Abstract

The topic provides general information about the authentic materials and their effective use in classrooms. There are different definitions for the authentic materials, but they do have something in common. All the definitions highlight the fact that authentic materials mean “exposure to real language and its use in its own community” (Widdowson, 1990). “Authentic materials are materials that we can use in the classroom and that have not been changed in any way for ESL students” (Sanderson, 1999). As a result of the researches carried out and the surveys conducted it has come out that there are many advantages in using the authentic materials. At the same time, there are a few disadvantages that teachers and students should be aware of when using different sources of authentic materials such as newspapers, TV programs, menus, magazines, the internet, movies, songs, brochures, comics, literature, etc. The paper shows how authentic materials can be used at any level in accordance with the students’ needs and knowledge.

Introduction

The use of authentic materials in an EFL classroom is what many teachers involved in foreign language teaching have discussed in recent years. There are persuasive voices insisting that the English presented in the classroom should be authentic, not produced only for instructional purposes. Generally, what this means is that authentic materials involve the language that naturally occurs as communication in the native speaker contexts of use, or rather in the selected contexts where standard English is the norm: real newspaper reports, real magazine articles, real advertisements, cooking recipes, horoscopes, etc. Most of the teachers throughout the world agree that authentic texts or materials are beneficial to the language learning process, but what is less agreed is when authentic materials should be introduced and how they should be used in an EFL classroom.

The definitions of authentic materials

The definitions of authentic materials are slightly different in literature written by different researchers of language. Rogers (1988) 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. Harmer (1991) defines authentic texts as “materials which are designed for native speakers; they are real texts; designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language”. Jordan (1997) refers to
authentic texts as “texts that are not written for language teaching purposes”. Peacock (1997) describes authentic materials as materials that have been produced to fulfill some social purpose in the language community. What we understand that is common in these definitions is “exposure to real language and its use in its own community” (Widdoson, 1990), in other words it is the benefit students get from being exposed to the language in authentic materials. In short, “authentic materials are materials that we can use with the students in the classroom and that have not been changed in any way for ESL students. A classic example would be a newspaper article that’s written for a native-English-speaking audience” (Sanderson, 1999).

Bringing authentic materials into the classroom can be motivating for the students, as it adds a real-life element to the student’s learning experience. Authentic materials is significant since it increases students’ motivation for learning, makes the learner be exposed to the “real” language. Of course, we should always remember that we should bear in mind the task, not the material. This means that, for example, instead of asking a beginner student to read a full-page article that’s over their heads, we should ask them to read the headline and guess what the article will be about.

The sources of authentic materials and their effects

What can serve as authentic materials? In today’s globalized world, examples abound, but the most commonly used perhaps are: newspapers, TV programs, menus, magazines, the internet, movies, songs, brochures, comics, literature (novels, poems and short stories), advertisements for events, course catalogues from schools and so forth. Such materials have their advantages and disadvantages to classroom students.

Advantages of using authentic materials

Using authentic material in the classroom, even when not done in an authentic situation, and provided it is appropriately exploited, is significant for many reasons. Some of them are:

- Students are exposed to real discourse, as in videos of interviews with famous people where intermediate students listen for gist. They provide exposure to real language.
- Authentic materials have a positive effect on learner motivation.
- “Authentic materials keep students informed about what is happening in the world, so they have an intrinsic educational value. As teachers, we are educators working within the school system, so education and general development are part of our responsibilities” (Sanderson, 1999).
- Textbooks often do not include incidental or improper English.
- Authentic materials can produce a sense of achievement, e.g., a brochure on England.
given to students to plan a visit.

• The same piece of material can be used under different circumstances if the task is different.

• Language change is reflected in the materials so that students and teachers can keep abreast of such changes.

• “Reading texts are ideal to teach/practice mini-skills such as scanning, e.g. students are given a news article and asked to look for specific information (amounts, percentages, etc.), basic students listen to news reports and they are asked to identify the names of countries, famous people, etc. (ability to detect key words)” (Martinez, 2002).

• Books, articles, newspapers, and so on contain a wide variety of text types, language styles not easily found in conventional teaching materials.

• Authentic materials can encourage reading for pleasure because they are likely to contain topics of interest to learners, especially if students are given the chance to have a say about the topics or kinds of authentic materials to be used in class.

• Authentic materials support a more creative approach to teaching.

Disadvantages of using authentic materials

We can claim that learners are being exposed to real language and they feel that they are learning the “real” language. These are what make us excited and willing to use authentic materials in our classrooms, but while using them, it is inevitable that we face some problems.

The disadvantages mentioned by several researchers are:

• Authentic materials may be too culturally biased, so unnecessarily difficult to be understood outside the language community.

• The vocabulary might not be relevant to the student’s immediate needs.

• Too many structures are mixed so lower levels have a hard time decoding the texts.

• Special preparation is necessary which can be time consuming.

• Too many different accents can be heard which can cause some confusion.

• The material can become outdated easily, e.g. news.

• There are many headlines, adverts, signs, and so on that can require good knowledge of the cultural background.

What can be done to overcome the difficulties we face?

Considering the advantages and disadvantages of using authentic materials, there comes the question of when authentic materials should be introduced and used in a classroom; in other words, can we use authentic materials regardless of our students’ level? Guariento & Morley (2001) claim that at post-intermediate level, the use of authentic material is
available for use in classrooms. This might be attributed to the fact that at this level, most students master a wide range of vocabulary in the target language and all of the structures. They also note that at lower levels, the use of authentic materials may cause students to feel de-motivated and frustrated since they lack many lexical items and structures used in the target language. Matsuata states that the use of authentic materials is a burden for the instructors teaching beginning students as they have to spend a lot of time to prepare for authentic materials regarding the ability level of the students.

Do all these mean we are not able to use authentic materials in lower-level classes apart from post-intermediate and advanced levels? According to the findings of the survey carried out by Chavez (1998), learners enjoy dealing with authentic materials since they enable them to interact with the real language and its use. Also they do not consider authentic situations or materials innately difficult. However, learners state that they need pedagogical support especially in listening situations and when reading literary texts such as the provision of a full range of cues (auditory and visual including written language).

We may conclude that learners feel better with authentic materials helping them get involved in the “real” language as long as we, as teachers, provide them with pedagogical support. In order to achieve this, we have a wide range of choices. Martinez (2002) suggests that teachers may use authentic materials for the learners to listen for the gist of the information presented and also he adds that by using authentic materials teachers will have the opportunity to encourage students to read for pleasure especially certain topics of their interest. Matsuta claims that using audio-visual materials aiding students’ comprehension is beneficial since it will prevent students especially beginning ones from being frustrated about authentic materials. Materials such as popular and traditional songs will help us to create a non-threatening environment. Guariento & Moley suggest that authentic materials should be used in accordance with students’ ability and add that suitable tasks can be given to learners in which total understanding is not important. According to Jordan, in the earlier stages, non-authentic materials can be used, but stresses that upon students’ dealing with materials from their own subject area, authentic materials should be introduced.

Conclusion

Many researchers have conducted studies about the authentic materials. They support the use of authentic material and do have different views, but they have in common one idea: “exposure”, exposure to “real language and real life”, in other words, the benefit students get from being exposed to the language in authentic materials. The authentic materials should be used in accordance with the students’ level of knowledge and the students should be helped by their teachers to overcome the difficulties they encounter.
Endnotes

1. Bruce Joyce: Models of teaching
2. http://www.bbc.co.uk/communicate/

References


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