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Authenticity and Teaching Idioms

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Abstract

The concept of ‘authenticity’ or ‘the authentic material’ has been a controversial issue during the past 30 years. However, in recent years, more emphasis has been given to a multifaceted model and there has been an attempt to put an end to binary definitions of authenticity. In the present study, five types of input authenticity proposed by Brown and Menasche (2008) were taken into account. This model consists of genuine input authenticity, altered input authenticity, adapted input authenticity, stimulated input authenticity and inauthenticity. In this study, an attempt was made to explore the effect of four out of five types of multifaceted input authenticity model on learning idiomatic expressions of EFL learners. A quasi-experimental research study was conducted and 62 male EFL learners were assigned to four groups and four types of authentic idiomatic materials were prepared and taught to them. A one-way ANOVA was run on the scores obtained from a pre-test (which tested participants’ idiomatic expressions understanding) and it did not show any significant difference among the participating groups ($F = 0.39, p = .757$). During the treatment period, which lasted for two months, three sessions a week, four groups received four types of different idiomatic materials with different types of authenticity. A one-way ANOVA run on the scores of the four groups reached statistical difference ($F = 31.31, p = .000$). In order to find the exact location of differences found, a follow-up analysis (LSD test) was conducted. Generally viewed, the results found in this study suggest that the materials with less authenticity, namely simulated input authenticity and inauthenticity, could be more beneficial than the materials with higher degree of authenticity, namely altered and adapted input authenticity.

Keywords: genuine input authenticity, altered input authenticity, adapted input authenticity, stimulated input authenticity and inauthenticity.

1. Introduction

The definitions of the terms ‘authentic’ and ‘authenticity’ and their application to language learning have been the subject of great controversy over the past three decades (Mishan, 2005). As Widdowson (1998) declares, long-standing presence in the authenticity debate is that the use of authentic texts in language learning is a contradiction since the language loses its authenticity once taken out of its context. He adds that reality is not embedded in the text; however, what makes the text real is that it has been produced as appropriate to a particular set of contextual conditions and when these conditions cannot be duplicated, the reality disappears. According to Widdowson (1979, pp. 166) authenticity ‘depends on a congruence of the language producer’s intentions and language receiver’s interpretation, this congruence being effected through a shared knowledge of conventions’. However, Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) emphasize that this interpretation of authenticity might be fine for ELT in the UK or USA, but as soon as English texts are used in real-life contexts other than those of their original producers, authenticity of language use becomes problematic.

Traditionally, authenticity was considered as a binary concept and the language learning materials were seen as either authentic or inauthentic. At the same time, some materials were classified at a level in between called the intermediate position. Such categorization of authentic materials was limited. However, a model of input authenticity proposed by Brown and Menasche (2008) is multifaceted and seems to be

applicable to different phases of language classroom processes. They argue for several degrees of authenticity because they believe that it is not a binary concept and in practice complete authenticity is impossible to achieve in the classroom. This model consists of genuine input authenticity, altered input authenticity, adapted input authenticity, stimulated input authenticity and inauthenticity. They will be discussed in the following parts.

All languages have phrases or sentences that cannot be understood literally. Even if you know the meaning of all the words in a phrase and understand all the grammar of the phrase completely, the meaning of the phrase can still be confusing. A phrase or sentence of this kind is said to be *idiomatic*. In fact, learning idioms is one of the fundamental aspects of language learning. However, it is often postponed until the learners reach their advanced levels. Irujo (1986b) emphasizes that most students are very interested in learning idiomatic expressions so it will be a wrong decision to postpone learning them until students reach advanced levels. Irujo (1986a) highlights that it is a lack of suitable materials for teaching idioms that makes it difficult for the learners to learn them.

The present study was an attempt to bridge a gap between multifaceted input authenticity excluding genuine input authenticity and learning idiomatic expressions. In this study, attempts were made to investigate the effects of four types of input authenticity on learning idiomatic expressions of EFL learners.

