

# **Authentic Task-Based Materials: Bringing the Real World Into the Classroom**

**Gail K. Oura**

## **Introduction**

One of the most challenging tasks constantly facing language teachers is how to capture the interest and to stimulate the imagination of their students so that they will be more motivated to learn. To this end, the ongoing search for and the development of meaningful teaching materials, which often can be used to supplement the textbook for a course, is a critical planning activity to be done by teachers.

This paper reviews two major aspects of teaching materials, which, as many language researchers believe, may contribute to the overall effectiveness of the learning process because the learner sees the activity as relevant to his or her learning needs. Are the materials derived from **authentic** sources, reflecting real-world language? Are the materials **task-based**, involving the learner in the practical use of the language? Following this discussion, some examples of a classroom activities in which students can use authentic task-based materials to enhance their language learning are presented.

## **Materials Available to EFL/ESL Teachers**

There currently is a wide array of teaching materials available to EFL/ESL teachers to accommodate their various needs and their unique teaching situations. Many of these materials are commercially produced. These can include EFL/ESL texts, audiotapes

with accompanying workbooks, videotapes with student worksheets, and various Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) programs. There are materials available for teaching reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, vocabulary-building, survival English, cross-cultural communication, pronunciation, business English, TOEFL preparation, and various other content-based English courses.

Some teachers at universities, junior colleges and private language schools may find themselves teaching with locally designed materials. Such materials are often produced "in-house", and provide classroom teachers with day-by-day lesson plans, steps for implementing them, and materials needed to teach them.

Whatever situation a teacher may have, it is very likely that at some time the teacher will find the need to adapt a particular text or lesson with material that he or she feels is more useful for promoting learning. To get beyond the limitations of a given text or lesson, many teachers often adapt or create activities involving authentic materials or media. Once teachers start to use authentic materials and observe the impact the real world context has on students, they may actually seek out ways to incorporate them more into lesson plans.

Where do EFL/ESL teachers find authentic materials? According to Gebhard (1996), there are unlimited sources for teaching materials. For many who live in countries where English is a foreign language, it is simply a matter of searching creatively. Teachers in urban areas of these countries can access authentic materials from cable TV, English language newspapers and magazines, and even from popular music on the radio. In large cities, modern grocery and department stores carrying imported products and the tourist in-

dustry such as hotels can offer useful authentic resources. Or else, during travel to English-speaking countries, teachers could pick up useful materials that could be adapted for their English lessons.

### **What Are Authentic Materials?**

Nunan (1999) defines authentic materials as spoken or written language data that has been produced in the course of genuine communication, and not specifically written for purposes of language teaching. In fact, in his teaching he encourages his students to bring into the classroom their own samples of authentic language data from "real-world" contexts outside of the classroom. They practice listening to and reading genuine language drawn from many different sources, including TV and radio broadcasts, taped conversations, meetings, talks, and announcements. They also read magazine stories, hotel brochures, airport notices, bank instructions, advertisements and a wide range of other written messages from the "real world" in situations as they occur.

Gebhard (1996) gives more examples of authentic materials EFL/ESL teachers have used. Some of his examples, which may serve as source material for lesson planning, are shown below:

1. Authentic Listening/ Viewing Materials -- TV commercials, quiz shows, cartoons, news clips, comedy shows, movies, soap operas, professionally audio-taped short stories and novels, radio ads, songs, documentaries, and sales pitches.
2. Authentic Visual Materials -- slides, photographs, paintings, children's artwork, stick-figure drawings, wordless street signs, silhouettes, pictures from magazines, ink blots, postcard pictures, wordless picture books, stamps, and X-

rays.

3. Authentic Printed Materials -- newspaper articles, movie advertisements, astrology columns, sports reports, obituary columns, advice columns, lyrics to songs, restaurant menus, street signs, cereal boxes, candy wrappers, tourist information brochures, university catalogs, telephone books, maps, TV guides, comic books, greeting cards, grocery coupons, pins with messages, and bus schedules.
4. Realia ("Real world" objects) Used in EFL/ ESL Classrooms -- coins and currency, folded paper, wall clocks, phones, Halloween masks, dolls, and puppets, to name a few. (Realia are often used to illustrate points very visually or for role-play situations.)

