Reality and Authenticity: A critical look at modern ELT materials

PETER HUBBARD, UNIVERSIDAD DE GUADALAJARA [1]

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to take a critical look at the notions of authenticity and realism in the context of ELT materials. This is worth doing because many modern textbooks are written under the influence of communicative approaches [2], which, among other things advocate an emphasis on authentic materials and tasks. While there can be little doubt that authenticity and realism have an important role to play in ELT materials, we should perhaps be cautious in identifying this role. As a first step, it would be helpful to analyze the concept of authenticity and consider in what ways exactly textbooks can incorporate authentic elements.

Background

Before engaging with the main ideas to be presented here, it is worthwhile to take a look at the early days of the communicative movement.

The influence of linguistics

Language as a natural object of study can be viewed from different angles, depending on your particular purposes or interests. Hence both American Structuralist Linguistics and Transformative-Generative Grammar viewed a language as a self-contained system: their interest was in how the different parts of the system functioned with each other. They were less interested in the relationship of language to the world in which we live and act. Cook (1989: 10) observes:

> In linguistics, especially in the English-speaking world between the 1930's and 1960's there have been several schools of thought which believe that context--this knowledge of the world outside language which we use to interpret it--should be ruled out of language analysis as far as possible. In this way, it is

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[1] The author can be reached at FAX: (913) 647-7258 / (913) 854-1594. Email: peter@fuentes. csh.udg.mx.

[2] I use the term communicative approaches throughout, because there are a wide variety of realizations of communicative language teaching; and also because to speak of *The Communicative Approach* might seem to imply that there is a well-defined and well-established body of theory and practice under this name. I prefer to see communicative language teaching as a broad movement rather than a dogmatic, take-it-or-leave-it position.

> believed, linguists will be able to make discoveries about the language itself, and its system of rules which exists quite independently of particular circumstances.

British linguistic tradition, on the other hand, which can be traced from the linguistic observations of the anthropologist Malinowski through the work of Firth and then Halliday, has always been concerned with the context in which language is used and the uses to which it is put. Hence, Halliday's Systemic Grammar, for example, begins with language function and views the different options available to a speaker who wishes to **do** something with language.

Language teaching theory and practice

When we look at the field of language teaching, we can note that there have also been some differences between American and British traditions. It has been said (e.g. Howatt 1984: 267ff) that American ELT was driven by abstract theories generated by university researchers, whereas British practice was based on field experience translated into sets of working principles. This, of course, is a gross overgeneralization[3]. However, what is true is that in the American sphere of influence, the twin disciplines of structural linguistics and behaviourist psychology, both rooted in a positivist philosophy of science, assumed complete authority over the practice of language teaching, and the product of this union was the dogma of audiolingualism. Language teaching was effectively isolated from the general field of educational studies and this was to its loss. The advent of Transformative-Generative Grammar did not in itself shake practitioners out of the grip of this dogma, but Chomsky's attack on behaviourist accounts of language acquisition did. We then saw the gradual dismantling of audiolingual materials and approaches, and the dissolution of moldering language laboratories.

Meanwhile, in British traditions, there was relatively little contamination by audiolingualism. Structural-situational teaching was a development of the old-style direct method. Both in this type of approach and in the Audio-Visual method, which incidentally had particular influence on the teaching of French, there was a strong emphasis on meaning. Language teaching had to be meaningful. It was intuitively predicted (in the total absence of scientific evidence) that language learners would both retain and analyze language better if it was presented and practiced in a context of real use. However, we could say that the motives for this partial form of realism were methodological rather than

syllabus-related: they were more concerned with **how** we teach than **what** learners will learn.

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[3]Consider for example the impressive work done at the University of Columbia, NY, based in large measure on the experience of Peace Corps teaching.

Communicative approaches

We must remember that the Notional Syllabus (also called the Functional Syllabus, the Notional-Functional Syllabus, the Functional-Notional Syllabus and the Semantic Syllabus) was in part the result of a historical accident. The historical context in this case was the integration of European states into what was, in the early days, the Common Market and later the European Economic Community or EEC. Collaboration on a common syllabus for the learning of languages within the Community led to the development of the Threshold Level, a unified concept statement that expressed in definitive form the objectives of teaching any language. Since the teaching of English, French and German, not to mention the other languages, differ markedly in terms of pedagogical emphasis and strategy. It made considerable sense to specify objectives in terms of language function rather than language form (although the formal goals were also included in the statement).

