

## Authentic Materials in ESL/EFL Classroom

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### Abstract

*Today foreign language teaching has been going through major methodological changes. Namely, pragmatic aspect of the language has started to be seriously considered, as well as teaching culture as part of a language course. The attempts to go beyond the traditional paradigm of a teacher-centered static closed classroom environment have introduced new language spaces such as global simulation, telecollaboration, virtual spaces that Web 2.0 tools provide, etc. All those extensively exploit authentic materials, the subject of our paper, that provide access to the non-sheltered, animate, and culturally loaded language. In our paper we will address the following three issues: authenticity as an obscure term, text modification approaches (simplification & elaboration), and bridging activities.*

**Keywords:** authentic materials, pragmatics, text modification approaches, bridging activities.

## Introduction

Today foreign language teaching has been going through major methodological changes. Namely, pragmatic aspect of the language has started to be seriously considered, as well as teaching culture as part of a language course. However, new objectives require re-consideration of the setting where these new goals are to be met. Thus, the attempts to go beyond the traditional paradigm of a teacher-centered static closed classroom environment have introduced new language spaces such as global simulation, telecollaboration, virtual spaces that Web 2.0 tools provide, etc. All those extensively exploit authentic materials, the subject of our paper, that provide access to the non-sheltered, animate, and culturally loaded language. It's not any longer a question of whether to use or not to use them but rather how to use them efficiently.

## Methodology

The organization of our paper will address the following three issues: authenticity as an obscure term, text modification approaches (simplification & elaboration), and bridging activities.

### *Relative Authenticity*

According to Gilmore, "authenticity is frequently used as a selling point in the marketing strategies of publishers" [Gilmore 2007, p.106]. Among the claims what makes it so are the tailored fit nature of authentic materials that are always available to meet specific needs of any student unlike textbooks that cater to a broader scope of audience; they offer much richer input due to the exploiting multilayered language with all complexities including pragmatics and frequent vocabulary surrounded by extensive contextualization; and authentic materials are, simply, more attractive since they are artifacts of the real world and they keep pace with the language, a living entity, reflecting its life cycles from the appearance of neologisms to turning into archaic and obsolete forms [Gilmore 2007, p.107; Lee 1995, p.324]. We would also like to note Wong's point of authentic texts that "can help us in helping students to generate a learning strategy for (note: the author's word choice preserved; [Wong et al. 1995, p.318]. We do agree that classroom presents a protective sheltered environment with knowledgeable instructor who either delivers that knowledge or coordinates co-construction of it unlike the situation that exists

outside the classroom space with no competent guiding in language learning or acquisition[Fahrutdinova et al.2014]. That way, the exploitation of authentic materials in a language classroom serves scaffolding purposes to let learners go on their own later on.

As there are supporters of authenticity there are expected to be balancing adversaries, as, for instance, Roessingh [Roessingh et al. 2004] with her debate that the materials learners need to promote reading abilities and language development in intermediate level are qualitatively and quantitatively distinct from what authentic texts may offer. Particularly, “failure to support learners through this transitional phase may result in short-circuiting, that is, an overemphasis on content acquisition at the expense of language-learning with the consequence of low plateau and fossilization” [p. 56]. She advocates for rewriting authentic materials “to render them useful as raw data for language development” while preserving their natural “look and feel” through “intentional patterning, recycling, and text enrichment” [p.49]. In essence, she argues against the commonly accepted perception of authentic materials as powerful in making language learning implicit, since the focus is moved from the form to the conveyed message. Both viewpoints have a right to exist, the suggestion for further research though is how much of the correct form our learners acquire while we try to deflect their attention with the content through authentic texts.

However, all that glitters is not gold. Taylor’s discussion on ‘inauthentic authenticity or authentic inauthenticity’ could be a good start to the debate of what is considered to be authentic, since this term is quite relative and it might change the definition depending on the angle-of-view. He talks about Breen’s classification of the four authenticity types, consisting of *authenticity of the texts* as input for our students, *authenticity of learners interpretation* of those texts, *authenticity of the tasks* favorable to language learning, and *authenticity of language learning classroom* [in Taylor 1994, p.1, Breen 1985]. Similar attempts to approach the issue of authenticity were made by Gilmore in his cumulative coverage of all the meanings related to authenticity in the literature among which are “1) *the language* produced by native speakers for native speakers in a particular language community; 2) *the language* produced by a real speaker/writer for a real audience, conveying real message; 3) *the qualities bestowed on a text* by the receiver, in that it is not seen as something inherent in a text itself, but is imparted on it by the reader/listener; 4) *the interaction* between students and teachers and is a ‘personal process of engagement’; 5) *the*

