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journal or publication title	Annual Research Report of the Language Center
number	22
page range	53-62
year	2019-03
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10236/00027670

Using Authentic Reading Materials in the Japanese EFL Classroom

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This paper outlines the benefits of using authentic reading materials in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom settings. It begins by discussing the importance of the text selection process, before moving on to how schema theory can be of value in the successful exploitation of authentic reading materials. It also provides a number of activities that may be used in conjunction with authentic reading materials, as well as justification for each activity, and instruction for teachers on how to use each activity. The authors posit that the use of authentic reading materials can lead to increased learner motivation, by facilitating successful learning experiences with materials designed for native speakers. The authenticity of the materials also provides students with the opportunity to interact with varieties of English that they may not encounter in traditional textbooks or EFL materials.

The British Council's teaching English guidelines (2004) identify the use of authentic reading materials in higher-level courses as critical for student motivation and provoking imagination. The use of authentic materials in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom setting could certainly be seen as an effective motivational tool, as they offer students the opportunity to interact with natural English, which has not been altered, or made easier for language learners. If the materials are utilized in a manner that results in a successful learning outcome, then this sense of accomplishment, experienced by the learner, can be highly motivational (Dörnyei, 2001; Sawada, 2005).

Lansford (2004) addresses the difficulties in using authentic materials, suggesting that they can be overly long, dense, and complicated. This perceived difficulty often leads to authentic materials being overlooked and under-utilized in EFL classrooms. However, it could be argued that by selecting appropriate materials, and pairing them with the correct activities, authentic materials can be beneficial for both students and teachers (British Council, 2004).

Throughout this report, the authors attempt to justify the use of authentic reading texts for second language (L2) learners. We will start by briefly describing the text selection process while discussing the benefits of authentic texts. We will then consider how *schema theory* can aid students in their comprehension of reading texts. Finally, we will outline a number of activities that have been designed to exploit the chosen authentic reading text. We will provide a set of instructions for teachers, and a rationale for each activity.

SELECTION OF AUTHENTIC TEXTS

When selecting a reading text, it is important to consider a number of factors: the difficulty of the text, the authenticity of the text, and how relevant it is to the students, both culturally, and with relation to their learning goals. Taking into account that one of the goals of most reading classes is to introduce students to natural English, the authenticity of the text becomes an important part of the text selection process. In order to evaluate the authenticity of a text, it is first important to consider what makes a text authentic. Harmer (2007) defines authentic material as “language where no concessions are made to foreign speakers. It is normal, natural language used by native or competent speakers of a language” (p. 273). Textbooks and course books are often designed specifically for language learners, with various concessions to non-native speakers, so they therefore would not be considered authentic texts. Although specially designed materials are important, or sometimes necessary for L2 learners, an over-reliance on them can be a hindrance to language acquisition and fluency. One such problem with using only non-authentic texts is that, as Cook (2008) suggests, “designers of course books and syllabuses may miss some of the aspects of language used in real-life situations” (p. 159). Cook even goes as far as suggesting that students are “handicapped” if they are deprived of the richness and diversity of authentic materials (p. 159). Therefore, we can conclude that the use of authentic materials can be highly beneficial to L2 learners.

If students have had limited exposure to authentic reading material, with the correct text and activities, introducing them to the benefits of reading authentic materials could increase their motivation to read. Successful comprehension of an authentic text intended for native speakers provides students with a sense of satisfaction that they are not able to get from textbooks. The use of authentic texts allows students to feel they have achieved genuine communication. This is a great motivator for students, as noted by Little, Devitt, and Singleton (1988), who confirm that by utilizing texts that serve a real communicative purpose, students will become better motivated. Variation in the kinds of language the students encounter is an important factor in fostering a desire for further reading, and encouraging reading for pleasure. Encouraging students to read for pleasure, and associating a sense of enjoyment with reading will increase students’ motivation to read, which eventually benefits their acquisition of the target language (Robb & Susser, 1989).

Teachers are often hesitant to make use of authentic materials in class due to their perceived difficulty when compared with the textbooks, which are usually required to use as part of any school’s curriculum. Cook (2008) recognizes that “the fact that the language is authentic does not in itself make it more difficult than specially written language” (p. 160). Cook (2008) goes on to say that “difficulty depends partly on the amount of material that is used” (p. 160). This once again reaffirms the importance of careful text selection when opting to use authentic materials.

