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## What Makes “Alignment” Work Effectively in a Foreign Language Class?

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### Abstract

This study aims to argue for the crucial role of task authenticity in alignment in a foreign language class. Alignment means learners' application of what they have learned from their foreign language class. An action research study was conducted with an English class in the context of a Chinese university in order to exemplify task authenticity for addressing effective alignment. The intervention was a focus on “realism” in language learning activities featuring personalized topics, production-oriented tasks and thinking skills development. This article reports on the way the study was conducted and the cycles gone through, especially focusing on one of the lessons with the authentic activity in practice. Students' assignments and their evaluation of the instructor's teaching performance were employed for analysis. Results indicate that students appear to be more interactive and apply more vocabulary and ideas from their learning material in comparison with those before the action research study.

**Key words:** Alignment; Task authenticity; Foreign languages classes

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### INTRODUCTION

Alignment is considered as the tenet of the socio-cognitive approach to second language acquisition (SLA) (Atkinson

et al., 2007). Originally, it is “the complex means by which human beings effect coordinated interaction and maintain that interaction in dynamically adaptive ways” (Ibid., p.169). Atkinson (2010, p.612) claims that “SLA itself is a process of alignment in the L2 environment”. Its implication for teaching is “the more alignment the better” (Atkinson et al., 2007, p.85). Accordingly, learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is to align learners themselves effectively and deeply with English learning materials. Simply, learners are supposed to apply what they have learned in EFL classes.

In reality, many English teachers may face a challenge in getting their students to use what they have learned, such as use language expressions, ideas, skills etc. even though they already know it. In other words, students seldom align themselves effectively and deeply with their learning material. Consequently, errors may occur in their speaking and writing. Also, more students feel frustrated about their English learning since they seldom use something new and cannot perceive that they are making progress.

C. Wang and M. Wang (2014, p.4) claim “where there is interaction, alignment and hence learning will occur”. And the extent of alignment hinges on the intensity of interaction (Wang, 2010a). Here, interaction is an umbrella term for a range of communications in classes including the one between learners, learners and their instructor, and learners and their learning material. Accordingly, one possible reason for the above challenge may be lack of interaction in EFL classes. Research has shown that “all language learners have powerful interaction engines supporting their learning at every turn” (Atkinson et al., 2007, p.612). And “interaction engines” are defined as pre-existing capabilities making people interactive (Ibid.). It indicates that a learner was born with an engine producing the power to make interactive work, and the engine will work as it is triggered. The finding reminds us of the critical role of teachers in EFL classes. That is, they function as triggers of students' interaction engines

and then help their students align themselves with their learning material.

Noticing the problem above, an action research study was planned with a freshman EFL class at a Chinese university. It aimed to investigate what teachers could do regard learning task design to stimulate students' powerful interaction engines and then make "alignment" work effectively in EFL classes. It was accomplished by means of authentic activities featuring personalized topics, production-oriented tasks and thinking skills development. The notion of alignment in EFL is relatively new and few empirical studies have been reported on how to enact alignment in language learning classes (C. Wang & M. Wang, 2014). Therefore, it is believed that the study would enrich the empirical understanding of alignment and would spread the notion to teachers working in other EFL contexts.

This article began by briefly reviewing the research literature on alignment and task authenticity in EFL. Next, it reported on the four cycles of the action research study based on the well-known model of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), i.e. plan, act, observes, and reflects, focusing on one of the lessons with the authentic activity in practice.

## 1. RESEARCH LITERATURE ON ALIGNMENT AND TASK AUTHENTICITY IN EFL

### 1.1 Alignment and EFL

What does alignment mean for EFL? To answer the question, it is necessary to review the relationship between alignment and SLA. Alignment takes place between human beings and their social and physical environments (Atkinson et al., 2007). As mentioned above, every language learner has a powerful interaction engine supporting his learning and SLA is a process of alignment in L2 environment. C. Wang and H. Wang (2014, p.3) claim that alignment through interaction with L2 environment impacts on the human learning system and leads to L2 development. So for SLA, L2 environment can be regarded as the social and physical environment. L2 learners can align with the L2 environment if they learn to work in adaptive ways with the support of their interaction engine. Importantly, alignment and hence learning will not occur if there is a lack of interaction.

