

Reconsidering Authenticity in ESL Written Materials

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Abstract

The practice of using authentic written materials in the ESL classroom has been highly debated and, at the same time, promoted by teachers and scholars worldwide. This paper reviews the history of using authentic materials in language teaching and critically evaluates the many different ways to define authentic materials. The main assumption behind the promotion of authentic materials is that they have a great advantage over constructed ones. While there is evidence that authentic materials have their benefits, all in all, this paper suggests that the notion of authentic materials is perhaps oversimplified in the TESOL community and ultimately, the appropriateness of the materials is much more important than material authenticity.

Introduction

The practice of incorporating authentic written materials into language classrooms around the world has become incredibly popular for teachers of English as a second or foreign language. Adams (1995) stated that authentic materials are being increasingly viewed as much better than any materials created intentionally for the ESL student (p. 4). In fact, Day (2004) went so far as to say that the dedication teachers have towards authentic materials is reflective of a cult (p. 101-102). However, there are two issues with adopting authentic materials without careful consideration. First, there is often no agreement on which materials are considered authentic, especially for written texts. Day maintained that there is absolutely “no consensus” between teachers as to what exactly authentic materials are (p. 107). Second, teachers might not be maximizing the teaching time or providing students with the skills they need to reach their full potential if they are using authentic materials simply because they are authentic. Authenticity of the materials does not necessarily reflect their usefulness in class or mean they are going to be effective and interesting. According to Day, the important thing to consider when evaluating materials is appropriateness (p. 110). Perhaps teachers and even advertisers have blown the term “authentic materials” out of proportion (Day, pp. 102-103). Authenticity in the ESL classroom has many different definitions that need to be evaluated, and teachers must critically think about how to most effectively lead their students to their goal of communication in the target language.

In this paper, I critically evaluate the term “authentic materials,” mainly concerning written texts, and show how the focus should be instead on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the materials. First, I assess some of the most widely used definitions of materials authenticity in the ESL classroom and demonstrate how these definitions devalue the term “authentic materials.” Then I show how three different teaching strategies have, over time, utilized authentic materials. Finally, I examine the benefits and challenges of



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authentic materials to prove that constructed materials should be viewed in a more positive light and teachers need to re-focus on the goal of teaching English.

Defining Authentic Materials: The Challenge

While it may be easier to distinguish between spoken authentic materials (recordings of naturally occurring conversations) and constructed dialogs in textbooks (scripted conversations recorded in studios), the issue of authentic materials is a lot fuzzier when it comes to written texts. The discussion below will focus mainly on written materials.

Scholars do not agree as to what is the best definition of authentic materials in the ESL classroom. In fact, Day (2004) asserted that it is not possible to define this term at this point because of the conflict between the many definitions (p. 108). That being said, Cook (personal communication, November, 2013) pointed out that a widely accepted definition, and perhaps the most inclusive one, is that authentic materials are materials that have been created for native speakers and are taught to second language students unaltered (Abersold & Field, 1997; Day, 2004; Nunan, 1988; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992; Tomlinson, 1998; and Wong et al., 1995). Generally, when teachers reference authentic materials, they are using this definition because of its understandability and classifiability. A few examples that would fall under this definition are: classic literature, magazines, newspapers, films, recordings from radio, or TV talk shows.

Some scholars have attempted to create a definition that makes it possible for teachers to actually use authentic materials in the classroom. McGrath (2003), for example, maintained that the main problem with text authenticity “is how far it is reasonable to go in the direction of rendering a text accessible to learners” (p. 105). It is not possible for materials to be edited and then still considered authentic because truly authentic materials have to be presented to the student in the same way they would appear in the real world; however, this seems to be what McGrath implied. Richards and Eckstut-Didier offered even another definition they found in an ELT reading text for low-intermediate learners, “[authentic materials] feature adapted texts from a variety of authentic sources...” (as cited in Day, 2004, p. 107). This definition also cannot be applied at the same time as the ones mentioned before. The irony of teachers and scholars attempting to permit the term “authentic materials” to include modified materials is that it renders the definitions mentioned in the previous paragraph meaningless; it is not possible to accept some or any of the definitions without being contradictory.

