Authentic Materials in Language Learning:
Definitions, Advantages and Disadvantages, and Future Directions of Study

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Abstract

This paper provides a review of the current literature regarding authentic materials and their usage in the language classroom. While a simple definition of authentic materials is straightforward enough, there is disagreement in the literature regarding precisely how to define authentic materials within a language education context, and disagreement over what exactly makes materials authentic. Thus, the paper begins with a comprehensive review of the discussion over how to define authentic materials. The paper then presents the arguments that have been put forward over the potential advantages and disadvantages of using authentic materials in the classroom, as well as the debate over the extent to which authentic materials should supersede traditional specially written language teaching materials. Finally, with a view to developing future directions of study, the paper ends with suggestions for areas within the field where further research and data will be valuable for greater understanding of the effective application of authentic materials in the classroom.

1．Introduction

Today, unlike in 1989 when Nunan stated the difficulty of obtaining authentic input for an EFL environment (Nunan, 1989, p. 138), the accessibility of information technology means anyone can obtain real-time information from around the world. This has certain implications for the language classroom, as the amount of potential teaching materials — not just materials provided in traditional textbooks — has vastly increased. However, not everyone agrees about exactly how beneficial these materials are, or on the extent to which teachers should incorporate authentic materials (AM) into the classroom in favor of traditional materials; linguists, researchers, and language teaching practitioners continue to debate these points. Even the very definition of what constitutes authentic materials has been under discussion; although general consensus on the definition does now appear to exist, there are still differences of opinion over some detailed points, particularly with regard to whether materials remain 'authentic' if they are modified from the original in any way. This paper, then, will start with a review of the discussion of how to define authentic materials. It will then share some of the principal thoughts in the literature on the perceived advantages and disadvantages of AM, and will end with thoughts on possible future directions of study and research within this field.

2．Definition of authentic materials

Authentic materials (AM) are defined by many linguists and ELT practitioners. As Kilickaya (2004) states, the definition of authentic materials differs within the literature. This variation slightly depends on the focus or the angle being taken by the researchers. However, before starting to discuss definitions in detail, one important distinction should be made. When people talk of authentic materials, they generally imagine a text (spoken or written) or extract of text that is a real-life example of the language in use. Widdowson (1978) proposes regarding these extracts in two ways; in terms of their 'genuineness,' described as "characteristic of the passage itself" and an "absolute quality" (p. 80), and their 'authenticity,' relating to how the reader (student) responds to it — what relationship exists between the reader and the text. Authenticity, then, can be seen as a wider concept that exists (either inside or outside the classroom)

if the communication represents or approximates the way people interact in real-life situations, regardless of the types of materials used. For the purposes of this paper, however, authentic refers more simply to what Widdowson described as "genuineness" of the materials or texts in question. This definition of authentic is expanded upen below.

In this context, Nunan (2004) defines it as "the use of spoken and written material that has been produced for purposes of communication not for purposes of language teaching" (p. 49). Similar definitions are found in Wallace (1992), Kramsch (1993), Jordan (1997), Richards (2001), and Tomlinson (2012). Richards and Schmidt (2002) define AM in the following way:

> In language teaching, the use of materials that were not originally developed for pedagogical purposes, such as the use of magazines, newspapers, advertisements, news reports, or songs. Such materials are often thought to contain more realistic and natural examples of language use than those found in textbooks and other specially developed teaching materials. (p. 42)

Harmer (2015) adds to this definition that authentic material is "language where no concessions are made to foreign speakers" (p. 306). Jacobson et al (2003, p. 1) see authentic materials as printed materials, which are used in classrooms in the same way they would be used in real life. There is, then, general agreement that AM are real materials not originally intended for the classroom, but that can be used for language teaching purposes.

The extent to which AM are defined by having been prepared by or for native speakers has also been questioned over the years. According to Bacon and Finnemann (1990), authentic

materials are texts produced by and intended for native speakers for non-pedagogical purposes; their limitation to 'native speakers' is notable. On this native speaker issue, however, Zyzik and Polio (2017) have a different view, taking the definition from a wide variety of perspectives, and they define AM as "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). Harmer (2015) states that authentic material is "normal, natural language used by competent or native speakers of a language" (p. 306). Given the widespread use of English as a *lingua franca*, it is sensible to qualify that AM are often — but not necessarily — by native speakers for native speakers.

