

Original Paper

A Brief Review of Recent Literature on Authentic Materials

Kevin Jerome Axton^{1*}

¹ Career English Department, Kyushu Lutheran College, Kumamoto-shi, Chuo Ward Kurokami
3-12-16 Japan

* Kevin Axton, E-mail: axton@klc.ac.jp

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Abstract

Exploiting authentic materials in education is not a recent practice, however recently research has been increasing as to how to use them in classroom situations. This literature review summarizes recent research and also explains certain instructional methods that are being used currently. The review begins with accepted definitions of what authentic materials consist of and then moves on to explore both advantages and disadvantages of the uses of those materials.

Keywords

authentic materials, motivation, input, exposure to language, communicative skills development

1. Introduction

The use of authentic materials in language learning is not a new field of research in pedagogy, and with the relative ease now that authentic materials such as video clips, news and other sources can be accessed, they are being used more widely than ever. This is not to say that authentic materials (AM) are being used, or even properly exploited, by all teachers. In fact, there have been some researchers that may recommend that at some levels AM should not be used under certain circumstances.

This paper will first explore various definitions of what AM are. In the second section there will be a review of the literature of ESL/EFL research concerning the advantages and disadvantages of AM. Finally, this paper will explore effective methods and uses of Authentic Materials in a classroom setting.

2. Definitions of Materials

2.1 Definitions of Teaching Materials

Before covering the various definitions of AM, it is first necessary to discuss what teachings materials are in general. Throughout the history of education teachers have used a wide variety of materials in order to explain and demonstrate the information they wish for their students to learn or understand.

Materials in today's classrooms include textbooks, workbooks, chalkboards, television monitors, and the internet, to name a few. Given the vast diversity available to many teachers in recent years, one would think that teaching materials can include anything that a teacher wishes to utilize.

Tomlinson (2001, p. 66) defines teaching materials as follows; "Materials' include anything which can be used to facilitate the learning of a language. They can be linguistic, visual, auditory or kinesthetic... They can be instructional in that they inform learners ...". With this definition in mind, this paper will refer to materials as those things with which teachers use to convey information to students.

2.2 Definitions of Authentic Materials

As for AM, over the years the definitions have varied depending on who may be discussing them. Rogers and Medley (1988, p. 468) defined authentic materials for the purpose of their article as, "...language samples – both written and oral – that reflect a naturalness of form ... that would be found in the language as used by native speakers". In this definition, the initial purpose of the text/sample of language is not a priority of qualification for the term authentic, but rather the form and naturalness of it. Nunan (2011) stated that AM refers to materials from the world outside of the classroom whose original purpose was not meant for teaching. Tomlinson (2001, p. 68) gives a similar definition; "[authentic materials are] ... ordinary texts not produced specifically for language teaching purposes." Authenticity has been explained by Richards and Schmidt (2002) as being indicated by the degree which materials have a naturalness to them and being similar in genuineness, realness, and validity, among other things.

Other researchers define AM by also referring to cultural and psychological aspects of interaction. In her research, Tatsuki (2006) states that the authenticity in materials lies in the quality of social interactions during communication, not just materials produced for native speakers. Gilmore (2007) gives detailed description of what authenticity is; laying out eight possible definitions of what authenticity can mean in relation to teaching. In one of those definitions, authenticity is related to "... the language produced by native speakers for native speakers in a particular language community" (Gilmore, 2007, p. 3 cited from Porter & Roberts, 1981; Little et al., 1989). Gilmore goes on to say that authenticity relates to the types of tasks chosen for the classroom as well as the social interactions therein as well as being related to culture and the communicators' ability to behave like the target language group.

There are other definitions as to what AM are, but most seem to have similar meanings as those stated above. It could be stated then that the basic qualifications for authentic materials are that they should either be texts and/or samples taken directly from natural occurring sources from the target language, or at least mirror the naturalness of the target language. Also, the materials should have a social purpose and include cultural relevance within the context they are used. Finally, for the purposes of this paper, it needs to be stressed that at the core of the definition of teaching materials is that the purpose of materials is to teach, to be instructional in use. Therefore, this paper considers something to be a teaching material if it is used to instruct learners about a second language.