### **Why Use Authentic Materials?**

The extra time involved for teachers in planning for the use of authentic materials to supplement lessons is well worth it. In fact, using authentic materials has several advantages. According to Brinton (1991), authentic materials and media can reinforce for students the direct relationship between the language classroom and the outside world. Gebhard (1996) sees authentic materials as a way to "contextualize" language learning. When lessons are centered on comprehending a menu or a TV weather report, students tend to focus more on content and meaning rather than the language itself. This offers students a valuable source of language input, so that they are not being exposed only to the language presented by the text and the teacher.

In addition, Melvin and Stout (1987) find an overall increased motivation to learn in students, as well as a renewed interest in the

subject matter, when students use authentic materials for the study of culture in the language classroom. In class, they regularly “sent” students to a city in a target culture (for example, to spend a weekend in New York City) through prepared task-based activities using authentic materials. As students gained more confidence working directly with authentic materials, they also reported an increased understanding of the practical benefits of being able to use the language in real world scenarios. Students commented that they found it useful to be practicing skills they would need outside the classroom and to be learning about cultures beyond their own.

Also, there are some researchers who point out that more authentic materials are needed in the classroom because of the wide disparity that is often found between materials developed specifically for English language teaching and authentic conversation. Porter and Roberts (1981) show several differences between authentic materials and non-authentic materials in terms of spoken language. For example, conversations recorded for language texts often have a slow pace, have particular structures which recur with obtrusive frequency, and have very distinct turn-taking of speakers. Also, hesitations (such as “uh’s” and “mm’s”) are often missing, and sentences are very well-formed with few if any mistakes. In other words, what the language learners hear in class is different from the language in the real world. In many cases, the language heard in classrooms is a stilted use of spoken language, and authenticity is lost because of a need to teach specific language points in a way that some teachers feel would be more understandable for learners.

Brosnan et al. (1984) justify the importance of the use of authentic language in the classroom in this way:

1. Language is natural. By simplifying language or altering it for teaching purposes (limiting structures, controlling vocabulary, etc.), we risk making the task more difficult. We may, in fact, be removing clues to meaning.
2. Authentic language offers students the chance to deal with a small amount of material which, at the same time, contains complete and meaningful messages.
3. Authentic printed materials provide students with the opportunity to make use of non-linguistic clues (layout, pictures, colors, symbols, the physical setting in which it occurs) to help them discover the meaning more easily.
4. Adults need to be able to see the immediate relevance of what they do in the classroom to what they need to do outside it, and real-life material treated realistically makes the connection obvious.

While Nunan (1999:27) realizes that it is not realistic for teachers to use only authentic materials in the classroom, he makes a point that “learners should be fed as rich a diet of authentic data as possible, because, ultimately, if they only encounter contrived dialogues and listening texts, their learning task would be made more difficult.” He also goes on to say that it is important that learners listen to and read authentic material of as many different kinds as possible. This will help motivate the students by bringing the content and the subject matter to life for them, and enable them make the important connections between the classroom world and the world beyond it.

## **Task- Based Language Teaching**

Another aspect of teaching material design considered essential to many leading language researchers today is that such material promote task-based learning. Task-based learning is an overall approach to language learning that views the “tasks” that learners do as central to the learning process. The learning process is seen as a set of communicative tasks that are directly linked to curricular goals.

Nunan (1991: 279) outlines “five characteristics of a task-based approach to language learning:

1. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
2. The introduction of authentic texts (teaching materials) into the learning situation.
3. The provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language, but also on the learning process itself.
4. An enhancement of the learner’s own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
5. An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom."

He views the task as a piece of meaning-focused work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing and interacting in the target language.

Specifically, tasks can be analyzed according to the goals, the input data, the activities derived from the input, the settings and roles implied for teacher and learners. Nunan (1989:11) graphically

depicts a way to analyze the various elements of tasks, as shown in Figure 1.

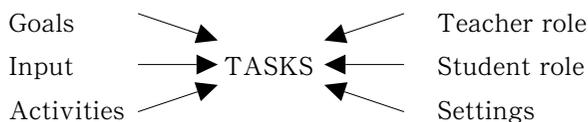


Figure 1: A framework for analyzing communicative tasks

Goals refer to the general intentions for the learning task. Input is the data that forms the point of departure for the task. Activities specify what learners will actually perform with the input. Roles refer to the social and interpersonal relationship between learners and teachers in a task. Settings refer to the classroom arrangement affecting interaction entailed in the task, such as pair work or group work. When selecting, adapting, modifying and creating communicative tasks, Nunan believes that specification of all these components is needed.