Other definitions also focus more on the social rather than the non-pedagogical element of AM. Peacock (1997) defines authentic materials as "materials that have been produced to fulfil some social purpose in the language community." Guariento and Morley (2001) also define AM by focusing on their social aspect, saying that for a material to be authentic, it is "…one 'created to fulfil some social purpose in the language community in which it was produced'" (p. 347). Thus, they see the use of authentic materials as a bridge to real life (p. 347).

One other debate within the context of definition is the extent to which modified authentic materials remain 'authentic', in the strict interpretation of the word. Harmer (2015) says it is important that we use materials that learners have a chance of understanding, and for beginners this might mean "roughly-tuned language from the teacher…and specially designed reading and listening texts from materials writers. However, it is essential that such listening texts should approximate authentic language use. The language may be simplified, but it must not be unnatural"

(p. 306). This, however, opens up the debate between real and realistic materials; the former being genuinely authentic, the latter meant to approximate authentic. McGrath (2002) writes that, "Strictly speaking, an authentic listening text would be neither scripted nor edited; in practice, poor quality, length and other pedagogic considerations lead to spoken texts being re-recorded and/or edited for use in classrooms" (pp. 104-105). He then states that, in most cases, the pedagogic argument in favor of comprehensibility is compelling enough that many materials are modified for the classroom, but asks at what point the line must be drawn; that is to say, how far can you go in making materials accessible to learners before they become inauthentic? If the whole point of using authentic materials in the classroom is to present a more accurate depiction of how people use language to communicate, thereby better preparing students for the real world, surely it defeats the purpose if the materials are 'sanitised' for the classroom.

Then again, as Harmer (2015) states, the line between authentic and inauthentic is hard to draw. "A stage play written for native speakers is a playwright's representation of spontaneous speech rather than the real thing so it is, in a sense, both authentic and inauthentic" (p. 306) . Equally, he says, a parent modifies their speech when using 'baby-talk' with their young child; does this make it inauthentic? Harmer argues that any language modified for pedagogical purposes is equally valid as 'authentic', "provided it is not altered in such a way as to make it unrecognisable in style and construction from the language which competent speakers encounter in many walks of life" (p. 306).

While there is no definitive answer to this, Brown and Menasche (as cited in Nunan, 2004: pp. 51-52) argue for a continuum of materials from genuinely authentic to non-authentic, with five distinct stages along the continuum (genuine, altered, adapted, simulated, minimal/incidental). This is a good way to view the issue, since it removes the need to classify according to the rigid authentic/non-authentic dichotomy, but rather allows consideration of what side of the continuum materials lean towards. This is especially useful when asking a question such as, for example, "does a video become inauthentic if you slow down the speed by 25%?"

In summary, then, though there are differences over the finer details, there appears to be general agreement that authentic materials are those that were originally prepared for communicative, social, non-pedagogical purposes, and they are often (though not exclusively) prepared by native speakers for native speakers. The extent to which modifications to AM, in order to make them more suitable for the classroom context, render them somehow 'inauthentic' is not yet fully agreed upon, though it may well be best to think of materials as being placed along a continuum rather than conforming to a straight dichotomy.

3．Advantages and disadvantages of authentic materials

There has been much debate over the perceived positives and negatives of using authentic materials as teaching materials in the classroom. In this section, first the possible advantages and then the possible disadvantages of using AM, as put forward by linguists and researchers, will be presented.

3．1．Advantages

Many researchers believe that authentic materials scaffold language learning effectively and are beneficial for students' overall communicative competence (Weyers, 1999; Guariento and Morley, 2001; McGrath, 2002; Gilmore, 2011). Richards

(2001) summarizes the advantages of using authentic materials as follows:

- They have a positive effect on learner motivation.
- They provide authentic cultural information about the target culture.
- They provide exposure to real language.
- They relate more closely to learners' needs.
- They support a more creative approach to teaching. (pp. 252-253)

Richards raises learner motivation as the first advantage of using authentic materials in a teaching environment, and in fact many researchers have claimed increased motivation toward learning as a significant merit of exposing learners to authentic materials. For instance, authentic materials are believed to make learners feel that they are learning the 'real' language (Guariento & Morley, 2001). Hyland (2003) also emphasizes that one important role of using authentic materials is to increase learners' motivation and ability to function well in the learning process (p. 94). Further, a research study by Peacock (1997) found that motivation significantly increased in beginner EFL classes when authentic materials were used (although, interestingly, this related to observed motivation, while student self-reported motivation only increased in the latter half of the study — and learners actually reported AM to be less interesting than specially written materials).

