

A Critical Look at the Concept of Authenticity

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Abstract

This article is intended to briefly overview the concept of *authenticity* which cannot be defined similarly for all contexts, as we confront various contexts around the world, each with their unique characteristics. In other words, authenticity is a relative concept, materialized within each context with the interaction of its participants. Also, following Chavez' (1998) comments, authenticity cannot be defined as anything really existing in the outside world because any text taken out of its original context and away from its intended audience automatically becomes less authentic. Learners' proficiency levels and their positive attitudes towards the text are other aspects in this regard. Authentic materials require at least two features: communicative potential and relevance. The binary division of authenticity is no longer relevant and efficient; rather, it is to be considered in relation to the context where the material is used. Therefore, literature on authenticity suggests that authenticity is subject to pragmatic variation which cannot be defined in a vacuum and that its defining characteristics lie in the context. This argument has implications for teacher education and material development because of the changing situation of ELT practice around the world. The final conclusion is that the notion of authenticity within the global context must be considered in the light of the pragmatic appropriateness of the materials used and the interaction tasks set in relation to learners' needs and interests. The knowledgeable teacher is the nexus for empowering materials and tasks that are 'authentic' for their specific groups of learners.

1 Introduction

With the spread of English as a world language, more textbooks and teachers are needed all over the world. A key feature of texts, or discourse samples in general, have long been said to be their *authenticity*. This article will briefly review different perspectives about authenticity, and discuss how authentic materials can be found for a diverse range of learners throughout the world. Throughout this article, it will be argued that authenticity is not to be applied solely to discourse samples (written or spoken). Rather, authenticity can be determined by many other factors which are mainly context-dependent.

The terms *authenticity* and *authentic* are often used to describe language samples – both oral and written – that reflect the naturalness of form, and appropriateness of cultural and situational context (Rogers & Medley, 1988). The term *authentic materials* may mean different things for different people; for some, materials generated *by* native speakers and *for* native speakers are con-

sidered authentic (Rogers & Medley, 1988). Throughout the history of English language teaching (ELT), authenticity is taken as being synonymous with genuineness, realness, truthfulness, validity, reliability, undisputed credibility, and legitimacy of materials or practices (Tatsuki, 2006). It has also been a major feature in syllabus design, task-based approaches, materials development and the main focus of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the past (Bax, 2003).

Historically, materials development and syllabus design have largely relied on the *arrangement* of materials and activities rather than authenticity. For instance, syllabus types such as procedural, text-based, EAP, ESP, synthetic, linear, structural, notional-functional, situational, atomistic, genre-based, etc. all have in common the concern about *how the content is arranged and organized*. One should be reminded that although CLT focused on authentic materials in general, the traditional definition adopted for such materials was "those [materials] which have been produced for purposes other than to teach language" (Nunan, 1988, p. 99). However, there have been sporadic attempts to authenticate these syllabus types. At best, copies of personal letters, novels, academic articles, and narratives as well as excerpts from natural audio-taped materials (Dunkel, 1995) came to be considered as authentic materials in genre-based syllabuses.

2 Decline of a dichotomous definition

Remedial attempts, however, have been introduced to amend and fortify this seemingly narrow perspective on authenticity as a binary concept – either authentic or inauthentic – as well as a concept which merely refers to the input, written or spoken. For instance, Oxford (2001) suggests whole language, cooperative learning, task-based learning, content-based learning or multiple intelligences as examples of practice leading to *authentic interaction* in the class. The advantages of such approaches, termed ‘integrated skills approaches’, are said to be authentic language, natural interaction as well as the richness and complexity of the language. Also, English thereby becomes a real means of interaction. Teachers can track students’ progress in multiple skills at the same time. The learning of real content, and not just the language forms, are promoted and, finally, they can be highly motivating to students. As a proponent of the integrative approach, McDonald (2005) believes that relying solely on one aspect of authenticity would not be sufficient for communicative purposes. McDonald contends further, that, as the consequence of over-emphasizing one aspect, problems will arise. For instance, authenticity of competence, or learners’ waiting for a native-like competence, can lead to a reduction in learners’ performance and thereby to the poverty of communication. In the literature, the definite communicative purpose of materials is considered as a major authenticating feature (Chastain, 1988). Introducing other dimensions to the discussion, Rogers and Medley (1988) argue that the criteria for identifying the authenticity of materials should include the quality, appropriateness and naturalness of the language rather than the source and purpose of the sample. Therefore, after a brief review of these works, it seems clear that there have been challenges to the dichotomous definition of authenticity, and that other aspects such as the learners, the teacher, and the situation of teaching could make a difference.

