

AUTHENTICITY IN OUR LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

In order to help our students learn English more effectively, we teachers of English need to place an equal emphasis both on designing suitable teaching materials and making use of effective teaching methodologies. Of the two types of teaching materials; namely authentic and non-authentic materials that are being used nowadays in schools and universities in most EFL countries, the use of the former type is becoming increasingly more popular. The textbooks we are currently using to teach English to our students in our university, especially the English I and English II textbooks, carry both types of the materials. This article briefly examines to what extent our students can exploit the authentic materials presented in our textbooks to their advantage, and also explores some of the recommendations made by experienced scholars with regard to the important factors to be considered in the selection of the required authentic teaching materials.

บทคัดย่อ

เพื่อให้ผู้เรียนเรียนภาษาอังกฤษอย่างได้ผล ครูสอนภาษาอังกฤษควรออกแบบสื่อการสอนที่เหมาะสม และใช้วิธีสอนที่มีประสิทธิภาพ สื่อการสอนที่ใช้ในโรงเรียนในประเทศที่สอนอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ แบ่งได้เป็นสองประเภท คือ สื่อสภาพจริง และ สื่อไม่ใช่สภาพจริง ในปัจจุบันสื่อแบบแรกเป็นที่นิยมเพิ่มขึ้นเรื่อย ๆ หนังสือเรียนประกอบวิชาอังกฤษ 1 และอังกฤษ 2 ที่เราใช้สอนมีทั้งสื่อสภาพจริง และสื่อไม่ใช่สภาพจริง บทความนี้ต้องการตรวจสอบว่านักเรียนของเราสามารถใช้ประโยชน์จากสื่อสภาพจริงในการเรียนได้มากน้อยเพียงใด และได้ตรวจสอบคำแนะนำของนักวิชาการในเรื่ององค์ประกอบที่ควรคำนึงถึงเมื่อเลือกใช้สื่อสภาพจริงประกอบการสอน

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INTRODUCTION

Along with the growing acceptance of the communicative approach to language teaching in EFL classrooms nowadays, most language teachers all over the world seem to be of the opinion that the use of authentic materials in language classes has more positive effects on the learners than that of non-authentic materials. This trend can be seen in a statement made by Widdowson (1990): “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”. Many reasons have been given in support of their opinion towards the use of authentic materials, the most common ones being the power of these materials to motivate the learners’ interest, the authentic cultural information they carry, their exposure to real language, and their suitability to teach language through a more creative approach. The aim of this paper is to assess roughly how well we are getting on in the use of authentic materials in our situation and to share with the readers some of the knowledge I have gained with regard to the use of authentic materials in language classrooms from all the readings I have done so far.

WHAT RENOWNED SCHOLARS SAY ABOUT AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

Despite its seemingly simple and straightforward look, the term “authentic

materials” has caused many a scholar to interpret it in quite a number of different ways. Harmer (1991) defines authentic texts as “materials which are designed for native speakers; they are real texts; 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”. Peacock (1997) describes authentic materials as materials that have been produced to fulfill some social purpose in the language community. Sanderson (1999) states that “authentic materials are materials that we can use with the students in the classroom and that have not been changed in any way for ESL students. A classic example would be a newspaper article that’s written for a native-English-speaking audience”. Interestingly enough, only one out of the four researchers quoted here talks about the profitability of using authentic texts in language classrooms.

EXPLOITABILITY OF THE AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN OUR SITUATION

In fact, authentic materials can be of two types - authentic reading materials and authentic listening materials. For a variety of reasons, listening has not received wide attention in the past though it is the language skill most often used in everyday life. Taking into consideration the fact that more schools are currently using authentic materials to teach reading skills than listening skills, this paper will deal solely with the use of authentic reading materials in our language classrooms.

Logically speaking, more language teachers are now beginning to choose authentic reading materials over non-authentic materials for teaching English mainly because of some major defects the latter is associated with. One commonly accepted idea is that the language and structures found in non-authentic texts do not reflect how the language is really used in real life.

Together with the fact that non-authentic reading materials are getting short shrift in schools comes an unavoidable task for a critical and observant teacher to explore what makes authentic materials more effective for learners. Below, a brief examination will be made to see if the merits that authentic materials are supposed to bring to students can really be enjoyed by the students learning English in our university.

As mentioned earlier, authentic texts are said to benefit students a lot from the exposure to real language being used in a real context. This is, of course, one of the universally accepted concepts by language teachers across the globe. This supposition seems to have been established as a near fact by those being involved in the practical teaching and research work through the study of human behavior. No one likes artificiality. If there is choice, people will choose whatever is original over anything that is fake - true friends over fair-weather friends, genuine stones over synthetic stones, brand name products over generics, to name just a few such choices. Judging from the experiences gained by watching generations of Assumption University students, the merit given to the use of authentic materials in this aspect does not seem questionable in any way. Our textbooks usually carry both authentic and non-

