Authenticity revisited: text authenticity and learner authenticity

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The term 'authenticity' has sparked off a lot of discussion in the fields of linguistics, materials design, and language learning; a consensus, however, has not been reached on a precise definition. In this article, a distinction is made between text authenticity and learner authenticity. A set of guiding principles for making textually authentic materials learner authentic is suggested. Finally, a three-week supplementary English programme, which was devised for a group of Hong Kong Polytechnic students based on these principles, is described.

Introduction

In the last ten years the use of authentic materials has become common in classroom teaching. However, the question of whether such materials appear authentic to the language learner seems to go unasked.

Some teachers assume that they can achieve the purposes of communicative teaching simply by giving learners an authentic text, or engaging them in authentic discourse. They seem unaware that authentic materials can appear 'unauthentic' to learners, just as unauthentic materials can appear 'authentic'. In practice, the extent to which materials appear authentic to learners seems to depend very much on how they are presented to them.

Text authenticity and learner authenticity

In this paper, 'text authenticity' is defined in terms of the origin of the materials, while 'learner authenticity' refers to the learner's interaction with them, in terms of appropriate responses and positive psychological reaction.

According to Widdowson (1980), proper interaction between learners and materials will not occur unless the learner can respond to the materials 'appropriately'. This suggests that authenticity can only be achieved when there is agreement between the material writer's intention and the learner's interpretation. However, it seems that this view needs to be expanded, since whether the congruence can be attained also depends in part on the learner's affective and cognitive responses to the materials, his or her perception of their inherent interest and usefulness. Clarke (1989) and Bacon and Finnemann (1990) also find it natural for the learner's perceptions to affect the outcome of learning. Thus, learner authenticity should refer not only to appropriate responses to the materials, but also to positive perceptions of them.
Looking at authenticity in this way, we can conclude that textually authentic non-textbook materials will not necessarily be learner authentic, and that textually unauthentic textbook materials will not necessarily be learner unauthentic.

**Features of textually authentic materials**

A text is usually regarded as textually authentic if it is not written for teaching purposes, but for a real-life communicative purpose, where the writer has a certain message to pass on to the reader. Because of this intrinsically communicative quality, many teachers assume that all textually authentic materials are authentic to learners, and that continuous exposure to such materials will provide for their longer-term communicative needs.

Authentic texts are often regarded as more interesting than textbook materials because they can be more up-to-date, and related to everyday issues and activities. Linguistically, however, they tend to be more difficult, being unsimplified, with ungraded syntactic patterns and vocabulary.

**Features of learner-authentic materials**

According to Breen (1985), the nature, type, and topic of a text decide whether it is authentic, not just its authentic quality. He illustrates his argument by pointing out that a poem in a coursebook which might be used for teaching purposes is authentic in nature, and provides learners with a basis for genuine communication, because the poet uses language to stimulate our interpretation of his message.

From the learner’s viewpoint, authentic materials are motivating, interesting, and useful, with content that does not cause them culture shock or discomfort (Young 1980: 224). Their rhetorical structure must be appropriate to learner’s needs and learning purposes (Widdowson 1980). Krashen (1982) suggests that the linguistic features of comprehensible input should be just a little beyond the learner’s current linguistic competence. When learners read an authentic text, their prior knowledge, interest, and curiosity make it easier for them to engage with it.

To summarize, we can say that learner-authentic materials are mainly learner-centred, and that they can serve affectively to promote learners’ interest in language learning. In cognitive terms, they can provide learners not only with a chance to develop their linguistic and communicative competence, but also with an awareness of conventions of communication, which will enable them to use appropriate styles in different communicative contexts (Bacon and Finnemann 1990).

**Making textually authentic materials learner authentic**

Because of their intrinsically communicative quality, textually authentic materials tend to have greater potential for being made learner authentic than textually unauthentic materials. This view has been supported by Alderson (1980: 134) who points out that when they cannot find commercially-published materials to meet their learners’ needs, teachers start to produce their own materials in order to simulate...
learning activities appropriate to their real-world needs. Research has shown that the majority of students prefer non-textbook materials to textbook materials (Bacon and Finnemann 1990, Allen et al. 1988). However, two questions remain: How can we make materials really authentic to learners? Can good and interesting materials by themselves elicit positive affective and cognitive responses from learners, especially in a classroom learning context?

Breen (1985: 61–7) makes a concrete suggestion by claiming that there are four factors involved in establishing text and learner authenticity:

—What is an authentic text?
—For whom is it authentic?
—For what authentic purposes?
—What is authentic to the social situation of the classroom?

Here the author is drawing our attention to the fact that, apart from the materials themselves, there are four other aspects to consider in order to facilitate an interaction between learners and materials. In pedagogical terms, these aspects might be defined as text factor (materials selection), learner factor (individual differences), task factor (task design), and learner setting factor (learning environment). To which could be added one more—the teacher factor (the teacher’s attitude and teaching approach).

**Importance of a teacher factor**

The teacher plays an important role, because even if the materials are learner authentic they will cease to be so if the teacher assumes an authoritarian role in class, or opts for a traditional teaching approach which does not give students the chance to interact with one another. Thorp (1991) and Tudor (1993) suggest that teachers who are friendly, understanding, and sensitive to learners’ needs, and who also have high cultural awareness, will be more likely to create a good learning atmosphere, and to hold discussions with learners on material content, teaching methodology, and evaluation.