2.1 Authenticity as a situational construct

As major concerns about authenticity start with the authenticity of texts, Lee (1995) contends that teaching materials are usually regarded as textually authentic if they are not written for teaching purposes, but for a real-life communicative purpose. Chavez (1998), on the other hand, claims that this definition is too broad and perhaps even immaterial to language teaching. In the case of texts designed for proficient speakers (or readers) of the language, Widdowson (1998) refers to them as possessing ‘genuineness’ – a characteristic of the text or the material itself. He distinguishes between ‘genuineness’ and ‘authenticity’ which refers to the ‘uses’ to which texts are put. Thus the claim is that texts themselves can actually be intrinsically ‘genuine’, but that authenticity is a ‘social construct’. In other words, a certain kind of authenticity is created through the interaction of the users, situations and the texts (Lee, 1995). That kind of authenticity is determined mostly by the authenticity of situation in which the language is produced as well as by the source

of the sample and the purpose of the speakers.

2.2 *The role of learners*

Michael Breen (1985) subdivides authenticity of language into the authenticity of the texts used as input data for learners, and the authenticity of the learners' own interpretation of the texts. The former is restricted to the tasks conducive to language learning, and the latter refers to the authenticity of the actual social situation of the language classroom. Taylor (1994) summarizes some of the inconsistent views surrounding authenticity claiming that in many discussions it is not clear whether we are dealing with authenticity of *language*, authenticity of *task*, or authenticity of *situation*. He goes on, then, to remark that the general confusion about 'authenticity' and 'genuineness' is compounded by the idea of *naturalness*: What is natural? Does naturalness mean the same thing to everyone? Is naturalness in one context naturalness in another? Finally, he concludes that one should concentrate on the use and interpretation of texts. However, he refuses to accept an abstract concept of authenticity to be defined once and for all. Instead, he acknowledges that authenticity is a function not only of the language but also of the participants, the use to which the language is put, the setting, the nature of the interaction, and the interpretation that the participants bring to both the setting and the activity.

2.3 *'Realness' and learners*

The case can now be extended to the concepts of *realness*, *reality* and *real-life*, which form still another facet of the authenticity complication. Those raised in the CLT tradition have been led to believe that real-life is "out there in the outside world" (Tatsuki, 2006) and that reality is something to be imported into classrooms. However, Chavez (1998) argues that any text that has been taken out of its original context and away from its intended audience automatically becomes 'inauthentic'. Even the 'realia' that we import into the classroom is 'inauthentic'. In other words, the world outside the classroom is not intrinsically more 'real' and it is the quality of our social interaction inside the classroom that may seem 'unreal' when compared with the outside world (Chavez, 1998, p. 282).

Further elaboration on the critical role of the participants comes from Lee (1995) who adds *learner authenticity* to the discussion. For Lee, learner authenticity is possible only if learners feel positive about materials and react to them as pedagogically intended. She cautions that learners should not automatically like materials just because they are 'real' or 'authentic' – the materials need to have communicative potential (i.e. they bring about a negotiation of meaning in the context of teaching), be relevant to learner's experiences, as well as a host of other factors. Some scholars have suggested that authentic (listening) materials may be very frustrating for beginners (Ur, 1984; Dunkel, 1995). Echoing this concern, Ommagio (2003) contends that unmodified authentic discourse may prove to be impractical particularly for low-proficient learners. Moreover, Guariento and Morley (2001) contend that even authentic materials can be frustrating, confusing and de-motivating if they are too difficult for lower level learners to comprehend, and if there is a mismatch as far as the goals and interests of the learners are concerned. Thus, the question is not whether authentic texts – *found* texts or *unscripted* texts in Dunkel's (1995) words – should be used, but *when* and *how* they should be introduced (Guariento & Morley, 2001) or, as Cardew (2006; cited in Tatsuki, 2006, p. 3) puts it, "just because the materials are authentic, it is no guarantee that the lesson will be successful". However, two key questions still remain: Will the materials be taught well by the teacher? Will the learners respond positively to the materials? Also, Bacon (1989) believes that *real language* must be "intelligible, informative, truthful, relevant and sociolinguistically appropriate" (p. 545).

