The Use of Authentic Materials for the Teaching "Reading"

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A B S T R A C T

The reason for reading depends very much on the purpose for reading. The use of authentic materials in the classroom is discussed, with the student benefiting from the exposure to real language being used in a real context. Other aspects which prove positive when using authentic materials are that they are highly motivating, giving a sense of achievement when understood and encourage further reading.

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Reading means different things to different people, for some it is recognizing written words, while for others it is an opportunity to teach pronunciation and practice speaking. However, reading always has a purpose. It is something that we do every day, it is an integral part of our daily lives, taken very much for granted and generally assumed to be something that everyone can do. They also reflect the changes in the use of language, there is a wide variety of text types, they are also very versatile (they can be used in different ways to promote different skills) and can be used more than once as well as be updated. Anything can be used as authentic material but for developing reading one of the most useful resources is the Internet, with large amounts of varied material being easily accessible.

One of the main reason for using authentic materials in the classroom is once outside the "safe", controlled language learning environment, the learner will not encounter the artificial language of the classroom but the real world and language how it is really used. The role of the teacher is not to delude the language learner but to prepare him, giving the awareness and necessary skills so as to understand how the language is actually used. knowledge is inadequate.

Top-Down processing is the opposite, where a global meaning of the text is obtained, through "clues" in the text and the reader's good schema knowledge. This is often associated with a good reader, who does not read word for word but quickly and efficiently. The most comprehensive description of the reading process are interactive models, "…in which every component in the reading process can interact with any other component… (Alderson 2000:18)", combining elements of both bottom-up and top down models. Reading is considered to be an interactive process (a conversation between writer/reader, even though the writer is not present) and for it to occur both processes are necessary, top-down to predict the meaning and bottom-up to check it. The two are therefore complementary ways of processing a text. Our knowledge and experiences of the world around us also influence how a text is read or processed, this is known as schema theory (Bartlett 1932). It operates actively and constructively, with our knowledge of the world being a continuous process that upon receiving new information interprets it on the basis of what is already known. Good readers have an idea of what is normal (linguistically and conceptually) and of how the world works, therefore when reading they make use of existing schemata and then modify them with any new information. They also have expectations or make predictions before reading that are either reinforced, challenged or modified after reading. Schemata has also been described as

"…cognitive onstructs which allow for the organization of information in the long term memory…" (Widdowson 1983:34). Often a writer will presume that the target reader has the relevant schemata to read the text and will therefore leave certain facts out or unstated (presuppositions) but this creates problems when the writer and reader do not share the same relevant schema.

Authenticity can therefore be considered to be the interaction between the reader and the text and not just the text in itself. Reading is considered to be an ongoing interaction, going beyond the physical context of the text, looking for meaning as well as processing information. Goodman takes this even further claiming that reading is "…an essential interaction between language and thought…" (1988:12) Where the writer encodes his thoughts as language and the reader decodes the language into thought. Authentic materials are any texts written by native English speakers for native English speakers. So, there is some advantages of using authentic materials:

1. Authentic materials bring learners into direct contact with a reality level of Business English.
2. Authentic materials drawn from periodicals are always up-to-date and constantly being updated.
3. Authentic materials from a particular source, such as The Economist, tend to work in consistent areas of language, so, after a while, students who practice reading The Economist will become experts in reading English language business publications.
4. Authentic materials provide us with a source of up-to-date materials that can be directly relevant to business English learners' needs.

Now let's take them in order:

Authentic materials bring learners into direct contact with a reality level of English. Real Business English – that is, English as it is used by businesspeople to communicate with other businesspeople – English that has not been made especially easy for learners – can be a great motivator. Constant exposure to real English as it is used to talk about business defines the end of the tunnel – the goal – for many learners. "If I work with and practice real Business English, I am developing a tool that I can use in real life." The other extremely important point here is that many of our learners are already in business so they will have had a certain amount of exposure to the English language that is used to conduct real business. A lot of value can be generated out of a marriage between real Business English and our learners 'real business experience.