types of task chosen; 6) the social situation of the classroom; 7) assessment; 8) culture and the ability to behave or think like a target language group in order to be recognized and validated by them” [Gilmore 2007, p.98]. Widdowson argues that authenticity was mistakenly attributed to the texts, while it is a characteristic of relationship between the learner and the text, the task and the text, and the setting and the text. Genuineness is apparently what Breen meant under the first authenticity type, a characteristic of a text and an absolute quality [in Taylor 1994, p.2, Widdowson 1978]. Trying to think of a metaphorical example, we came up with the idea of genuine leather. Genuine is a characteristic of the material, however, to use genuine leather by a vegan would be *inauthentic* (that is a relationship) though the product still remains genuine in its quality.

Having discussed advocates and opponents of authentic texts in ESL/EFL classroom, the relative notion of authenticity, and the subtle contrastive shades in synonyms *genuine* and *authentic*, one more relevant issue, that is also heatedly discussed in the literature, demands attention, namely, which culture to target in ESL/EFL materials. Cortazzi et al. suggest that there are three types of textbooks on the market: 1) those that teach students’ own culture; 2) the ones that teach the target-language culture; and 3) those that exploit ‘*cultura franca*’ [in Gilmore 2007, p.105; Cortazzi et al. 1999]. Alptekin’s objection is that the 2<sup>nd</sup> type of textbooks are detrimental to foreign language learning due to the fact that material developers neglect the fact that learners rely on their already established knowledge when developing new systemic knowledge, and, consequently, the latter fails at fitting correctly in the already existent systemic knowledge. The worst that might happen as a result of one’s exposure to the unknown target-language culture, according to him, and obviously highly exaggerated, is “psychological problems affecting the learner’s mental equilibrium negatively”, the examples of which are schizophrenia, regression, and reluctance to learning [Alptekin 1993, p.139]. Alptekin distinguishes the problems that target-language materials apparently provoke such as students’ lack of experience with that culture, thus he denies perceiving target-language culture introduction as an enriching contact practice but rather prefers to see inexperience of learners as a static dimension. Among the rest are alien modes of behavior, ownership of language (native speaker vs. *lingua franca*), and stereotyping [p.141]. Gilmore makes this article’s critique evident [2007, p.105]. For instance,

Alptekin's call for using students' own culture in EFL classroom as a way to reinforce their national identity in the world dominated by western paradigm was challenged for being "rather patronizing, underestimating, as it does, the non-native speakers' ability to take from the language materials only what they consider useful, and to appropriate English for their own needs" [p.105]. Other possible dangers of Alptekin's argument according to Gilmore are erroneous assumption by students that all the cultures operate similarly and the danger of discouraging language learners' curiosity in other cultures [p.105]. Though in the beginning of his article Alptekin makes an impression of demanding a total discard of target-language culture teaching, he doesn't sound that categorical in pedagogic the implications he offers. Namely, he refers to universal concepts in introducing unfamiliar data and he advocates for *cultura franca* [p.142]. However, this whole argument was possible due to the discussion of English language classroom; hardly would it work with any other language.

#### *Text Modification Approaches*

Every medal has its reverse. Authentic materials do not 'ennoble' language classroom by its mere raw presence. To benefit from them a certain amount of modification is required. How much authenticity remains in them after that is a different discussion. Thus, actually, authentic materials utilization does not mean lesser work load but rather a heavier one for an educator or a material developer granted that they are in easy access in the Internet. Gilmore agrees with factors that may define kinds of modifications needed by a natural baseline text [Gilmore 2007, p.109]. Among them are learner proficiency, mode (spoken or written), text features (lexical density, rhetorical style, etc.), types of adjustments (linguistic, syntactic, rate of delivery, etc.), topic familiarity, and finally approach taken (simplification or elaboration) [Abdrfikova et al. 2014].

