

THE ROLE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN EFL EDUCATION: MAXIMIZING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract: *This paper attempts to explore the motivational effects that stem from the use of authentic materials in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning contexts. Additionally, it provides some suggestions with respect to how educators can frame materials to increase students' understanding and subsequently keep up and improve their motivation. Authentic materials have nowadays become an important part of second language classes mainly because they provide semantic input to students and enable them to interact with a wide variety of information that allows them not only to find inspiration but also to become motivated learners. Foreign language teachers use a wide variety of authentic materials, from menus, leaflets and magazine articles to audio materials, such as recorded radio programs, TV shows and movies. There are many reasons why these materials are used, but EFL teachers mostly view them as a means to provide students with real-world language input that is able to motivate them.*

Keywords: authentic materials, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), foreign language acquisition, language teaching, student motivation

1. Introduction

Most language educators usually follow the well-designed structure of a textbook since it has a lot of benefits to offer; the well-defined framework allows students to engage with the content while facilitating learning. Most of the textbooks also include grammar and vocabulary glossaries for quick reference. However, there are still plenty of occasions when educators – as well as students, most of the time – will wish to break away from the framework that textbooks offer in order to enhance learning and make it more productive. Using authentic materials is one of the methods that has proved to be particularly successful while learning English as a foreign language (EFL) is represented by the use of authentic materials. This approach not only supports students in their

understanding of the language, but also ensures long-lasting and effective learning outcomes.

Using authentic materials to teach a second language is not a recent development. Widdowson (1990) suggests that “It has been traditionally supposed that the language presented to learners should be simplified in some way for easy access and acquisition”; on the other hand, “nowadays there are recommendations that the language presented should be authentic” (p. 60) [1].

According to Rogers and Medley, language teachers should provide their students with the opportunity to develop and internalize all the skills that would help them cope with actual language outside of the classroom if they are to operate well in a foreign language. Language instructors

should “bring authentic materials into the classroom and make them consistently accessible to the students” (1998: 475) [2]. Thus, using authentic materials has developed into a rather simple and practical technique to help students become more confident in real-life situations and to enhance their conversational skills.

The present paper aims to provide a fresh perspective on how the effectiveness of EFL classes can be improved by using authentic materials. Classroom activities have shown that, when it comes to learning English as a foreign language, students face issues related to overall text comprehension, proficient reading, understanding native speakers, and having a conversation in the target language. Therefore, it is essential that teachers create real-life learning scenarios where students are able to practice language while utilizing authentic materials.

2. What are authentic materials?

Researchers have provided numerous definitions of what authentic materials are. The definition by Peacock (1997) states that authentic materials “have been produced to fulfill some social purposes in the language community” (p. 146) [3]. Nevertheless, it is quite unclear what this definition refers to when mentioning “social purposes.” Morrow suggests a more unambiguous definition: “a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort” (as cited in Gilmore, 2007, p. 98) [4]. Yet again, this definition also requires a bit more of precision since the term “real”, which sometimes can be biased, is viewed as the main catalyst for understanding the notion of “authentic materials.” Zyzik and Polio (2017) offer perhaps the most accurate definition, stating that a text can only be categorized as authentic if it has been produced for informative purposes, rather than for language instruction: “Authentic materials are those created for some real-world

purpose other than language learning, and often, but not always, provided by native speakers for native speakers” (p. 1) [5].

In other words, authentic materials can be seen as all the resources (texts, audio, videos, etc.) that have been created for native speakers. In the traditional ESL classroom, the materials used have long been created for second language learning, that is why they are structured in a specific manner to help students understand the language easier. Authentic materials can prove useful in supporting the entire learning process mainly because they help students develop a relationship with the language they are learning.

EFL teachers can use authentic resources to supplement the language structures provided in the textbooks. The following resources can be successfully employed as authentic materials during the ESL classes:

- **books** – can prove to be advantageous since they are challenging enough for the students, but they are not overwhelming; there are books of all lengths and difficulties that can be used in the EFL classroom;
- **magazines and newspapers** – many of them have digital versions which make them easier to access; they can be a great source of learning materials since they tackle current topics that students can relate to;
- **podcasts** – are a great source of authentic English materials especially if we take into consideration the fact that teachers can also use the transcripts to aid students in their learning process;
- **videos** – the same as podcasts, videos can be accompanied by transcripts; they are entertaining to use and can promote student engagement and motivation with the content that is being taught.

In these cases, students will be better equipped to strengthen their reading and listening skills; at the same time, these

materials can also be used to review information that has previously been delivered in order to establish solid learning results.

3. Using authentic materials in EFL teaching

One effective strategy for encouraging intrinsic motivation in EFL students is the use authentic materials and this is because usually learners are more likely to display interest and motivation when being exposed to resources that are authentic, interesting, and most of all, relevant.

In order to explain the connection between student motivation and the use of authentic materials, it is paramount to understand how motivation works.

Motivation plays a crucial role in determining student academic success and achievement. Motivation can be understood as the willingness, drive, and desire that students have to participate in academic activities, pick up new knowledge and abilities, and accomplish academic objectives.

There are several factors that can influence student motivation, including:

- personal goals and aspirations
- interest and curiosity
- a supportive learning environment
- feedback and recognition
- self-efficacy
- intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

The development of student motivation can be encouraged by establishing an encouraging and welcoming learning environment, giving students opportunities for independent choices, providing feedback on a regular basis, and acknowledging student accomplishments.

Gardner and Lambert (1959) conducted groundbreaking research on foreign language learner motivation. According to them, integrative motivation is a concept which refers to the fact that student motivation is generated by the desire to be incorporated in the group of foreign

language speakers [6]. Gardner and Lambert's idea has recently been questioned, particularly with reference to English language learners. But because English is a universal language, it has grown more challenging to pinpoint the precise group of people or learners that it is intended for. (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009) [7].

