Developing Authentic L2 Reading Materials

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Abstract

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 everyday; it is an integral part of our daily lives, taken very much for granted and generally assumed to be something that everyone can do. The reason for reading depends very much on the purpose for reading. Among aspects which prove positive when using authentic materials is that they are highly motivating, giving a sense of achievement when understood and encourage further reading. One of the main reasons for using authentic materials in the classroom is once outside the controlled language learning environment, the learner will not encounter the artificial language of the classroom but the real world and language the way it is really used (Berardo, 2006).

Keywords: Authenticity; Foreign language (L2) learning; Reading comprehension; Reading materials

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1. Introduction

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 everyday; it is an integral part of our daily life. Alderson (2000) defines reading as "…an enjoyable, intense, private activity, from which much pleasure can be derived, and in which one can become totally absorbed (p. 28). Reading, in Berardo's (2006) terms, can have three main purposes; for survival, for learning or for pleasure. Reading for survival is considered to be in response to our environment, to find out information and can include street signs, advertising, and timetables.

It depends very much on the day-to-day needs of the reader and often involves an immediate response to a situation. In contrast reading for learning is considered to be the type of reading done in the classroom and is goal orientated. While reading for pleasure is something that does not have to be done.

For Nuttall (1996) the central ideas behind reading are the idea of meaning; the transfer of meaning from one mind to another; the transfer of a message from writer to reader; how we get meaning by reading; how the reader, the writer and the text all contribute to the process.

2. Concept of L2 Reading

The ability to read in a second language is one of the most important skills required of learners in multilingual international settings. 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. Alderson (2000) defines reading as "an enjoyable, intense, private activity, from which much pleasure can be derived, and in which one can become totally absorbed (p. 28).

Grabe (2002) points out that reading can be simply defined as the ability to derive understanding from written text and enumerates five features for reading in a Second-Language:

1. A rapid and automatic process, that is different dates of information being activated, working men need to be active at the same time its understanding is to be achieved.
2. An interacting process; reading is interactive in two ways: first it requires many skills and abilities to be carried out some meals to industry and second it requires an interaction of textual information and background knowledge.
3. Reading is strategic and flexible. In that readers assess whether or not they are achieving the purposes.
4. Reading is purposeful.
5. Reading is a linguistic process (as opposed to the reasoning process). In other words, meaning and understanding of the text are derived as readers interact with text information by means of linguistic processing.

Widdowson (1979) defines reading as the process of gaining information via print. The author describes(1990)that, "It has been traditionally supposed that the language presented to learners should be simplified in some way for easy access and acquisition. Nowadays there are recommendations that the language presented should be authentic" (p. 67).

In addition to above definitions, Ushiro (2004) argues that besides understanding the meaning of words and phrases reading ability is characterized by complex city of sentences structure, idea density, quantity and quality of illustrations, and legibility (that is, for example, type size and typeface).

2.1 Reading processes

Readers, as Brown (2001) comments, process texts in two ways, either Top-Down or Bottom Up. Bottom-up processing is when the reader builds up meaning by reading word for word, letter for letter, carefully scrutinizing both vocabulary and syntax. This is often associated with poor or slow readers, but can sometimes occur when the readers own schema knowledge is inadequate. Top-Down processing, as Brown argues, 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. Alderson (2000) asserts, "in which every component in the reading process can interact with any other component (p. 18)", hence combining elements of both bottom-up and top down models. Berardo goes on to suggest that 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 the 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.

3. Authenticity and authentic texts

The literature on L2 reading materials (Widdowson, 1979; Alderson & Urquhart, 1984; Brown, 2001; Ushiro, 2004; and Crossley et al., 2007), reveals that there is a divide within the field of second language (L2) materials development over the use of authentic reading texts versus the use of simplified reading texts as the means of language input for beginning and intermediate L2 learners. Although the popular trend over the past 20 years has favoured the use of authentic texts for all levels of L2 learners, as Crossley et al. (2007) assert, the majority of L2 learning texts at the beginning and intermediate levels still depend on simplified input, and many material writers and L2 specialists continue to emphasize the practical value of simplified texts, especially for beginning and intermediate L2 learners (e.g., Johnson, 1981, 1982; Shook, 1997; all cited in Crossley et al., 2007).

