A Case for Authentic Materials in Language Teaching

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Abstract

Communicative approach towards language teaching has changed the conventional teacher centered perceptions and attitudes. It has placed the learner at the center of the language teaching process and all other parameters of the process that include teachers, methodology, curriculum, and teaching materials have to align to the needs of the learners. This paper explores the importance of language teaching materials and their relationship with learners where the taught language is not their native language but is a second language: how these can help the learners to become autonomous and make a case for using authentic materials in language teaching classroom at Intermediate level in Pakistan.

Introduction

It has been argued that teaching materials should motivate the learners by stimulating their interest and should encourage them to further explore the potential for language learning capacities and should provide the teacher with scope to create meaningful and engaging activities.[1] English language is taught at Intermediate level in state owned colleges in Pakistan using the prescribed textbook as the only teaching material. Textbooks, as it is, not only control what is to be taught but also determine the teaching methodology and the evaluation. As such, textbooks enslave the teachers and usurp the classroom procedures.

The 'Authenticity Debate'

With the initiation of Communicative Language Teaching in the 1970's the use of authentic materials was advocated as against specially written pedagogic materials for language teaching. The concern with authenticity has its origin in ethnographic objective of elicitation, description and explanation of pure data of linguistic

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interaction.[2] Mishen traces the authenticity concern to three sources:

> *"...the modern day preoccupation with authenticity in language learning is born of prevailing currents from three areas. The first is from SLA research, the second is from language pedagogy itself-Communicative and approaches to language learning, and the third is sociological – the growing influence of information and communicative technologies (ICT) on our work and learning practices."[3]*

English Language Teaching researchers favoured the use of authentic materials on the grounds that they substitute real world for the artificially created linguistic data. The learners would be exposed to language as it is used in real life outside the classroom. Another argument in favour of the use of authentic materials is their cultural content. The learners would be exposed to the cultural force of the language that they are learning and so comprehension and perceptions of the language would improve; as Mishan argues "…there is substantial research evidence to support the use in language learning of the linguistically rich, culturally faithful and potentially emotive input supplied by authentic texts."[4]

Following these arguments, a heated debate started on what type of material is really authentic. Many different definitions emerged, all of them highlighting different aspects of the concept of the term 'authentic'. Cook describes it as "…authentic material simply means using examples of language produced by the native speakers for some real purpose of their own rather than using language produced for and designed solely for the classroom."[5]

This excludes any text that is supposed to copy the real life communicative discourse. The implication is that any text, written or spoken, that is deliberately designed by the textbook writers, teachers, material designers or any other concerned personnel for the explicit purpose of language teaching are inauthentic and artificial. Authentic text, then, remains a text that is outside the needs and goals concerns of teaching and learning language process. They are "… produced to fulfill some social purpose in the language community".[6] David Forman as cited in Underwood (1989:56) sums it up as: "Any text is 'authentic' if it is produced in response to real life communicative needs rather than as an imitation of real life communicative needs. This can be applied to any text, written or spoken, and in relation to any kind of situation of language use."[7]

Widdowson made a distinction between authenticity and what he termed as 'genuineness' of a text. He describes the later as a quality 'intrinsic' to the text, a characteristic that aligns it with the particular conventions of a language and its use syntactically, stylistically, and rhetorically. He holds it as "… characteristic of the passage itself and is an absolute quality".[8] Authenticity, on the other hand, he describes, as "…a characteristic of the relationship between the passage and the reader and it has to do with appropriate response".[9] Here he takes authenticity out of the text and makes it a quality that is "…extrinsic to the text".[10] His emphasis has been more on text realism and gives importance to the learner response. His argument is that there is no guarantee that an authentic text would necessarily elicit an authentic learner response. This stance alters the approach towards authenticity by making it a part of the process rather the product of the teaching and learning phenomenon. The shift from the authenticity of the text to the learner response changes the drift of the argument to the authenticity of the classroom discourse.

Breen makes further development in the concept of authentic classroom discourse. He believes that it is the classroom activity/task that will elicit the authentic response from the learners. The nature and quality of classroom discourse would determine the authenticity of the learner response. The onus now shifts from the text to the task: "An authentic learning task in the classroom will be one which requires the learners to communicate ideas and meanings and to meta-communicate about the language and about problems and solutions in the learning of language."[11]

He extends the notion of authenticity to cover the way in which an L2 learner responds to L2 texts as language learning materials. A lot, then, depends on the learners' schema. William and Moran describe schema as "…an abstract structure representing concepts stored in memory".[12] And it is precisely in schema that Breen locates authenticity: "The learner will redefine any text against his own priorities precisely because he is a learner. The learner will actually recreate [the text] in a way which is perfectly authentic to his knowledge – or lack of knowledge – about the conventions of communication."[13]

He also stresses the social environment of the classroom in which the interaction takes place. He suggests that classroom interaction "…should generate authentic language learning behaviour".[14] Classroom is where people meet for an authentic reason i.e. to learn. The authenticity of both the classroom teaching and learning procedures need to be assured. McDonough and Shaw

describe this concept as "A term which loosely implies as close an approximation as possible to the world outside the classroom, in selection both of language material and of the activities and methods used for the practice in classroom."[15]

The debate on authenticity has moved along the cline from the primary concern with the selection and construction of the text, through text realism to learner response and classroom interaction.

