

Authentic Language Teaching Materials – Advantages and Challenges

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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. Nonetheless, using authentic materials also presents quite a few challenges.

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

INTRODUCTION

To communicate is to intelligibly convey a message to a listener **within a larger social and situational context**, so that, in the end, both the speaker and the listener will have the same information (Byrne, 1987). From this perspective, to communicate in a foreign language would mean not just to be able to convey the message in the respective language, but also to be able to do so in *a given* social and situational context. In other words, one should be able to use a foreign language similarly to the way in which a native would.

This is the reason why we believe that exposing students to authentic materials throughout the teaching process is crucial. The present paper is an attempt to analyze how such materials can be used in the particular situation of teaching/learning, presenting some of the main advantages these materials offer, as well as the problems they pose.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

First of all we should try to define what we understand by “authentic”. Some people argue that no language used in a classroom can be “authentic” or “real” because it is used in a classroom, and therefore the context is somewhat “artificial” and far from what they call “real life situations”. Others would argue that classroom language is as real as any language, being used in order to convey a message in a given situational context.

What we mean by “authentic materials” is materials produced in order to fulfil a purpose within the respective language community, that is to say, all written or oral materials containing “real”, not processed language, produced by a real speaker for a real audience and in a real situation. They 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.

Moreover, authenticity means that the focus is not the text itself, but on the learner and on whether she/he has the necessary knowledge to interpret it correctly, that is be capable of appropriate response. As the focus is on the message, means other than language itself (such as format, design, style and context) are often used to help communicate it.

Authentic materials teachers could actually use in their lessons can be divided into four main categories (Calderhead et al., 1997), namely:

1. Paper-based materials (most common examples are books, newspapers and magazines, but flyers, posters, leaflets may also prove to be very useful)
2. Audio-video materials (TV/radio/tapes)
3. The internet (an almost limitless resource varying from news to the latest articles available on-line, to web pages)
4. Others (songs, nursery rhymes, etc.)

Paper-based materials include a wide range of materials 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.

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.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

However, there is one very important issue that must be considered when discussing authentic materials, namely the way in which these materials are actually used in classroom context. There is no question that, although the samples are not abridged, they are almost never used in the original format and purpose. In other words, authentic materials are

normally used genuinely, not authentically. For example, a news article will never be used in classroom as a simple piece of reading. Teachers might for instance cut it to pieces and then ask the students to re-order the jumbled paragraphs.

When it comes to the advantages of using authentic materials, one may safely say that they are significant both from the obvious pedagogical perspective, and from a psychological one, as they can help students become more confident, once they realize that they can “survive” in a real life communication situation. This way learning the foreign language in question will make sense to them and will be stimulating, as they get a sense of achievement (it really is of use to them in real, concrete, veridical situations as compared to the sterile, abstract ones presented in textbooks). Furthermore, students will feel motivated when seeing that they can find the things they need for themselves, and they may also feel encouraged to continue reading for pleasure in the respective language.

One other advantage worth considering is that authentic materials help students keep up with the “living” language. No language is stationary and frozen; all languages are in a continuous process of enrichment: they change, evolve and develop. Genuine materials record these changes, helping the students remain in contact with the language really used in the respective language community.

Moreover, authentic materials expose students to a very large range of text types and language styles, which they will not normally come across in textbooks, helping them acquire more complex knowledge of the language in question.

Last, but not least, these materials may prove to have an intrinsic educational value (Harmer,1983) as they help the students be informed and learn more about that particular culture.

Nevertheless, using authentic materials can also prove to be not just challenging, but also problematic.

These materials can be biased and difficult to understand outside the language community in question, while the vocabulary they contain may prove to be too much for the students and not relevant to their immediate needs, both in terms of vocabulary and in terms of language structures. If not properly chosen, handled and used, they can produce panic among the students and can prove to be de-motivating for the learners faced with highly unfamiliar language.

Finally, one other aspect worth considering is the fact that using authentic materials in teaching is extremely time consuming, both when it comes to preparing it and when it comes to actually using it in classroom.

Nevertheless, 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 everyday life, as well as in the course of practicing their present/future job. The ways in which this material can be used is, of course, 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 labeling 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

All in all, we can say that, despite the fact that the use of this kind of materials poses quite a few challenges to both teachers and students, if used sensibly, they can provide learners with secure bridges into the real world of authentic, native-like use of the language in question, and they can help

1. meet the students' learning needs,
2. offer them the chance of becoming truly competent in a foreign language,
3. stimulate personal motivation,
4. assure the much needed mental comfort and confidence.

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