

## *A Critical Look at Authentic Materials\**

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The use of authentic materials is a major preoccupation in English language teaching (ELT). Teachers often try to ensure their students use authentic materials; publishers proclaim proudly that their materials are authentic. The assumption, of course, is that authentic materials are to be preferred over other types of materials. The purpose of this article is to explore the use of authentic materials in ELT. I begin with a brief discussion of the origins of our field's present preoccupation with such materials. This is followed by an examination of the reasons why authentic materials are preferred. I then discuss the problems with using authentic materials, and suggest that 'appropriateness' should be the primary consideration.

Unfortunately, in teaching English as a foreign language, the use of materials that take into account the linguistic abilities of students is controversial. In the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the use of authentic materials reached the status of a cult. The goal of this article is to argue that the use of authentic materials is not a necessity and may often be misguided.

I begin with a critical analysis of the cult surrounding the use of authentic materials. I provide reasons why I think there is such a cult and discuss its origins. I then turn to the reasons that are given for using authentic materials.

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This is followed by a discussion of some of the problems with the use of authentic materials, including an examination of the reasons that are often advanced in favor of such materials. In the next section I suggest that *appropriateness* should be the primary consideration. I conclude by discussing what I mean by this concept.

## THE CULT OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

I use the term *cult* as defined by the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (1996): “a great devotion to a person, idea, object, movement...; *esp*: such devotion regarded as a literary or intellectual fad. . .” (p. 282). If we accept this definition, then I need to establish that there is “great devotion” to the use of authentic materials by teachers, materials developers, and publishers.

As evidence, I offer a random sampling of what authorities in ELT have written about the use of authentic materials.

- Sarceni (2003, p. 77) states unequivocally, “Materials should be based on authentic texts...”
- Guariento and Morley (2001, p. 347) claim, “There is now a general consensus in language teaching that the use of authentic materials in the classroom is beneficial to the learning process.”
- McGarry (1995, p. 3), writes, “There is now a general recognition of the valuable role which authentic texts can play in helping to create a language-rich environment in the classroom, and in providing students with bridges to the real world of the target language community.”
- Clarke (1989, p. 73) observes that the use of authentic materials is a “growing moral imperative.”

A second source of support for my claim that there is a cult of authenticity is publishers and the way in which they promote or advertise their ELT

materials. Here are some representative samples:

- “Motivating texts from a variety of authentic sources” (Hutchinson, *Life Lines, Intermediate* (1997, back cover)).
- “Frequent use of authentic reading and listening material” (Swan and Walter, *The New Cambridge English Course, Intermediate* (1992, back cover)).
- “All of the texts in the book are real samples of written English. . . . None of them was written especially for foreigners.” (Walter, *Genuine Articles: Authentic Reading Texts for Intermediate Students of American English* (1986, vii)).

There is also anecdotal evidence. I often hear teachers remark on the need to use authentic material. Such remarks are voiced by teachers who come from a variety of backgrounds, who teach in widely different situations, and with differences in formal education in ELT, from those with no experience to those who hold advanced degrees.

### **The Origins of the Cult**

Of interest is the source of the cult. The actual beginnings can be found in the last century with the growing popularity and spread of communicative language teaching (CLT). One of the major features of CLT is the strong preference for authentic materials. Thus, interest in and preference for authentic materials grew and spread with the widespread acceptance of CLT.

### **WHY USE AUTHENTIC MATERIALS?**

In this section, I present a number of reasons that are given in the literature for using authentic materials. Each reason is followed by a critique of it.

## **Affect**

Perhaps the most common reason for the use of authentic materials concerns the affective dimension of ELT. Authentic materials are often claimed to motivate students because they find them interesting, engaging, culturally enlightening, and relevant. Little and Singleton (1991, p. 124, cited in Peacock 1997, p. 144) call this the “classic argument” for using authentic texts.” McGarry (1995, p. 3) claims that “...they can play a key role in enhancing positive attitudes to learning . . .” Others who hold this position include Swaffar (1985, p. 18), and King (1990, p. 70). Little, Devitt and Singleton believe that learners who use authentic materials become motivated because the materials bring them close the culture of the target language (1989, p. 26).

There is disagreement, however. Some believe that motivation and attitude can be negatively impacted by the use of authentic materials. Rivers observes that “rushing students too soon into reading material beyond the present capacity for fluent comprehension with occasional contextual guessing . . . destroys confidence” (1981, p. 260). Williams (1984, p. 26) and Morrison (1989, p. 26) also maintain that using authentic materials may lower student motivation.

Unfortunately, what little research that has been done on authentic materials and learner attitude and motivation does not help us resolve the issue. Let’s look at two of the more reliable and valid investigations. Bacon and Finnemann (1990) investigated the relationship between affect and authentic oral and written input. They found that their subjects reported somewhat negative reactions to the use of authentic oral and written input.