The benefits of simplified language materials [SLM] have long been contested. It has been argued that SLM lead learners to develop reading strategies that are inappropriate for unmodified English [Rix 2009, p.96]; by reducing linguistic and extralinguistic cues, they, ironically, increase the difficulty of the text for learners; simplification can cause unnaturalness at the discourse level since the chances of elaboration of the input by NS to NNS are higher in real life

[Gilmore 2007, p.110]; removal of possibly unknown items from a text at the expense of comprehension will deny learners access to the items they need to learn thus negatively affecting their output [Yano 1994, p.194]. Leowin his study on the effects of simplification through the rationale of intake (Leow 1993) disputes the results of studies by Krashen [1989], Long [1985], and McLaughlin [1987] who stated that SLM positively affects comprehensibility of a text, by reducing cognitive demand they allow learners to focus on forms. Operating within Corder's [1967] notion of *intake* Leow comes up with findings that deny SLM's beneficial role in facilitating learners' intake of linguistic items. Thereby his appeal is to stick to unmodified authentic texts utilization since the amount of efforts, time and expertise needed to authentic text simplification seems to be an unreasonable expense [Leow 1993, p.344].

However, before losing faith in the appropriation of authentic texts for language learners let us consider text elaboration practice that, referencing to Yano, consists in parenthetical expansion of key terms and concepts in the initial text [Yano 1994, p.213]. Elaboration, though a reverse of the simplification process, owes its success to "the clarity of references to unfamiliar concepts, the removal of pronouns with unclear antecedents, the deletion of irrelevant details in distracting phrases, and the highlighting of important concepts" [Yano 1994, p.190]. Yano's study on the effects of simplified and elaborated texts on foreign language reading comprehension [Yano 1994] has indicated that both text modification approaches are of help to students in extracting surface information from a fragment, but elaboration furthermore allows inferencing about possible meanings by providing rich semantic detail. Gilmore makes similar claim mainly about the original richness of a text that elaboration partially helps to preserve, that in turn allows catering to broader scope of learners' needs [Gilmore 2007, p. 111]. Curiously enough, Yano has a completely opposite viewpoint on unmodified texts than Leow does. Reportedly, unmodified and simplified texts fall in one category "providing less context for stimulating the deeper pragmatic linkage necessary for inferring the consequence of passage meanings". Unmodified texts underperform (the author's verb choice - *fail*) here due to concepts being obscured by organizational and lexical detail [Yano 1994, p.214]. Thus it seems Leow has started the research but lacked subjects of analysis to make valid claims about which of modification approaches to favor, whereas Yano is a step ahead.

*Bridging Activities*

Modification approaches, i.e. simplification and elaboration, or decisions to leave authentic texts in the original form that we have discussed so far imply teacher-execution. However, as Yano states, to stimulate learners intellectually and develop their reliability on contextual guesses and learning a language through content, authentic materials should match their interest and maturity [Yano 1994, p. 215]. Now to diminish the discrepancy between teacher intuitions of what learners might find enthralling and motivating and actual learners' interests Thorne and Reinhardt's [2008] pedagogical model of 'bridging activities' come into play. The authors propose this model in dealing with advanced foreign language proficiency in the context of emerging and present internet communication and data sharing communities. It is discussed how the modern world is unimaginable without having online accounts, avatars, live journals –any type of digital personal space that, in turn, involves digital mediation of linguistically structured identities in L1 and L2. Communicative genres in internet-mediated communicative environments, however, differ from analogue-normative textual conventions [Ostroumova et al. 2015]. Thus, in order to deal with those genres in L2 they require language proficiency and genre awareness as well as digital competency. The aim of this article is to approach methodologically internet communication in terms of internet-specific genres and apply it to explicit formal foreign language instruction. Bridging activities are constructed upon student-selected texts from their internet environment, contrastive analysis with their conventional formal counterparts, corpus-informed and qualitative discourse analysis of two types of texts. A lot of notions from Krashen's Theory of SLA are actualized in this language-awareness based pedagogical framework, for instance, input and monitor hypothesis, Vygotskian scaffolding theory, McCarthy and Carter's principles aiming to develop awareness of language as discourse, etc. In their study, the authors provide the following examples of new media literacies for which they are creating materials – instant messaging and synchronous chat, blogs and wikis, remixing (creative blend of existing cultural artifacts), and multiplayer online gaming. A pedagogical application of the Project would include a 3-phase cycle of activities such as observation and collection, guided exploration and analysis, and creation and participation. The authors also share specific ideas about possible activities in this cycle.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, as a next level of discussion about bringing authentic materials to a language classroom we see this particular model of bridging activities of adding immensely to the work methodology with the original texts. Here students are asked to critically define their own needs, followed by bringing relevant *to them* texts to the classroom, and, eventually, they are expected to work towards their needs under the teacher guidance. If we talk about authenticity as being a catalyst of students' motivation in a language classroom then we should definitely consider their own ideas of types of texts to be discussed.

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