However, other ingredients were thrown into the witches' cauldron: British linguistic traditions, noted above, of analyzing language beyond the sentence level, some remarkable philosophical work on speech acts (Austin, Searle), pioneer work on discourse analysis (Sinclair and Coulthard) and a growing body of research on needs analysis. Also, across the Atlantic, repeated attacks on Chomsky's notions of grammatical competence and deep structure, led to Hymes' (1972) postulation of communicative competence, a concept that has since been modified and refined by numerous workers in the field.

In a parallel development, the growing body of research on second language acquisition, originally provoked by Chomskyan speculation about the existence of a language acquisition device (LAD), has increasingly influenced language teaching, first prematurely in the development of **methods** based on highly speculative theory (Krashen and Terrel 1983); and later, more satisfactorily, in the development of **task-based syllabuses** (Long and Crookes 1992).

Communicative approaches: The what

Communicative language teaching was initially concerned with **what** learners will learn. Language is viewed as a means of communication rather than a closed system. Wilkins in his modestly titled but widely influential book *Notional Syllabuses* states:

> In drawing up a notional syllabus, instead of asking how speakers of the language express themselves or when and where they use the language, we ask what it is they communicate through language. We are then able to organize language teaching in terms of the content rather than the form of the language.
>
> (Wilkins 1976: 18)

It is interesting to note that Wilkins' original perception of a functional-notional syllabus was quickly metamorphosed by textbook writers into a 'structural-

functional' syllabus, in which neither functions nor structures assumed dominant emphasis. Notions were all but abandoned, since semantico-grammatical items were closely linked to grammatical forms anyway (and nobody would be so rash as to abandon grammar altogether). On the other hand, textbook writers swiftly latched on to functions as communicative items that would possess face-value and immediate relevance for learners. Sequencing of grammatical items followed the traditional 'simplicity' criterion, which Wilkins had criticized and there was a parallel functional syllabus based partly on the urgency of learners' needs and partly on the grammatical means they had at their disposal to form the exponents of each function.

Communicative approaches: The how

Later work concentrated on how to achieve the communicative goals outlined in the Threshold Level and other functional specifications of objectives (Johnson, Morrow, Brumfit and many others). Hence there has been development of communicative exercise types that are congruent with functional-notional syllabuses. Especially popular are communication gap types. Prabhu (1987: 46-47) has classified these into three groups: information gap (exchange of information in a collaborative tasks), opinion gap (exchange of opinions) and reasoning gap (collaborative problem solving). We should add role-play and simulation, which were in use long before communicative approaches were identified as such, and may involve all three of the 'gap' elements mentioned above. And let us not forget humble personalization, in which students are given an opportunity to use their own knowledge of the world as the content of practice.

All these exercise types share the same underlying principles. Learners are encouraged to concentrate on expressing themselves by whatever means available and to complete the communication task, rather than focusing on language form. In other words, the emphasis is on fluency rather than accuracy. The practice activity should be perceived by learners as being collaborative tasks. Students' knowledge and intelligence is made use of.

Other influences on modern communicative practice

We should note at least two other influences on communicative approaches as they are used today: humanism and student autonomy. Both these influences have come from the mainstream of educational research, theory and philosophy. And it is evident that language teaching and learning will return to the fold of general education more and more in years to come, although we would expect second language acquisition studies to continue to inform theory and practice. At any rate, communicative approaches are congruent with general humanistic principles and with learner centred learning. Interesting blends have

emerged, some of them more effective than others. For a critical counter-example, see O'Neill (1991).

The return to grammar teaching

As noted above, grammar teaching was never really abandoned altogether. Now second language acquisition research is providing scientific evidence for the position that conscious attention to grammar may be necessary (Montgomery and Eisenstein 1985, Schmidt and Frota 1986, Spada 1990) and that mere immersion in comprehensible input does not necessarily lead to intake.

Authenticity and Communicative Approaches

The position on authenticity in communicative approaches was stated by Wilkins (1976: 79):

> ...In courses based on a notional syllabus in particular, much more attention needs to be paid to the acquisition of a receptive competence and...an important feature of materials designed to produce such a competence would be authentic language materials. By this is meant materials which have not been specially written or recorded for the foreign learner, but which were originally directed at a native-speaking audience...Such materials will be the means by which [the learner] can bridge the gap between classroom knowledge and an effective capacity to participate in real language events.

We should note that Wilkins was committed to what he called **analytic** rather than **synthetic** syllabuses. The latter introduces the learners to bits of language one at a time, whereas the former plunges the learner into language in use as an integrated whole.