2. Authenticity of Materials

In general, in language teaching, according to Richards and Schmidt (2002), materials that are not originally developed for pedagogical purposes, such as magazines, newspapers, advertisements, news reports, or songs, and tapes of natural speech taken from ordinary radio or television programs, etc., are said to be authentic. Texts are called authentic because they are natural instances of language use. Such materials are often thought to contain more realistic and natural examples of language use than those found in textbooks and other specially developed teaching materials. In the same way, Kramsch, C, F., A'Ness and W. Lam (2000) define authentic texts as those being used by native speakers in culturally authentic contexts of use. Authenticity is an important feature of communicative approach to language teaching because as Thornbury (2006) says

*“with the advent of the communicative approach, inauthentic texts were felt to be inadequate, either as models for language use, or as preparation for real life reading and listening. This view was reinforced by the demand for courses designed to teach **English for special purposes** (ESP). Accordingly, authentic texts and semi-authentic texts (that is, texts that look like authentic texts but which have been adapted in some way) started finding their way into ELT materials” (p. 21).*

Widdowson (1978) makes a significant terminological distinction between the concept of authenticity and what he termed *genuineness*. According to him, genuineness is a characteristic of the passage itself and is an absolute quality. Authenticity is a characteristic of the relationship between the passage and the reader and it has to do with appropriate response. The crux of the term authenticity is, then, that it applies not to any characteristic of the material itself, but to the interaction between the user and the text. In other words, authenticity may be something that is realized in the act of interpretation, and may be judged in terms of the degree of participation of the learner. This claim has raised the issue “authentic for whom” -- the teacher, the learner, or the materials writer? This concept has critical implications for the pedagogical context, where it implies that what is important is what we *do* with a text rather than its having occurred in a “real” environment. The idea suggested by Widdowson (1978) is in parallel with the input authenticity model proposed by Brown & Menasche (2008) because both of them focus on what we do with the text. Hence, there is often pressure on materials writers and teachers to provide authentic materials for the learners.

Similarly, Van Lier (1996) states that “authenticity is not brought into the classroom with the materials or the lesson plan; rather, it is a goal that teacher and students have to work towards, consciously and constantly”. He adds that “authenticity is the result of acts of authentication, by students and their teacher, of the learning process and the language used in it” (p. 15).

Taylor (1994), in the same way, believes the classroom has its own reality and naturalness and participants in the language classroom create their own authenticity as they do elsewhere. Or as Widdowson (2001)

states “it is felt that the classroom is an unreal place but there seems no good reason why the classroom cannot be a place of created context, like a theater, where the community of learners live and move and have their being in imagined worlds, purposeful and real for them” (p.16).

Corbett, J. (2003) asserts that authentic materials are valuable classroom resources. He emphasizes that authentic materials being those written or spoken texts that have not been produced primarily for teaching purposes. Tomlinson (2003) states that there are typically two sides in authenticity debate: One side argues that simplification and contrivance can facilitate and accelerate learning; the other side argues that they can lead to faulty learning and that they deny the learners’ opportunities for informal learning and the development of self-esteem. He believes that meaningful engagement with authentic texts is a precondition for the development of communicative and strategic competence but that authentic texts can be created by interactive negotiations between learners. As it was mentioned earlier, historically there have been three common positions:

1. The strong authenticity position: language is best learned if all input is authentic, without any manipulation or adaptation.
2. The intermediate authenticity position: language is best learned if input is varied in degree of authenticity according to the learner’s proficiency and the purpose of the lesson at that point in the curriculum.
3. The non-authenticity position: language is best learned if all input is specially written for the learners. (Brown and Menasche, 2008, p. 1)

Such arrangement of authenticity is deficient because it is defined in holistic, vague, and imprecise ways. However, the input authenticity model presented by Brown and Menasche (2008) is more coherent and well-defined than the traditional one. They believe in multifaceted types of authenticity rather than the binary position. According to them, input is that text (written or spoken) that is read or heard by the learner. They propose five types of input authenticity and reject the word “level” to avoid the implication that one type is better than any other. They are as follow (adopted from Brown and Menasche, 2008):

