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THE USEGE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Submission Date: February 17, 2023, **Accepted Date:** February 22, 2023,

Published Date: February 27, 2023

Crossref doi: <https://doi.org/10.37547/ijll/Volume03Issue02-13>

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ABSTRACT

Teaching with authentic materials has been a hot topic in the English teaching industry for quite some time. With the dawn of easy and widespread internet access, students are exposed to a large number of authentic English texts and resources online. Many of our learners now also work in multi-cultural and multi-national companies or study abroad. The article create the need for students to be able to understand a variety of authentic English sources. In this article we will show you how to help your students develop the skills needed to understand and react to authentic texts.

KEYWORDS

Authentic materials, foreign language, second language, newspaper articles, podcasts, formal writing, multi-word expressions.

INTRODUCTION

By authentic materials in English Language Teaching , we understand any text written, edited, and published without any consideration for learners of English as a second or foreign language. This may include:

- Reading texts such as newspaper articles, e.g., from The Guardian or Financial Times
- Long-reading texts, like novels
- Specific, unique literature genres, like poetry or drama plays

- Videos, such as movies, TV series, conference presentations, or TV news
- Listening texts, like podcasts or radio shows
- Formal writing, like legal documents, academic papers, or formal letters

Some of these have long been available and used in classroom, like traditional English literature. Many of these texts have had the language simplified for learners, for example, like graded literature readers. Grading the language, e.g., by reducing the number of complex words and sentences, is one way authentic texts have been made accessible to learners. But many

types of authentic texts are new. Often students are intimidated and give up quickly when they encounter them.

Authentic materials are audio, print and video materials that have not been designed for deliberate use in the English language classroom.

Authentic materials may fall into two main categories - print and auditory.

Let's check out some examples of authentic materials from each category:

AUTHENTIC PRINT MATERIALS	AUTHENTIC AUDITORY MATERIALS
Job applications	TV commercials
Restaurant menus	Radio broadcasts
Food labels	Movies
TV guides	Podcasts
Magazines	E-books
Newspapers	Songs
Journal articles	
Blog posts	
Novels	
Leaflets	

There are a few reasons why students are unable to engage with authentic materials effectively:

Cultural differences

English is taught virtually everywhere around the world and the local culture of the students might be vastly different to that of English speaking countries. Also, in these countries, there are many cultures and even

varieties of the English language. The majority of texts are composed for a specific area, e.g., Australia only. When someone writes a text, they also usually have their audience much more narrowed down to a specific age group, people of a specific educational background, political views or interests, etc. Each authentic text is written with the assumptions about its target audience and their knowledge, which your students might not have.

Unfamiliar or idiomatic expressions

Of course, an authentic text might be full of new unfamiliar words. However, an added difficulty is that many of them come in multi-word expressions, such as phrasal verbs or idioms. Because of this many learners have problems with identifying the words that go together so that they are able to look them up in a dictionary.

Variety of structures

English achieves variety and the lack of repetition not only by varying vocabulary, but also by utilizing different sentence structure. A stylistically sophisticated piece of writing contains many sentence structures and alternates between them. For example, one short paragraph can go from an active sentence to a passive one, followed by a conditional one. Many specialized texts are written in Academic or Business English too. These types of English have their own complex characteristics. For instance, a formal business email has a fixed structure and many standard phrases.

You might think that authentic materials are too difficult and give up on the idea of using them. But this will be doing our students, who want and need to interact with these texts, a disservice. It can also be

hugely motivating for them to be able to tackle a 'real' English source. It is important to notice that there is no minimum level below which we should not use authentic materials with our students.

You can find appropriate authentic materials for all levels. For example, for elementary and pre-intermediate classes, leaflets, short letters, postcards, or ads can be fantastic sources. Intermediate students can handle even longer and more complex texts. The key is to structure a task in such a way that does not require them to understand every sentence or fact. For instance, you can ask your students to skim the text for overall meaning, or find two facts about the celebrity mentioned in it. Higher-level students can answer more specific questions, but remember they will need scaffolding, too. You can help them by introducing the key vocabulary before, for example.

Think about your students - have they seen and read a similar text before? For example, if you are giving them a business news podcast, have they listened to one before? Also consider the similarities and potential differences between how such text is structured and what it contains in their first language. For instance, a formal letter in English has a fixed organization which might be different in the learners' mother tongue.

An authentic text that's completely unfamiliar or uninteresting will be discouraging for learners. Consider if your learners have any previous knowledge of the topic of the piece and if it matches their interest and knowledge. It might be difficult at first, but as you bring more and more different texts to your classroom, encourage students to share their views on them. Make sure you also welcome the negative feedback (e.g., when your students find a text boring or unrelatable), so that it can inform your future choices.

In basic terms, look at the four core skills in language acquisition: speaking, listening, reading, and writing in the context of the text. Then, you need to specifically consider subskills. For example, in a reading text, which type of reading skills will the students need: reading for specific information, gist, inferring meaning from context? Think also if students struggle with that specific skill in their first language. Many sources might involve more than one skill, e.g., a podcast could come with a transcript mixing listening and reading.

Summary of the main advantages of using authentic materials:

- Authentic materials for non-linear syllabi - There's little evidence of a fixed acquisition order when it comes to authentic materials. Many teachers and scholars might repudiate the use of authentic texts on this basis. However, I believe that language acquisition does not occur in a magical linear fashion;
- Integrative motivation - Genuine materials from the target culture provide learners with a crucial 'stepping stone' towards their own understanding of, and adaptation to, that culture;
- Confidence levels rise when learners are treated as 'native speakers' - Distributing authentic materials in class might cause students to believe they are being treated as 'native speakers'. Therefore, their confidence levels rise and their overall learning experience is enhanced;
- Enhanced engagement - Engagement in a text assumes a certain degree of empathy. Indeed, authentic materials tend to have great personal significance for learners. Hence, a

powerful argument in favour of utilising authentic materials is the increased levels of engagement they tend to foster;

- Accessibility to low level learners - Low level learners can approach genres such as the television news bulletin with confidence. Learners should be familiar with the presentation and format of the news bulletin, mostly owing to its use of visual images. Instructors should teach low level learners how to recognise proper nouns (people and places) and 'international' words (e.g. airport, terrorism). Moreover, teachers should encourage learners to contribute their own knowledge about items in the news.

The advantages of using authentic materials in the EFL classroom far outweigh the drawbacks.

In my view, there is an argument that entire courses should revolve around authentic materials, even for lower level learners.

So, perhaps, Directors of Studies and teachers don't need to devise syllabuses at all.

Nowadays it is virtually impossible for our learners to avoid any contact with authentic English texts. They need help to develop key skills to understand and benefit from these sources. As teachers we can do this by taking into consideration the type of texts, the background and characteristics of our students, and the skills and language they need for the purpose.

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