L2[16] Teaching in State Owned Colleges in Pakistan

The teaching methodology employed in English Language Teaching classroom is materials centered and does not consider the active role of the learner. The emphasis is on internalization of rules, memorization of vocabulary, translation, structural drilling, and rote learning of grammatical formulas. It is no surprise that the graduates of such colleges have the competence of the language to an extent but hardly any performative capability. The target of the classroom instruction remains the textual knowledge and the operational value is completely ignored. The focus in classroom in on presentation and memorization of language forms and usage.

One of the driving forces behind the adoption of this teaching methodology is the teaching materials that are used in English language classroom. Not only is the methodology driven by these materials; the evaluation system is also governed by them. The artificially created pedagogic teaching materials are hardly a reflection of real world use of language. Their contact with the target language, at best, remains mechanical and artificial.

Authentic Teaching Materials

In this paper, I propose the use of authentic teaching materials especially in the teaching of reading skills with emphasis on vocabulary and grammar. Reading is one of the most potential area which offers most comprehensive space for making generalizations about grammar, structure, vocabulary, cohesion and coherence. The traditional method of teaching reading in our context consists of presentation of the text, loud reading either by the teacher or a comparatively proficient learner, and then the emphasis on singled out difficult vocabulary and possible questions, of various types, that can be asked on the text: "…the English teachers' major activities in the classroom are reading the text, translating it into either Urdu or mother tongue…they frequently expose learners to loud reading…"[17]

Authentic texts help the learner to understand the operational patterns of vocabulary. Depth of knowledge about the

pragmatic application of vocabulary has a strong and definite link with reading comprehension. Depth and size of vocabulary help to build the ability to deduce lexical inferences of the learners. It also helps the learners to make assertions about lexical items and relation between them. According to McCarthy and Carter, understanding the operation of vocabulary: "…lies in an examination of …relations between lexical items (a) above sentence level; (b) across conversational turn boundaries; (c) within the broad framework of discourse organization."[18]

Learners get greater opportunity to discover, internalize, and apply these relations through authentic texts. By being exposed to a variety of context-embedded lexicon and lexical relations, they are getting a chance to study these in a more meaningful manner. Prescriptive teachers and learners may advance an argument that vocabulary can be best taught and learned by simply referring to a good dictionary and matching the meaning with lexical item. In this case, they have to be made aware of the authentic use of the lexicon.

The teaching of grammar traditionally is done through concocted texts. These texts often sound unreal and stilted if not outright ridiculous in some cases. This happens because the texts are supposed to revolve round various instances of use of the grammar point being taught. Most often isolated sentences are used. This is certainly not the manner in which language in real life situations. Teaching of grammar in this style leads to an understanding of grammar formulas only. What they seriously lack is the forming their own hypotheses and applying them. This is exactly the point where authentic texts can be of immense help. They reduce the learners' reliance on pedagogical rules that are a simplification of language which do not always fit into the operational patterns of language. Use of authentic materials leads the learners to discover rules, their usual and routine application and most importantly their deviant, though accepted, use as well. A range of authentic texts will enable the learners to internalize all these areas of language and to test their hypotheses in real authentic texts. This will also give them a certain amount of control over their own learning processes. Moreover, the variety in these texts is a sure and positive approach to cater to differing areas of interest among the learners.

Learning grammar of a language through consciousness-raising has been advocated by Ellis.[19] This view of language learning springs from second language acquisition theories: "…input would appear to be most valuable when it is in the form

of authentic texts which contain a rich variety of unmediated elements from which the language learner can source his/her language acquisition."[20]

Consciousness-raising can be best achieved by exposing learners to variety of authentic texts. They encounter language as it works in real life situations rather than language through simulated discourse. Exposure to real life texts help the learners to focus on language details and get a working knowledge of the linguistic features that lend cohesion to a text. In this method of teaching, the teacher: "…no longer simply presents the language to the learner for the purpose of illustrating language forms. Instead, they encourage learners to examine their own experience of the language and make generalizations from it."[21]

Once again, we come back to the importance of making generalizations and their application by the learners themselves. These generalizations spring from their prior knowledge or schema and enable the leaners to become efficient users of language. At this point, our argument ties up with schema theory. According to Mishan "Schema theory …gives a psycholinguistic interpretation to the role of cultural knowledge in the learning and understanding of the target language".[22] Along these lines schema is a mental abstraction for an object, event, or situation located in our memory. In this light, a text only serves as a guide for the reader to retrieve and construct meaning based upon his/her previously acquired knowledge. This cumulative background knowledge is termed as *schemata*. Comprehension is supposed to result from interaction between the learners' overall schemata and the text. Both the basic modes of text processing; bottom-up and top-down are closely linked to this theory. According to Richard in top-down processes, the learner sees a text or hears a conversation or encounters a situation and then uses his/her schemata to decode the meaning. In bottom-up processing, the learner hears or sees a word and then recognizes its meaning and decodes the formation of a sentence.[23]