Since then, there has been a marked tendency for textbooks to contain authentic texts (mostly written texts, for reasons that will be discussed shortly). This tendency has been followed almost without question and it is worthwhile considering in simple terms the underlying argument for using authentic texts. David Nunan (1989: 54) states:

> The argument for using authentic materials is derived from the notion...that the most effective way to develop a particular skill is to rehearse that skill in class. Proponents of authentic materials point out that classroom texts and dialogues do not adequately prepare learners for coping with the language they hear and read in the real world outside the classroom.

In general, communicative approaches emphasize the need to bridge the gap between classroom practices and real use of the language outside the classroom. Nunan again (1989: 40)

> Classroom tasks are generally justified or rationalised in either 'real-world' or 'pedagogic' terms. Tasks with a real-world rationale require learners to approximate, in class, the sorts of behaviours required of them in the world beyond the classroom...Tasks with a pedagogic rationale, on the other hand, require learners to do things which it is extremely unlikely they would be called upon to do outside the classroom.

However, later Nunan softens this distinction (1989: 44)

> ...The distinction between real-world and pedagogic tasks may be more apparent than real. Many may be justified both in real-world and pedagogic terms...Pedagogic activities (such as some problem-solving ones), while they may look artificial, particularly in terms of their content, may, on analysis, be practising enabling skills such as fluency, discourse and interactional skills, mastery of phonological elements and mastery of grammar.

Prabhu, in designing his well-documented Bangalore Procedural Syllabus, did not regard real-world tasks as necessary. Prabhu (1987: 93):

> ...A procedural syllabus of tasks only envisages constant effort by learners to deploy their language resources in the classroom, and does not attempt either to demarcate areas of real-life use for different stages of teaching or to bring about a 'thorough' learning of use in some functions at each stage.

To sum up the arguments, then, communicative approaches are committed to the view that language should not be separated from its social and pragmatic context. The purpose of learning a foreign language is to enable the learner to communicate in it. Therefore, teaching should concentrate on communication skills and learners should be given classroom opportunities to practice the most useful areas of communication that they are likely to encounter outside the classroom. Included in such tasks are listening to and reading authentic texts, that is to say, samples of spoken and written language not designed for the pedagogical purpose of teaching foreign languages.

Authenticity in Textbooks: How it comes out in print

Perhaps the most effective use of authentic material has been in the teaching of reading comprehension, especially in the case of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). In many parts of the world, non-English speaking students need to read books and articles in their area of specialization written in English. They need to read these quickly and understand the gist of the reading passage, examining the ideas contained in it critically and comparing them to the knowledge they already possess; and they have to extract the most important details (facts, figures and quotations) that they need for their own studies. Well planned and executed teaching involving the academic texts the students need to read has resulted in

enabling the students to become better academic readers and, arguably, better students in general.

However, how well has authenticity of texts fared in general English courses?

One obvious problem is that beginners are faced with unsimplified materials and this increases the learning load. Nunan (1989: 138):

> Many low-level learners are traumatised when first exposed to authentic samples of language, and have to be taught that it is not necessary to understand every word for communication to be successful.

Teachers and textbook writers are well aware of this difficulty. There are only two strategies for dealing with it: selecting the text with great care or adapting it. An example of selection would be to present the learners with an extremely short piece of text, such as a notice in a building or on a street corner; or one written in extremely simple language. However, short texts are highly dependent on contextual clues, and if these are given to students, they can hardly be said to be reading at all, in the normal sense of the word. On the other hand, if texts are adapted, they are no longer *ipso facto* authentic. Nevertheless, a number of textbook writers have opted for including so-called 'simulated-authentic' texts in their materials, In other words, the texts are either adapted from genuinely authentic texts to make them more accessible or they are completely fabricated, but with the look and 'feel' of the real stuff. Hence students are given a gradual introduction to texts that they may encounter in real life. This is supposed to be at the same time both motivating and instructive.

It is particularly difficult to get hold of authentic spoken texts that are pedagogically usable. It is impossible to record a spontaneous conversation without using CIA-type bugging devices. Even then, apart from ethical considerations, we would have extraneous noise, overlapping speech and incomplete sentences (which some proponents of authentic materials, incidentally, may regard as bonuses). Off-air recordings from radio or television are likely to be far more usable because they will be professionally recorded under studio conditions and the speakers will be people accustomed to speaking in public. Some writers have experimented with 'unscripted' conversations, where actors or ordinary native speakers are give a role to play, but not an exact script to follow.

To sum up, then, authentic materials may have a useful role to play in ESP or EAP teaching situations, but they usually suffer some kind of sea change when included in general English course materials. In many cases, the resulting texts

are no longer authentic, in the strict sense of the word. This may not be a problem, in fact, as I will try to show later on.

Challenges to the concept of authenticity

To what extent can it be said that authenticity in language teaching is mere dogma without systematic pedagogical foundations?