Another way to define authentic materials is to say that authenticity paradoxically cannot exist in the ESL classroom; instead, authenticity of text is determined by the environment of the classroom, teacher-students relations, and the reaction or perception of the reader. Breen pointed out that authenticity is relative to the use of the materials in the classroom: “Both pedagogic texts and pedagogic tasks are authentic because the classroom is their point of origin” (as cited in Badger, Dasli, & MacDonald, 2006, p. 253). He defined text authenticity as anything used in the classroom; however, Widdowson noted that by this definition, all materials used in the classroom would be authentic. He argued that authenticity has to do with the relationship of the text, the reader, and the appropriate response, not just the materials (as cited in Badger, Dasli, & MacDonald, 2006, p. 253). He suggested that the fact that students use the materials in the classroom makes them inauthentic, because their reason for using them is not what the materials were originally intended for. On the other

hand, the classroom creates its own type of authenticity because students have a genuine reason for being in class; however, the materials would still not necessarily be authentic, yet the task would be.

The very fact that there are so many contradicting definitions gives the term "authentic materials" little to no meaning even though it is thrown around in the TESOL community often. As Day (2004) put it, the goal is not to define authentic materials but rather to establish that perhaps the very concept of authentic materials is in and of itself "meaningless and lacking in pedagogic value" (p. 108). For the purpose of this paper, I will align with Cook's (2013) point above and take the term "authentic materials" to mean, "materials that have been created for native speakers."

Authentic Materials: A Glimpse into the Past

The idea of using authentic materials in the ESL classroom has been around for a long time; however, early teaching methods did not place such an emphasis on them as we see today. The advantages of authentic materials were first discussed in 1899, but they did not become very widely used until later (Baghban & Pandian, 2011). One of the earliest methods of language teaching, Grammar Translation, is focused mainly on reading and writing. Generally, this method is considered difficult and tedious for many students and teachers since students often have to translate many sentences of the text. It also does not help develop students' listening and speaking skills, which are necessary for students to thoroughly learn a language. According to Horwitz (2013), students are given texts, usually authentic ones, to translate into their native language or vice versa. Also, most of the class is taught to the students in their native language (p. 61). The authentic texts given to students are frequently pieces of literature in the target language, which are often challenging.

Another early teaching method is the Audiolingual Method (ALM) which was developed almost in direct response to the Grammar Translation method. According to Horwitz (2013), the focus of the ALM is on listening and speaking instead of reading and writing. The teachers conduct the entire class in the target language and make students do a lot of oral drills; however, teachers and students both criticize that the ALM does not prepare students for spontaneous conversation (pp. 62-63). Although a teacher could easily incorporate authentic materials and follow the ALM, there is no mention of this being emphasized. Both Grammar Translation and the ALM are widely criticized for not being effective teaching methods.

Newer teaching methods, such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Instruction (TBLI), place more importance on authentic materials and were developed because of ALM ineffectiveness (Horwitz, 2013, p. 69). Teachers who use CLT provide interesting and engaging materials for their students, and often use a lot of small groups to help students learn, but they also teach grammar as it comes up (Horwitz, 2013, p. 68). This method is often considered more effective than the older ones. In fact, Kumaravadivelu (2006) observed that this method became so popular that TESOL scholars began to create academic materials based on the word "communicative" (p. 3). He asserted that CLT focuses on authentic communication (p. 4). This means the emphasis is on creating opportunities for students to be exposed to authentic materials and spontaneous conversations in order to promote fluency. According to Day (2004), CLT was one of the main advocates of using authentic materials in the classroom (p. 103). That beings said, CLT

is not necessarily popular with students since “there is growing evidence that, in communicative classes, interactions may, in fact, not be very communicative after all” (Nunan, 1989, p. 144). He discovered that his students actually preferred and valued language and grammatical accuracy activities over communicative fluency activities (p. 144). There is much debate about the effectiveness of CLT, but it also is a strong advocate for authenticity.