Three functions of schemata have been identified. Firstly, it acts as 'filling in the blanks' in the texts for the learners. No matter how explicitly a writer or a speaker expounds his message; there is always a gap, which the schemata of the reader try to interpret through inferential elaboration. Secondly, schemata help in the interpretation of an ambiguous text. Finally, schemata has meta-comprehension function i.e. it establishes a correspondence between things represented by the schemata and the given information in the text.[24]

Schema theory then supports the use of authentic, materials in a language classroom. Barlow mentions that some of the schemata may have different degree of abstraction but they are "…ultimately based on and anchored by the actual instances of usage".[25] Learners' schemata serve as the jumping board for a language teacher; she can use authentic materials to provide a direction to the learners' schemata so that they may construct meaning based on their own cognitive structures.

Selection of Authentic Materials
Having established the value of authentic materials in language teaching, the most important question facing the teacher then, is how and what type of materials to collect. Dumitrescu mentions three types of challenges that a teacher has to meet in this respect.[26] The first of these 'effective research skills' is to be able to find the exact material relevant to the needs of his/her learner group. Various rich sources are available for this purpose: newspapers, journals and magazines, material from the internet, pamphlets and advertisements, songs, literature, fiction. The availability is overwhelming.

This abundance of material leads to the second challenge. This stage requires careful selection keeping in mind various factors. The teacher needs to keep the learners' present linguistic competence and the desired linguistic competence in mind. Linguistic background of the learners' has a direct bearing on text selection. Conceptual difficulty will determine the specificity or generality of the information within the text. It directly influences comprehension and is necessary to keep students from a vague feeling of the alienation to the text. Besides, the selection would also depend on the topic, the target language area, skills, the needs, and the interests of the learners. The teacher, in making selections would also have to keep in mind the applicability of the chosen material. For instance, learners studying science subjects would react favourably to the texts related to the sciences because of cognitive ease of comprehension. Such texts also have a relevance to the academic schema of the learners.

Moreover, the selected texts need to be adaptable i.e. they should lend themselves easily to designing tasks and activities that would elicit authentic responses from the learners. The authenticity of the response would depend on how authentic are the tasks that are designed. According to Mishan, it should produce real world behaviour from the learners.[27] Such tasks need to be designed that are linked with actual communicative needs outside the classroom

to ensure authenticity both of the tasks and the responses. It would be ideal if integrated tasks can be designed on them so that one text can be used for multiple teaching purposes. Moreover in our context, the teacher also needs to make sure that the materials selected should be such that lend themselves to such exercises, tasks and activities as will help in achieving the goals of the academic programme that the learners are attending. If this factor is ignored then there may arise a feeling of dissatisfaction with classroom activities and routine lessons.

While using authentic materials, it must be remembered that they are cognitively essentially complex. Occasionally even when the language itself is very clear and comprehensible, the learners cannot actually get the gist of the text. One reason for this breakdown can be "the density of cultural and situational references".[28] Another cause could be topicality of the information. It may have only a passing interest even for those learners who actually belong to the same cultural background. Cook rightly points out "The point, then, is that much authentic writing is essentially ephemeral".[29] Attention has to be paid to the quality of information of the chosen texts, the content needs to offer information of comparatively durable value.

Finally the material selected should not be too disconnected. They need to be organized in some kind of continuity. Disjointed pieces of the text will perplex the learners' sense of direction and they might end up feeling disoriented and adrift. It would be beneficial if the chosen texts are linked through a related theme or an idea linked with their prescribed syllabus that the learners can approach and examine from various angles.

In Pakistani colleges, English language teaching is enslaved by the learners' short-term goal of passing the examinations and obtaining the certificate or the degree for which they have enrolled. Use of authentic material may cause resentment among the learners. Our learners are focused on the prescribed syllabus and the textbooks. Any activity outside these may lead to a heightened sense of insecurity. They might feel that authentic texts are irrelevant and are an unnecessary adjunct to the 'real books'. Being used to years of prescriptive guidance, they might feel lost at having to take an active part in their learning. Tackling authentic texts may prove awesome and tedious labour. These feeling will surface when the learners are not taken into confidence and are not aware of the rationale and outcome of such activities. In this set-up, it is important for the teacher to provide guidance and assurance to the learners.

Conclusion

There is no denying the importance of explicit pedagogy especially in the view of its open-endedness. The simplified nature of explicit grammar teaching pedagogy provides the learners with tools to grapple with language input. However, leaving off at that point only serves to equip them with the instrument without teaching them how to put it to use. Providing them with authentic data and making them see and discover the already internalized rules and their diverse applications would help them to become efficient users of the target language.

Authentic materials are an excellent method of filling gaps in the existing syllabi, gaps that may appear due to changes in the language itself. Learners can be introduced to new additions in the language and the new ways in which is being used. The use of authentic texts bring the learners and the knowledge together when they encounter the language as it is used in real life situations and they can apply the generalizations that they have formulated during the course of instruction.

The use of authentic teaching materials in English language teaching would prove beneficial provided they are chosen and applied with academic, pedagogic, and tutorial caution.

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