Peacock (1997) investigated the impact of authentic materials on the classroom motivation of his students. His results were mixed. On the one hand, he did find evidence in support of that position (1997, pp. 148-50); on the other hand, the results of a questionnaire revealed that, “overall, learners found authentic materials to be significantly less interesting than artificial” (p. 151).

There is one major problem with Peacock's investigation. He was not able to control for the topics of the texts and for the activities. It might be that it was the tasks associated with the authentic materials that the students found motivating. This would be a fruitful area for research.

### **Prepare Students for the 'Real' World**

A second common reason that is advanced for the use of authentic texts is that they reflect *real-world goals*. Won, Kwok and Choi (1995) claim:

In particular, authentic materials can help us to achieve the aims of enriching students' experiences in the learning and use of English, sensitizing them to the use of English in the real world, and helping them to generate a learning strategy for learning not only English but also other subjects. (p. 318)

Abersold and Field, while recognizing there is "an ongoing debate" on the use of authentic materials in teaching foreign language reading (1997, p. 48), nevertheless argue that "Mastering even a small degree of comprehension of authentic materials gives students confidence in dealing with reading for real purposes" (p. 49).

Unfortunately, supporters of this argument offer no evidence for their position. Again, this is an area that deserves to be investigated.

It is my position that this argument – that we should use authentic materials because they prepare our students for the world outside our classrooms – is misguided. I believe that this reason confuses the *goal* with the *means* – that it confuses the desired outcome of language learning and teaching with the process of achieving this outcome.

### **The Alternative is Terrible**

Another reason for using authentic materials comes from what many mistakenly think as the only alternative to authentic materials: simplified

materials. Regrettably, simplified materials have a terrible reputation in language teaching, particularly in teaching reading. If authentic texts are seen as natural, interesting, relevant and pedagogically sound, simplified texts are generally considered to be just the opposite: stilted, unnatural, unreal, bland, and a pedagogic dead-end. There is, to be sure, good support for this point of view, for it is relatively easy to find examples of really poorly simplified materials.

Criticism of simplified materials is justified, for such materials can be poorly written, uninteresting, hard to read, and lacking normal text features such as redundancy and cohesion. But, as Carter and Long observe, “It is worth remembering that--as with all books--there are good, bad and indifferent simplified texts” (1991, p. 152). And, I must stress, we need to include authentic texts as being good, bad, and indifferent. Authentic materials can be poorly written, uninteresting, hard to read, and can lack normal text features such as redundancy and cohesion.

To summarize this section, the most common arguments given for using authentic texts lack an empirical foundation. In addition, the argument that simplified materials are terrible can be turned around and applied to authentic texts. But there are more problems with authentic materials, as I propose in the next section.

## **PROBLEMS WITH AUTHENTIC MATERIALS**

Given the widespread acceptance of the use of authentic materials, we might wonder if there are problems associated with authentic materials. There are, of course, and I will discuss the most serious.

### **Definitions**

To begin with, there are a number of different interpretations as to what authentic materials are. Day and Bamford (1998, p. 54) claim that there is no

consensus as to the meaning of authentic. Not only is there no consensus but some of the definitions contradict others.

- Scarcella and Oxford: “Generally, authentic language is considered unedited, unabridged text that is written for native. . . speakers” (1992, p. 98).
- Tomlinson: An authentic text “is not written or spoken for language teaching purposes” (1998: viii).
- Abersold and Field: “Authentic materials are taken directly from L1 sources and are not changed in any way before they are used in the classroom” (1997, p. 48). (emphasis in the original)
- Wong et al.: “We use it to refer to materials which are used in genuine communication in the real world, and not specifically prepared for the teaching and learning of English” (1995, p. 318).
- Nunan: “Authentic materials are usually defined as those which have been produced for purposes other than to teach language” (1988, p. 99).

These definitions are straightforward and easy to understand. Now, however, look at what others say:

#### **Authentic materials**

- Walter: texts both “shortened” and “slightly adapted” (1986, ix).
- McGrath: “The key issue in relation to text authenticity, however, is how far it is reasonable to go in the direction of rendering a text accessible to learners” (2003, p. 105).
- From an ELT reading text for low-intermediate learners: “Featuring adapted texts from a variety of authentic sources...” (Richards & Eckstut-Didier, 2003, x).

In these two definitions and in the blurb from an ELT text, we see a major shift from the previous four. If we accept the first definition of authentic texts, then we would have to reject the second definition. And if we accept the

second definition, which allows some sort of modification (simplification?) of a first language text, then the question becomes, as McGrath points out, how much can a text be modified (simplified) and still be authentic?

Indeed, there are those who argue that the test of whether a text is authentic is not found in the text itself; rather it is to be found in the reaction of the audience.

- Williams: authentic text is one “written to say something, to convey a message” (1984, p. 25) .
- Swaffar: For purposes of the foreign language classroom, an authentic text . . . is one whose primary intent is to communicate meaning. In other words, such a text can be one which is written for native speakers of the language to be read by other native speakers (with the intent to inform, persuade, thank, etc.) or it may be a text intended for a language learner group (1985, p. 17).