In the context of EFL, alignment means learners' application of what they have learned in EFL classes. Specifically, learning EFL can be viewed as a process of alignment with English learning materials. Interactions in EFL classes help learners align with their English learning materials effectively and deeply. Thus, a teacher in such a class should function as a trigger of students' interaction engines by designing a learning task in which students' powerful interaction engines can be stimulated. For this reason, it is helpful to explore which learning tasks can facilitate effective interaction.

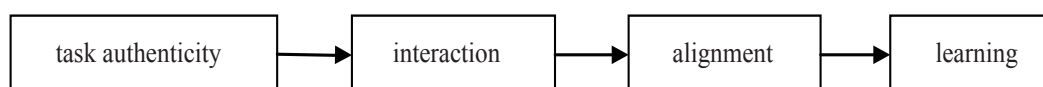
### 1.2 Task Authenticity in EFL

Authenticity is related to notions of "realness" or "trueness to origin" and has been applied as a technical term in ELT to characterize texts, learning material, tasks, forms of assessment and so on (Buendgens-Kosten, 2014). The focus in this article will be task authenticity, which is associated with an emphasis on "realism" in learning activities. Different from the traditional language learning activities that focus on form, authentic activities take on personal and social significance and create opportunities for interaction between learners and their learning material.

Guariento and Morley (2001) identify four schools of thought regarding task authenticity: a genuine purpose, real world needs, classroom interaction and student engagement. Depending on the existing research and the writer's professional experience in China, authentic learning activities in this study feature personalized topics, production-oriented tasks and thinking skills development.

Specifically, personalized topics are those related to students' life and concerns. Production-oriented tasks encourage students to use the foreign language for real communication. Research indicates that authentic tasks should be related to real world needs (Long & Crookes, 1992; Guariento & Morly, 2001). Few studies argue that authentic tasks are those that focus on the present and not the future. For example, writing a resume might not be regarded as an authentic task unless it is done for a specific position that one is actually applying for. Concerning thinking skills development, this means that authentic activities should involve logic, critical thinking, problem solving etc..

Figure 1 briefly clarifies the relationship between alignment and task authenticity in EFL classes. It also works as the philosophy of the action research study below.



**Figure 1**  
**Relationship Between Alignment and Task Authenticity in EFL Classes**

## 2. THE STUDY

### 2.1 Cycle 1: Plan

In the first cycle, a 15-week action research programme was established with a freshman EFL class at a university in Guangzhou, China. The class was selected as a convenience sample. The students were non-English major students learning college English as a required subject. Most of them had reached the intermediate level, which meant they "can understand longer English radio and TV programs on familiar topics spoken at a speed of around 150-180 wpm..." while listening and "express their personal opinions, feelings and views, to state facts and reasons..." while speaking according to *College English Curriculum Requirements*. In practice, they appeared to lack interest and motivation in English learning since English was not their major and they had been learning it for at least eight years before they entered the university. For this reason, the teacher faced a difficult challenge to get them to interact. The situation described above was common among all non-English major students.

*Classroom Theatre* (Sun, 2007), an EFL textbook,

employs English movie clips as teaching materials in the course of College English. It aims to cultivate students' interest in English and improve their command of authentic English especially in terms of listening and speaking by exposing them to authentic texts. Eight units in the textbook were covered during the 15-week semester. This article used one of them, *The Shawshank Redemption*, as a sample lesson to illustrate how the intervention of task authenticity worked in addressing effective alignment. This unit was chosen as an example because it was the most difficult and demotivating one according to the feedback from the students over the past two years.

The philosophy that guided the design of authentic tasks was "realism" in language learning activities featuring personalized topics, production-oriented tasks and thinking skills development. An outline of the action plan for each unit (see Appendix I) was an integral part of the action research study in that it provided the teacher with specific guidelines to learn tasks design. For each unit, the instructor was supposed to follow the outline and design an authentic task. Table 1 presents the action plan for the sample lesson.

**Table 1**  
**Action Plan for *The Shawshank Redemption***

Unit	Theme	Authentic task
<i>The Shawshank Redemption</i>	i Institutionalization	<p><b>Personalized topic:</b> Standardized test</p> <p><b>Production-oriented task:</b> Writing to a student who is struggling to avoid being institutionalized by the standard answers</p> <p><b>Thinking skills development:</b> Help the student solve her problem</p>

It was certain that alignment could not be achieved instantaneously. Rather, it was achieved gradually over a period of time from numerous exposures. Therefore, the evaluation of the intervention focused on classroom atmosphere and awareness of alignment with the authentic English in the teaching material instead of on students' English proficiency. After all, it was not realistic to expect the students to achieve progress in proficiency in 15 weeks. An active classroom atmosphere was indicative of more interaction. If some words or ideas from the teaching material were used by the students, it was indicative of awareness of alignment. Thus, it was believed that the intervention of task authenticity could address effective alignment in EFL classes.