All of the factors listed above were considered when deciding on the text that would be used in this example. We selected a short article by Rogers (2016)

from a Japanese news website called Soranews24 (www.soranews24.com); a website that reports Japanese news stories and articles in English. The article's title is "VR and GPS combine for new Japanese castle and historical landmark sightseeing app" (Appendix A). We felt this article would be appropriate as it is a good example of an authentic text. It contains, colloquial, natural English that students are not likely to have encountered before in their textbooks. The article is short, so as not to overwhelm the students. The article is also relevant to the students, as it contains information pertaining to virtual reality (VR), smartphone apps, and their use with relation to Japanese historical sites. These should all be topics that the students are not only familiar with, but also have an active interest in. Ur (2012) notes the importance of familiarity during the text selection process: "texts should be selected with reader interest in mind: topics that are likely to be at least partially familiar to students, but with enough extra information to invite curiosity and increase knowledge" (p. 145). This familiarity with the subject matter will also aid students with the activities, as they will be able to use their pre-existing knowledge or *schema* to help with their comprehension of the text.

SCHEMA THEORY

Bartlett (1932, as cited in McDonough, Shaw, & Masuhara, 2013) first used the term *schema theory* "to explain how the knowledge that we have about the world is organized into interrelated patterns based on our previous knowledge and experience" (p. 119). This knowledge and experience is of great importance when it comes to teaching reading. Even if the students can read the words, with no frame of reference, or understanding of the topic being discussed, they will merely be "decoding symbols" (Ur, 2012, p.138). Ur argues that in order to fully understand a text, we need to have knowledge of not only the words, but also the subject matter. Ur goes on to say that it is these two elements interacting with each other that allows us to "access the meaning" of a text (p. 136).

These two elements interacting as we read a text are known as *top-down*, and *bottom-up* processing. Top-down processing involves applying our own background knowledge and experiences to the text. Bottom-up processing refers to the "decoding and understanding" of each individual letter to ascertain their meaning (Ur, 2012, p. 135). These two elements interact with each other in order to achieve comprehension of the text as a whole (McDonough et al., 2013). This suggests that you cannot completely understand a text unless you understand both the language being used and the topics being discussed. This is an important consideration to make when selecting texts to use with L2 learners, as it reinforces the idea that the text must be relevant to the readers in order for it to successfully aid in language acquisition.

Background knowledge of a subject brings with it certain expectations and ideas, and "according to the proponents of Schema theory, these 'schemata' also allow us to predict what may happen" (McDonough et al., 2013, p.119). This is important to note when creating pre-reading activities, as thoughtful exploitation of these schemata can lead to a more successful reading experience. Weaver (1988) even goes so far as to posit that if children encounter natural written language that is

relatable to their own experiences and knowledge, they will learn without direct instruction of the grammar or vocabulary being used in the text.

Taking everything discussed so far into consideration, we have designed a number of activities that we feel will facilitate successful exploitation of the selected authentic text for learners of varying ability levels.

ACTIVITIES

When designing reading activities, it is important to link reading to other language skills, and to consider how reading can usefully be “integrated with the other language skills” (McDonough et al., 2013, p.124). To this end, group discussions have been included to practice speaking and listening. A writing task has also been included, intended as homework. This is meant to not only consolidate the contents of the class for the students, but to also ensure the inclusion of all four of the major skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) that students are usually required to study.

As noted by Morimoto (1994), “One successful innovation for the teaching of reading comprehension in cognate languages is the teaching of comprehension strategies—making and confirming predictions, summarizing, questioning, and clarifying.” Other academics agree that variety is important in enabling the students to use their different reading skills in appropriate ways (McDonough et al., 2013). The recommendation to integrate a rich mix of activities was taken into consideration when designing the following activities.

Pre-reading

Pre-reading activities are designed to activate students’ schemata, in order to help with comprehension, and to create interest in the text to aid in student motivation. If some students are not familiar with the subject matter, then using numerous pre-reading strategies to supply missing information is suggested. The authors propose the following activities to accompany the suggested article:

1. The teacher will join the students in a class discussion about smart phones. The teacher will attempt to elicit as much information as possible from the students before showing them the text to be studied. Questions can include the following: Do you own a smart phone? How long do you use it every day? What is your favorite app? What do you like about this app?
2. Next, put the students into groups, and give them the text. Tell them to look at the title, and discuss the following topics, first, with their groups, and then as a class. What do you think the app does? How do you think it works?

While-reading

The while-reading activities are designed, as noted above, to provide the students with the opportunity to use their different reading skills to exploit an authentic text. They are examples of intensive reading exercises, which as Harmer (2007) notes, are often used by teachers to “enable students to develop specific receptive skills” (p. 283). The following points describe the authors’ recommended procedure:

1. The first activity is designed for the students to practice skimming, or reading for gist. They must read the article once and underline any words they do not understand. At this stage, they are not to look up the meaning of unknown words or expressions. The purpose of this first reading is to simply understand the general idea of the text. When they have finished reading once, they should discuss with their partners if their predictions about the article were correct, or not. After finishing the discussion, the teacher should ask the whole class for any words they did not understand from the text, and then write them on the board. While writing down unknown words on the board, the teacher should try to elicit answers from the students, asking if anyone can explain what the words mean, as a form of peer review where students teach each other. If any words remain unexplained that are important for the text, the teacher should explain them before moving on.
2. The next activity is designed for the students to practice scanning, or reading for specific information. The students will have to read a series of sentences to discern which sentences are correct, and which are incorrect (Appendix B). The teacher should make three options to choose from, with at least four sentences in each option. Two sentences should be correct and the other two sentences should contain small mistakes, either in spelling or content. The teacher can also change the wording of the sentences, if they want to increase the difficulty of the activity. On the other hand, to make the activity easier, the mistakes can be more obvious.
3. The last activity is designed for the students to practice their reading comprehension. They must answer a number of comprehension questions (Appendix C). The number of questions given can be determined by the time allowance of a given class; however, in our teaching contexts, we deemed four questions to be an appropriate number.