Task-Based Language Instruction is a more recent teaching method that tries to incorporate the advantages of CLT while placing even more emphasis on using authentic materials in the ESL classroom and addressing students' needs. In this method, teachers integrate authentic content, scaffold activities, and encourage students to speak in the target language as much as possible (Horwitz, 2013, p. 77). The teachers accomplish this by giving their students authentic tasks, which I will not address in depth; however, it is worthy to mention that in authentic tasks, students would likely use authentic materials.

The idea of using authentic materials for the purpose of language teaching is a fairly modern one and has been greatly emphasized in the popular Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method. The use of authentic materials can be found in older methods, but only recently have they been used purposefully in place of constructed materials.

Authentic Material's Benefits and Problems

Often, teachers use authentic written materials because of the perceived advantages for students over constructed materials. It is not difficult to find communities and advertisers within the language teaching discipline who endorse authentic materials indiscriminatorily. The ESL Literacy Network (n.d.), for example, stated that authentic materials “build background knowledge by exposing learners to new ideas and content from real-life” (para. 3). Day (2004) challenged this statement by saying there is no absolute evidence proving that students become fluent in the real world by being taught materials that are authentic. Day (2004) also pointed out that adopting authentic materials in a whole-sale fashion “confuses the goal with the means—that it confuses the desired outcome of language learning and teaching with the process of achieving this outcome” (p. 105). Students do not learn how to cope and communicate in the real world by using only materials that are from the real world; the class should be the bridge to help students to reach the goal of communicating with other speakers of the language. The key here is the selective adoption of authentic materials when they are suitable. Indeed, in an imperial study to compare textbook and well-selected authentic materials for developing oral communicative competence over a 10-month period, Gilmore (2011) found that students gained a more diverse range of communicative competencies with authentic conversation materials. Thus, authentic materials themselves may not guarantee effective learning; careful selection of authentic materials to suit students' levels and needs is crucial.

It is generally accepted that authentic materials help motivate students to learn the language. The ESL Literacy Network (n.d.) claimed that authentic materials “motivate learners by showing them that the literacy skills they are learning are valuable in an information-age culture and prepare learners to deal with real-life situations outside of the classroom” (para. 3). There are many scholars who believe that authentic materials motivate students because they are “interesting, engaging, culturally enlightening, and relevant” (Day, 2004, p. 104). While motivation is key for student learning, there is only little evidence or

research (e.g., Gilmore, 2011, on oral communicative competence) proving that authentic materials help to motivate students. Although Peacock (1997) discovered that there was a slight correlation between motivation and authentic materials, some students actually thought the authentic materials were less interesting than the artificial ones (as cited in Day, 2004, p.104). One reason why the students could have found the artificial materials more interesting is because of the tasks surrounding them, as Day (2004) suggested. Thus, when students seem motivated by authentic materials, they might be actually motivated by the task.

Teachers can always find current, readily available authentic material on topics that interest students. Case (2012) agrees and points out there are a wide variety of current topics to choose from (para. 4-7). Even though this is true, it brings up the problem that the materials will often become outdated and not usable in future classes (Berardo, 2006, p. 62). For example, if a teacher found a useful article from a newspaper for a class one semester, the next semester the same article may not be relevant. That being said, students enjoy being able to pick their own topic because they are interested in it personally.

Another perceived benefit of authentic materials for teachers is how readily available they are. Case (2012) maintained that the reason some teachers use authentic materials is because of their convenience. It is easy to find them, and there are a lot of different materials available for the teachers to choose from (para. 4). This is true; however, the materials found are not necessarily always the best for students. Day (2004) pointed out that authentic materials are most of the time too difficult for beginning and intermediate students. He critically evaluated research to discover if the challenge was detrimental for learners, but he discovered that no one is sure if using authentic materials is beneficial for students in any way (p.108-109). In addition, he pointed out that when students have to struggle to read a text, they are not learning to read effectively or enjoy the target language (p. 109). Students will become frustrated when given tasks that are above their level (Chappelle & Jamieson, 2008, p. 3). The ESL Literacy Network (n.d.) offers a solution by saying that teachers should always rewrite authentic materials for their students' needs (para. 7). The problem with this is that it takes a lot of time, which is an issue for most teachers.