**Relationship between the learner authenticity factors**

The five factors mentioned above are interrelated, and each will contribute to the quality of learner authenticity. As users of the materials, the needs of learners should play a central role, and govern factors of text, task, teacher, and learner setting. This view is supported by Clarke (1989), who points out that learner influence on the language teaching process is potentially significant, both at the macro level of syllabus design and at the micro level of what is done within each lesson.

**Textually authentic materials selection**

As pointed out above, textually authentic materials are not inherently learner authentic. A careful and wise selection of materials focused on learners is a ‘must’ if we want to obtain a positive response from them. The following are suggested guiding principles for making textually authentic materials learner authentic:

**Text authenticity and learner authenticity**
Designing learner authentic tasks

If we want tasks to be accessible to learners then, like materials, they should be learner authentic. The task design stage is crucial when using authentic materials, and the following points should be considered:

- In real-life communicative situations it is very common to use more than one language skill to achieve different communicative purposes, and for this reason an integrated skills approach is recommended.
- Contexts have to be provided for tasks, so that learners can practise the skills in a natural, meaningful, and relevant way.
- Tasks must have task validity, i.e. the content and nature of the task should develop the language ability we want learners to practise (Bachman 1990).
- The task content should be related to the authentic materials selected, so that learners can use them as a springboard for the task.
- Whether the task is used as pre-activity, practice activity, or post-activity depends on the course objectives, the skill(s) to be practised, and learners’ preferences.

Practical applications

A programme based on the above principles was devised for a group of BA part-time Social Work students at Hong Kong Polytechnic on a three-week supplementary English programme. The aim of the course was to improve their general English proficiency. Textually authentic materials such as newspaper articles were used because of their greater potential for being made learner authentic. In ideal circumstances, students would have been encouraged to choose their own materials and design their own learning tasks. However, it was felt that this particular group did not have the learner-training background and experience necessary to make these choices by themselves.

Materials were prepared for the students, based on the responses they gave to a needs analysis questionnaire completed on registration. It was hoped that, by identifying their needs and interests, the materials
selected would be relevant and useful. A topic approach was used for materials selection, to help identify learners’ interests. The students were asked which topic areas they were interested in. As they were full-time social workers, issues such as teenage suicide and problems of the elderly were used. They were also asked which skills and activities (e.g. conversation, discussion, report writing, memo writing) they regarded as important to them in their academic studies and future careers.

The same questionnaire was sent to the English teacher and course leader of the students’ parent department, to help ensure that we had a balanced view of students’ actual needs and interests.

**Text selection**

It was found that most students preferred the topic on teenage suicide. Articles were chosen on the selection criteria discussed above, with special attention to length and linguistic difficulty, since as part-time students they could not afford to spend hours struggling with long, complex articles.

**Task design**

The questionnaire results indicated that students would have to do a lot of report writing, oral presentation, and project work in their academic courses and later careers. Appropriate tasks were therefore designed, using realistic work-environment contexts, all related to one another around the same theme. The following examples show some of the tasks students could choose from:

*Role-play activity* The death of Yu Po-shan has once again drawn the public’s attention to the problem of teenage suicide. You are the school social worker at Po-shan’s school and your supervisor wants you to conduct an investigation into the causes of this tragedy. You decide to hold a meeting with the Principal, Po-shan’s class teacher, and his mother. (Read the newspaper articles before doing this activity. They will give you ideas and some relevant vocabulary).

*Report writing* After the meeting, your supervisor wants you to write a short report on Po-shan’s death. This should include: Introduction, Action taken/Procedure, Results, and Conclusion/Recommendations.

*Project* Your supervisor wants you and your colleague(s) to organize a seminar for teachers and parents on teenage suicide. In order to give some solid suggestions on how to solve this problem, you decide to do a survey, and interview teenagers (13–16 years old) to get their opinions on this issue, and an idea of the sorts of problems they face in their daily lives. (Refer to the newspaper articles—they may give you ideas that will help in the design of your survey.)

*Short oral presentation* After doing the survey you are asked to give a short oral presentation to your supervisor and your colleagues on the results.

**Evaluation**

After the course, students were asked for their opinions of the materials and tasks they used. Most of them gave positive affective and cognitive
responses. They said that the materials and the tasks were both interesting and useful, as they were readable, accessible and, more importantly, gave them a chance to rehearse what they would have to face in the future. This suggested that materials and tasks were learner authentic.

**Conclusion**

There is no single model or framework which will fit all learning situations equally well. Widdowson (1984) has pointed out that there is no model of language which has the monopoly on truth, that captures reality. We need to be flexible and sensitive to the characteristics of learners if we want our materials to be learner authentic.

*Received November 1994.*

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Don Porter of the University of Reading and Bruce Morrison of the English Language Study Centre, Hong Kong Polytechnic, for their valuable comments on this paper. I also wish to thank Rodney Jones, Nora Honeyman, and Dick Powney for reading the preliminary version of this paper, which was presented at the ILE conference held in Hong Kong, December 1993.

**References**


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