2.4 Degrees of authenticity

The *relative* notion of authenticity was popularized in the 1980s and many scholars started to identify various degrees of authenticity. For instance, Dunkel (1995) cites Rings' (1986) 16-level semantic differential scale, ranging from (highly authentic) *native speakers' spontaneous conversations* produced for their own purposes to (relatively less authentic) *composed conversations* printed in textbooks. An additional aspect suggested by Brown and Menasche (2005; quoted in Tatsuki, 2006) is the distinction between *input authenticity* and *task authenticity*. Rather than considering authenticity as a binary concept (authentic or not authentic), they argue for degrees of authenticity. For them, materials that are not authentic in different ways are more than just useful; they are essential in language learning. Non-authentic materials are as valuable as authentic materials. Indeed, there are some situations in which authentic materials are useless – especially when the learners' receptive proficiency is low. They go on to propose five levels for input from *genuine input authenticity*, *altered input authenticity*, *adapted input authenticity*, through *simulated input authenticity* to *inauthenticity* while noting that no one type is better than the others. They also note that there is probably no such thing as 'real task authenticity' since classrooms are, by nature, artificial. The only genuine *task authenticity* for language learning may be considered as total immersion in the target language environment without an instructor. On the preparation of authentic tasks, Rogers and Medley (1988) also propose three levels of appropriateness including appropriateness of text, appropriateness of *task* and appropriateness of *sequence*.

Such concerns about the apparent artificiality of classroom discourse were first addressed in ESL contexts as the world outside the ESL classroom held infinite opportunities and resources for interactions in L2. Particularly, in EFL contexts, the classroom is the major, or even the sole, source of input and the only opportunity for interaction. It is also important for teachers to find ways to make out-of-class hours potentially conducive to language learning as well as to promote language awareness. It is especially important to encourage the development of pragmatic knowledge because pragmatic errors are judged more strictly than grammatical ones, and it is therefore crucial for teachers to help learners develop *pragmatic competence*, particularly for global communication (Grundy, 2004).

3 Discussion

The argument so far leads us to the conclusion that certain extralinguistic aspects, such as sociopragmatic elements, require reconsideration in relation to authenticity, which is one of *the* controversial concepts in the global context of ELT, where settings and participants constantly change, participants are both native speakers and non-native speakers, and learners come from different sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds. As noted earlier, the literature on the concept of authenticity suggests that the notion of authenticity is often a question of *pragmatic variation*. It is not to be defined in a vacuum. Its defining characteristics lie in the context of teaching. Its utility in the global context poses a challenge for teachers. It requires the use of new learning strategies by (and for) learners, and it presents novel challenges for material developers. As the core of this argument revolves around the interaction of these three elements (i.e. context of teaching, learners and teachers) with language (manifested in materials), developing a model of interaction between these elements will be helpful in understanding how it contributes to the new concept of authenticity and will bring meaning and authenticity to classes and activities. While the authors of this article do not intend to propose a model, they firmly stress the applicability of interactive approaches to authenticity. Despite the existing literature on the multi-dimensionality of the concept of authenticity, the narrow dichotomous conception of authenticity still remains popular.

A strong responsibility, in this connection, will be that of the animate participants, not the inanimate materials, and more specifically that of the teacher. As Tatsuki (2006) contends, even with the poorest and most unnatural sounding textbook or supplementary materials in the world, a skilful teacher can find a way to create authenticity through social interaction. However, even the most brilliantly crafted textbook or infinite supplementary resources are useless in the hands of an un-

