Enriching English Language Learning Ambiance with Authentic Materials

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Abstract: Generally students do not get exposure to the effective usage of the language in learning English as foreign language context. Learners feel it difficult to apply their linguistic knowledge outside of the classroom and thus knowledge remains inert. To address this issue, the class is expected to facilitate authentic material for motivation besides the process of acquisition. Maintaining essential conditions with adopted and adapted authentic material facilitates authentic interaction in the classroom.

Language learning is a process of enculturation (Brown, et al., 1989) where the authentic activity and social interaction are the central components of learning. Once activity, context and culture are separated in the class, learning will be decontextualized. This paper analyzes the use of authentic materials by providing appropriate ambiance in the class and suggests that the criteria for material development should be clear, accountable, specific and valid to be really useful for language learning. Authentic materials should be prepared and practiced based on such core principles as "the ability to interest and engage learners, to be meaningful and challenging and to have a sustained positive impact" (Cooker, 2008). Further, it proposes the authentic learning principles that can be used to guide the design of language learning activities.

Key Words: Language Learning, Authentic Materials, Appropriate Ambiance, Authentic Learning Principles

Introduction

Learners' achievement in language acquisition largely depends on their surroundings. Teachers and their professionalism, parents and their support and social situations of learners are of a considerable importance and influence their approach. Learners who reached certain level in developing skills in their native language are likely to have fewer problems in acquiring those skills in other languages. Teachers execute various pedagogical approaches analytic / synthetic and different methods like behavouristic, cognitive and communicative during various activities according to the needs of the particular groups of learners. They encourage students to access to cable and satellite TV, radio, available books and magazines that provide them exposure to the use of authentic language and help them master it. Learners who could not get exposure to the

effective usage of the language are provided with the authentic material for motivation besides the process of acquisition. Adapted and adopted real-life material provides ambiance conducive for language acquisition.

Willis (1996) argues that while a learner is acquiring another language, s/he naturally focuses on meaning; however, "in classrooms, many speaking activities involve students in producing a given form or pattern, or expressing a given function, rather than saying what they feel or want to say" (p. 7). Van Gorp and Bogaert (2006) suggest that "focus[ing] on linguistic knowledge as a goal in itself, [and] leaving it up to the learner to create or search for opportunities for their functional use" (p. 80) hinders learners from becoming fluent users of the target language, being able to communicate in it and reaching to the desired competence level. Therefore, learners must be given opportunities to be exposed to the authentic use of language if it is aimed to use the target language like a native speaker (Harmer, 2007, pp. 47-48; Willis, 1996, pp. 11-14).

Maintaining essential conditions for authentic interaction in the classroom is important aspect of EFL class. In many language classrooms teachers nominate the topic, control the turn-taking to speak and/or to answer the questions, decide on how to do the activities and evaluate the responses of the learners (Van den Branden, 2006; Willis, 1996). Learners' interaction with learning resources, such as texts, in many classes is also inauthentic. Learners are usually given some texts to read followed by comprehension / referential questions. In the day to day situations people do not read to answer comprehension or referential questions but to gather information in an area of interest (Breen, 1985) or to solve problems (Jonassen, Howland, Moore, & Marra, 2003). During this information gathering process, the reader/s choose texts that they have interest in and read to develop their knowledge further or to do critical reading. They may also use this knowledge in the future, for example, while producing their own texts, whether it is an essay, report or an article, or they might recall it while discussing the topic in social or academic settings.

Lebow and Wager (1994) argue that teachers often give learners low-level work consisting of recognition and reproduction of memorized information or practice of isolated skills and do not supply contexts for functional uses. The main target for students, for this reason, becomes passing tests rather than making connections to the world around them (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989a; Clayden, Desforges, Mills, & Rawson, 1994; Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990a; Herrington, et al., 2010; Perkins, 1999; Pugh & Bergin, 2005). As a result many students find it difficult to apply their knowledge outside of the classroom and thus knowledge remains inert (a term used by Whitehead, 1932).

