

Critical View on Authentic Materials and Authenticity in EFL Classroom

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Abstract. There is now a general consensus in language teaching that the use of authentic materials is beneficial to the learning process. Why? Can we use them to teach students in China in which more emphasis is on structure not on communication? Is it necessary to use them under such conditions? And how? In order to answer these questions, we need to look at what is meant by authentic materials and their advantages in EFL classroom first. Then the author presents her own view on the use of authentic materials in EFL.

Keywords: Critical View, Authentic Materials, Authenticity, EFL Classroom.

1. Introduction

In China, most of the teachers work on specially contrived materials. Students are presented with over-familiar and artificial materials which do not focus on what they can bring to the text, but emphasize language items of structural usage. In this case, no real interaction takes place between the writer and the reader as the artificiality of the text means that no real message is being communicated. Reader is seen as the recipient of information or as an empty vessel that bring nothing to the texts. However, the artificial materials still has its place in China. The main reason is that using such materials is easy for learners to learn the structure, which is the main emphasis in the exam. But I strongly argue that it is necessary to let students have an experience of what a real language is and how native English speakers use it. Otherwise they will be misled into thinking that English communication in the real world is exactly the same as what they experience in the textbook after several years of learning English. We then need to understand what authentic materials are, and their benefits and drawbacks. We admit authentic texts are sometimes more difficult for learners to understand, so we need to carefully choose text for them.

2. The Definitions of Authenticity and Authentic Materials

The use of authentic materials in foreign language learning has a long history and there is a considerable range of meanings associated with authenticity. The notion of authenticity was popularized in the 1980s and many scholars started to identify various degree of authenticity. For example, Rogers(1998) defines authentic materials as ‘appropriate’ and ‘quality’ in terms of goals, objectives, learner needs and interest and ‘natural’ in terms of real life and meaningful communication[1]. Harmer(1991) says that authentic texts are those which are designed for native speakers: they are real texts designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language in question[2]. Nunan(1989,p54) defines authentic texts as “any materials which have not been specifically produced for the purpose of language teaching[3].” The advantages of using authentic texts have been widely discussed and recognized. For example, Guariento & Morley(2001) in their article argue that both the effective and affective factors make teachers and learners favor authentic texts. In other words, the use of authentic texts can help bridge the gap between classroom knowledge and students’ ability in real world events and it is also considered to be one way of maintaining or increasing students’ motivation for learning because using authentic texts makes learners feel that they are learning the ‘real’ language that is used by the English native speakers[4].

Of course, authenticity in classroom refers to not merely authentic texts, but also “authenticity of tasks conductive to language learning.” So in the actual design, authentic tasks should also be included.

The teaching materials or course books seem to share the notion of teaching and learning for both linguistic and non-linguistic purposes, since they mention the following objectives: to consolidate language, learn language, and develop reading skills, to use language for real purposes, to develop skill proficiency, and to use language outside the class, and show the target language in a natural context.

Several factors now have an influence on the selection of texts for the EFL classroom. Among them, authenticity and reader interest are two of them which are placed high priority by some researchers when choosing learning materials for language learners. The notion of 'authenticity', together with that of 'simplication', has been a matter of debate among teachers and researchers for decades. An authentic texts has traditionally been defined as one written for native speakers. Another interpretation is that proposed by Widdowson (1976), for whom authenticity lies in the interaction between the reader and the discourse, that is to say, authenticity depends on the reader's appropriate response[5]. As a result, he does not recommend the use of authentic texts at earlier stages, and propose the 'doctoring' of texts, using simple accounts to achieve appropriate response. Davies (1984) also favors simplication; but his identification of authenticity and reader's response leads him to consider simplified texts as authentic[6].

