

Authentic Materials and Cultural Content in EFL Classrooms

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This paper aims to answer the questions of when and how authentic materials should be used in EFL classrooms, and how cultural content may be included in the curriculum. To address these questions, the paper is organized in two parts. In the first part, the definition of authentic materials is given. Then advantages and disadvantages of the use of authentic materials are discussed. In the second part, the definition of culture is given and then, why and how cultural content should be used is discussed.

Introduction

The use of authentic materials in an EFL classroom is what many teachers involved in foreign language teaching have discussed in recent years. We have heard persuasive voices insisting that the English presented in the classroom should be authentic, not produced for instructional purposes. Generally, what this means is materials which involve language naturally occurring as communication in native-speaker contexts of use, or rather those selected contexts where standard English is the norm: real newspaper reports, for example, 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.

Authentic Materials: Definition

The definitions of authentic materials are slightly different in literature. What is common in these definitions is 'exposure to real language and its use in its own community'. Rogers (1988) defines it as 'appropriate' and 'quality' in terms of goals, objectives, learner needs and interest and 'natural' in terms of real life and meaningful communication (p. 467). Harmer (1991), cited in Matsuta (n.d., para. 1) defines authentic texts as materials which are designed for native speakers; they are real text; designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language. Jordan (1997, p. 113) refers to authentic texts as texts that are not written for language teaching purposes. Authentic materials is significant since it increases students' motivation for learning, makes the learner be exposed to the 'real' language as discussed by Guariento & Morley (2001, p. 347). The main advantages of using authentic materials are (Philips and Shettlesworth 1978; Clarke 1989; Peacock 1997, cited in Richards, 2001):

- They have a positive effect on learner motivation.
- They provide authentic cultural information.
- They provide exposure to real language.
- They relate more closely to learners' needs.
- They support a more creative approach to teaching.

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.

Disadvantages of Using Authentic Materials

Richards (2001, p. 253) points out that alongside with these advantages, authentic materials often contain difficult language, unneeded vocabulary items and complex language structures, which causes a burden for the teacher in lower-level classes. Martinez (2002) mentions that authentic materials may be too culturally biased and too many structures are mixed, causing lower levels have a hard time decoding the texts. 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?

Using Authentic Materials: At Which Level?

Guariento & Morley (2001) claim that at post-intermediate level, the use of authentic materials is available for use in classroom. 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. Matsuta (n.d.) 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).

What Can be Done to Overcome Difficulties We Face?

We may conclude that learners feel better with authentic materials helping them involve 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 (n.d.) 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 (2001) suggest that authentic materials should be used in accordance with students' ability and adds that suitable tasks can be given to learners in which total understanding is not important. According to Jordan (1997), 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.

Cultural Content

Westerhuis (as cited in Cheung, 2001, p.56) defines 'culture' as the customs, values, laws, technology, artifacts and art of a particular time or people. Culture in English language teaching materials has been subject to discussion for many years. The reason for the use of cultural content in classroom is for the supposition that it will foster learner motivation (McKay, 2000, p.7).

Changes in linguistic and learning theory suggest that culture can be used as an important element in

language classrooms, but many students say that they do not want to learn about the culture of the target language. This might be because of the fear of assimilation into what they perceived as something strange to them. Also, misrepresenting cultures by reinforcing popular stereotypes and constructing these cultures as monolithic, static 'Others', rather than as dynamic, fluid entities might result in failure in making cultural content an effective element in language learning and teaching (Guest, 2002).

I believe that cultural content is a key to effective teaching and learning a language provided that problems arising from introducing culture into EFL classroom are dealt with effectively and teaching strategies and learning materials are chosen appropriately.

Why Should We Use Cultural Content?

As all we know, knowing a language goes beyond the knowledge of grammatical rules, vocabulary items and pronunciation of these items. Successful language learning requires language users to know that culture underlying language in order to get the meaning across. Also, Tseng (2002) suggests that culture effects changes in individual perception and is vital for expanding an individual's perspective of the world.

According to Stuart and Nocon (1996),

Learning about the lived culture of actual target language speakers as well as about one's own culture requires tools that assist language learners in negotiating meaning and understanding the communicative and cultural texts in which linguistic codes are used" (p. 432).