The instrument used for data collection was students' assignments and their evaluation of the instructor's teaching performance.

### 2.2 Cycle 2: Action

The second cycle was to implement the designed action plan above. Its focus was to present how the authentic task was conducted to trigger students' interaction engines and then encourage them to align with their learning material.

The clip employed in the sample lesson was about Brooks, a prisoner housed in Shawshank prison for 50 years. He committed suicide when he was set free. Red, another prisoner, explained that "Brooks has been institutionalized". Students were supposed to comprehend the main idea of the clip while watching and then discuss the theme of "institutionalization" for further understanding.

The clip had been taught with different groups of students in two different school years before the action research study. At that time no authentic activity was involved. Contrived activity, such as "what would you do if you were Brooks", was conducted. The teaching diary recorded that both of the groups were quiet and few volunteered to share their ideas in the class. When they were named to present their ideas on the theme, most just said Brooks could not get used to the life outside; none of them mentioned the word "institutionalization" not to mention analysed it with the ideas from the clip.

The situation described earlier obviously showed that no interaction and no alignment occurred in the class. Therefore, an action plan (see Table 1) was conducted for change and improvement. Brinton (2003) sets up a

principle for instruction, that is, content should be relevant to students' lives and interests. Accordingly, it was urgent to bridge the gap between "institutionalization" and students' lives since it was new to most of the students, both as a lexical item and as a topic.

To help the students realize that not only prisoners could be institutionalized, a personalized topic was first introduced. In China, most people were brought up with standardized tests. Usually, multiple-choice tests were administered, so it was unnecessary for students to come up with their own ideas; they only had to agree with one of the multiple choices. All students were familiar with the topic of standardized test.

Following it, a story was shared in the class. One day the writer visited her friend and while chatting the friend complained that her daughter, Chenchen, a junior middle school student, got "zero" on her latest test. Because Chenchen disagreed with the multiple choices on the standardized test, she wrote her own answer beside the four multiple choices. Even worse, Chenchen did not think she was wrong and argued with her mum in her diary (see Appendix II), in which she questioned "standardized tests" and expressed her fear of losing her ability to think independently.

It was believed that Chenchen's story could work as "triggered interest" (Wisniewska, 2013) to arouse the students' interest since they just graduated from middle schools and might understand Chenchen better. Interest would result in increased motivation to complete a task (Ibid.).

Then Chenchen's diary was shown in the class with her permission. The students were grouped to work on suggestions for Chenchen's problem. During the process, the students were guided to relate Chenchen's context with Brooks'. In the clip, Brooks had been institutionalized at Shawshank Prison. A 50-year life sentence there had deprived him of his ability to live independently. In fact, he had lost the ability to adapt over the last 50 years. Similarly, Chenchen was going to be institutionalized by "standardized tests", which meant that she might lose her ability to think independently. By the end of the class, the writer wrote down the e-mail address of Chenchen on the blackboard and encouraged students to write to her with their suggestions.

It was worth noting that the purpose of writing to Chenchen was to use English for real communication in order to solve her current problem. It met the criteria of the action plan mentioned above: current real world needs and development of thinking skills.

### 2.3 Cycle 3: Observation

In the study, the classroom atmosphere was continuously observed to see the effects of task authenticity. As mentioned above, "where there is interaction, alignment and hence learning will occur" (C. Wang & M. Wang, 2014, p.4). An authentic task would trigger student interaction. In

contrast, when the task failed to do so, students would tend to be quiet and the classroom atmosphere would be passive. This section first presented the classroom atmosphere of the sample lesson. Then, students' assignments and students' assessment of their instructor's teaching performance were employed for analysis.

#### 2.3.1 Classroom Atmosphere

As described, classroom atmosphere was passive when *The Shawshank Redemption* was taught before the action plan. However, change and improvement were perceived when the action plan was implemented. It was found at the moment when Chenchen's diary was shown in the class, the students' interest was triggered. They read it carefully and took part in the discussion actively. Most students volunteered to present their ideas in the class. The classroom atmosphere became very active. More surprisingly, some of them could use the ideas or words learned in the movie clip to support their views, such as "Brooks is unhappy when his parole has come"; "he has been institutionalized". It indicated that they were tending to align with their learning material. When Chenchen's e-mail address was written on the blackboard, it was noticed that most students took it down immediately even though they were not required to do so.

