An Overview on How to Utilize Authentic Language Input for Language Teaching

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Abstract

Today, the application of various audiovisual mass media programs such as films and cartoons has gone beyond the boundaries of entertainment. As a matter of fact, various types of audiovisual programs can be used as a rich source of authentic language input for language teaching. The pedagogical values of authentic materials have been emphasized by many researchers. In fact, many researchers agree on the fact that authentic language input from various audiovisual programs has the potential to provide the necessary language input for language learning. In the same line, the present paper aims at highlighting the pedagogical values of films and cartoons as two types of programs which have the optimal potential to enhance language learning if they are utilized properly in language classrooms.

Key words: Authentic language input, Sources of authentic language input, Language teaching

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Authentic language input

Considering to the concept of authentic language input, Gilmore (2007) defined authentic language input as the language carrying a real message which is created by a real speaker or writer for a real audience. Taylor's (1994) also considered authentic language input as any material in English which has not been specifically produced for the purpose of language teaching. In fact, authentic language materials are spoken or written language materials that have been produced in the course of real communication and not specifically produced for the very purpose of language teaching (Nunan, 1999).

According to Nunan (1999), authentic language input can be drawn from various sources of audio-visual mass media technologies including TV. Linguistically, authentic language input refers to the use of authentic materials from the target culture which is presented in the target language such as different programs, for example, news, movies, songs, soap opera, and comedy as audio-visual mass media materials provided by various technologies. The important point to be considered is that these materials are not initially made for language teaching purposes.

In the same line, there are varieties of authentic teaching sources and materials available from various audiovisual technologies that EFL/ESL teachers can employ for different needs for various teaching situations. Accordingly, various audiovisual mass media materials can include different print materials followed by related video and audio, audiotapes and CDs with accompanying textbooks, and videotapes with textbooks.

Considering the integration of various audiovisual programs that provide authentic language input into language learning, many studies have been conducted (Martinez, 2002; Gilmore, 2007; Nunan, 1999; Gebhard, 1996; Brinton, 1991; among others). These studies all underscore the point that audiovisual materials are pedagogically valuable to be utilized for language teaching. According to Gebhard (1996), there are unlimited sources for authentic language materials from TV programs such as TV that language teachers and learners can utilize for the very purpose of language learning.

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The advantages of utilizing authentic materials for language teaching

There is an agreement among foreign/second language instructors that authentic language input can be utilized as an essential part of second language learning. According to many scholars (Martinez, 2002; Gilmore, 2007; Nunan, 1999; Gebhard, 1996; Brinton, 1991; just to name a few), there are many advantages associated to authentic language materials which make these materials pedagogically valuable to expose language learners to the target language. In this regard, Martinez (2002) provided a number of sound advantages for using authentic language materials for language teaching. An important advantage is that authentic language materials provide a wide range of language change of the target language. For example, by listening to songs and stories in the target language, language learner will be able to hear dialectal differences of various countries that speak the target language (Martinez, 2002). This can be used for a class discussion.

According to Brinton (1991), authentic materials and media can strengthen the direct relationship between the language classroom and the outside world for students. Gebhard (1996) considered authentic materials as a way to contextualize language learning. When lessons are focused on comprehending, language learners tend to concentrate more on content and meaning rather than the language itself. This offers the language learners a valuable source of authentic language input, so that they are not exposed only to the language presented by the text and the teacher.

In the same manner, Brosnan et al. (1984) put forth that by simplifying the language or changing it for teaching purposes, the task may become more difficult. According to Brosnan et al. (1984), authentic language offers language learners the opportunity to deal with a small amount language input which contains complete and meaningful messages. Moreover, authentic language materials help language learners to notice the immediate relevance of what they do in the classroom to what they need to do in the real world communication. It is essential for language learners to listen to and read different kinds of authentic language material because it helps motivate the language learners by bringing the content and the subject matter to life for

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them, and enable them make the important connections between the classroom world and the real world outside the classroom setting.

Another advantage of using authentic materials is the comfortable environment that these materials create for young children. Authentic language materials are more appealing to the language learners than non-authentic language materials because of their objective to communicate a message rather than emphasize particular aspects of the target language (Gilmore, 2007). Another advantage of using authentic language material is the focus on every feature of the language (Gilmore, 2007). In contrast, the artificial language materials tend to cause continual repetition of certain grammatical constructions, certain elements of the vocabulary, or certain combinations of words.

