

How authentic is the vocabulary dealt with in class?

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1. Introduction

This paper reports on advances of an ongoing research project on the development of learners' lexical competence and the ability to use lexical items to communicate in a foreign language. It is based on data collected from observations carried out in classes of adult and adolescent learners in public and private institutions. We aim to analyse whether the vocabulary items presented or recycled in class are selected by the teacher or the learners, their relevance to the topic of the lesson and to the activities proposed. We believe this will allow us to estimate the degree of authentication of learner-required lexis inasmuch as it responds to the communicative needs of the learners.

Our work is divided into three main parts. First, we discuss various conceptualizations of *authenticity*, then we briefly describe the research project and methodological aspects such as the instruments of data collection used, and finally we concentrate on a working definition of *learner authentication* to use as a measure for the analysis of the partial findings of our research, which suggest that there are strong conceptual links between authenticity and motivation in terms of learners' need to communicate (Pinner 2014, p. 16) and that authenticity does not relate strictly to the origin of the texts, but that, as Lee states, it depends in part on the learner's responses to the materials. (1994, p. 323).

Finally, we stress the importance of an understanding of the different factors involved in vocabulary teaching and learning and the pedagogical implications of designing activities with a potential for learner authentication of language in general and lexis in particular, which

inevitably leads to rethinking teaching training courses - in that a new approach to authenticity would prepare teachers to create situations that allow students to request, use and produce vocabulary to authenticate it themselves.

2. Theoretical framework

Much of the theoretical support for our study draws upon Gilmore's research and the eight different meanings of authenticity he finds emerging from the literature (2007). These eight inter-related definitions emphasize different aspects such as (1) the 'native' quality of texts produced by native speakers for a native speaker community; (2) the 'realness' of a message produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience; (3) the investment of the 'self' of the reader or listener to make a text authentic rather than an inherent authenticity in the texts; (4) the 'interactional' nature of authenticity resulting from the classroom interaction between teachers and students; (5) the 'task' factor that suggests that authenticity is not in the texts we use in class but in the way we use them; (6) the 'social' situation of the classroom; (7) the 'assessment' value as measured by the correspondence between test tasks and real world uses; and (8) the 'cultural' competence that allows the learner to act or think so that they can be recognised and validated by the target language group.

Despite the elusiveness of and overlapping in the concept of authenticity, we will attempt to narrow some of the discussion down to those aspects that seem to be most relevant to our study. Guariento & Morley (2001) address the question of text and task authenticity, considering that, though there are advantages to the use of real texts in that they help to "bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world" (p. 348) and have a positive impact on affective factors as they are "a way of maintaining or increasing students' motivation for learning" (p. 347), there is still the problem of the difficulty of authentic texts, which can lead to lack of understanding, frustration and demotivation, especially at lower proficiency levels, thus cancelling out one of the reasons for using them. To the alternative of

‘doctoring’ texts by simplifying them, we could turn our attention to task authenticity and what we require our students to do with the texts.

Breen (1985) claims that in any language classroom, a teacher is usually concerned with four types of authenticity:

1. Authenticity of the texts which we may use as input data for our learners.
2. Authenticity of the learners' own interpretations of such texts.
3. Authenticity of tasks conducive to language learning.
4. Authenticity of the actual social situation of the language classroom.

(Breen, 1985, p. 61)

Breen poses these factors as questions – “What is an authentic text?, For whom is it authentic?, For what authentic purposes?, What is authentic to the social situation of the classroom?” (*op. cit.* p. 61) – and with them he provides us with a useful tool to analyse to what extent we can consider that the language used in class could be authentic, or – as we explain in this paper – *authenticated* by students. While these four types of authenticity at constant interplay may produce tension in the language classroom, Breen finds all four should be addressed, but especially the one concerning for whom the texts might be authentic.

Other authors like Widdowson (1978), in discussing the ‘authentic’ extracts of larger discourse units teachers present their students with for reading comprehension, highlights the fact that though the texts may be ‘genuine’ samples of language use, learners respond to the texts in ways that are not usually authentic, concluding that “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” (p. 80). Tatsuki (2006) interprets Widdowson’s distinction as a claim “that texts themselves can actually be intrinsically “genuine” but that authenticity itself is a social construct. In other words, authenticity is created through the interaction of users, situations and the texts” (p. 80), with the point being illustrated in Figure 1.