Also, Shanahan (1997, p. 168) states that cultural content provides exposure to living language that a foreign language student lacks. So, culture is not something consisting of facts to be learnt, but a helpful tool to make learners feel the need to speak and use the target language.

How Can We Deal with Problems?

Today, English teachers have a lot of choices in terms of textbooks, and it is surprising that many of them rely on uninteresting textbooks that focus students' attention on grammatical structures, and on practice in isolation. Also, the activities chosen are based on teacher-talk and student-listen routines as suggested by Cheung (2001). These practices are unlikely to lead students to develop a genuine interest in learning English. Students lacking motivation to learn a language need variety and excitement. We should help them to notice that learning a language is not just learning its grammatical rules, vocabulary items and so on.

The reason for the use of cultural content in classroom is that it will foster learner motivation (McKay, 2000, p. 7). She, like many other experts, believes that there should be a variety of culture in the materials and not only an overload of western culture in ELT classrooms. Besides, learning about a culture does not mean accepting that culture. If the role of the culture in the materials is just to create learner interest towards contents and thus towards language, that is highly desirable. But overuse of cultural material in the language classrooms will constitute problems not for students but also for the teachers and decrease the motivation.

McKay identifies three types of cultural materials: target culture materials, learners' own culture materials and international target culture materials. For her, the best one is international target language materials, which supposedly covers a variety of knowledge from different cultures all over the world using the target language (McKay, pp. 9-10). That will most probably increase the learners' interest rather than imposing only one culture all the time and prevent learners from having the fear of assimilation into a specific culture, and help them respect other people's cultures. Students' own culture should be discussed together with target culture. In other words, home and target culture should be integrated. Robinson (as cited in Stuart and Nocon, 1996, p. 435) refers to this integration as 'Color

Purple'. According to Stuart and Nocon, this synthesis is created when one becomes aware of one's own cultural lens (e.g. blue) through the recognition that a person from another culture has a different lens (e.g. red). Neither person can escape his or her own cultural lens, but each can choose to overlap lenses (e.g. purple) in order to understand better the other's perspectives and arrive at shared meaning. While using cultural content in classrooms, teachers should keep in mind that English is an international language, and culture is an aid to motivate our students rather than something to be taught.

How Can We Introduce Cultural Content in Our Classrooms?

There are a lot of activities we can use in our classrooms in order to create interest towards the target language by using cultural content. The key point is that we should create a relaxing environment where our students can discuss their own culture together with the target culture in meaningful and communicative tasks and activities. This will ensure that students are doing something with a purpose in their mind.

Sources and Techniques for Cultural Content

Today, with the help of technological developments, we have access to many sources easily and quickly. Almost all the printed materials are on the Internet in electronic forms and we can easily search anything anytime. As a result, we do not lack cultural content to use in our classrooms. Cullen and Sato (2000) suggest practical techniques and a wide range of sources for teaching culture in the EFL classroom using three different parameters, namely, information sources, activity-types and selling-points and also Kodotchigova (2002) discusses the role of role-play in teaching culture for classroom suggesting quick steps for classroom implementation. Jordan (1997, p. 105) lists sources of cultural information:

- Newspapers: these are a good source of cultural information: local papers will give more of a flavour of everyday life in towns.
- Video: a number of published ELT video tapes are a good visual source of cultural information. (Today, we have CD/DVD versions of these video tapes, which provide us with better quality.)
- Talks/discussions: some topics may be suitable for giving information to students in a plenary session.
- Role play/dramatizations: these can be used to initiate discussion and introspection.
- Culture quizzes/tests.

Conclusion

Authentic materials enable learners to interact with the real language and content rather than the form. Learners feel that they are learning a target language as it is used outside the classroom. Considering this, it may not be wrong to say that at any level authentic materials should be used to complete the gap between the competency and performance of the language learners, which is a common problem among the nonnative speakers. This requires the language patterns being put into practice in real life situations. Since learning about a culture is not accepting it and the role of the culture in the materials is just to create learner interest towards the target language, there should be a variety of culture in the materials, not a specific one.

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