Cartoons and films as sources of authentic language input

The use of various films and cartoons as sources of authentic language input to provide the necessary data for language learning have been the focus of some studies. In this relation, Chapple and Crutis (2000) carried out a study on the utilization of different films as a source of authentic and appropriate teaching materials in content-based instruction approaches in EFL classrooms in Southeast Asia. The study emphasized how intrinsically motivating materials such as films for with content-based instruction can be to help improve language learning. According to Chapple and Crutis (2000), films have many cross-cultural values, provide excellent basis for the development of critical thinking skill, provide a rich source of content for language learners, and offer linguistic diversities. These features of films along with the motivating feature facilitate language learners' oral communication (Chapple & Crutis, 2000). Similar studies conducted by Ryan (1998), Heffernan (2005), and Gebhardt (2004) also considered films to have the potential to increase language learners' motivation and enhance their language learning.

Similar to films, cartoons as a type of audiovisual program has also been the focus of a limited number of anecdotal studies (Clark, 2000; Doring, 2002; Rule & Ague, 2005). According to Clark (2000), cartoons can engage the attention of the learners and present information in a non-

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threatening atmosphere. Moreover, cartoons can encourage thinking processes and discussion skills (Doring, 2002). Rule and Ague (2005) also provided evidence of the students' preferences to use cartoons in language learning. Similar to cartoons, songs are also preferred because they create a high degree of motivation for students to recognize humor, enhance memory, and they enable students to make connections between the new materials and the prior knowledge through the use of analogy. Rule and Ague (2005) also claimed that students who use cartoons can improve different language skills and achieve higher test scores. However they did not specify which language skill(s) can be improved through the use of cartoons.

How to utilize authentic language input

One of the essential factors to be considered in utilizing various audiovisual mass media programs as sources of authentic language input is the choice of the programs that should be based on some criteria that can serve the purposes of the teacher. Accordingly, some important criteria for selecting the appropriate segments of various films or cartoons can be:

1. The students' language proficiency: cartoons can be beneficial for low level students while for intermediate and advance levels films with English subtitles are preferable. The reason behind this is that the type of language which is used in developing the utterances of cartoons is modified to facilitate comprehension. In contrast, films rarely contain modified input.
2. Choose stories that are relevant to students' lives.
3. Ask the students about their preferences regarding different cartoon or films.
4. Choose stories that motivate the students.
5. Use various broadcasts that provide exposure to various accents and cultures.
6. Choose stories that are proficiency-level appropriate; political and science related stories are often too difficult for many students to understand.
7. Use stories that lend themselves to many learning activities and the integration of the four skills.
8. Use cartoons or films that are interesting to the students.
9. Include various segments of different cartoons or films to keep the variety.

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10. Let the students view a short segment of 2-3 minutes first for understanding the general topic. Replay the selected segment if the students have difficulty comprehending the general idea by the first time.

11. Let the students share what they understand from their viewing.

12. Ask the students to watch selected segments before the class meets.

Helpful Teaching Tips

After outlining some of the criteria for selecting and preparing various audiovisual programs, the following several teaching tips that will help make teaching with various authentic materials easier and more enjoyable for both the teachers and the language learners should be taken into consideration:

1. Offer students a choice in the content of the materials you show in class. Take an inventory of their interest.

2. Prepare extension activities to fill the space between the first and last students' finishing an activity.

3. Get feedback from the students: It is important for teachers to get feedback from students regarding their comfort level on the various four skills assignments, processes, and procedures used in conjunction with the stories.

4. Ask your students regularly about their feelings about activities in class. You could give them a formal feedback form to fill out or ask them informally to give you a thumb up or a thumb down.

5. All four skills activities should include opportunities for students to play an active role in their own learning. When preparing for a task, help students become aware of any relevant strategy, from their own language, that might help them to perform the task successfully. For example, you may want to ask the students to think about positive interpersonal skills in their culture before they interact with or participate in small groups when talking about the story.

6. Recycle, recycle, and recycle! Language learners need to see and use the language

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numerous times before it is acquired. Thus, it is essential that teachers reuse and include language taught in previous lessons in their current lesson. Thematic units are a useful method of recycling language in any lesson.

Conclusion

The pedagogical value of utilizing various authentic audiovisual materials to provide the necessary language input for language learning has been emphasized by many researchers. In the same line, authentic materials have proven to have the potential to increase learners' motivation because they are intrinsically more interesting and motivating than conventional materials which have been designed for the very purpose of language teaching/learning. Accordingly, the use of various authentic materials helps the language learners at diverse proficiency levels to have exposure to real world dialogues similar to that of the native speakers which includes all the characteristics of natural language.

However, the points which have been highlighted by the present research were around how to give some room to authentic language input in language classrooms. In a nutshell, we believe that utilizing authentic materials is more fruitful than some instructors and practitioners believe.

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