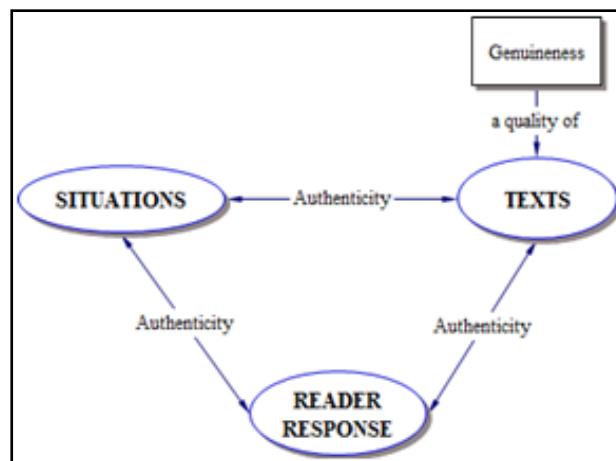


Figure 1. Interaction of users, situations and texts in authenticity (based on Widdowson, 1978 & Tatsuki, 2006)

Guariento & Morley (2001) focus their attention on the notion of task authenticity, and maintain that what is important is not only the input learners receive but also what is expected from them in terms of performance and development of strategic competencies. They identify four schools of thought with respect to task authenticity:

- 1 Authenticity through a genuine purpose, as we would have it when learners engage in real communication through ‘tasks’ – as understood by Willis (1996) – rather than through activities;
- 2 Authenticity through real world targets, by means of pedagogic tasks that seek to simulate the tasks learners are likely to be performing in real life and previously identified through needs analysis;
- 3 Authenticity through classroom interaction, as proposed by Breen (1985) who considers that what results from classroom interaction and negotiation provides “sufficient potential for communication” (p. 67);
- 4 Authenticity through engagement, which focuses on the learners’ response to text, on whether they are actually engaged and interested in the tasks proposed and find them relevant. For example, teachers could ‘authenticate’ tasks to learners by explaining their rationale.

Along the same line as Widdowson, Lee (2005) argues that “‘text authenticity’ is defined in terms of the origin of the materials, while ‘learner authenticity’ refers to the learner’s interaction with them, in terms of appropriate responses and positive psychological reaction” (p. 323). Lee elaborates on the concept of learner-authentic materials as those that are learner-centred, arouse interest in language learning and can be used to develop learner competencies as well as to raise awareness of discourse conventions leading to appropriateness in use in a variety of contexts (p. 324). To the four aspects that Breen (1985) finds – and which Lee defines as text factor (materials selection), learner factor (individual differences), task factor (task design), and learner setting factor (learning environment) – she adds a fifth one, the teacher’s attitude and teaching approach (p. 325). These five interrelated factors contribute to learner authenticity with the needs of the users of the materials (the learners) playing a central role, so that, among other features, learner authentic materials will not only have communicative potential but also be relevant to learners’ experiences and communicative needs (Lee, 2005, Shomoossi & Ketabi, 2007).

Concerning the teacher factor, Shomoossi and Ketabi (2007, p. 154) present the concept of *authenticating teacher*, stressing the role of teachers in ‘giving’ authenticity to materials, instead of considering materials authentic or not in themselves. In this paper, we draw a parallelism with this idea, and propose the concept of *authenticating learners*, which explains how language (vocabulary, in this case) can be *authenticated* by learners when they express their need of using it with communicative and learning purposes in classroom situations. This working definition is also related to Pinner’s idea of authenticity as a motivational force in language teaching, which bestows a sense of validity that comes from the individual self about the teaching/learning situation (2016).