Day (2003) claims two reasons for using authentic materials in reading and understanding speech and conversation in the classroom. One is that authentic texts are attractive and motivating. The other reason is that regular material in textbooks is unreal and unnatural (pp. 2-3). In a similar vein, Spelleri (2002) believes that "there is a gap between communicative competence as measured in textbook tasks and as needed by the

adult who has to fulfill his roles as employees, parents and community member". Nunan (2004) writes of specially written materials that they

> do not adequately prepare learners for the challenge of coping with the language they hear and read in the real world outside the classroom…If we want learners to comprehend aural and written language outside class, we need to prepare them with structured opportunities to engage with [authentic materials] inside the classroom. (p. 50)

Further, Spelleri (2002) adds that authentic materials are rich in culture and context so they can offer real language as used in the real world. Thus, researchers say that authentic materials can offer to learners some elements that cannot be learned in the classroom. Larson-Freeman (2011) recommends the use of authentic materials in communicative language teaching. She states that authentic materials play a role "to overcome the typical problem that students cannot transfer what they learn in the classroom to the outside world" (p. 125). She also introduces what kind of authentic languages are suitable to learners with different levels of English proficiency.

The benefit of learning about culture is another significant non-linguistic aspect. Garcia (1991) claims that the use of authentic texts in the classroom enhances learners' cultural awareness. Sherman (2003) sees authentic materials (in this case videos) as "a window on English-language culture" (p. 2). Erkaya (2005) states that using authentic materials not only helps students in learning the culture of the target language in a natural manner but also helps to develop their critical thinking. Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) state that "increased cultural awareness can help us to achieve cultural empathy and sensitivity. It

can also facilitate language acquisition, as being positive, empathetic and inquisitive can contribute to one of the optimal conditions for language acquisition: motivated exposure to language in use" (p. 7).

In summary, then, researchers have found many positives of using authentic materials in the language classroom, including increased scaffolding, improved communicative competence, enhanced motivation, the possibility of teaching and learning 'real' language, and as a window into a new culture.

３．２．Disadvantages

Although many researchers present advantages of using authentic materials in the language learning class, there are voices against it — or at least voices of caution. While Richards (2001) admits the advantages of using authentic materials, he also states that authentic materials contain difficult language, vocabulary, and language structure (p. 253). Because of these complexities of language use, they become a burden for teachers in lower-level classes. The burden is not only imposed on teachers, but the complexity including ungrammatical expressions causes learners, especially those at lower levels, to become confused and even demotivated (Guariento & Morley, 2001; Gilmore, 2007). As Harmer (2015) states, "authentic material which has been carelessly chosen can be extremely demotivating for students since they will not understand it" (p. 306). It should be noted, however, that a study by Rebuck (2008) found that "*excessively* [original italics] difficult authentic listening can be motivational for [lower-level] learners, partly because of their very inability to comprehend it" (p. 197).

The above point about demotivating students should be seen not so much as a criticism of authentic materials *per se*, rather a criticism of

the wrong kind of selected materials. The implied disadvantage, perhaps, is that there is a significant burden on the teacher to ensure that the materials are appropriate. In fact, many highlight this burden as a disadvantage. Kilickaya (2004) states that using AM increases the work and effort in adapting the materials to the level of the students, as they include difficult words and grammar. Further, finding appropriate materials and making suitable exercises and contriving tasks from the materials are time-consuming (Crystal & Davy, 1975: Bell & Gower 1998: Kuo, 1993: Hughes & McCarthy, 1998).

In section 3.1 above, one advantage of using authentic material in the classroom was that learners can improve their cultural understanding of the target language. However, Nostrand (1989) raises a concern over the cultural issue, stating that "the fact that a text is authentic, then, does not assure that it gives a true impression unless one adds to it the context it evokes in the mind of a person who lives in the culture" (p. 50). What is more, Buendgens-Kosten (2014) warns that "discussions of authenticity often emphasize the role of the native speaker as the source of the authentic material, disregarding the important (and, one may argue, authentic) forms and functions of English as a *lingua franca*." She also cautions that if authenticity is inherently associated with native speakers, this may have an unfairly damaging impact on the image of non-native speaker teachers of English.