Passive or Inert knowledge

Perkins (1999) suggests that "inert knowledge sits in the mind's attic, unpacked only when specifically called for by a quiz or a direct prompt but otherwise gathering dust" (p. 8). He also notes that even though it is hoped that the majority of gained knowledge at school is aimed to be used actively outside school, it remains inert. Students are unable to make connections between what they have learned in school subjects to the world around them. Having knowledge and being able to use it are two fundamental things that indicate that an educational practice has accomplished its aim by equipping learners with the required tools instead of merely facts. However, traditional schooling and thus many curricula orients towards the transfer and retention of knowledge as knowledge reproduction, which is done in an abstract and decontextualized form (Brown, et al., 1989a; Herrington, et al., 2010). For many students and teachers, passing exams is the sign of having the relevant knowledge. However, even though passing exams to some extend may show the success of students at school, students still may not have the ability to use a domain's conceptual tools in a novel context. Thus, knowledge gained in the class remains inert and students are not able to apply their knowledge to real-world problems outside of school.

Brown, Collins and Duguid emphasize the importance of the separation between 'knowing and doing'. Their analogy is based on conceptual knowledge being similar to a set of tools and thus they argue that it is very common for a person to have the knowledge but be unable to use it when relevant. They endorse the idea that "knowledge is situated, being in part a product of the activity, context, and culture in which it is developed and used" (p. 32). If activity, context and culture are separated, learning will be decontextualized. Nowhere is this more relevant than in language learning. It is very common for language teachers to see their students talking about grammar rules wisely but be unable to use them in communicative activities, let alone in unstructured, ill-defined novel contexts outside the classroom. Johnston and Goettsch (2000) argue the difference between understanding (knowing what) and production (knowing how) in language education.

Larsen-Freeman (2003) contends that while language learners can cope with the presentation and practice sections of a lesson, they struggle at the production stage which is the more communicative part of a lesson that necessitates transfer of knowledge. She indicates that despite the fact that students understand and thus know a rule, they are not necessarily able to apply it. Hence, their output may be inaccurate and/or disfluent. She notes that "students can recall the grammar rules when they are asked to do so but will not use them spontaneously in communication, even when they are relevant" (p. 8), a clear indication of inert knowledge. Therefore, she suggests that if it is aimed to help language learners overcome the inert knowledge problem, then grammar should be thought as something people do rather than people know (p. 143), a suggestion that aligns well with the construct of authentic and situated learning.

Types of Authentic Materials

Marrow opines that "a stretch of real language produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to carry a real message of some sort." Harmer says that authentic texts (either written or spoken) are those which are designed for native speakers: They are real text designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language in question. Nunan thinks that a rule of thumb for authenticity here is any material which has not been specifically produced for the purposes of language teaching. Based on these definitions, we can find the real meaning of authentic materials: they are real language; produced for the native speakers; designed without the teaching purposes. In this sense, there are a large amount of authentic materials in our life such as newspaper and magazine articles, TV and radio broadcast, daily conversations, meetings, documents, speech, and films. One of the most useful is the Internet. Whereas newspapers and other materials date very quickly, the Internet is continuously updated, more visually stimulating as well as interactive.

Authentic materials in language teaching are classified to use them as per the needs of a particular class. According to Gebhard, authentic materials can be classified into three categories.

➢ Authentic Listening-Viewing Materials: TV commercials, quiz shows, cartoons, news clips, comedy shows, movies, soap operas, professionally audio-taped short stories and novels, radio ads, songs, documentaries, and sales pitches.

➢ Authentic Visual Materials: Slides, photographs, paintings, children' artwork, stick-figure drawings, wordless street signs, silhouettes, pictures from magazine, ink blots, postcard pictures, wordless picture books, stamps, and X-rays.

➢ Authentic Text Materials: Newspaper articles, movie advertisements, lyrics to songs, restaurant menus, street signs, cereal boxes, information brochures, maps, TV guides, comic books, greeting cards, and bus schedules.

