use. Also they do not consider authentic situations or materials innately difficult. However, learners state that they need pedagogical

support especially in listening situations and when reading literary texts such as the provision of a full range of cues (auditory and visual including written language). Naturally certain texts will lend themselves more easily to certain levels. At lower levels some possibilities include leaflets, timetables, menus, short headline type reports, audio and video advertising, or short news broadcasts. The task should be simple and relatively undemanding, and it is important to pre-teach key vocabulary so as to prevent panic. At more intermediate levels this list could be expanded to include longer articles, four- or five-minute TV or radio news reports, a higher quantity of shorter items, or even whole TV programmes. Again, pre-teaching is important, although your students should be able to deal with unknown vocabulary to some extent. At higher levels it is a case of anything goes. At an advanced level students should have some tactics for dealing with new vocabulary without panicking, but it is still useful to have a few quick definitions to hand for some of the trickier stuff.

Conclusion

Authentic materials enable learners to interact with the real language and content rather than the form. Learners feel that they are learning a target language as it is used outside the classroom. Considering this, it may not be wrong to say that at any level authentic materials should be used to complete the gap between the competence and performance of the language learners, which is a common problem among the nonnative speakers. This requires the language patterns being put into practice in real life situations. Since learning about a culture is not accepting it and the role of the culture in the materials is just to create learner interest towards the target language, there should be a variety of culture in the materials, not a specific one. This paper has tried to explore some of the implications of using authentic materials in the classroom. The conclusion is that authentic materials are indeed a valuable part of the teacher's work, and can do some things that other materials are not capable of. However, inevitably they have to be used in small doses, must be carefully selected and controlled, and need well-thought out teaching exercises to be fully exploited. When learners are asked to memorize grammar rules or study the textbook for examination purposes they cannot experience the feel of the language as a real language used for real life purposes. Research studies on the use of authentic materials have proved that there is an overall increase in motivation to learn, a more positive attitude towards learning, as well as increased involvement and interest in the subject matter. Authentic materials are perceived by the learners as useful, lifelike, and interesting.

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