3. The Benefits of Authentic Materials

Many researchers have claimed that authentic materials have a positive effect on English learning, especially on learner's motivation in the foreign language classroom. Many justifications have been put forward to support these claims, and one of the most commons is that authentic materials are inherently more interesting than artificial ones owing to their purpose of communicating rather than highlighting target language, though artificial materials mentioned here are not only produced to focus on form. With all the benefits of authentic materials outlined by various researchers, the following ones are what I strongly hold with:

3.1 'Real' Language in Real Life

The final purpose of learning a foreign language is to use it in real life, no matter in ways of reading, listening, speaking or writing. Authentic materials are conducive for EFL learners to learn the language in real life. Learning languages from contrived materials can not enable learners to use the language smoothly in real life, and they will then feel frustrated after learning a language for so many years when the real life target language are exposed to them. For example, in contrived materials, we never see some of the expressions which are frequently seen on the time table of a board in a train station in actual life. I remember my experience in UK when I caught a train. The train did not arrive on time for a certain reason. I did not know why, so I was very worried and did not know how to do until a native speaker pointed to the board and explained to me what the words (which are often seen in the artificial course books but with the different meaning this time)on the board meant. Therefore, with the authentic materials in class, students' written and spoken words will expand, and meanwhile, experiencing real world events through authentic materials helps learners mend the gap between classroom knowledge and real life knowledge.

3.2 Cultural Content in Authentic Materials

Authentic materials can provide students the culture of that country, which is very important for a learner who is learning its language. The cultural content of that country will increase EFL learners' motivation in learning English and thus improve their ability to make real life conversations. With different culture content in authentic materials, EFL learners will be attracted and stimulated to leaner the language better. Furthermore, culture content in magazines, websites, movies and newspapers is updated at a fast frequency, and more visually attractive as well as being interactive, therefore promoting a more active way to accept rather than a passive one[7] (Berardo,2006). In addition, language learning is often considered tedious and boring, but with the culture content involved, learners will be attracted by the culture difference and then be attracted to

learn the language because in order to understand the culture on authentic materials, he or she must master the language of that country. Kilickaya (2004) also points out that from exposure to a certain cultural content, learners will master the language better, in terms of grammar, syntax and semantics[8]. Therefore culture learning and language learning combine with each other and complement each other. Culture learning from authentic materials is another important factor that can help EFL learners with their language learning.

3.3 Linguistic Achievement Authentic Materials Provided

From the standpoint of linguistics, authentic materials will provide learners with the flexibility of learning, abundance of knowledge and informality of expressions. Even advanced non-native learners have problems in distinguishing idiomatic and non-idiomatic expressions and this can be charged for the inefficiency of natural language knowledge provided in the classroom. Authentic materials can provide learners such natural language, and will bring them many ways to fine-tune their language proficiency which is not included from contrived course books. In addition, using authentic materials in class can greatly improve learners' reading skills because new vocabulary and expressions are presented. Besides, Guo's (2012) research shows students who used authentic materials performed much better in the exams than those who used contrived course books[9]. This research shows the effect of authentic materials used in classroom is more significant than contrived course books. In short, authentic materials can help learners learn and use the language better.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

With all the benefits mentioned above, I have something to say about the actual use of authentic materials in EFL classroom. As is shown above, in total, authentic materials can bring the learner motivation in learning, in terms of providing them real language in real life, culture content, and better linguistic learning. This is what most researchers and teachers would agree on. But there are also some scholars who will hold a different view. For example, Peacock(1997) in his study conducted in a South Korean university EFL institute tries to investigate whether authentic materials increase the classroom motivation of learners. His research result shows that while on-task behavior and observed motivation increased significantly when authentic materials were used, self-reported motivation only increased over the last 12 of the 20 days of the study[10]. However, learners also reported authentic materials to be significantly less interesting than contrived materials. His research results coincide with some other authors (Willams(1983), Freeman and Holden(1986, and Morrison[11,12]) who maintain authentic materials reduce learner motivation because they are too difficult.

In order to make the best use of authentic materials to help learners in language learning, not hinder them in learning because of the text's difficulties and some irrelevant information in authentic materials, as we are choosing authentic materials we should carefully select materials and try to design authentic tasks for learners in the classroom as well. My criteria for the selection of authentic materials are following. The materials should be relevant to learner needs; the topic need to be interesting to learners. The materials which can satisfy both linguistic and cognitive demands are essentially recommended and all the materials chosen must be materials with moderate difficulty.

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