There are other question marks over the exclusive use of authentic materials in the classroom. Not all teachers, for example, would be comfortable with the necessary adaptations for the classroom, and so requiring them at the level of the curriculum may be counter-productive. Furthermore, materials are not automatically 'good' just because they are authentic. In fact,

a strong case can be made that custom-made materials, precisely because they have been written with learners in mind, are much more appropriate and effective. Finally, it would be a mistake to assume that AM by themselves will automatically improve all elements of language teaching; the way in which the materials are implemented is equally important. This is well exemplified in a study by Miller and Hegelheimer (2006), in which learners performed computer game tasks as part of their classwork. In the study, there were significant increases in students' vocabulary acquisition, *if* the students were required to also do supplementary activities. That is to say, AM work when properly applied and complemented by traditional classroom activities.

3．3．Summary

Thus, the use of authentic materials in classroom has both perceived positives and negatives. Few would argue against the use of AM completely; most agree there is room to implement them to some extent in any curriculum. It is where exactly this balance between AM and specially written materials is to be struck that sparks continued debate.

4．Conclusion

Teaching at Japanese universities, one of the key goals of the authors' language instruction is to prepare students to use English in meaningful ways in the outside world, whether that be travel, study, the workplace, or other situations that require actually using English. In the quest to provide opportunities for students to be exposed to and to develop 'real' language, authentic materials represent a potentially very powerful tool. For this reason, understanding of authentic materials and deeper research into them is very important.

There is a general consensus on the definition of authentic materials, though also still debate on whether modified materials or specially written realistic materials classify as authentic. Some may argue vigorously for the overall benefits of AM in the classroom, and others may urge more caution when applying them. Few, however, would argue that AM have no place in the classroom. Rather, the debate is over to what extent and in what way AM should be incorporated. Some claim more than others that AM should be the main or exclusive material used in language teaching. Harmer (2015), for example, writes that "an argument can be made for using mainly authentic reading and listening texts in class" (p. 306). It's likely to be more a question of balance, though; as Nunan (2004) summarizes, "it is not a matter of whether or not authentic materials should be used, but what combination of authentic, simulated and specially written materials provide learners with optimal learning opportunities" (p. 49).

In closing, one final point to highlight is that the context in which you are teaching (age, level, motivation, TEFL vs. TESL, etc.) will certainly influence the type of AM you choose and the way in which the AM should be applied in the classroom. Nunan (2004) hints at this when he says, "Given the richness and variety of [authentic material], it should be possible for teachers to select authentic written texts that are appropriate to the needs, interests and proficiency levels of their students (p. 51).

5．Future directions

This paper concludes in reference to the specific context in which AM may be used, and the implications this has for the type of AM chosen and the way they are applied. In future, more empirical evidence regarding exactly which materials are effective in exactly which contexts would be welcome.

Also, further studies that focus on the

learner would be of great benefit to the literature. In particular, learners' own perceptions of the difficulty, interest, and effectiveness of AM, as well as how much students believe that use of AM raises their motivation and pushes them to seek out similar materials by themselves, would be valuable data and ought to be investigated in greater detail.

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言語学習におけるオーセンティック・マテリアル
定義、長所、短所および今後の研究の方向性

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要　　約

　本稿は、オーセンティック・マテリアルと授業でのその使用に関する文献のレビューである。オーセンティック・マテリアルを簡潔に定義することはむずかしいことではないが、言語教育のコンテキストにおいて、オーセンティック・マテリアルの定義、そして、どのような教材をオーセンティックと考えるかという点においては見解の相違がある。本稿ではまず、オーセンティック・マテリアルの定義に関するディスカッションを包括的にレビューしていく。そのうえで、授業におけるオーセンティック・マテリアルの使用に伴う潜在的な長所と短所について、これまでなされてきたさまざまな主張を示していき、さらに、従来の教育目的で作成された教材にどの程度取って代わるのがよいのかという議論を紹介する。最後に、今後の研究の方向性をふまえ、授業におけるオーセンティック・マテリアルの効果的な使用に関して理解を深めるための提案を示唆していく。

言語学習におけるオーセンティック・マテリアル
定義、長所、短所および今後の研究の方向性