There are a number of different interpretations in the literature of what a “task” actually is. However, many researchers today make an important distinction between **target tasks**, which students need to accomplish beyond the classroom, and **pedagogical tasks**, which form the basis of the classroom activity during the instruction.

As far as target tasks are concerned, Long (1985: 89) lists a number of them: “filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter ... making a hotel reservation, writing a check, finding a street destination ...” He sums up a definition of “task” in

this way: "by task is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in-between." These are the kinds of things that individuals typically do outside of the classroom. The ultimate rationale for language instruction is to enable learners to accomplish these activities successfully in the real world using the target language.

Of course, target tasks could be practiced to some extent in the classroom. However, learners will also do many other things in the classroom that are not just rehearsals for performance outside of the classroom. Learners will become involved in various activities that facilitate the development of their general language proficiency, as well. Such tasks, with a pedagogical rationale, are the types of tasks that Richards, Platt and Weber (1986: 289) refer to as:

"actions carried out as the result of processing or understanding language. For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape, listening to an instruction and performing a command, may be referred to as tasks. Tasks may or may not involve the production of language. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as successful completion of the task. The use of a variety of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make language teaching more communicative."

A definition of a pedagogical task, that is seen by a number of researchers as capturing the essence of the concept, is given by Breen (1987: 23): "any structured language learning endeavor which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the

task". Another view of pedagogical tasks is given by Nunan (1999: 25) who refers to them as "... classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning."

Successful completion of pedagogical tasks would enable learners to acquire the skills needed to master real-world target tasks. For instance, a target task might be:

The learner will listen to a weather forecast and decide whether or not to take an umbrella and sweater to school.

Its related pedagogical task might be:

The learner will listen to an aural text about the weather and answer questions afterwards on whether given statements are true or false.

As soon as learners master the pedagogical task, including all of its related activities or exercises, they would have developed the necessary skills to accomplish the target task. Ultimately these newly developed skills could be used outside of the classroom.

A task-based curriculum then, with its supporting instructional materials, specifies what the learner needs to do with the English language in terms of target tasks and organizes a set of pedagogical tasks intended to reach those goals. According to Brown (1994:229), "in task-based instruction, the priority is not the bits and pieces of language, but rather the functional purposes for which the language must be used." Such a curriculum should focus

on pragmatic language competence. Task-based language teaching requires the teacher to organize classroom activities around those practical tasks that language users will engage in when they are "out there" in the real world.

### **Classroom Activities Using Authentic Task-Based Materials**

The following are some examples of classroom activities in which students use authentic materials and have specific tasks to accomplish in order to meet real-world language objectives:

#### Activities Using Cultural Objects

Activities involving the direct use and handling of products of a culture (such as postcards, photographs, symbols, and images in song lyrics) can be very effective in the classroom. One such activity, called Culture Composition developed by Tomalin and Stemplewski (1998), has as its purpose the development of writing skills, as well as the recognition of cultural artifacts. The teacher hands out various pieces of realia, collected from travels abroad to English-speaking countries, such as bus or air tickets, receipts, coupons, money and photographs. The items are mixed up and in random order. Students are put into groups of two or three. They identify each item, and then make up a story about their set of items. The groups present their stories to the rest of the class, each person in the group taking a turn to tell part of the story. As an item occurs in the story, it is shown to the class and placed on the table. When all groups have finished, the students write their own individual version of their story.

For these types of activities which teach culture, a task-oriented approach is suggested. Students work together in pairs or

small groups to fine-tune precise information. They share and discuss what they have discovered, and interpret the information within the context of the target culture and in comparison to their own culture.

### Listening Activities

One way to focus students' attention on developing real-world listening skills is through listening activities. This activity called "Eavesdropping" developed by Porter and Roberts (1987) teaches strategies for listening. Students are told that they are guests at a party and that they can eavesdrop on conversations. They listen to short segments of real-world party conversations and complete a worksheet in which they note down what topic the people are talking about. They also indicate on the worksheet whether they are interested in the topic or not. Follow-up activities could include other eavesdropping in real-world settings where English is spoken (or simulations of real world settings like watching an English conversation on TV), taking notes on what is heard and reporting back to the class.