1. *Genuine input authenticity*: The input is created only for the realm of real life, not for the classroom, but is used in language teaching. No changes at all are made in the text. Examples: An entire movie watched without interruption and without consulting the script or a magazine which is read in the classroom.
2. *Altered input authenticity*: The input is created only for the real life and there is no meaning change in the original input, but it is no longer exactly as it was because of changes like visual resetting, or changes in pictures or colors. Examples: A movie shown in five-minute segments, with vocabulary work and discussion following each segment or a newspaper article that has been photocopied and some explanations or comments have been added to it.
3. *Adapted input authenticity*: The input is created for real life but adapted by the classroom teacher. Words and grammatical structures are changed, usually to simplify the text (e.g., difficult words are changed to synonyms or explained). This category also covers the case of elaboration, in which a text is expanded to make it more comprehensible to learners. Examples: Simplified novels.
4. *Simulated input authenticity*: The input is created for the classroom and attempts are made to copy the style and format of the genuine. It is written by the author or teacher as if the material were real and as if for a real audience. It may have many authentic text characteristics and is often indistinguishable from the genuine. Examples: An advanced textbook with reading comprehensions or listening textbooks written for classroom.
5. *Inauthenticity*: The input is created for the classroom and there is no attempt to make the materials resemble genuine authentic materials though there may be a few, possibly incidental authentic features. However, Brown and Menasche (2008) emphasize that ‘inauthenticity’ does not imply that such materials are of lesser pedagogical worth than those that are genuine, altered, adapted, or simulated. Examples: grammar books with formal explanations of grammatical points.

3. Authenticity of Materials

All languages have phrases or sentences that cannot be understood literally. Even if you know the meaning of all the words in a phrase and understand all the grammar of the phrase completely, the meaning of the phrases can still be confusing. A phrase or sentence of this kind is said to be idiomatic. According to Celce-Murcia (2001), an idiom can be defined as a phrase which has a different meaning from the meaning of its separate components. One of the characteristics of idioms is that you cannot normally change the words, their order, or the grammatical forms in the same way as you can change non-idiomatic expression. In other words, idioms are basically fixed expressions. In the same way, another definition contributed by Irujo (1986a, p. 2) is that "an idiom is a conventionalized expression whose meaning cannot be determined from the meaning of its parts. Idioms differ from other figurative expressions, such as similes and metaphors, in that they have conventionalized meanings."

Learning idioms is one of the fundamental aspects of language learning that is postponed until the learners reach their advanced levels (Irujo, 1986a). She highlights that it is the lack of suitable materials for teaching idioms that makes it difficult for the learners to learn them. She believes that deciding which idioms to teach is necessary. Idioms chosen to be taught should be frequent in reading and conversation. Sometimes, the meaning of an idiom can be grasped because the idiom is transparent. The meaning can be easily figured out because such idioms are really dead or frozen metaphors (Irujo, 1986b). She indicates that comparing and contrasting literal and figurative meanings of idioms will enable students to recognize idiomatic usage and to interpret idioms accordingly. Irujo (1986b) emphasizes that most students are very interested in learning idiomatic expressions so it will be a wrong decision to postpone learning them until students reach advanced levels. Hussein *et al.* (2000) point to the fact that in contrast to syntax which received a great attention, the study of idioms has been neglected and learner's poor competence of English idioms can be attributed to this fact. The use of idioms in general is a characteristic of advanced EFL learners. They hold that due attention is not given to the learning idioms and not only students' idiomatic competence needs to be improved but also some emphasis should be put on the production.

According to Cieslicka (2006), traditional approaches to idioms considered idiomatic expressions as non-compositional strings whose figurative meanings are not associated with literal meanings of their individual words. However, recent approaches propose that idiomatic meanings are built both out of literal meanings of idiom constituents and the specific figurative interpretation of these constituent word meanings in a given context.

The Configuration Model, suggested by Cacciari and Tabossi (1988); Cacciari and Glucksberg (1991), puts emphasis on the role of literal meaning in constructing the figurative interpretations of idioms. According to the model, the language comprehension device processes the idiom literally, simultaneously with the emergence of its figurative interpretation. Idiomatic key, here, plays an important role. The notion of key has been defined by Tabossi and Zardon (1995) as the information in the string that has to be processed literally before the figurative meaning of an idiom can be activated. So the configuration model does not put priority either literal or figurative meanings in idiom processing. A research study conducted by Wu (2008) showed that English idioms with illustrations could increase college students' idioms understanding better.