3. Review of Previous Literature on Authentic Materials

3.1 Advantages

As stated above, the use of and research into AM is not a new concept in L2 teaching. One of the main factors in support of making use of AM in the classroom has been that of motivation. Zohoorian (2014) found that AM used in an EAP course increased motivation of the students; "... it [was] concluded that the authentic context was more effective in increasing the students' motivation level" (Zohoorian & Pandian, 2014, p. 22). Many researchers defend the use of AM as having an effect on the attitude and motivation of learners (Bacon & Finnemann, 1990; Kuo, 1993; Little et al., 1994).

Similarly, Benavent and Peñamaría (2011, p. 4) report that, "... [AM] motivate and immerse learners in specific areas of the target language in which practice is needed". They state that learners, when the chance arises find authentic materials more motivating when given the chance to practice the target language within.

Gilmore (2007) draws on several studies regarding the motivational effects of authentic materials. In some studies, it had been suggested that learners intrinsically find authentic materials more interesting than ones that have been contrived because they strive to deliver a message rather than a grammar point. He also indicates that some learners may be motivated by AM because those sources are perceived as 'real.' He summarizes that even though it seems that the belief that AM can be a motivating factor in ESL/EFL, there seems to be no empirical evidence that this is actually true. He finally suggests caution and more carefully designed experiments in linking motivation to authentic materials.

In a study conducted by Peacock (1997) students had reported an increase in their motivation using AM, but he also stated that the increase in motivation was only reported by students as their time using them progressed. However, he also found that students reported that they considered AM to be less interesting than artificial materials. Gonzalez (1990) also reported this. Therefore, motivational factors may only be enhanced as the learners grow more used to using them in class.

Otte (2006) studied the impact of aural authentic texts on listening comprehension abilities of adult ESL students at an American university. He found that exposure to authentic materials would lead to better listening comprehension abilities and motivation of the language learners to seek out authentic language outside the classroom. The same type of results were found by Hussein (2017). He stated in his conclusion that: "[The use of authentic materials] created a motivated and healthy atmosphere which in turn helped students to study freely ..." (Hussein, 2017, p. 12).

In a study done by Sample (2015, p. 118) to find if AM helped increase or decrease student motivation, he found that the elementary students' motivation was somewhat raised by exposure to AM. However, he also stated that this may be linked to certain activities and tasks that the students enjoyed, not merely due to the AM themselves. He continues to explain that the qualitative data showed that, "... the students preferred activities involving passive skills, which were more common in the experimental class. Additionally, the instances where de-motivation occurred in the experimental class were when the activity was active in nature, such as writing". In other words, one of the de-motivating issues of AM

was linked to difficulty of language as well as whether or not the learners enjoyed the tasks. In another study on the listening comprehension of EFL university lower-level students Sabet and Mahsefat (2012) show that exposing learners to authentic listening materials not only has a positive effect on listening skills of students, but also enhances their attitude and interest in sed materials.

As has been discussed above AM would seem to have a positive effect on learners' motivation, and in many cases also attributes to the enhancement of attitude towards interest in the materials being used. Motivation is one of the benefits of AM on language learning. However, there are other benefits of using Authentic materials in the classroom.

Most literature would argue for authentic materials being exploited in L2 classrooms. The usefulness of authentic materials has been increasingly recognized in L2 teaching, especially in non-native countries. Studies have demonstrated the positive effects of utilizing authentic texts on language learners. For example, some researchers show that using authentic materials leads to oral language development (Bacon & Finneman, 1990; Miller, 2005; Otte, 2006). Also, Bacon & Finneman have confirmed that using authentic materials has great influence on developing reading comprehension by presenting new words and expressions to students (Bacon & Finneman, 1990).

Polat and Eristi (2019, p. 147) conducted a study on the effects of authentic video materials on listening skills development and found that, "... authentic materials provide much stronger and more effective results in the development of listening skills of students studying at higher English proficiency levels". They also showed that as the language proficiency of their subjects increased, so did the effectiveness of the AM increase. Similarly, Fields (2009) and Kaiser (2011) explain that introduction to AM from beginning level also increases the proficiency of language skills in L2 learners.

In a study on the effects of AM on English communicative competence conducted by Guariento and Morely (2001) and Ginaya et al. (2019, p. 1085), "... significant influence on students' communicative English competence [which] was evident after classroom action research was conducted in three learning cycles for the experimental group". They also noted an increase in actual competence as seen in the results of pretests and posttest scores. Along these same lines, Allen et al. (1988, as cited in Baird, 2004) mentions that attempting to develop students' strategies in comprehending authentic tests will lead to developing their writing proficiency in the target language learning.

