TEACHING ENGLISH WITH AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

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Abstract:
The use of authentic materials in EFL has long been acknowledged to be advantageous to leaners as they provide real-life experience in the language classroom. However, many of the existing definitions which most teachers are utilizing to select appropriate teaching resources present a strong bias toward the notion of "native speakers' production". This brief paper aims to call for reconsideration of defining "authentic materials" by pointing out that the English language no longer belongs to the so-called "native speakers", stating the fact that a growing number of non-native speakers are using it to communicate purposefully every day. It is argued that the language that those speaking English as their second or foreign language create can perfectly be employed as teaching materials in EFL/ESL classrooms because such language presents real communication among English language users in the 21st century whether they speak it as their mother tongue or not. By discussing those points, the paper goes on to recommend a theoretical framework on which more suitable criteria for choosing authentic materials can be built on to conform with the teaching context of this century.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching with authentic materials has been a hot topic in the English teaching industry for quite some time. With the dawn of easy and widespread internet access, students are exposed to a large number of authentic English texts and resources online. Many of our learners now also work in multi-cultural and multi-national companies or study abroad. These contexts create the need for students to be able to understand a variety of authentic English sources. In this series, one stop English will show you how to help your students develop the skills needed to understand and react to authentic texts.

The notion of authenticity has been much discussed. Morrow ties it with "a stretch of real language produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to carry a real message of some sort" (Morrow, 1977). Harmer (1983) states that authentic texts (either written or spoken) are designed for native speakers; they are real text designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language in question. Nunan (1989) thinks that a rule of thumb for authenticity might be any material which has not been specifically produced for the purposes of language teaching. Based on these definitions, the real meaning of authentic materials will be as follows:

they are from real language;
produced for the native speakers;
designed without the teaching purposes.

One of the important principles of communicative language teaching is that authentic language should be used in language teaching whenever possible (Omaggio-Hadley, 1993). But some of the problems are determining what authentic materials are, why it is important to use authentic material in the classroom, and what are the sources for authentic materials? Taken from Peacock (1997), the definition of authentic materials is the materials that have been produced to fulfill some social purpose in the language community. Martinez (2002) defined that "Authentic would-be material designed for native speakers of English used in the classroom in a way similar to the one it was designed for".

Why your students struggle with authentic materials:

There are a few reasons why students are unable to engage with authentic materials effectively:

Cultural differences

English is taught virtually everywhere around the world and the local culture of the students might be vastly different to that of English-speaking countries. Also, in these countries, there are many cultures and even varieties of the English language. The majority of texts are composed for a specific area, e.g., Australia only. When someone writes a text, they also usually have their audience much more narrowed down to a specific age group, people of a specific educational

background, political views or interests, etc. Each authentic text is written with the assumptions about its target audience and their knowledge, which your students might not have.

Unfamiliar or idiomatic expressions:

Of course, an authentic text might be full of new unfamiliar words. However, an added difficulty is that many of them come in multi-word expressions, such as phrasal verbs or idioms. Because of this many learners have problems with identifying the words that go together so that they are able to look them up in a dictionary.

Variety of structures

English achieves variety and the lack of repetition not only by varying vocabulary, but also by utilizing different sentence structure. A stylistically sophisticated piece of writing contains many sentence structures and alternates between them. For example, one short paragraph can go from an active sentence to a passive one, followed by a conditional one. Many specialized texts are written in Academic or Business English too. These types of English have their own complex characteristics. For instance, a formal business email has a fixed structure and many standard phrases.

You might think that authentic materials are too difficult and give up on the idea of using them. But this will be doing our students, who want and need to interact with these texts, a disservice. It can also be hugely motivating for them to be able to tackle a 'real' English source. It is important to notice that there is no minimum level below which we should not use authentic materials with our students.

When people first think of authentic materials, they usually assume that teachers are talking about newspaper and magazine articles. However, the term can also encompass such things as songs, web pages, meetings, documents, speech, radio & TV broadcasts, films, leaflets, flyers, posters, indeed anything written in the target language and used unedited in the classroom.

In this sense, all authentic materials can be grouped into three main types:

1.Authentic Listening-Viewing Materials: TV commercials, quiz shows, cartoons, news clips, comedy shows, movies, soap operas, professionally audio-taped short stories and novels, radio ads, songs, documentaries, and sales pitches.

2.Authentic Visual Materials: slides, photographs, paintings, children' artwork, stick-figure drawings, wordless street signs, silhouettes, pictures from magazine, ink blots, postcard pictures, wordless picture books, stamps, and X-rays.

