The Role of Authentic Materials in Foreign Language Teaching

Sorana Lucia ADAM\(^1\), Rodica Silvia STAN\(^1\), Anca Simona MOANGA\(^1\), Elvira OROIAN\(^1\), Mihaela MIHAI\(^1\), Magdalena CIUBANCAN\(^2\)

\(^1\)Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, 3-5 Manastur Street, Cluj-Napoca, Romania; adam_sorana@yahoo.com
\(^2\)ASE, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania.

Abstract. The aim of learning a foreign language is none other than to be able to use the respective language similarly to the way in which a native would, which is why we believe that exposing the students to authentic materials throughout the teaching process is crucial. This is also one of the core pillars of the communicative method. Therefore, after a brief presentation of the main principles this teaching theory is based on, we tried to exemplify some of the ways in which its methods could be successfully used in our particular case, laying special emphasis on the advantages of choosing such an approach, among which that of meeting the students’ learning needs and that of offering them the chance to become truly competent and efficient language users. In other words, they will be able to adequately convey an intelligible message to a speaker, within a larger social and situational context.

Keywords: communication; learning needs; linguistic competence; authentic material.

INTRODUCTION

Starting from the assumption that authentic materials are crucial in teaching/learning a foreign language, this paper is an attempt to analyze how such materials can be used in the particular situation of teaching/learning, especially since our access to materials designed for native speakers of English/German/French is virtually unlimited, due to various reasons (geographical, financial etc.). We have laid special emphasise on the internet, since we consider it to be an extremely useful and convenient resource. Generally speaking, communication is based on the existence of a speaker and of a listener, between which there is an information gap which will be filled in the communication process, so that, in the end, both the speaker and the listener will have the same information. In other words, the aim of all communication is to adequately convey an intelligible message to a speaker, within a larger social and situational context.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Teachers have always been on a continuous search for the most adequate and efficient teaching method, even though, in reality there is no such a thing as a “perfect” teaching/learning recipe, maybe except for the one indicated by the American journalist Dave Barry (1992:20): [in learning Japanese] “the method recommended by experts is to be born as a Japanese baby and raised by a Japanese family, in Japan”. For all others, less fortunate, there is nevertheless the possibility of being included in a learning context that resembles real life situations as much as possible. This is the very general principle the communicative teaching/learning method is based
upon, a method focused on making the student acquire communicative competence. Its declared purpose is that of enabling the students to use the appropriate language in a given real-life like context (appropriate from the point of view of the communication situation), and to make themselves understood by communicating efficiently, while establishing at the same time the process of negotiating meaning with the listener.

To attain this, the communicative method is based upon a few clear, well-defined principles that guide the entire teaching/learning process, that is:

1. the aim of all verbal interactions is to communicate;
2. linguistic competence must be doubled by the competence/ability to adequately convey meaning in various contexts;
3. communication of all kinds occurs in social and situational contexts, which is why language must also be learned in authentic, real-life like situations;
4. for an efficient communication in a language it is necessary to acquire communication abilities and skills, as well as all four communication competences, that is: reading, speaking, listening, writing;
5. all verbal interactions have an aim;
6. one remembers better familiar, interesting and relevant (to the learner) situations;
7. one remembers better things that one performs.

For the above stated reasons, the teaching/learning process is seen from this perspective as being focused on an efficient language use – with special emphasis on content, not structure – on the students, with their needs, interests and preoccupations, and not on the text itself. Thus, the emphasis is laid on verbal interactions among students (using the target-language) working in pairs or groups, on the initiation of real-like like communicative situations and on the frequent use of the discovery techniques in the learning process (the student will understand on their own from the examples given), as well as of authentic materials. By authentic materials one understands all written or oral materials containing “real”, not processed language, produced by a real speaker for a real audience and in a real situation. These can be grouped as: published material (paper-based) (magazines, journals, etc), audio-visual material (radio, T.V.) or materials available on the Internet (an almost limitless resource varying from news to the latest articles available on-line). The advantages of using authentic materials are significant not only from a pedagogical perspective, but also from a psychological one: the students become more confident, since they realize that they can “survive” in a real life communication situation, they will also see a point in learning (it really is of use to them in real, concrete, veridical situations as compared to the sterile, abstract ones presented in textbooks) and will feel motivated (can find the things they need for themselves). Furthermore, as the students will be exposed to situations they are likely to come across in real life, they will be forced to use the respective foreign language in the same way as a native speaker would.

Moreover, the language – in all its aspects, from structure to vocabulary – will be presented in interesting, adequate, relevant contexts that are close to the students’ every-day experience, and the teaching/learning process will be structured on 5 stages, that is: introduction, presentation, practice, application and ending. Although all 5 stages are compulsory, the most important stage from the perspective of the communicative method is “application”, in which students have to use the knowledge and skills acquired in a creative way in a new situational context.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As already mentioned, the communicative method emphasizes the importance of developing all four competences, which is why the student must also be exposed to listening and writing activities, and not just to reading and speaking ones. While exercises of the project-draw-up kind (in groups or pairs) answers both the question of the reading and that of the speaking part, the teacher must find a way to introduce listening to authentic text –exercises (which can also be found on the Internet or on CDs/videotapes). Moreover, the use of varied materials will help the students focus better and maintain their interest alive.

Authentic materials can provide resources for teachers of modern languages such as English, German and French and offer them the opportunity to expose learners to materials produced for real life and for out-of classroom context. By authentic material we understand materials with “real” language, produced by real speakers for a real audience. The focus is on the message, and means other than language such as format, design, style and context are often used to help communicate it. If teachers use authentic texts sensibly, they can provide learners with secure bridges into the real world of authentic, native-like use of the language in question. One way of reaching communicative goals is to base classroom activities on authentic materials as often as possible. Authenticity means that the important factor is not the text itself, but the learner and whether she/he has the necessary knowledge to interpret it correctly, that is be capable of the appropriate response.