#### 2.3.2 Students' Assignments

Breen (1985, p.67) argues that students should be allowed to pursue their preferred ways of working in the class regarding 'sufficient authentic potential for communication'. Accordingly, the assignment, writing to Chenchen, was not compulsory but optional, in order to authenticate the task.

One week after the class, the writer contacted Chenchen and asked for the e-mails she received from the students for the purpose of research. Altogether, 10 out of 35 students had written to Chenchen. It reminded the writer of the experience before the action plan. The assignment, finding out one example of "institutionalization" in daily life, was compulsory. When checking the assignment, it was found that only 2 out of 40 students in the first year and 3 out of 45 in the second year had done this assignment. When asked why they did not finish the assignment, the excuses were mainly "I have forgotten" or "it is too difficult, so I can't find one". Based on professional experience, such excuses often implied a lack of interest.

Regarding the ten e-mails, it was found that they shared the following points:

(a) All of them were written in English, carefully and thoughtfully. The shortest one was about 250 words and the longest one was more than 700 words. Few grammar mistakes were found, which was uncommon in the past.

(b) Alignment could be seen in the emails. It was noticed that ideas and vocabulary from the movie clip were employed in the e-mails. For example, "It's important for us to learn how to adjust ourselves to the environment and keep ourselves thinking", "The first

thing we should do be to obey the institution. But, in the meanwhile, do not let your dreams and ambitions come to nothing”. Words like “institutionalization”, “institution” and “institutionalized” could be found in many of their e-mails.

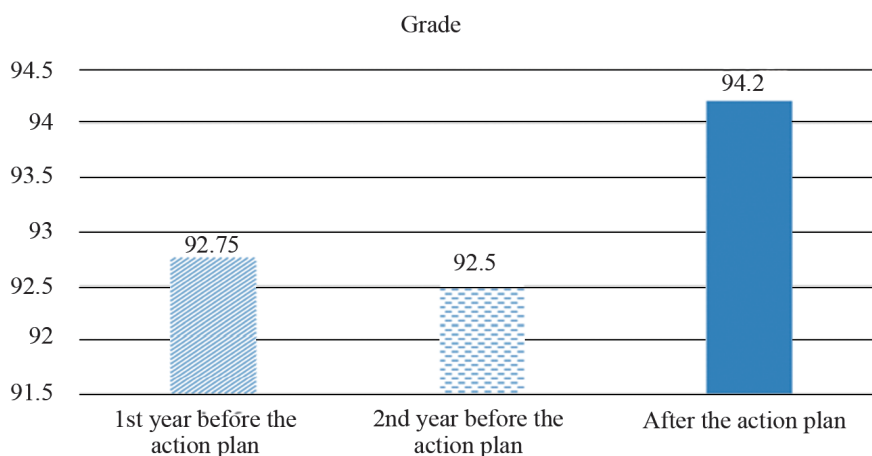
(c) Real communication worked in the e-mails. Most of the messages began with notes of empathy for Chenchen. For example, “when I was your age, I had the same confusion”; “When I was a senior student, I always thought about the Chinese exam institutionalization”; “I can understand your puzzle”. It proved to be helpful that the story of Chenchen bridged the gap between the classroom and real life.

### 3.3.3 Students’ Evaluation of Their Instructor’s Teaching Performance

Wang (2010b) suggests that learners tend to align with what they like. In other words, if learners do not like what they are learning, they seem to be resistant to align with it. Many factors might affect one’s attitude to learning,

such as individual interest, instructional quality, content, etc.. The role of a teacher is ranked as the first place (Ibid.). Therefore, to observe students’ evaluation of their teacher’s performance helped to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention.

“Students’ evaluation of Teaching” is a routine task at the end of each term in the university where the writer works. It requires the students to grade their instructors’ teaching performance online anonymously. The instructor can see his evaluation when it is released by the university administration. Figure 2 displays the results of students’ evaluation of their instructor’s teaching performance before and after the 15-week action plan. The grade (94.20) after the action plan was higher than both of grades before the action plan, either the first year (92.75) or the second year (92.50). At this point, it was clear that students preferred the class with the intervention of task authenticity to the one without it, which implied that alignment worked more effectively after the action plan.