skilled teacher. Although these are radical examples falling at the extremes, teachers can be conceived as the people selecting materials from a variety of sources, and preparing tasks that are appropriate to learners and help them to use language with a purpose (Rogers & Medley, 1988). Hence, we should be looking for 'the authenticating teacher' not 'the authentic text.' As an implication for teacher training, it seems reasonable to spend, at least, as much time and effort on teacher training and professional development, as is currently spent on textbook development. Dunkel (1995) also contends that teachers and materials developers need to figure out what levels of text authenticity are appropriate for particular classroom activities and for particular groups of learners. Conversely, the learners should not be overlooked because part of the authenticity of any material is related to its intelligibility for learners who *may* or *may not* develop positive attitudes toward the materials. Rogers and Medley (1988) believe that learners should bring both linguistic and cognitive processing strategies to the language classrooms which will help them comprehend the materials. As a further determinant of the learners' comprehension of the materials, teacher bilingualism is also suggested as a promoting factor in this process, particularly in the EFL contexts (McKay, 2003), as the knowledge of learners' native language helps the teacher in leading learners toward a deeper negotiation of meaning and developing more interaction between learners, teacher and the materials.

3.1 *Pragmatic appropriateness*

Curriculum reformers and syllabus designers may have to rethink what is meant by authenticity in terms of appropriateness. Finding authentic materials (produced only by native speakers and for non-teaching purposes) is a major preoccupation in ELT, and publishers' claim that their materials are authentic in the narrow sense of authenticity have been inevitable issues in the past. For current practice, however, pragmatic and pedagogic appropriateness should be the primary consideration in syllabus design. Based on Widdowson's (1998) portrayal of authenticity as a social construct, people and the context in which they are communicating can certainly contribute more to authenticity than textbooks. For example, in a medical context, there will be differences in how a request is uttered by a doctor to a nurse, a nurse to a doctor, or a doctor to a patient. While the materials adopted in such a teaching situation may not contain the tone or details of utterances, it is up to the teacher to enliven the situation by providing sufficient information to the learners. Materials designers also need to consider the effects or outcomes of *what* is said to *whom*, *when* and *how* in terms of complying with the demand of being 'real', in a sense that materials presented can be perceived as 'real' examples of communication in the classroom setting. If coursebooks are to survive in the future, they will need to find ways of responding to the global needs of the learners; a new dimension in the teaching of English will be added in interactions between two speakers of different first languages in unpredictable contexts, and in situations where speakers need to manage cross-cultural communication. Therefore, new approaches to materials development will need to avoid culturally loaded formulas once borrowed from the native speaker variety of English because the shared knowledge between interlocutors is not necessarily a copy of the native speaker norms; rather, new approaches are likely to focus more on materials where the context is created immediately by the human participants in interaction, the key role being assigned to the teacher – whether native speaker or non-native speaker. Ultimately, the best resource of genuine materials could be the learners themselves, and in particular those who have been exposed to real-life situations and tasks.

4 Conclusion

Viewing the concept of authenticity from various perspectives, the authors of this article come to the conclusion that the term is not merely to be applied to texts. Rather, in addition to being genuine and authentic, texts must be relevant and potentially communicative. Learners must feel positive toward tasks and activities to help authentic interactions emerge. Their interpretations of the teaching materials rely mostly on teachers' oral input and authenticating strategies. Appropri-

ateness in terms of language, activities, and tasks (Day, 2004), learners' level of proficiency (Chastain, 1988) and all contextual factors need to be taken into account to achieve pragmatic appropriateness – which could be considered as the real meaning of authenticity in a global context. Authenticity is in, fact, the result of pragmatic variation, and implications for teaching and materials development have to be considered for the future. In conclusion, the context of use needs to be re-emphasized, and the goals and interests of the participants should similarly be re-emphasized. But as Brown and Menasche (2005, quoted in Tatsuki, 2006) caution, both educators and materials designers need to stop thinking about authenticity as a dictated imperative having an 'either-or' quality but rather think of it as being multifaceted and applicable to different phases of language classroom processes. To do this, the development of pragmatic knowledge and teacher professionalism should be put at the heart of an educational and curricular revolution. In short, as a pragmatic phenomenon influenced by contextual factors, teachers' active and authenticating role, and students' interaction with language, authenticity requires revisiting as well as re-materialization in our textbooks and classrooms.

Notes

¹ By 'authenticating teacher', the authors stress the role of teachers in the classroom as a leader and the central element who gives the teaching material its authenticity. In other words, it is the teacher who helps learners understand the materials, feel positive towards it, approach it with a communicative purpose, and finally respond positively such that classroom communication develops and a real negotiation of meaning occurs.

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