The importance attached to the learning of idioms and the effective role of authenticity in ELT stimulated the researchers to investigate the possible effect of four types of input authenticity on learning idiomatic expressions. To my best knowledge, no research has been done to measure the importance of the authenticity on learning idiomatic expressions. Based on the purpose of the study, the following research question was addressed:

What is the effect of altered, adapted, simulated input authenticity and inauthentic input on learning of idiomatic expressions of EFL learners?

4. Method of the Study

The participants in this study were 62 pre-intermediate EFL learners who had registered in a language institute in Ardabil, Iran. They were enrolled in classes during the summer quarter, a period of 10 weeks.

The participants were male ranging from 14 to 22 years old. They were learners of English as a foreign language in the communicatively oriented classes. The participants were randomly selected and assigned to four groups; altered input authenticity (G1), adapted input authenticity (G2), stimulated input authenticity (G3) and inauthenticity (G4). At the same time, four types of materials with different types of authenticity, based on the model proposed by Brown and Menasche (2008), were included as the contents of the treatment.

To start the preliminary study, at the outset, a pilot test was conducted. It provided the study with the possibly appropriate validity for the questionnaires, the pre-test and the post-test. In the pilot study, 30 idiomatic expressions with different kinds of authenticity (e.g., 'altered' and 'adapted', 'simulated' input authenticity' and inauthentic') were taught to a sample which represented the population. The pilot test was the try-out of materials before administering to the main participants to determine their suitability and effectiveness.

After carrying out the pilot study, a pre-test consisting of 20 idiom questions with the total score of 20 was administered to the learners. The purpose of this administration was to classify the learners' former idiomatic knowledge. Participants were instructed to answer the questions in 20 minutes. The pre-test served the purpose of selecting a homogeneous group of students for the treatment. The reliability index computed for the pre-test was .76. In undertaking the present research, a treatment was undertaken to observe its result on the posttest.

The content of the treatments with 'altered' and 'adapted input authenticity' were extracted from *Reader's Digest Magazine* that was published in August, 2003. Additionally, the content of the treatment with 'simulated input authenticity' were taken from a book called *Street Talk 3* (Burke, 1995). The content of the treatment which was 'inauthentic' was extracted from *Essential Idioms in English* (Dixon, 2004) and *Pictorial Idioms and Slang of English Language* (Solhi & Dargahi, 2008). At the same time, some modifications were made to supply homogeneous educational materials for the learners.

A post-test including twenty idiomatic questions which were presented as multiple choice questions was administered. Before administering the test, treatments, the contents of which were extracted from the before-cited references were undertaken. To this end and in order to observe the numerical scores resulting from the post-test followed by the picture-based treatment, the scores of the two tests were compared to examine any possible significant difference between them and to observe the intended improvement. The reliability index computed for the post-test was .75.

In order to find answers to the research questions, some procedures were taken. Sixty two male students studying English in pre-intermediate level were randomly selected and assigned to four groups. The participants aged between 14 to 22 years old and studying English in the same level. The teachers explained to the participants the importance of their participation in this study. In addition, the teachers assured the participants of the confidentiality of their responses and that their responses would be used just for study purposes. The content of the pre-test was extracted from *Essential Idioms in English* (Dixon, 2004) and the items were modified in order to meet the objectives of the study. They were multiple choice questions. The learners were supposed to answer the questions in 20 minutes. Before administering the pretest, the participants were informed that it could be normal if they would not even be able to answer to all of the questions. To test for best, they were told that it should not be considered as an exam and if they would not be able to answer the questions, it could be useful to them to discover the area that they are not good at and in the future they would be able to compensate for their weaknesses.

To start the preliminary study, at the outset, a pilot test was conducted and 40 idioms based on different types of authenticity were taught to a sample (four groups) which represented the population. The pilot test was the try-out of materials before administering to the main participants to determine their suitability and effectiveness. Then, the pretest was given to all groups to examine learners' former idiomatic knowledge; next, a one-way ANOVA run on the scores obtained from a pre-test (which tested participants' idiomatic expressions understanding) did not show any significant difference among the participating groups ($F = 0.39$, $p = .757$). Then, idiomatic expressions with four types of authenticity proposed by Brown and Menasche (2008) were taught to four groups. Each session the idiomatic expressions were taught to the

participants and they were asked to work in groups and they used the learned idioms to run a conversation. This task lasted for fifteen minutes. Then, participants had to act out the conversation in front of the class. At the end of the semester, the participants were supposed to know at least three hundred idiomatic expressions. Finally, the posttest was administered to the experimental and the control groups. The scores obtained from the post test were summarized to be analyzed statistically.