Lastly, authentic materials are not created to teach or help people *build* literacy; instead, they are created for people who can already use the language. The ESL Literacy Network (n.d.) made this clear by saying, “They [authentic materials] are made for the mainstream literate public and not geared toward language or literacy learning” (para. 5). Because authentic materials are not intended to teach the language used in them, they can actually be less helpful to students than constructed materials and more challenging to teach. According to Cook (2013), students might notice an aspect of language that creates a dilemma for the teacher because, “The instructor may want to answer students' questions about that aspect, but he/she has to ask two questions: Do I have time to explain this now? Is the answer beyond my students' current level of proficiency?” (personal communication, November, 2013). This predicament can be avoided by using materials that are at the students' level and cover aspects the teacher wants to emphasize to students.

Choosing Between Constructed Materials and Authentic Materials

Constructed materials are often looked at in a negative light in the TESOL community. Day (2004) offered a reason why, by saying it is easy to find examples of constructed (or simplified) materials that are “poorly written, uninteresting, hard to read, and lacking normal

text features such as redundancy and cohesion” (p. 106). Much research has indeed showed that this is the case, especially when it comes to spoken materials (e.g., Boxer & Pickering, 1995; Gilmore, 2004, 2007; Holmes, 1988; Nguyen & Ishitobi, 2012; Nguyen, Tsukimi, and Lin, 2014; Pearson, 1986; Reber, 2011; Scotton & Bernsten, 1988; Shortall, 2003; Wong, 2002, 2007, to name a few). It is, however, important to keep in mind that this does not reflect all constructed materials and that there are authentic ones, especially written texts, with the same problems (Day, 2004, p. 106). Many constructed materials are natural-sounding, class-ready, readily available in textbooks, and require less planning from the teacher. Velazquez maintains by saying that since constructed materials are created specifically for the learner, “[they] can reinforce vocabulary and grammar prepare learners for reading authentic texts” (as cited in Baghban & Pandian, 2011, p. 6). When well-designed to balance between naturalness and learners' needs, constructed materials can be highly effective.

According to Taylor (1994), the environment of the classroom and the students' awareness of it renders materials authentic for the students and teachers (para. 15). This makes the issue of whether or not materials are authentic irrelevant, but more important to consider is whether or not the materials used are benefiting the students as much as possible. Van Lier (1991) agreed by saying that instead of asking if the materials are authentic or genuine, “our question now is: Am I using undistorted language sincerely to further language learning, promote commitment and interest, and in ways that make my intentions clear to my audience?” (pp. 29-68). In other words, it is important for teachers to evaluate materials by asking themselves how effective the materials will be at facilitating learning.

In order to be most effective, the activity should give students a purpose. To many teachers, task authenticity is more important than the authenticity of materials (Guariento & Morley, 2001, p. 349). Activities should have a “genuine purpose” (p. 349), relate to the real world, and engage the students rather than simply incorporate authentic materials (p. 349-350). Horwitz (2013) strongly approved of authentic tasks. She stated, “The more realistic (...) the task for the particular group of students, the better” (p. 77). Students learn best when they are engaged, interested, and motivated to complete a task. This is understandable because, as Chappelle and Jamieson (2008) pointed out, “in real life, people have a purpose for listening to something. The purpose focuses their attention” (p. 135). When students have a genuine purpose for doing a task and using materials, they are more likely to participate and learn.

Conclusion

Teachers should be more concerned with using appropriate materials that will help their students learn the language the most effectively, rather than the authenticity of materials alone. As more and more authentic texts, both written and spoken, are readily available online, with not only raw texts but also corpus examples, it is important to keep in mind the words of Adams (1995), “if we decide to use authentic materials: either we must select them very carefully or we must be very attentive to the way we treat them in the classroom” (p. 6). Teachers should always choose appropriate materials that will best suit their students' individual language development needs, regardless of the materials' source of origin.

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