THE USE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN THE TEACHING OF READING

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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 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. 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. 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.

I. Introduction

Alderson defines reading as *"...an enjoyable, intense, private activity, from which much pleasure can be derived, and in which one can become totally absorbed"* 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.

The reason for reading depends very much on the purpose for reading. Reading 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 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.

II. The main part

Readers 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 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...",* 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. 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 constructs which allow for the organization of information in the long term memory...".* 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.

Authentic texts have been defined as *"...real-life texts, not written for pedagogic purposes"* They are therefore written for native speakers and contain "real" language. They are *"... materials that have been produced to fulfil some social purpose in the language community.",* in contrast to non-authentic texts that are especially designed for language learning purposes. The language in non-authentic texts is artificial and unvaried, concentrating on something that has to be taught and often containing a series of *"false-text indicators"* that include:

- perfectly formed sentences (all the time);
- a question using a grammatical structure, gets a full answer;

- repetition of structures;
- very often does not "read" well.

The artificial nature of the language and structures used, make them very unlike anything that the learner will encounter in the real world and very often they do not reflect how the language is really used. They are useful for teaching structures but are not very good for improving reading skills (for the simple fact that they read unnaturally). They can be useful for preparing the learner for the eventual reading of "real" texts. If authentic texts have been written not for language learning purposes but for completely different ones, where do they come from and how are they selected?

The sources of authentic materials that can be used in the classroom are infinite, but the most common are newspapers, magazines, TV programs, movies, songs and literature. One of the most useful is the Internet. Whereas newspapers and any other printed material date very quickly, the Internet is continuously updated, more visually stimulating as well as being interactive, therefore promoting a more active approach to reading rather than a passive one. From a more practical point of view, 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. From an even more practical/economical point of view, trying to obtain authentic materials abroad can be very expensive, an English paper/magazine can cost up to 3-4 times the price that it usually is and sometimes is not very good. Often by having unlimited access in the work place, looking for materials costs nothing, only time. Authentic materials should be the kind of material that students will need and want to be able to read when travelling, studying abroad, or using the language in other contexts outside the classroom. Authentic materials enable learners to interact with the real language and content rather than the form. Learners

feel that they are learning a target language as it is used outside the classroom. When choosing materials from the various sources, it is therefore worth taking into consideration that 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 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 motivate as well as. Exploitability refers to how the text can be used to develop the students' competence as readers. A text that can not be exploited for teaching purposes has no use in the classroom. Just because it is in English does not mean that it can be useful. 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. It is important to assess the right level for the right students.

Variety and *presentation* 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, as can be the case when dealing with English for Specific Purposes (ESP). 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. While on the contrary, the student becomes highly specialized in that particular area and not in others. 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, 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. A more *"attractive"* text will appeal to the student and motivate them into reading. It may seem to be a very superficial aspect but the appearance of any article is the first thing that the student notices. An *"attractive"* looking article is more likely to grab the reader's attention rather than a page full of type. Very often it is so easy to just download an article from the Internet and present the student a page full of impersonal print, without taking any of these factors into consideration.

One of the main ideas of using authentic materials in the classroom is to "*expose"* the learner to as much real language as possible. Even if the classroom is not a *"real-life"* situation, authentic materials do have a very important place within it. It has been argued that by taking a text out of its original context, it loses its authenticity:

"As soon as texts, whatever their original purpose, are brought into classrooms for pedagogic purposes they have, arguably, lost authenticity."

Even if true, the learner is still exposed to real discourse and not the artificial language of course textbooks, which tend not to contain any incidental or improper examples. They also tend to reflect the current teaching trend. Authentic materials also give the reader the opportunity to gain real information and know what is going on in the world around them. More times than not, they have something to say, be it giving information, a review. They also produce a sense of achievement. Extracting real information from a real text in a new/different language can be extremely motivating, therefore increasing students' motivation for learning by exposing them to *'real'* language. They also reflect the changes in language use, (again something that does not occur in textbooks, which become very dated, very quickly) as well as giving the learner the proof that the language is real and not

only studied in the classroom:

"Authentic texts can be motivating because they are proof that the language is used for real-life purposes by real people. "

The wide variety of different types of text means that it is easier to find something that will interest the learner and may even encourage further reading or reading for pleasure. An advantage of taking a complete newspaper or magazine into classroom, rather than photocopies of an article, is that students can actually choose what they want to read. The more the learner reads, the better a reader he will become, not only improving his language level but also confidence. If the text interests the learner it can also be related to his own experiences. One of the aims of authentic materials is to help the student react in the same way L1 speakers react in their first language (L1). Learners who live in the target language environment, once outside of the classroom will encounter a variety of situations in which different reading purposes/skills are required. We can claim that learners are being exposed to real language and they feel that they are learning the *'real'* language. The main advantages of using authentic materials in the classroom therefore include:

- having a positive effect on student motivation;
- giving authentic cultural information;
- exposing students to real language;
- relating more closely to students' needs;
- supporting a more creative approach to teaching.

These are what make us excited and willing to use authentic materials in our classrooms, but while using them, it is inevitable that we face some problems.

The negative aspects of authentic materials 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. Students often bring copies of newspaper articles (in particular the tabloids) or song lyrics to the classroom, asking to translate them after having looked up each word in the dictionary and not understood a single word. 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 but unlike textbooks can be updated or replaced much easier and more cost effectively. The biggest 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.

Conclusion

The use of authentic materials in the classroom has been discussed, with the student benefiting from the exposure to real language being used in a real context. Other aspects which proved positive when using authentic materials were that they are highly motivating, giving a sense of achievement when understood and encourage further reading. 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.

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delude the language learner but to prepare him, giving the awareness and necessary skills so as to understand how the language is actually used. Having made a distinction between authentic and non-authentic material and evaluated the use of them in the classroom.

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