Needless to say, the advantages of using authentic materials are huge. First and foremost, the use of authentic materials will definitely increase the learner’s self-confidence, as they will see that they can manage in a real-life situation, while their language will become more “natural” since the student will get the chance to discover the ‘living’ language, and not the highly-polished language from the textbooks.

While textbooks, tapes and other various types of teaching materials specifically designed for foreigners are always at hand, the main problem which has been raised in regard to this type of materials is that they have limitations, in the sense that either the language used there is somehow artificial, or that they offer ‘solutions’ for only a limited number of situations. This is why teachers must continuously search for other types of materials that could compensate for the limitations of the teaching resources designed for non-native speakers.

A third concept that we could refer to when discussing the advantages of using authentic materials is cultural awareness. Once again, the students’ coming in contact directly with the realities of the modern language in question will trigger out a better understanding of the different, as well as of the common points between the respective culture and their own.

The use of authentic materials does not have, however, only a positive side. The major disadvantage that has been associated with such materials is their degree of difficulty. Many teachers claim that authentic materials can only be used with certain levels of study, beginners being usually excluded. While that may be true with some types, such as newspapers or broadcast materials, others can definitely be used from the very first lessons.

This is the case with menus, for example; thus, a menu of a fast-food chain that is found both in an English speaking country and in the learners’ country can be successfully integrated into teaching; it is good practice for reading/writing and it is also real and up-to-date, giving the learner a realistic view on what is available in the country in question, as compared to his/her
country. A calendar can also be used in beginners’ classes to teach the names of the months or the days of the week. More difficult materials can be preceded by specific exercises which will help the learner deal with the problematic parts, such as grammar structures. Thus, we do not consider the degree of difficulty of authentic materials as a real disadvantage, since the various problems that may appear can be easily solved with a little imagination.

What could however indeed be regarded as disadvantageous as compared to the classic textbook is the amount of time that the teacher must allot to the preparation of the activities accompanying the piece of authentic material, as well as the issue of the correctness of such materials. Although some of the ‘irregularities’ which can now be found in materials designed for native speakers and which are now considered mistakes will probably be integrated into the language and sometimes replace existing forms and structures, teachers are expected to select only those materials that do not deviate from the current grammatical or stylistic rules and that will not turn into a source of confusion for the learners.

Authentic materials teachers could actually use in their lessons can be divided into four main categories, namely: 1. Paper-based materials; 2. Audio-video materials (TV/radio/tapes); 3. The internet; 4. Others.

Paper-based materials include a wide range of things that native speakers use in everyday life, for various purposes. Some of the most common examples in this category are books, newspapers and magazines, while books require a certain level of proficiency. Newspapers and magazines provide the language teacher with a multitude of elements that can be used with various levels and for various teaching purposes: advertisements (both commercial and classified), horoscopes, TV/radio programmes are just a few of the items in a newspaper/magazine that can be of much help when trying to make your lesson more interesting and appealing. Cook books, recipes and menus are a good idea when teaching, for example, certain forms of the verb, the direct object or vocabulary related with food. Maps could be an example of material for raising the learners’ awareness about the country in question, introducing names of places or vocabulary related to travelling. Paper-based materials may also include various other things that could be linked to teaching: entrance tickets, labels, pamphlets, medical prospects, postcards, calendars etc. As already mentioned, finding authentic material for teaching vocabulary not only does it not represent a problem, especially now, when we can use the Internet, but it also increases the chances of finding material that meets the students’ interests and preoccupations, and thus of being relevant.

Audio-video materials are an extremely important aspect in teaching foreign languages, since, on the one hand, the learners will thus acquire a natural pronunciation and will greatly improve their listening skill and, on the other hand, the impact of the visual element, especially when combined with the sound, is very powerful and will enable learners to retain and remember the information presented easily. The problematic aspect related to audio-video materials is the necessity for equipment, doubled by the difficulty of finding such materials in our countries. Moreover, especially with video materials, it is vital that the teacher pay special attention to time management, since while using video resources can be extremely appealing, they are also time-consuming and there is also the risk that students’ concentration will be drawn to the material itself, and that they will neglect the task that they are supposed to fulfil.

Authentic materials are plentiful on the internet and teachers can use the internet to include pieces of true and meaningful communication in the lesson. In this way, the traditional
teaching of grammar, vocabulary, writing etc. will become enriched with strategies for developing the four language skills (speaking, listening, writing and reading) and the fifth - culture skills. The Internet is not only a vast pool of information but also is a place to communicate with remote people.

We strongly believe that a language can be taught resorting to a series of such materials, ranging from realia, to pictures, documentaries available on-line or on CDs or on videotapes, materials which the students will undoubtedly come across in every day life, as well as in the course of practicing their present/future job. The ways in which this material can be used is up to the teacher, who can adopt the solution they consider to be most appropriate to the given teaching/learning situation (students, level, etc) and who will be able to select from a large series of practical activities – from matching (names/definitions), to labelling parts of a picture using the words newly learned, to fill in the gaps exercises (with the missing information) or even role-play (in pairs or in groups) transposing the respective situation into practice.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, one must say that the use of authentic materials in teaching/learning specialized vocabulary is not just possible, but also recommended, since it manages: to meet the students’ learning needs; to offer them the chance of becoming truly competent in a foreign language; to stimulate personal motivation; to insure the much needed mental comfort and confidence; to allow the acquisition of vocabulary as active vocabulary.

REFERENCES