4.1 Data Analysis

The design of the study was quasi-experimental and to test the null hypotheses, the data obtained through the pretest and the posttest were analyzed by using the SPSS software version 11.5.

At first, descriptive statistics of the pretest of the four groups were calculated to indicate the distribution of the participants. As it is evident in Table 1, the mean of scores is 28.06 and the standard deviation is 6.22 with the variance of 38.75.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the pretest

N	M	SD	
G1	17	26.76	5.71
G2	15	28.93	6.16
G3	14	28.78	5.97
G4	16	28.00	7.28
Total	62	28.06	6.22

At first, to get assurance that the difference between the pretest score of the four groups was not significant, a oneway analysis of variance among the four groups of the learners was conducted. As the results of the one-way ANOVA run for the pre-test indicated (Table 2), there was no significant difference among the groups in the pretest $F(3, 58) = .39, p = .757$. Hence, I conducted a study to examine the possible effect of the multifaceted authenticity on learning idiomatic expressions of the learners.

Table 2. One-way ANOVA results for the pretest of the four groups

	S*S	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between groups	47.39	3	15.79	.39	.757
Within Groups	2316.34		39.93		
Total	2363.74				

In order to compare the scores obtained from the posttest of the four groups, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to investigate the possible significant difference amongst the four groups of the participants (Tables 3 and 4). One-way analysis of variance indicated that there was a significance difference in scores amongst the participants receiving altered input authenticity ($M = 66.05, SD = 12.73$), the individuals with adapted input authenticity ($M = 81.06, SD = 7.62$), those with simulated input authenticity ($M = 91, SD = 4.18$) and the ones with inauthenticity ($M = 89.81, SD = 4.69$), $F(3, 58) = 31.31, p < .001$.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of the posttest

N	M	SD	
G1	17	66.05	12.73
G2	15	81.06	7.62
G3	14	91.00	4.18
G4	16	89.81	4.69
Total	62	81.45	13.05

Table 4: One-way ANOVA results for the posttest of the four groups

	S*S	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between groups	6425.04	3	2141.68	31.31	.000
Within Groups	3966.31	58	68.38		
Total	10391.35	61			

LSD post hoc tests showed that simulated input authenticity (G3) was significantly more effective than altered input authenticity (G1) and adapted input authenticity (G2), $p > .05$, whereas simulated input authenticity (G3) and inauthenticity (G4) did not differ from each other significantly ($p > .05$). In addition, that altered input authenticity (G1) and adapted input authenticity (G2) were significantly different from each other, $p < .05$ (Table 5).

Table 5. Least Significant Difference results amongst the four groups with four types of input authenticity

G3 > G4**
G4 > G2***
G2 > G1***

4. Conclusion

The main objective of the present study was to investigate the possible effect of four types of input authenticity on learning idiomatic expressions of the learners in an EFL context. The findings of this study indicated that there was a meaningful effect of four types of input authenticity on learning idiomatic expressions. In addition, according to the result, the materials with less authenticity, e.g., simulated input authenticity and inauthenticity, can be more beneficial than the materials with higher degree of authenticity, e.g., altered and adapted input authenticity.

The very existence of this effect sheds light on the importance of multifaceted input authenticity in teaching idioms and at the same time focuses on the critical role of language teachers and syllabus designers to provide the materials based on such multifaceted input authenticity. Hence, while developing materials, course books and text books, curriculum developers and material designers should paying close attention to the multifaceted input authenticity.

In this study, it was indicated that including the materials with less authenticity in teaching idioms can be beneficial. Based on this finding, it can be suggested that in order for the teachers to have more practical and beneficial classes in their teaching career, they are supposed to pay attention to the materials with different types of authenticity particularly simulated or inauthentic materials. In addition, the content of instruction should be modified and even simplified to make it appropriate to the learner's proficiency level.

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