The Process-Oriented Model developed by Dörnyei in 2001 offers a significant rethinking of foreign language learner motivation. According to this model, student motivation suffers a series of changes or fluctuations over time. There are three stages in this framework:

- Preactional Stage – motivation must be provoked;
- Actional Stage – motivation must be actively preserved and supported or safeguarded;
- Postactional Stage – includes student reflection on their performance [8].

If we are to acknowledge that student motivation fluctuates over time, then it is the responsibility of educators to consider what steps to follow to either maintain or boost learner motivation. It is not enough to choose the appropriate authentic materials according to the language level of our students or to their interests.

Scaffolding is certainly crucial when trying to enhance student motivation in EFL learning. Through scaffolding, the teacher offers support regarding task comprehension and accomplishment, which increases the possibility that the students feel a sense of accomplishment upon completing the task, and, as a result, feel more motivated to complete the next task. In other words, motivation could be regarded as a result of achievement and task completion rather than the trigger of it. Providing positive learning experiences and a sense of enjoyment while using authentic materials can help students enhance their motivation for language learning. This leads

to more student exposure in terms of linguistic input, and, in turn, more language will be acquired, reducing the obstacles that EFL learners face as they continue to interact with the language. Authentic materials can thus become a part of a positive learning cycle that ultimately leads to an increment of students' confidence and desire to use the language.

There are various ways that educators can use scaffolding. It would be difficult to outline all of them within the limits of this paper; nevertheless, we consider it would be helpful to discuss several common strategies that teachers should employ to aid students in understanding authentic materials:

1. *Vocabulary support.* While using authentic materials, it can prove difficult for students to grasp the meaning of all vocabulary used. Therefore, it is essential to reduce linguistic obstacles by pre-teaching low-frequency vocabulary. An alternative to this method would be providing glosses of these terms.

2. *Concept-mapping.* This approach is effective when it comes to helping students comprehend the materials used.

3. *Schema activation.* It is common for teachers to find themselves compelled to explain concepts precisely because their students lack relevant background related to the topic comprised in the authentic materials. As a result, it is important to take the time to activate students' schemata to generate comprehension. This can be done through simple activities, such as asking students to discuss what they know about the topic tackled in the authentic material provided. When this is not sufficient, the teacher might need to provide the students with the necessary information to enable comprehension (*schema building*).

4. *Summarizing.* This technique is easy to use, and it can be applied both to written and audio texts. Inserting this type of activity is effective as it encourages students to develop a more in-depth understanding of the material used.

There are several advantages of using authentic materials in EFL. From a linguistic standpoint, it can be argued that authentic materials provide learners with a genuine portrayal of real-life language on which to focus, as opposed to the mannered, and sometimes artificial, language presented in textbooks.

Although instructional materials designed specifically for the purpose of learning a foreign language may make students feel at ease, they cover only a limited amount of grammar and vocabulary. Conversely, authentic materials are significantly more liable to give the students a more diverse language input [4].

Furthermore, by allowing students to engage with content that is similar to what they will likely experience outside of the classroom, these kinds of authentic texts improve their ability to understand the language.

Language teachers can support students in becoming more intrinsically motivated while interacting with the target language and culture. Using real materials to promote intrinsic motivation might involve various strategies such as:

- choosing materials that are relevant both to learners' interests and goals, as well as their level of English and age;
- providing opportunities for learners to interact with the materials in meaningful ways;
- encouraging learners to explore the materials on their own, rather than simply presenting them as classroom materials;
- providing feedback that focuses on the learners' engagement and effort, rather than simply on their performance. This could be done by praising students for their curiosity, their willingness to take risks in the process of language learning, or their ability to make connections between the materials used and their own lives.

Teachers should constantly be mindful of the students' proficiency level; this means

that the authentic text that they choose to use can remain the same, but they should adapt the activities and the tasks that the students need to perform, based on their language level. For instance, the activities can be tailored to the proficiency level of the students by helping beginners do comprehension tasks in their first language, while this should be limited when it comes to the more advanced students.

Recent studies (Marzban & Davaji, 2015 [9]; Belet Boyaci & Güner, 2018 [10]) have demonstrated that, aside from the linguistic advantages that authentic materials offer to students, they also provide a beneficial impact on student motivation. The fact that the language used in these texts is “real” gives the learners the sense that they are better engaged with the language and that everything they are learning could actually be used in real-life situations. As a result, learners experience a more profound connection with the language and become more committed to their studies. Students not only have better access to material, but they also feel more accomplished since they can extract, understand, and apply the knowledge from these texts. In other words, because authentic materials have more linguistic content than non-authentic materials, EFL learners are motivated to interact more with them than with non-authentic texts since they bring more benefits of comprehension.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, teachers need to take their time to provide necessary assistance to the students to improve their comprehension of authentic texts. The above-mentioned strategies are easy to implement and ought to prompt improved understanding, which will create a feeling of accomplishment, thus generating more motivated students.

EFL teachers use authentic materials because of the authenticity of the linguistic input that they offer. Exposing students to language usage outside of the classroom enables them to engage with concepts and information that may be difficult for them to access in their first language and, eventually, leads to student interaction with a wealth of linguistic input. Using authentic materials to teach English can assist students close the gap between *what* they learn in the classroom and *how* they apply it in real-life communication scenarios. Students are “exposed to more than just the language presented by the teacher and the textbook” (p. 105) [11]; through authentic materials they are exposed to genuine language as it is used by native speakers in everyday contexts. In essence, authentic materials represent an exceptionally viable method for fostering English learners’ skills and competencies, while proving a highly motivating training approach for foreign language learning.

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