The advantage of authenticity approach to materials development, according to Rixon (2004), is felt to lie in the fact that, "in authentic texts, the language data is genuine and may be expected to embody characteristics that specially-devised teaching materials often fail to capture or which they distort" (p. 68). Proponents of authentic texts resort to pedagogical approaches as evidence to support the use of authentic texts than are supporters of simplified texts.

As Widdowson (1979) speculates, authenticity is achieved when the reader achieves the intention of the writer by reference to a set of shared conventions. It is in this way, according to Widdowson, that the creative impulse of the reader who must actively involve himself, corporate with the writer and come to comprehension of the text becomes more evident.

A fundamental issue with the use of authentic texts, as Rixon asserts, lies in the quantity of unfamiliar language which is often seen as a measure of difficulty. This has led in some cases to reluctance to use authentic texts with learners below a certain level of language attainment. An opposite view has been that learners can benefit from contact with lexis that are considerably above their attainment level, and that the teacher should grade the task rather than the text, so that a relatively impenetrable text can be given an extremely easy task.

Where the use of authentic written texts is concerned, according to Rixon (2004), a related dimension is the visual means that were originally employed to present the text, so that layout, typeface and headings are considered an integral part of the message as well as any accompanying pictorial or diagrammatic material. Discourse structure, in Rixon's (2004) view, "is felt to be another important aspect of communication that can best be studied through the use of authentic texts, both spoken and written" (p. 68).

Widdowson (1979) contends that "I am not sure that it is meaningful to talk about authentic language as much at all. I think it is probably better to consider authenticity not as a quality residing in

instances of language but as a quality which is bestowed upon them, created by the response of the receiver. Authenticity, in this view, is a fiction of the interaction between the reader/hearer and the text which incorporates the intentions of the writer/speaker" (p. 165).

However, to reduce the difficulty level of authentic materials, according to Brown (2001), the teachers can make use of simplified texts in which "an otherwise authentic text is edited to keep language within the proficiency level of a set of the students" (p. 314). He recommends that in order for teachers to make a decision on this issue, it is important to distinguish between (a) simple texts and (b) simplified texts and to understand sources of complexity in reading material.

Authentic simple text, according to Brown, can either be devised or located in the real world. Examples of simple texts range from ads to labels, reports, and essays which are grammatically and lexically simple. Brown goes on to suggest that simplifying an existing potential reading selection may not be necessary, however, if simplification must be done, it is important to preserve the natural redundancy, humour, wit, and other captivating features of the original material.

As far as the activities used with authentic texts are concerned, Saraceni (2003) maintains that such activities should also be authentic since using tasks such as filling the gaps or answering comprehension testing questions would make the text not authentic. It follows that the tasks should be based on realistic situations in order to expose the learners to realistic input Finally, Tomlinson (2003) argues that meaningful engagement with authentic texts is a prerequisite for the development of communicative and the strategic competence but authentic texts can be created by interactive negotiation between learners as presented to them.

3.1. Simplification and simplified texts

Simplification belongs to the special class of deliberate production which is labelled pedagogic and is used to make the act of communication easier (Davies, 1984). Davies Defines Simplification as a process in which the teacher for his agent consciously adjusts the language presented to the learner. Even further argues that Simplification of reading materials refers to this election of a restricted set of features from the full range of language resources for the sake of pedagogic efficiency. In other words, as Tommola, 1979, cited in Davies (1984) explains, the code is not affected; the learners are not presented with a simpler language system, but with a restricted sample of the full system.

According to Simensen (1987, cited in Crossley et al., 2007), simplified texts are texts written (a) to illustrate a specific language feature, such as the use of modals or the third-person singular verb form; (b) to modify the amount of new lexical input introduced to learners; or (c) to control for propositional input, or a combination thereof. The reasons behind advocacy of simplified texts, as Crossley et al. (2007) put it, rests on theories concerning input in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and on beliefs about the linguistic nature of simplified texts.