3. Description of the project

As it has already been mentioned, our paper is based on a research project entitled *Foreign Language vocabulary learning: teacher cognition and its relationship with teaching and learning* being carried out at the Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, which focuses on the development of learners' lexical competence. More specifically, the project's aim is to discover and analyse EFL teachers' cognition, beliefs, and preconceived ideas about what constitutes effective teaching and learning of vocabulary, and how these shape teachers' vocabulary instructional practices and materialize in the classroom.

The study is being carried out at public and private institutions in Cordoba City in both formal (secondary schools) and non-formal (adult education) contexts. As regards methodology, the research project is descriptive and follows a mixed-methods approach including instruments such as questionnaires and interviews, as well as data obtained from class observations, class materials and samples of progress tests.

In this paper, we are particularly interested in examining class observations, which were registered in structured observation grids created for this purpose. In these grids, we can observe exactly which items of vocabulary were presented or recycled in each class and, also, we can scrutinize how much of that vocabulary was required by students - as opposed to vocabulary previously selected for presentation and/or practice by the teacher - and whether it was relevant to the class topic or not. We believe that this instrument provides us with information that can be very useful to analyse and establish the degree of authenticity of the lexis dealt with in class, as determined by the students requiring said lexis in their need to complete an activity.

4. Analysis of partial findings

By closely examining the classroom observation grids -which give us information about vocabulary that was dealt with in class both as part of the teacher's plan and spontaneously- we could find that from a total number of 484 vocabulary items, 132 were

required by students. Of those 132, up to 128 were items relevant to the topic of the class (as shown in *Figure 2*), which means that 97% of the vocabulary that learners asked for responded to a need to complete a certain activity or task.

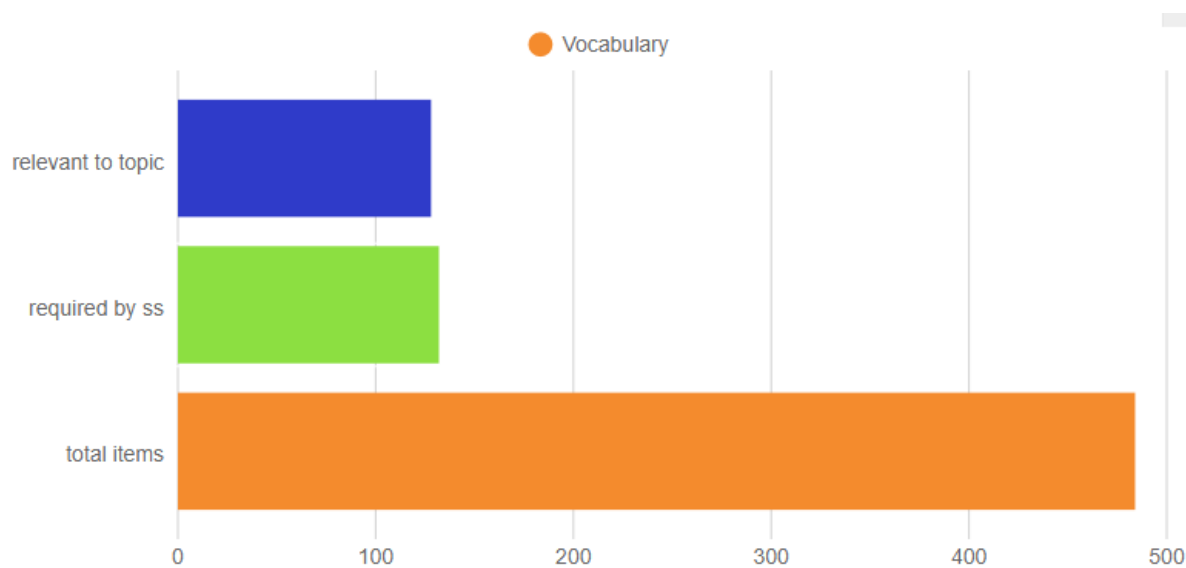


Figure 2 Vocabulary items required by learners and their relevance to the topic.

This implies that even though students' interventions are much more limited in number than those of the teacher, close to 100% of them arises from what could be considered as engagement, both with the topic and with the activities being carried out. We acknowledge this data as showing "engagement" because we believe it reveals that students don't digress from the topic; on the contrary, they require the language with the purpose of working on their assignments, thus fulfilling a communicative aim. It is important to mention that in the research study, we did not consider all language used or worked on; we only focused on "vocabulary items", and, as such, we considered not only isolated words but also lexical chunks and set expressions that were introduced or reviewed at any stage of the class observed.