Post-reading

Finally, post-reading tasks are administered that will help students to assimilate and reinforce the knowledge obtained from the pre-reading and while-reading tasks. The authors recommend the following activities to address this final stage:

1. At the end of the class the teacher should once again put the students into groups in order to discuss the text. The discussion topics can include, (a) why the students liked it, (b) why they didn't like it, and (c) what they learned from it. This is a good way for the students to share their thoughts and opinions, and to communicate with each other in English. It also provides the teacher with a good opportunity to circulate between the groups, listening to the discussions in order to determine to what extent the students engaged with the text, or any difficulties they may have had with the text.
2. For homework, the students should write about what they discussed with their groups, referencing specific parts of the text where applicable.

CONCLUSION

As noted throughout the paper, the successful exploitation of authentic reading materials can be of great benefit to students. Facilitating successful

interaction with reading materials, intended for native speakers, can act as a source of motivation by creating a sense of accomplishment for the students. Teaching students that successful learning can take place through the correct exploitation of authentic materials has the potential to inspire students to seek out more authentic material, thus expanding their potential interactions with English and creating a deeper connection with the language. The activities listed in this report are designed to be as comprehensive as possible, without being too difficult, thereby allowing the activities to be adapted for use with students of varying ability levels. The instructions included are intended as guidelines for teachers, but tasks can be altered, as deemed appropriate. The tasks described in this paper have been successfully integrated into L2 curriculum at the high school and university level. The authors plan to next collect empirical data on comprehension efficacy and motivational levels of students who engage in the described tasks.

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APPENDIX A: Soranews24 Article

VR and GPS combine for new Japanese castle and historical landmark sightseeing app

Introducing the “Street Museum” smartphone app enhanced with VR contents to make your travels that much more memorable.

On September 21st, Toppan Printing Co., Ltd. released a new smartphone app called “**Street Museum**” designed to enhance your visits to actual historical landmarks in Japan. While the app provides a wealth of information including audio commentary in both Japanese and English about a limited number of famous places, its real draw lies in its **downloadable content**, which only becomes accessible once you’ve physically entered a historical site, as seen in the following promotional clip:

At present, only six historical landmarks are currently available within the app, all related to castles and former castle sites: Edo Castle (Tokyo), Wakayama Castle (Wakayama) Fukuoka Caste (Fukuoka), Nagoya Castle (Saga), Takamatsu Castle (Kagawa), and the Yashimanoki ruins (Kagawa). However, seeing as the app was just released and is still in its first version, it’s hardly unreasonable to expect more and more locations to be supported in the near future. Presumably, other historical landmarks besides castles will also become available, true to the app’s name of being a street museum.

So what is the deal with the VR content, anyway? (It seems more like augmented reality content than virtual reality to us, but that’s what the company calls it.) In short, users can switch the app to “VR mode” once they’ve arrived at a historical site. This mode, coupled with their phones’ GPS function, allows them to bask in the surrounding scenery as it would have looked hundreds of years ago (especially suitable for those sites which no longer exist!):

Be sure to take commemorative photos while in VR mode, too!

You can also use the app to view both present-day and historical maps of the sites.

Finally, any VR content viewed on-site can be saved for browsing at a later time. At the moment, Street Museum is only available for download on iOS devices, but an Android-compatible version is also in the works.

APPENDIX B: True or False?

Please read all of the sentences carefully. **Two** sentences are correct, and **two** sentences are incorrect. Please circle the **incorrect** sentences.

A) The app was released by Toppan Printing Co., Ltd. / The app features audio commentary. / The app was released on September 31st. / The app allows people to see bass in the surrounding scenery as it would have looked thousands of years ago.

B) Currently, there are only five historical landmarks available within the app. / App users can switch to “VR mode” once they have arrived at the historical site. / The app is currently in the third version. / The app is called “Street Museum”.

C) The app is currently available on IOS and Android. / The app has commentary in both Japanese and English. / The app allows you to view both present-day and historical maps of the sites. / The app uses your phones’ AR function

APPENDIX C: Comprehension Questions

- 1:** On which websites can the app currently be found?
- 2:** What can you save to view at a later time?
- 3:** What does the author expect to be supported in the near future?
- 4:** What is the purpose of this app?