Davies (1984) remarks that simplification is deliberate, done for the ease of comprehension and communication and has a unique pedagogic purpose. Moreover, Widdowson (1979) in discussing simplification distinguishes between what he calls simplified versions and simple accounts. In his view, simplified versions are passages which are derived from genuine instances of discourse by the process of lexical and syntactic substitution. Therefore, the simplified version seems to be a simplification of the language code. A simple account, on the other hand, represents not an alternative textualisation of a given discourse but a different discourse altogether.

Widdowson makes clear that simple accounts are to be preferred to simplified versions in that the simple account is the genuine instance of discourse, designed to meet the communicative purpose while a simplified version is not genuine discourse. Lautomatti (1978, cited in Davies, 1984) argues that simplified texts are used in the teaching of foreign language reading comprehension as the ladder towards last simplified and finally authentic texts. In other words, simplified materials often find acceptance because they prepare the readers for alternate count role of authentic texts.

Despite the overt benefits of simplification, it is not without its critics. In fact, as Alderson and Urquhart (1984) suggest, syntactic simplification of the text may distort the message or increase difficulty in all other aspects of the text. Brown (2001) also points out that "sometimes simplified texts removed so much natural redundancy that they actually become difficult. And what is perceived as textual complexity may be a product of background schemata than of linguistic complexity" (p. 314). However, a possible resolution to the debate over how to render authentic materials accessible to learners, according to Rixon (2004), lies in the fact that not all authentic texts are of equal difficulty, in that there is often a balance between linguistic or discourse unfamiliarity and sources of comprehension support to be found within the same text. A reasonable action on the part of the teacher, then, is to put major effort into the selection of texts so that the level of challenge they present to a particular class is at a reasonable rather than an unfeasible level (Rixon, 2004).

3.2. Sources of Authentic Materials

The sources of authentic materials that can be used in the classroom are infinite, but the most common, in Brown's (2001) terms are newspapers, magazines, TV programs, movies, songs and literature. One of the most useful sources of reading materials is the Internet. Whereas newspapers and any other printed material date very quickly, the Internet, as Brandl (2002) puts it, is continuously updated, more visually stimulating as well as being interactive, therefore promoting a more active approach to reading rather than a passive one. Furthermore, the Internet is a modern day reality, most students use it and for teachers, there is easier access to endless amounts of many different types of material.

Authentic materials, as Berardo (2006) maintains, enable learners to interact with the real language and content rather than the form. Therefore, when choosing materials from the various sources, the aim should be to understand meaning and not form, especially when using literary texts with the emphasis being on what is being said and not necessarily on the literary form or stylistics. Nuttall (1996) gives three main criteria when choosing texts to be used in the classroom *suitability of content, exploitability and readability.*

Suitability of content can be considered to be the most important of the three., In that the reading material should interest the students as well as be relevant to their needs. The texts should also be motivating. Exploitability refers to how the text can be used to develop the students' competence as readers. A text that cannot be exploited for teaching purposes has no use in the classroom. Readability is used to describe the combination of structural and lexical difficulty of a text, as well as referring to the amount of new vocabulary and any new grammatical forms present.

Variety and presentation, in Berardo's view, also influence the choice of authentic materials. A reading course can be made more interesting if a variety of texts is used. Students very often find it very boring when dealing with only one subject area. However, one of the advantages of using texts dealing with the same subject area is that they use the same vocabulary, with the student having to make very little conscious effort to learn it (Berardo, 2006). Whether the text looks authentic or not, is also very important when presenting it to the student. The "authentic" presentation, through the use of pictures, diagrams, photographs, Berardo explains, helps put the text into a context. This helps the reader not only understand the meaning of the text better but also how it would be used.

Other factors worth taking into consideration when choosing authentic material for the classroom, according to Martinez (2002) can include whether the text challenges the students' intelligence without making unreasonable linguistic demands; does the language reflect written or spoken usage is the language in the text natural or has it been distorted in order to try and include examples of a particular teaching point?