David Gardner and Lindsay Miller point to different sources, including not only the obvious ones like newspapers, magazines, and brochures, but also user manuals, foreign mission information, airline promotional material, etc. Teachers can also use old course books, and supplementary books, and there is now a huge range of graded readers, which will cater for the reading and vocabulary development of a wide range of learners. These language resources in can be kept as materials / references. The material is to be kept with clear instructions to use them to improve / practice language skills.

Authentic and Unauthentic Materials

Learners are to be trained to use authentic materials for improving linguistic proficiency. Individual records of their self-access work, showing what they studied when and with what result is to be arranged to estimate their learning. Authenticity should not be thought of as a simple two-way issue – either authentic or unauthentic. It is, rather, a matter of degrees or types. Authenticity in materials design and learning activities has been an integral part of English class, chiefly because it increases student motivation due to face validity, provides appropriate cultural knowledge, exposes to 'real' language, takes attention to future student needs and provides more creative teaching environment (Richards). The five types are:

➢ Genuine input authenticity: The input is created only for the realm of real life, but is used in language teaching.

➢ Altered input authenticity: There is no meaning change in the original input, but it is no longer exactly as it was because of changes like lexical glossing, visual resetting, or changes in pictures or colors.

➢ Adapted input authenticity: The input is created for 'real life' but adapted by the classroom teacher. Words and grammatical structures are changed for better comprehension.

➢ Simulated input authenticity: The input is created for the classroom and attempts to copy the style and format of the genuine. It may have many authentic text characteristics and is often indistinguishable from the genuine.

➢ Inauthenticity: The input is created for the classroom with no attempt to make the materials resemble genuine authentic materials though there may be a few, possibly incidental authentic features.

Tomlinson states that there are typically two sides in this debate: "One side argues that simplification and contrivance can facilitate learning; the other side argues that they can lead to faulty learning and that they deny the learners opportunities for informal learning and the development of self-esteem". Yet authenticity is not an easy concept to pin down. McDonough & Shaw note, "The issue of 'authenticity' has been somewhat controversial….". Dunkel points out that terms like "authentic language," "authentic discourse," and "authentic materials" are all defined in "holistic, vague, and imprecise ways." Beginners and lower proficiency students need contrived or artificial material to help them gain an initial understanding of basic elements of the language. Non-authentic materials are as valuable as authentic materials.

Authentic Learning: Learning and Enculturation

The foundation of situated learning is embedded in the apprenticeship system of learning, which does not necessarily require formal instruction (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning is a process of enculturation (Brown, et al., 1989a) where the authentic activity and social interaction are the central components of learning (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989b). An apprentice acquires the relevant knowledge in that community and its culture by taking "peripheral participation" and gradual increase of involvement in the direct and central practice of the activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Some key examples include the training of midwives, tailors, carpenters and builders.

Proponents of learning suggest that robust knowledge develops within the context of ordinary practices of that culture, and those ordinary practices are referred to as authentic activities (Brown, et al., 1989a; Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves, 2003; Herrington, et al., 2010; Lave & Wenger, 1991). One criticism made is, those skills and knowledge gathered in school type of activity / context can only be interpreted in the school context and cannot be applied in novel contexts when relevant. Thus, it is argued that any type of learning activity in school should mirror ordinary practices of that culture as closely as possible. Clarke (1989) exemplifies some tasks from language course books, such as Headway, that are designed to be used along with authentic materials. However, he argues that none of these activities are authentic since they do not have any relationship with the communicative purpose of the text. When authentic materials are used, electronic or paper based, the goal should not be answering comprehension or vocabulary questions but rather a communicative objective (Clarke, 1989; Gilmore, 2007; Swaffar, 1985). The communicative objective may be comparing, informing, persuading, analyzing, reporting or instructing, and it makes the author's goal and message explicit to the readers. This provides information exchange between the author and the reader. Lave and Wagner (1994) compared the characteristics of class-based learning activities to authentic activities and suggested that school activities are very different to real-life problem solving activities that actual practitioners do. Differentiation between the two forms on five dimensions is summarized below.