### Listening / Viewing Activities

Many creative approaches for using video in the classroom are given by Stempleski and Tomalin (1990). One idea is through silent viewing of video clips to let students consider what is going on and guess what the speakers are doing and saying. Another approach would be for students to watch the beginning only of a video clip, and then they must predict what will happen next. Also, teachers could present a video clip through split viewing: half of the class sits with their back to the screen; half can see the screen; and

both groups can hear. Pairs then come together after the split viewing, and create a story about what happened.

In all activities like these, a task-based approach is suggested. Teachers need to decide what, if any, language needs to be pre-taught. Students' attention should be focused on particular viewing tasks. The teacher should decide what particular language points are to be taught, what follow-up activities will be used, and student worksheets need to be prepared. If possible, it is helpful to make transcripts of the dialogue from the video clip for later review with the students.

### Interactive Simulations

Another approach would be to set up a simulation of some real-world scenarios in which students familiarize themselves with the details through interaction with authentic materials. Then the students have to play a certain role in the scenario and communicate with others in a realistic manner while attempting to accomplish certain tasks.

The following is such a classroom activity that the author helped to design for a course at another university, and subsequently modified for use in an English Communication elective class at Sophia Junior College. The activity is called "Meet the Press", and is the simulation of a press conference. The authentic materials were compiled from news articles based on a real situation that occurred at a Japanese hospital.

Students are asked to read news clippings about the real-life event of a mix-up of patients for surgery that occurred at a Japanese hospital. Then they are told that they will participate in a press conference in the role of either a spokesperson for the hospital or a

reporter. Then students are divided into groups of four -- one is the spokesperson for the hospital and the other three are the reporters who must ask questions related to their concerns. (See handouts in Appendices 1, 2 and 3).

Spokespersons review their information sheets, write a prepared statement that they will release to the press, and try to prepare answers to possible difficult questions that reporters may ask them. They are given overall guidelines for how to conduct a press conference, how to handle reporters' questions, and what to do when they don't know the answer. Spokespersons have a practice session with the teacher before the event.

Reporters need to prepare questions to find out as much as they can about the situation. In addition, they play a role in which they have some specific concerns. Some of their questions should reflect these concerns. Then reporters review their questions in advance with the teacher, and are given guidance on how to ask appropriate follow-up questions.

At the press conference, the spokesperson greets the press, sets the ground rules, presents his or her prepared statement (about 3 minutes in length), and then opens up a 10-minute question and answer session, and when time is up, ends the session by thanking them for their participation.

In the real world, most students will probably never be a spokesperson or a reporter at a press conference. However, this activity provides the opportunity for students to develop the real-world ability to answer questions on the spot, as well as to ask in-depth questions about an issue.

All of these classroom activities, utilizing authentic materials

and giving students specific tasks to perform to complete a project, can be a very meaningful experience for students. Students often report gaining greater confidence in using the language during such activities. It's a way to bring real world experiences into the classroom by focusing on practical language skills.

Note: The "Meet the Press" activity was developed with assistance from Robert Gaynor, a colleague from another university. The author wishes to acknowledge him for his input.

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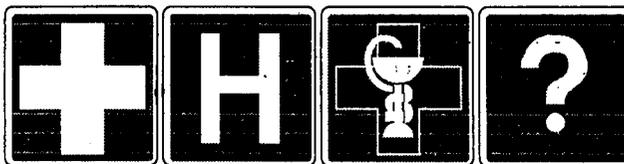
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## MEET THE PRESS

## Spokesperson's Information Sheet



### **Are Japanese hospitals a threat to patients?**

#### THE SITUATION:

You are the spokesperson for Yokohama City University Hospital. You are holding this press conference because there have been repeated questions following a mix-up of patients causing a heart patient to undergo lung surgery and a lung patient to undergo heart surgery at your hospital about a month ago. An investigation by prefectural police is underway, and it is possible that up to 18 medical personnel will be charged with professional negligence. The two patients are now in intensive care and their lives are not in danger. Your job is to convince the public that your hospital is doing everything possible to cooperate in the investigation, and to reassure the public that safety measures are in place to prevent the recurrence of similar errors.

#### Information you strongly wish to convey:

- ◇ Your hospital is setting up its own fact-finding team including outside experts to clarify the cause of the mix-up.
- ◇ Your hospital is actively reviewing all of its safety measures that are in place and will submit a detailed report on it to the appropriate government authorities.
- ◇ Neither of the patients' lives are in danger.