Gilmore (2007, p. 103) writes that authentic materials can; "... particularly audio-visual ones, offer a much richer source of input for learners and have the potential to be exploited in different - ways and on different levels to develop learners' communicative competence". Tomlinson (2012, p. 161) reports that several researchers "...argue that authentic materials can provide meaningful exposure to language as it is actually used, motivate learners and help them develop a range of communicative competencies and enhance positive attitudes towards the learning of a language." Finally, Spelleri (2002) and Berardo (2006) explain that authentic materials can give examples of language that is rich because of the context from which it naturally occurs and can also give a sense of achievement when they are understood by the learners and encourage further reading.

It is clear that there are definite advantages for the exploitation of AM, from motivating students to enhancing communicative skills. However, there has also been research that shows that AM are not completely useful in certain cases.

3.2 Disadvantages of Authentic Materials

In the previous section recent studies of the advantages of authentic materials were discussed. As with most pedagogical methods though, there have also been researchers who have shown disadvantages to AM in some learning situations and for some learners.

Berardo (2006, p. 65) writes that one of the biggest challenges with AM is that the vocabulary may not be, "...relevant to the learners' needs and too many structures can create difficulty." Gilmore (2007), Richards (2001, p. 253), and Bila (2020) also point out a similar disadvantage; "Authentic materials often contain difficult language and unneeded vocabulary items, which can be an unnecessary distraction for teachers and learners ... [And] they often contain language that may be beyond the learners' abilities". Richards goes on to state that in order to develop lessons and resources that use AM teachers need to take a considerable amount of time in preparation in locating and developing the materials.

Guariento and Morley (2001) stated that the lack of understanding or recognition of words/grammar structures will lead to frustration and confusion by the learners. The learners will feel frustrated because they do not completely understand the words while they are required to complete the classroom activity. Moreover, a case study of Korean University students by Peacock (1997) showed that authentic materials are less interesting by the learners. Also, in the same study, it was found that the self-reported motivation of the subjects only mentioned an increase in their motivation when using AM the last days of the study. Kim (2000) also stated that authentic materials at lower levels causes a sense of demotivation and frustration in students, and that authentic material may not expose students to comprehensible input at the preliminary stages of learning.

Another argument that has been asserted in opposition to using direct samples from authentic sources in foreign language classrooms is that unedited samples may be too difficult for students to understand or might be too complex for certain levels. However, Roger and Medley (1988, p. 470) suggest that it is not the text itself that should be the focus of learning, but rather, "... it is the task and subsequent guidance that the task provides – not the text itself – that must be tailored to the level of the students." They continue to explain that there are three factors that should be considered when preparing AM for different levels of students: 1) appropriateness of text, 2) appropriateness of task, and 3) appropriateness of sequence.

In a paper on teaching materials, Clark (1983) states that authentic materials do not affect learning at all. Kilickaya (2004) explains that authentic texts are random in respect to vocabulary, structures, functions, content, and length; therefore, they cause problems for the teachers in terms of adaptation for the classroom. When considering beginning learners, Crossley, Lowers, McCarthy, and McNamara (2007) concluded that simplified or artificial materials actually offer more benefits to beginners than do

unedited authentic materials because the texts often use more repetitions and high frequency words which help comprehension.

There are several challenges to using AM in ESL/EFL classes; however, there are measures that can be applied when choosing materials and designing lessons. Thomas (2014) gives some suggestions to what can be done to alleviate some of the problems that may occur with AM,

“First, you can decide to select locally relevant authentic materials in order to avoid materials with unfamiliar cultural content. Next, you can adapt authentic texts in order to match your students’ proficiency. In addition, you can develop an efficient organizational system that will allow you to gradually create a portfolio of reusable materials” (Thomas, 2014, p. 15).

Even when taking into consideration that there seems to be some evidence for argument against AM in certain situations, the advantages of their uses in L2 classrooms do appear to be both effectual and motivational. It is then necessary to discuss methods that can be exploited properly when using AM.

4. Uses of Authentic Materials in ESL/EFL Classrooms

In a survey conducted by Akbari and Razavi (2016) of 105 ESL teachers in Iran, the results indicated that a vast majority of those questioned found AM to be a positive asset in their classrooms. Also, in the same questionnaire most teachers answered that they would use AM for the purpose of showing students examples of English in the real world. One would also assume that similar results would be seen from teachers in other cultures as well.