Table. 1

Differences between Real-life Activities and Class-based Activities

Real-life / Authentic Activities	*Class-based Activities*
Involves ill formulated problems and ill structured conditions.	Involves 'textbook examples' and well-structured condition.
Language using situations are embedded in a specific and meaningful context.	Activities are largely abstract and decontextualized.

Situations have depth, complexity and duration.	Activities lack depth, complexity and duration.
Involves cooperative relations and shared consequences.	Involves competitive relations and individual assessment.
Situations are perceived as real and worth attempting	Activities typically seem artificial with little relevance for students.

It appears clear that there are important ideas here for teachers of EFL seeking to increase the relevance and effectiveness of language learning in their classrooms.

Principles of Language Acquisition

Tomlinson & Masuhara suggests that the criteria for material development should be clear, accountable, specific and valid to be really useful for language learning. Considering their ideals of authentic materials for effective English language teaching / learning the following principles are suggested to prepare authentic materials for English class:

1. The learners are exposed to a rich, meaningful, and comprehensible input of language in use: In order to acquire the ability to use the language effectively the learners need a lot of experience of the language being used in a variety of different ways for a variety of purposes. They need to be able to understand enough of this input to gain positive access to it and it needs to be meaningful to them. (Krashen, 1999; Long, 1985; Tomlinson, 2010)

2. Engaged Learners both affectively and cognitively in the language experience: If the learners do not think and feel whilst experiencing the language, they are unlikely to achieve language acquisition and development. Thinking while experiencing language in use helps to achieve the deep processing required for effective and durable learning and it also helps learners to transfer high level skills such as predicting, connecting, interpreting and evaluating. This is true of learners' responses to the content of what they are reading, writing, listening to or saying but the emotions stimulated by the self-access learning experience need to be positive and pleasurable to maximize the learning. (Arnold, 1999; Tomlinson 2011)

3. Language learners can benefit from noticing salient features of the input: If learners notice for themselves how a particular language item or feature is used they are more likely to develop their language awareness. They are also more likely to achieve readiness for acquisition. Such noticing is most salient when a learner has been engaged in a text and then returns to it to make discoveries about its language use. This is likely to lead to the learner paying attention to similar uses in subsequent inputs and to increase the potential for eventual acquisition. (Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Tomlinson, 2007)

4. Provide opportunities to use language for communicative purposes: Communicating in the target language allows learners to gain feedback on the hypotheses they have developed and on their ability to make use of their hypotheses effectively. If they are interacting, they are also being pushed to clarify and elaborate and they are also likely to elicit meaningful and comprehensible input from their interlocutors. (Swain, 2005)

Now let us look into the authentic learning principles that can be used to guide the design of language learning activities. Drawing on the works on authentic learning environments by Herrington and Oliver (2000), Herrington, Oliver and Reeves (2003), the following aspects are to be suggested to design / practice authentic materials / activities.

- ➢ Need to have day to day life relevance

- ➢ Requires learners to define the tasks and sub-tasks needed to do an activity

- ➢ Comprises challenging tasks to be achieved over a period of time with collaborated work

- ➢ Provides the opportunity to examine the task using different resources and to reflect

- ➢ Facilitates the opportunity to assess the output

- ➢ Allows competing solutions and diversity of outcome

These guidelines provide the necessary and relevant conditions for bridging the gap between the classroom and the real world. Others (such as Tuttle 2007; and Rivers, 2010) have sought to create activities that are often fun, engaging and achievable within a classroom context, while also focusing on authentic aspects of language use.

Conclusion

Thus, the authentic task to be used in this proposed study aims to provide EFL learners with the necessary and relevant conditions to be able to use the target language in authentic contexts for authentic purposes. This helps to overcome the limitations of even the best face-to-face language learning/teaching settings. Then language acquisition depends less for its authenticity in "its native speaker teacher" (Felix, 2002, p. 7), and more in the distributed nature of the activities students perform and the resources that support them - across the whole learning environment.

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