authentic reading materials for the students to read. Though it is undeniable that our students find the non-authentic materials easy to understand, the authentic materials seem to catch their interest more. Even with their limited knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, they seem to more thoroughly enjoy taking the challenge of the authentic texts than in fighting an easy battle with non-authentic texts. For example, various interpretations that our students come up with when they read James Thurber's "Unicorn in the Garden" not only give them the pleasure derived from their own guessing skills but also confirm to us that a good authentic text can be exploitable for the development of our students' interpretation skills. Our students have been exposed to both long and short authentic texts throughout their time in our English classes, but we discover that it is the shorter texts like 'The Unicorn in the Garden' which can help to stimulate their imagination better. In fact, that short story can help develop their critical abilities and increase their emotional awareness much more than a longer story entitled 'Waiting for the Police' (by J. Jefferson Farjeon) can, despite the fact that the plot of the latter is set in a present day situation and looks more interesting to adult readers.

The assertion that the authentic materials are highly motivating leaves little room for argument. In this regard, however, it is felt that one other factor should be taken into consideration in order for an authentic text to be motivating: the learners' tastes and interests. There have been instances in Assumption University English classes where students' initial interest in an authentic texts slowly diminishes at their discov-

ery that the content of the text does not match their interests well. For example, whereas the students devour an authentic text from a popular journal with regard to a child prodigy who goes to college at a very young age with great interest, they do not pay equal attention when they read a speech given by Martin Luther King, Jr. at the time he received the Nobel peace prize. The motivational power of an authentic texts becomes more obvious when quite a number of our students voluntarily read J.K Rowling's full-length Harry Potter novels, some of them even buying the whole series by using their own pocket money. This feat, however, may not have been possible if they had not been exposed to shorter authentic texts in our English classes over a long period of time. Unquestionably, Rowling's books give them a sense of achievement and encourage them to undertake further reading. As Nuttall (1996) points out, authentic texts can be motivating because they are proof that the language is used for real-life purposes by real people.

Authentic materials, as discussed in many contemporary publications, reflect the changes in the use of language, preventing the students from encountering the artificial language of the classroom, and at the same time introducing the real world and language as it is really used. We do not totally disregard non-authentic texts as unsupportive for the students' learning of English. We still believe they are useful for teaching structures and for preparing the learners for the eventual reading of real and authentic texts. That is why our textbooks still carry some non-authentic texts as well. However, we also accept that authentic

reading materials reflect the changes in the use of language. Following this belief, we do not prescribe a special grammar book for our students, but teach them all the aspects of grammar and syntactic skills based on how they appear in the authentic and non-authentic reading materials we have chosen for them. In other words, using a wide variety of text types, we help our students to promote their knowledge of grammar and other different language skills. This is, in some ways, similar to what some academics call teaching grammar in context.

CHOOSING SUITABLE AUTHENTIC READING MATERIALS

The discussion above shows that we are using authentic reading materials in our English classes, with positive effects on our students resulting, as asserted by prominent scholars. However, we still need to be careful with the choice of suitable materials, which proves more important than the actual practice of using them. Since negative results may occur following the wrong choice of the materials, warnings given by more experienced scholars should be taken heed of before the selection is begun.

Among the many factors discussed in recent publications with regard to the choice of authentic reading materials, the following three have the most common acceptance:

Suitability of Content

A suitable authentic reading text is one

that really interests the students. For example, though Lady Ga Ga's news articles and daily gossips may arouse the interest of the majority of our students, the topic of how sprouts appear from seeds will probably not. Following closely behind this factor is the relevancy of the selected materials to the student's needs. For example, authentic reading materials describing the secret business strategies of Bill Gates may not only be interesting for students aiming to become successful entrepreneurs but also be very relevant for both their academic and career needs.

Exploitability

It simply means finding out whether a text can be exploited for teaching purposes. For example, some texts can be used to enhance vocabulary knowledge. Some passages may be convenient for helping the students improve their reading comprehension, where we ask them questions whose answers can easily be recalled after reading the text, and then gradually move on to questions which require them to analyze the text, and to interpret the writer's message. Equally important are texts that are suitable to teach reading strategy skills. By means of a carefully selected authentic texts, we can teach our students a range of strategies from tackling difficult words to summarizing the contents of a passage.

Readability

Matters to be given consideration here are basically whether the selected text is structurally too demanding and how much new vocabulary it contains. Texts contain-

ing too much jargon and too many complex words should be avoided. The following questions will probably be of some help to us with the selection of the authentic texts for our students: How much of the language in the text will students be able to infer? Will students find it useful and enjoyable to study the text, or will they feel demotivated by the difficulties of the language? Even if the language is difficult, will students be motivated by other factors to study the text?

CONCLUSION

As with anything involving humans, no method or technique is error free. This means that using authentic texts in language classrooms alone may not guarantee a hundred percent success as far as the students' learning of English is concerned. For example, some authentic texts may be too culturally biased, making it difficult for the students to understand the original writer's main message. Sometimes, too many structures are mixed in the passage so students with lower proficiency levels have problems decoding the texts. However, with care and effective management on the part of the teachers, our students can still be made to enjoy all the benefits that authentic reading materials can offer.

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