Therefore, a major aspect of how and why teachers would use AM is the question put forth by Gilmore (2007),

“‘What are we trying to ACHIEVE with classroom materials?’ A logical response to this would be that the goal is to produce learners who are able to communicate effectively in the target language of a particular speech community, that is to say, learners who are communicatively competent. To reach this goal, I would suggest that teachers are entitled to use any means at their disposal, regardless of the provenance of the materials or tasks and their relative authenticity or contrivance (Gilmore, 2007, p. 6).

Often, researchers such as Rivers (1981) and Richards (2001) make a point of using AM in appropriate contexts. Richards (2001, p. 253) also explains that “... in order to develop learning resources around [AM], teachers have to spend ... time locating suitable materials and developing activities and exercises to accompany the materials.” That is to say that educators, when using AM should expect to create activities and tasks to be used in conjunction with the materials.

Context when teaching also plays a part in how AM is used within the classroom. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), Crawford (2002, p. 84) state that authentic materials should be contextualized. Crawford says that “ ... language, whether it is input or output should emerge from the context in which it occurs.” This will give the learners more depth of how, where and when the target language is actually used. She also goes on to say that language needs to be ‘authentic-like’ (p. 85).

For lower-level learners and classes Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011, p. 126) suggest that simpler AM or even materials that appear realistic are more desirable; “It is not so important that the materials be genuine as it is that they be used authentically [i.e., in context], with communicative intent”. They continue that with lower-level learners realia (authentic relics and other non-textual materials) be exploited to attempt to generate discussion and curiosity.

Berardo (2006) states that when choosing AM from various sources instructors should focus more on meaning rather than spend too much time sifting through them for appropriate grammar structures, as AM can give students a feeling that the language, they are studying is actually something used outside the classroom. Another factor to be addressed according to Berardo is if the materials are authentic in nature, they can easily become dated, and therefore need to be renewed or revised, which can be time consuming. However, Berardo (2006) suggest that:

“... the internet is continuously updated, more visually stimulating as well as being interactive, therefore promoting a more active approach to reading rather than a passive one. From a more practical point of view, the Internet is a modern day reality, most students use it and for teachers, there is easier access to endless amounts of many different types of material” (Berardo, 2006, p. 62).

When selecting materials, Nuttal (1996) explains that there are certain criteria for choosing sources, suitability of context, exploitability, and readability. Suitability refers to the extent to which the contents of the materials are relevant to the target language being taught, the relevancy to the students’ needs and their interest. Exploitability is how and if a source can be used in the classroom; if it doesn’t pertain to what is being taught, then the material is not usable. Lastly, readability refers to the amount of new vocabulary and grammar structures within the source; if it is too difficult or too far above or below the learners’ level then it is not considered appropriate. Rafalovich (2014) also mirrors this by stating that the materials chosen and used in a classroom should fulfill a purpose that suits the level and interests of the learners.

Rafalovich (2014) cites the ESL Literacy Network (n.d.) when explaining that some materials may be too difficult for learners, but the sources can be manipulated to fit the students’ needs. By doing this the authentic language remains in some form and can still be used for the classroom.

In terms of the exploitation of AM in education, there are several ways to use examples of natural language in classrooms, from reading to visual and audio resources. As researchers have explained it is vital to choose materials that will be appropriate to both the level of the learners and contexts of the lessons and the target language being taught. Also, some authors have suggested that perhaps a mixing of authentic and contrived materials be used to ensure students are not inundated with language that is not necessary or far beyond their understanding, as well as lightening the burden of the teacher in terms of locating suitable resources.

5. Conclusion

Authentic materials, although not a new area of pedagogical study and exploitation, have been shown to be effective resources for teaching. Not only do they have a positive effect on motivation in L2 learners, but they also have shown to be useful in enhancing communicative skills as well. While there do seem to be some disadvantages, the positive aspects of authentic materials far outweigh the difficulties that may arise for both the learners and the teachers. Evaluation of the materials has been suggested, and choosing the proper sources can be time consuming, however, authentic materials offer a richness and cultural background that may not be found in contrived textbook examples. Lastly, teachers need to consider the level and experience of their students when using authentic materials. “In other words, it is important for teachers to evaluate materials by asking themselves how effective the materials will be at facilitating learning” (Raflaovich, 2014, p. 101).

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