Basic principles: It is one thing to give your students an article that they find interesting and satisfying to read – and quite another thing to give them an article to read in class (even if it is an interesting and relevant one) that is so difficult for them to understand that they have problems with every third word and lose all confidence in their English. So, particularly when you start using authentic materials with them, you will need to be extremely patient and gently support them in their learning process. It is at this point where you need to make adjustments for your group to compensate for their level of comprehension and vocabulary. See lessons that provide added value and a first lesson with authentic materials.

Making it interesting for everyone: As you get to know your groups it will be easier for you to choose the most appropriate, relevant material – but, of course, you can always ask your groups to choose (the people in your group can even take it in turns to choose an article)! It is always worth bearing in mind, however, that if you give your groups something interesting to do with the article, then the interestingness or the relevance of the article itself can be less important!

Preparation program: Allow half an hour of preparation time for an article of 900–1200 words Sample article 1, during which you can do the following:

Cutting Cut the article, making sure that what is left still makes sense Cut article (see things to look out for when cutting articles) or Cut the article at the point where it has become interesting but not everything has been said … Cut-off article Things to look out for when cutting articles (These comments relate to an Economist article about the US Government suing the US tobacco industry. view complete article) Initials: When a company or organization is first named, it is often followed by a set of initials by which it is referred to later in the article:

"The first of these forces was a legal settlement between GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) … and the State of

New York." So, if you have cut the first reference to the company, you will need to insert the whole name of the company plus the initials – here, "GlaxoSmithKline (GSK)" – when you first mention it in the cut version of the article. Names of people: On first mention in an article, a person is named with both their first name, surname and a brief description:" Henry Waxman, a democratic congressman from California, pointed out … "Later in the article he appears as Mr Waxman: "Alan Gold hammer, another spokesman for PhRMA, claims that Mr Waxman was relying on preliminary data." If you have cut out the first mention of this person, remember to give his or her full name when you first mention that person.

Read it to yourself: Check the cut article through once more to yourself to make sure it makes sense and it does not feel as if there is something missing.

How long should such an article be? That really depends on how you are going to use it. At intermediate level as a rule of thumb, if the students are going to read it and discuss it during a 60–90-minute lesson, then a comfortable length is between half and one and a half A4 pages in 12-point type. If the article is longer (see sample article 1), it is a good idea to shorten it (see cut article) or simply work with the first half of it (see cut off article). When your students are familiar with the content of the shortened article, then they may well be 'hooked' enough to read the complete article for homework – and of course there are a number of follow-up activities that can be done.

How much time do I need to invest in preparing an article? As you have intermediate students, and The Economist is an authentic source of materials, some preparation is definitely necessary. The question is, how much of this preparation can your students do and how much preparation should you be doing? For students' preparation of materials see Lessons that require little or no preparation. Otherwise allow yourself half an hour of preparation time for an article of 900–1200 words. Remember you can often use the same preparation with several groups! What types of interaction are possible with this material?

Perhaps a more useful question to ask here is 'What are my students' requirements from this course?' as this will often generate the types of interaction that you will need. Here are a few examples: Presenting and discussing a proposal at a meeting. Businesspeople often need to present ideas at meetings. Normally, the presenter informs him or herself about the proposal and presents it for discussion. This person is also able to clarify things and answer questions. In a typical language school situation, such a meeting could be about choosing a diversification project, for example – and maybe three or four such proposals could be presented and discussed. A different article, one that is relevant to his or her field of expertise, could be chosen for (or chosen by) each presenter. Of course they will need to prepare, so give them time to do this or set this for homework. Tell your students that you will take the article(s) back before the actual meeting – that way they will have to express themselves in their own words. Your students are then practicing verbal summarizing and explaining at the meeting – and you can tell them that they have to explain themselves so clearly that even a financial manager can understand! (Of course, financial managers will have to explain themselves so clearly that even an engineer/advertising executive can understand!) They will also be practicing asking and answering questions. A variation on this is to give the same article to two students, or two groups of students. They then have to look for all the arguments in the article in favor of the proposal and all the arguments in the article against the proposal – and combine this with their knowledge of the world. In the meeting they then present their arguments and debate whether to adopt the proposal or not.

Authenticity can therefore be considered to be the interaction between the reader and the text and not just the text in itself. Reading is considered to be an ongoing interaction, going beyond the physical context of the text, looking for meaning as well as processing information.

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