In this sense, and based on Guariento and Morley's definition of authenticity *through engagement* (Guariento and Morley, 2001, p.350; emphasis ours), we can say that almost all

(97%) of the vocabulary that was dealt with in class that emerged from students' requirements could be regarded as authentic, as it was determined by the engagement that arises from the need to complete the activity at hand. We can furthermore analyse these results in the light of Breen's suggestions, as revised by Lee (1995, p. 325), concerning the four factors involved in establishing text and learner authenticity and previously mentioned in this paper: text, learner, task, and learner setting factors, and the fifth one Lee adds, the teacher factor. We understand that the vocabulary that learners needed and demanded, served an authentic purpose in the context - completion of a task - and that this constitutes authentic discourse (Gilmore, 2004, p.5) as it is natural and necessary in the classroom situation and in the interaction taking place during the teaching and learning process.

5. Discussion

In this paper, we have revolved around the concept of authenticity from different writers' points of view, and it has been made clear that it constitutes a complex construct from which several lines of discussion can be drawn. As we have already mentioned, we are particularly interested in focusing on Shomoossi and Ketabi's idea that the teacher can be the one 'giving' authenticity to materials (2007, p. 154).

After exploring this notion of an *authenticating teacher* in opposition to what the research study shows and the wide range of aspects concerning authenticity, we can introduce the idea of an *authenticating learner*, which implies – following many of the authors presented in this paper in the theoretical section – that there is no such thing as intrinsic authenticity, but that it is a property conferred by the students when they use or require the language they are learning in their need to fulfil a communicative purpose. Therefore, the role of the learners and their relationship with the language is fundamental, as it is through their interaction and responses that language is authenticated.

We can say, then, that although the vocabulary that was required by students is less than half than that selected by teachers, we believe that it can have great educational value, as it adjusts to the practical concept of “fitness to the learning purpose” (Gilmore, 2007, p. 7) and is, hence, made authentic by the learners themselves.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the notion of authenticity and its various aspects to further show the complexity the concept involves and the many definitions available and factors that can be taken into account. We agree with the idea of considering authenticity as a quality that does not only belong to the materials but also to all discourse produced in class (Gilmore, 2007, p. 5), and that teachers are not the only ones who can authenticate materials and classroom discourse and interaction but that students are the main agents in authenticating any particular instance of language use, as they use and/or require it for communicative purposes during interaction in a host of teaching/learning contexts.

We have also compared these ideas with some of the partial results of an ongoing research on vocabulary learning and reached some conclusions as regards the authenticity of the vocabulary dealt with in class. Essentially, our paper exposes how most -almost all- of the vocabulary that is not presented by the teacher but required by students, can be considered authentic because learners authenticate it themselves by conferring it a meaningful aim. However, we have also noticed that most vocabulary is presented or proposed by the teacher. This led us to believe that there is a need to start promoting an approach in which we put an emphasis on learner-authenticated language instead of giving a central role to teacher-selected language. Furthermore, we understand that this conclusion could become an important factor to take into account in the future and we expect that it will be a valuable contribution to the field of foreign language teaching. On the one hand, it could be of great importance in

materials design, in that activities that promote learners' use and requirements of language would trigger authentic - thus more meaningful and memorable - use of language in general and of lexis in particular, and, on the other hand, in teacher training courses, as a new approach to authenticity would prepare teachers to create situations that allow students to request, use and produce vocabulary they have authenticated themselves.

Finally, from the analysis of the data collected we could also detect some patterns regarding the context in which the instances of language occurred. This has to do with the type of tasks and activities that were being carried out during which the higher number of relevant vocabulary required by students took place. We regard this as being an imperative factor that could be investigated and analysed in our future work and which could have pedagogical implications as regards authenticity, because "in other words, [authenticity] is a factor of the learner's involvement with the task." (Mishan 2005, p.70)

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