The concept of authenticity is central to CLT, hence exposing the learner to the same language as a native speaker. Breen (1985) identifies four types of authenticity within the classroom:

"1. Authenticity of the texts which we may use as input data for our students;
2. Authenticity of the learners' own interpretations of such texts;
3. Authenticity of tasks conducive to language learning and
4. Authenticity of the actual social situation of the classroom language" (Breen, 1985, p. 61)

In addition to these 4 types of authenticity, Widdowson (1978) refers to the 'authenticity'' of response and the difference between what is authentic and what is genuine. He uses 'genuine' to refer to the material itself, 'an absolute quality' and 'authentic' to the response of the user to it, noting that such a response can occur without the material being genuine.

Lee (1995) maintains that text authenticity is defined in terms of the origin of the materials, while 'learner authenticity' refers to the learner's interaction with them, in terms of appropriate responses and positive psychological reaction. Authenticity, according to Prodromou & Mishan (2008), has to have a sort of 'end-user' validation; it does not stem solely from the originator - it is 'in the eye of the beholder'.

3.3. Factors to Consider in Choosing Authentic Materials

Among factors worth taking into consideration when choosing authentic material for the classroom, as Berardo (2006) puts it, (Those) can include whether the text challenges the students' intelligence without making unreasonable linguistic demands, does the language reflect written or spoken usage is the language in the text natural or has it been distorted in order to try and include examples of a particular teaching point? It is also important that the text lends itself to being studied, can good questions be asked about it or tasks based on it created? Above all does the text make the student want to read for himself, tell himself something he doesn't know as well as introduce new and relevant ideas? (p. 63)

The important factors in choosing authentic reading materials are listed below:

1. Suitability of Content	Does the text interest the student? Is it relevant to the student's needs? Does it represent the type of material that the student will use outside of the classroom?
2. Exploitability	Can the text be exploited for teaching purposes? For what purpose should the text be exploited? What skills/strategies can be developed by exploiting the text?
3. Readability	Is the text too easy/difficult for the student? Is it structurally too demanding/complex? How much new vocabulary does it contain? Is it relevant?

4. Presentation	Does it "look" authentic?
	Is it "attractive"?
	Does it grab the student's attention?
	Does it make him want to read more?

Source: Berardo (2006, p. 63)

3.4. Advantages of Using Authentic Reading Materials

Nuttall (1996) states that "Authentic texts can be motivating because they are proof that the language is used for real-life purposes by real people." (p. 172)

Berardo (2006) lists some of the main advantages of using authentic materials in the classroom: "having a positive effect on student motivation; giving authentic cultural information; exposing students to real language; relating more closely to students' needs; and supporting a more creative approach to teaching" (p. 64).

Despite these advantages, however, Martinez (2002) points to several disadvantages of authentic reading materials. The negative aspects of authentic materials, as Martinez remarks, are that they can be too culturally biased, often a good knowledge of cultural background is required when reading, as well as too many structures being mixed, causing lower levels problems when decoding the texts.

Moreover, Richards (2001) notes that authentic materials often contain difficult language, unneeded vocabulary items and complex language structures, which can often create problems for the teacher too. They can also become 'very dated', 'very quickly' in Berardo's (2006) terms, but unlike textbooks can be updated or replaced much easier and more cost effectively. Still, another problem with authentic materials is that if the wrong type of text is chosen, the vocabulary may not be relevant to the learner's needs and too many structures can create difficulty. Finally, as Fraizer & Juza (2008) argue, the lack of authenticity moves the class a step further from the target language in real use than the classroom already has.

Berardo (2006) contrasts the advantages and disadvantages of authentic reading materials.

4. Conclusion

From a pedagogic point of view, Breen (1985) points out that, authentic texts for language learning are any sources of data which will serve as a means to help the learner to *develop* an authentic interpretation. Breen means any text which can help the learner to discover those conventions of communication in the target language which will enable him or her to gradually come to interpret meaning within the text-or within any other texts-in ways which are likely to be shared with fluent users of the language. If texts can be regarded as the *means* for learning, according to Breen, then their inherent authenticity becomes a relative matter.

As far as the actual tasks undertaken by the learner of a language are concerned, Breen argues that, the most authentic language learning tasks are those which require the learner to undertake communication *and* meta-communication. He further assumes that genuine communication during learning and meta-communication about learning and about the language are likely to help the learner to learn.

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