#### Information you are willing to share if asked:

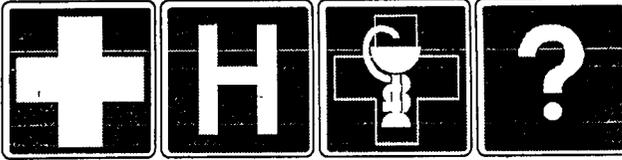
- ◇ It is thought that the mix-up took place when a nurse handed the two patients over to colleagues in nearby operating rooms.
- ◇ The mistake was detected about eight hours after the surgeries were completed.
- ◇ The two patients were elderly men, similar in physique.

#### Information you do not wish to share at present:

- ◇ The names of the patients or the names of the medical personnel involved.
- ◇ The mayor of Yokohama has decided to revoke the hospital's designation as a medical institution that provides quality, high tech treatment.
- ◇ Some doctors report that many errors are occurring because of chronic overwork.
- ◇ The number of nurses per 100 hospital beds is significantly lower than that of other major nations such as the U.S., Great Britain and France.
- ◇ There are over 100,000 malpractice cases a year in Japan.
- ◇ Doctors in Japan are not legally required to continue studying medicine after obtaining their licenses. Licenses to practice medicine never have to be renewed.

## MEET THE PRESS

## Reporters' Concerns



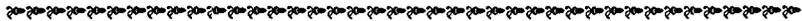
### **Are Japanese hospitals a threat to patients?**

#### THE SITUATION:

This press conference is being held because there have been repeated questions following a mix-up of patients causing a heart patient to undergo lung surgery and a lung patient to undergo heart surgery at Yokohama City University Hospital about a month ago. An investigation by prefectural police is underway, and it is possible that up to 18 medical personnel will be charged with professional negligence. The two patients are now in intensive care and their lives are not in danger.

#### Reporters' Concerns:

1. You want to know the names of the medical staff involved, and if the names will be made public. Since your own mother is scheduled for major surgery soon, you are very concerned about the ability and background of medical staff, especially doctors. You believe that people have a right to know background information about doctors who treat them. You also are very worried because this incident is just one of a number of serious mistakes occurring in Japan's medical facilities lately. Several weeks ago, a 58-year-old housewife died after a nurse accidentally injected her with disinfectant instead of blood medication. And last week, a 7-year-old boy had to have surgery to remove part of a surgical instrument left inside his skull. You want to know why this alarming trend is happening.



2. You want to know the names of the patients involved so you can do follow-up interviews of the family members and find out what they feel about the situation. You think that the family members should file a malpractice suit. You want to know if the hospital and medical staff will compensate the patients and their families for the wrong that has been done to them. You are also very concerned about the overall safety of the medical care in Japan. You want to know what hospitals are doing now to prevent similar situations from happening again in the future.



3. You want to know what punishment will be given to those medical personnel involved. You feel that those responsible should be held accountable for their actions. You just found out that this surgical error wasn't discovered until eight hours after the operation when the patients were undergoing blood transfusions. If the two patients hadn't had the same type blood, this could easily have been a fatal error. You want to know why it took so long for the hospital staff to discover such a serious mistake. You also want to know why the hospital hasn't given out information about this incident on a timely basis. You want to know if the hospital is trying to protect those involved.

## MEET THE PRESS

### OVERALL GUIDELINES FOR REPORTERS:

You are interested in finding out as much as possible the who, what, when, where and why of this story.

Ask a lot of questions, and try to ask a follow-up question. Be persistent.

If you feel that the spokesperson for the company or organization is not answering your question, repeat the question and insist on an answer.

Try to get as many facts as you can get so that you will be able to write a good story about it.

You are under a deadline, and you need to get the information as quickly as possible.

### OVERALL GUIDELINES FOR SPOKESPERSONS:

Be as honest as possible.

Stick to your facts as you see them.

If you don't know the answer to a reporter's question, tell the reporter that you'll find out and get back to him or her.

If you wish to avoid answering a question, say that you have no comment, or change the subject.

Remember, as the spokesperson, you are the media's main source of information. Be confident and be in charge.

Don't let a hostile question rattle you.

Set the ground rules. Let reporters know, for example, that there is a limited time period for questions and answers. Ask them to raise their hands, and you will call on them.