This last set of definitions establishes that there is no agreement as to what an authentic text is. These definitions completely contradict the definitions in the first set. It is not my goal to evaluate the conflicting definitions and to tell you what authentic texts really are; rather I would like to suggest that this confusion results in the concept of authentic materials as meaningless and lacking in pedagogic value.

### **Comprehensibility**

The final problem of authentic texts that I discuss concerns their comprehensibility. For beginning and intermediate students, authentic materials – whatever form they take – are most likely too difficult for them to understand. This leads me to wonder if their use might create problems for learners. To answer this question, I turn to reading. Williams (1983, p. 175) claims that an authentic text at too difficult a level of language forces the reader to focus on the linguistic code, and not on the meaning. What this



means is that students spend their time and energy deciphering the story, using a dictionary constantly. In these situations, students are not learning to read and to enjoy reading in the foreign language. Nuttall, in her discussion of authentic materials, writes that “linguistically difficult texts are unlikely to be suitable for developing most reading skills” (1996, p. 177). Recall the quotation from Rivers: “rushing students too soon into reading material beyond the present capacity for fluent comprehension with occasional contextual guessing . . . destroys confidence” (1981, p. 260).

There have been a number of studies that investigated the comprehensibility of different types of texts. Yano, Long and Ross (1994) compared three versions of a written text:

- *authentic* (e.g., “Because he had to work at night to support his family, Paco often fell asleep in class.”);
- *simplified* (e.g., “Paco had to make money for his family. Paco worked at night. He often went to sleep in class.”); and
- *elaborated* (e.g., “Paco had to work at night to earn money to support his family, so he often fell asleep in class the next day during his teacher's lesson.”) (p. 193)

Their subjects found the authentic version the most difficult. Incidentally, there was little difference in foreign language students’ comprehension of the simplified and the elaborated versions.

Young (1999) examined the types of simplifications made to four authentic texts to determine if there were differences in recall scores of her students who were studying Spanish as a foreign language. Her results were mixed. However, Young did find that recall scores for the simplified texts were not superior to the authentic ones—a result in direct contrast to what Yano et al. found.

These two investigations are representative samples of the research literature. It is not clear that using authentic materials is beneficial to learners.

To summarize, I have made two important points about authentic materials:

- we do not know what authentic texts are
- there seem to be no obvious benefits for using them

Because of the problems associated with the term and their use, I suggest that we abandon the concept altogether. Further, I suggest that all of us involved in language teaching — teachers, researchers, designers and developers of materials as well as publishers — put the issue of the use of authentic materials in the background, and think instead of *appropriateness*.

## **APPROPRIATENESS**

It is time to put the cult of authentic materials behind us. I believe that the concept of *appropriateness* should be the focus of our attention. There are many aspects or dimensions of this concept, not just materials. I will discuss the most important of these in this section.

### **Language Ability**

Teachers should use materials that are appropriate for the linguistic abilities of their students. Further, those who develop materials should ensure that the level of the language is appropriate for the abilities of the audience for whom they write. And publishers should advertise their materials appropriately.

### **Variety of English**

We need to extend our consideration of appropriateness to include the issue of *what English? What dialect or variety of English should materials developers use and teachers teach?* For example, should we use American English? What about British English? Does the English in materials have to be based on a native speaker model? Why not use materials that are based on

the variety of English spoken in Singapore? In India? The Philippines?

### **Activities, Tasks & Exercises**

Finally, we need to note that the notion of *appropriateness* is not restricted to language. The concept should also be applied to the activities, tasks, exercises, and so on, that we ask our students do. Those who design and develop materials should incorporate activities, task, and exercises that fit into the lives and needs of the target audience. A lot has been written about the notion of *authentic tasks* (see, for example, Guariento & Morely, 2001; Lee, 1995; Long, 1996), and a discussion of this is not within the scope of this article.

However, I must mention that materials developers and publishers are aware of this. For example, the blurb on the back cover of Cunningham and Moor (1998), states, “Authentic tasks give students the opportunity to develop their speaking skills in real life situations.”

### **CONCLUSION**

I hope that I have achieved my goal: to demonstrate that we no longer need to use the term authentic materials in considering what materials to use. I believe that the term is out of date and no longer useful, and that there are critical problems with the use of authentic materials in the ELT classroom. There are, I claim, problems with what they are (definitions), problems substantiating their value in the classroom, and problems with their inherent difficulty (they are too hard for most students). I suggest that that we use the concept of appropriateness.

Materials need to be appropriate in terms of language, both the level and the type or variety or dialect, and in terms of the activities, tasks and exercises that students are asked to do.

Finally, I do not mean to suggest that materials that were originally

prepared for an audience of first-language speakers and readers should not be used in the ELT classroom. Such materials certainly have their place as long as they meet the various criteria discussed above for *appropriateness*.

## THE AUTHOR

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