**Figure 2**  
**Grades of Students’ Evaluation of Teaching Before and After the Action Plan**

### 2.4 Cycle 4: Reflection

The premise of this action research study has been that task authenticity featuring personalized topics, production-oriented tasks and thinking skills development makes “alignment” work effectively in EFL classes. Following this line of thought, an action plan was designed within which every classroom activity was guided by the task authenticity features mentioned above.

It is believed that the intervention of task authenticity worked effectively in triggering student interaction and alignment with their learning material. This was particularly evident in the sample lesson, *The Shawshank Redemption*. The most difficult unit turned out to engage the students with the help of the intervention.

The notion of authenticity in ELT is not new. It has been an issue since the 1970s (Buendgens-Kosten, 2014). However, it is new to connect authenticity with alignment, a socio-cognitive process, and involve both of them in ELT. Further, it is new to relate task authenticity with

thinking skills development.

Regarding thinking, “no one doubts the urgency of teaching thinking in the education system” (Zhu, 2007, p.57) and it appears to be much more urgent when conducting courses in the university. College students, between the ages of 18-22, are eager to think independently. Besides, this generation was born after the 1990s and most of them are the only child in their families. Most of them tend to be self-centred, concerning more with their wants and needs and show little interest in things outside of their personal lives. In this respect, discussion isolated from their lives is unattractive to them. Activities designed for college students should create a setting in which they can think independently and find shared ground between what they are learning and their own lives.

Vygotsky’s concept of “the zone of proximal development” (ZPD) “refers to a situation where a child cannot yet do something unaided, but can do it with help of a teacher” (Nisbet ed. in Coles & Robinson, p.30). In

the context of this study, task authenticity is such a ZPD, where students' alignment with their learning material can be accelerated.

Despite the positive results, the time on the action plan is not long enough to investigate its impact thoroughly, and findings from the action research study may not be relevant to other classes. Ideally, a full longitudinal study of the same group should have been conducted for at least one year and more classes and instructors should be involved to increase the reliability of the research. Also, further research on the design of task authenticity tailored to the interests and needs of students should be carried out.

## CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, task authenticity featuring personalized topics, production-oriented tasks, and thinking skills development has justified its existence in EFL classes by its contributions to active interaction and effective alignment. While specific teaching materials and contexts may differ, the general rules above can be learned and applied. It is hoped that this article has proven the benefits of alignment on foreign languages teaching. It is also hoped that teachers recognize their important role in triggering students' interaction engines to make effective alignment in foreign language classes.

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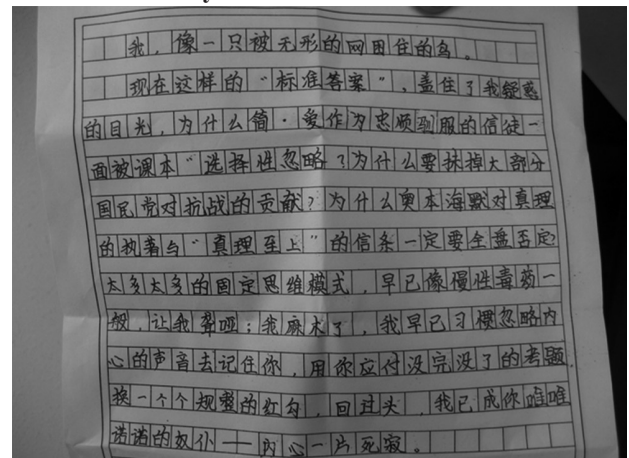
## APPENDIX I

### Outline of the Action Plan for Each Unit

Unit	Theme	Authentic task
		Personalized topic
		Production-oriented task
		Thinking skills development

## APPENDIX II

### Chenchen's Diary



### Chenchen's Diary in English (Translated by the Writer):

I am like a bird in the invisible cage. The "standard answers" have confused me a lot. Why does the textbook ignore that Jane Eyre is obedient to her belief? Why should Oppenheimer's persistence to the truth be abandoned? So many concrete mindsets, like slow poison, are gradually making me a deaf-mute person. I have been numb with it. I have to memorize all the standard answers and forget about my own voice. Thus, I can cope with the endless standard tests and get a satisfying grade. When I look back, I find I have been its slave. I am not able to think anymore.