3.Authentic Printed Materials: newspaper articles, movie advertisements, astrology columns, sports reports, obituary columns, advice columns, lyrics to songs, restaurant menus, street signs, cereal boxes, candy wrappers, tourist information brochures, university catalogs, telephone books, maps, TV guides, comic books, greeting cards, grocery coupons, pins with messages, and bus schedules. The most useful ones among authentic printed materials are magazines and newspapers. They and other publishing materials date very quickly, and even update faster and faster.

Morrow (1977) states, "An authentic text is a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of sort." Cook (1981) defines those as real examples of language produced by native speakers. Harmer (1994), in his influential The Practice of English Language Teaching, stresses on the realness of certain materials by stating that authentic materials are those written for native speakers of the language with the real purpose. Similarly, Bacon and Finnemann (1990) also provided a definition putting emphasis on the production of and the intention for native speakers. Sanderson (1999), while maintaining an analogous viewpoint in understanding this kind of materials, claims that a newspaper article written for a native-English-speaking audience is a very classic example in this. More recently, Kilickaya (2004) stresses on the "exposure to the real usage of the everyday life language" and how the materials are used by native speakers for their own purposes in daily life.

While selecting authentic materials, learners' level is an important factor. According to Driven (1981), spontaneously spoken language is too complex to be introduced in the classroom in the first stage of foreign language learning, but in the second or intermediate stage of foreign language learning, all the factors of the spontaneously spoken language come into action. So, for the learners with lower level, we should provide easier materials such as the short headline type reports, audio and radio advertising, or short news broadcasts or children's songs. For the intermediate levels, there is a wider range of choices. Four- or five-minutes TV or radio news reports, the slightly adopted movies, or even whole TV programs can be included. As for the advanced level students, they have learned the target language for years and have the ability of dealing with the possible difficulties with their linguistic competence and world knowledge. Teachers now can choose some political speeches, ceremonial formulae, gossip, family quarrels etc. as the teaching materials. These materials are either very formal (ceremonial formulae, political speeches) or fairly informal (gossip, family quarrels), which are considered very difficult for foreign language learners.

Some suitable types of the alternative for authentic materials due to the level of learners might be found in the following table

Beginner level	Intermediate level	Advanced level
reports with short headline	TV or radio news reports	political speeches
audio and video advertising	adopted movies;	ceremonial formulae
short news broadcasts	whole TV programs	Gossip
children's songs		family quarrels

Other factors influencing on the choice and usage of authentic materials are

Topic target language area intended practice skills students' needs and interests (It's no good trying to get your students fascinated by a text on the latest art movie if they are all fans of action films).

Many researchers (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Berado, 2006; Brown & Yule, 1983), introduced benefits of using authentic materials. One of them is authentic materials help integrating target culture with language teaching. Language and culture are closely related with each other. Language is a part of culture and plays an important role in it. On one hand, without language, culture cannot be transmitted. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture. Language and culture interact with each other and the understanding of one influences the understanding of the other. In the teaching of vocabulary comprehension, we can find that teaching materials, especially authentic materials, often have much cultural content that is closely related to the knowledge of American and British culture, society, and economy. If students lack this kind of knowledge, there will be difficulties in their vocabulary comprehension. Even if there are some new words, we are able to guess their meanings from the context. Bassnett (2001) maintains that no single textbook can provide information on a culture, as no culture is homogenous. Also, cultures are "dynamic and ever-changing". Therefore, when teaching culture teachers should refer to other sources in addition to textbooks.

Authentic materials have many other advantages compared with inauthentic materials. Martinez summarized several benefits of using authentic materials. The first one is that by using authentic material, students are exposed to real discourse, for instance, videos of interview with famous people can be used for intermediate students to listen for general idea. Secondly, authentic materials keep students informed about what is happening in the world, so they have an intrinsic educational value. Thirdly, as language change is reflected in the materials so that students and teachers can keep abreast of such changes. Fourthly, reading texts are ideal to teach/practice mini-skills such as scanning, e.g., students are given a news article and asked to look for specific information. Fifthly, different authentic materials such as books, articles, newspapers, and so on contain a wide variety of text types, and language styles not easily found in conventional teaching materials.

CONCLUSIONS

Nowadays it is virtually impossible for our learners to avoid any contact with authentic English texts. They need help to develop key skills to understand and benefit from these sources. As teachers we can do this by taking into consideration the type of texts, the background and characteristics of our students, and the skills and language they need for the purpose.

In this **one stop English** series, we will walk you through this process with real examples, so you can replicate it in your classroom.

In general, English classes should be a source of modern authentic English and authentic materials. Usage of authentic materials in such classes may be integrated with the practice of all language skills and can be useful in raising students' cultural awareness about the target language context.

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