The question has been elaborately discussed by Widdowson (1990: 44-48). In this passage, he proposes that the arguments in favour of authenticity are based on what he calls the 'means-end equation'.

> By the means/end equation, I mean the assumption that what the learner has eventually to achieve by way of language ability should determine what he does in the process of acquiring that ability... The belief here is that the language behaviour of natural use, which is the end of learning, should be replicated as closely as possible in the classroom as this language behaviour will also be conductive to learning... (Widdowson 1990: 44)

Widdowson challenges the view that language practice in the classroom should always as far as possible closely reflect what the learner should be able to do at the end of the course. If authenticity is 'natural language behaviour', then it is hard to see how learners under normal classroom conditions can engage in authentic practice.

> Authenticity of language in the classroom is bound to be, to some extent, an illusion. This is because it does not depend on the source from which the language as an object is drawn but on the learners' engagement with it. In actual language use...meanings are achieved by human agency and are negotiable: they are not contained in text. To the extent that language learners, by definition, are deficient in competence they cannot authenticate the language they deal with in the manner of the native speaker. The language presented to them may be a genuine record of native speaker behaviour, genuine, that is to say, as textual data, but to the extent that it does not engage native speaker response it cannot be realized as authentic discourse. (Op. Cit.: 44-45)

Language texts in the classroom may be authentic, but learners' tasks based on those texts will almost certainly not be authentic; and the language practiced during the performance of those tasks will not be authentic.

Authenticity, then, in the classroom is only to be found in limited quantities and questionable forms. Is it, however, also desirable?

> It may be generally true that the natural language use which constitutes the goal of learning is realized by a focus on meaning rather than form, and is a matter for top-down rather than bottom-up processing, but the process of arriving at that goal, the development of the authenticating ability, calls for an ef-

> fective internalization of form and capability of analysis which will allow for their use across a wide and unpredictable range of different contexts. In other words, the very learning process implies a focus on form as a necessary condition for the subsequent focus on meaning. (Op. Cit.: 45)

Widdowson throws doubt on the idea that learners should be discouraged from focusing on form altogether:

> The idea that learners should be discouraged from attending to the formal properties of language is comparable to the idea, prevalent in a previous era, that learners should be denied all access to translation. Learners will attend to form and make use of translation anyway because the learning process requires them to do so. A pedagogy which denies this perversely creates difficulties which hamper the learner in this task. The central question is not what learners have to do to use language naturally, but what they have to do to **learn** to use language naturally. In my view, the authenticity argument is invalid because it does not distinguish between the two questions: it confuses ends and means and assumes that teaching language **for** communication is the same as teaching language **as** communication. (Op. Cit.: 45-46)

As pointed out earlier, there is now second language acquisition research which provides evidence that drawing learners' attention to the formal properties of language does in fact aid efficient learning.

In short, Widdowson is arguing that authenticity in the classroom is neither possible nor desirable. As I have mentioned earlier, this assertion needs to be qualified: reading comprehension of authentic texts in an ESP context is still a valid use of authentic materials. However, it is certainly true that arguments in favor of using authentic materials seem weaker than they did in the early days of the communicative movement.

Alternatives: The use of authentic data

I have already mentioned that the question of authenticity is not a take-it-or-leave-it one. Rather than arguing against authenticity altogether, we need to consider what role authenticity and realism have in textbook design.

Authentic texts and authentic tasks

I have already made the point that the theoretical justification for authentic texts is that they bring the learner closer in the classroom to the end point of the process: the use of language in real situations. Widdowson (1990) has pointed out that this argument is weakened by the fact that learners' handling of authentic texts is never likely to be authentic. This is certainly true. And indeed most exercises based on authentic texts are far from authentic. However, as Nunan (1989, above) has pointed out, there are many non-authentic but communicative tasks

that have important pedagogical value for future authentic language use. This argument is, in fact, congruent with that of Widdowson.

Authentic texts, tasks and data

At this stage, I wish to make a distinction between three types of authentic elements. These are:

Authentic texts

Authentic tasks

Authentic data

We have already dealt exhaustively with the first two. Authentic data differ from the first in so far as it (data is only plural in theory!) need not be directly represented in the materials, but can be used as the basis for the design of pedagogical materials.

The point has been made again and again that textbook content is often highly artificial, at times grotesquely so. In contriving to include all the formal elements of language that he wishes to present, the textbook writer may introduce content that has nothing to do with either the world of the learner or that of the target language community. In short, it is unreal. Authentic texts can reduce this fault by including real-life elements into the book and classroom practice.

However, as we have seen, perhaps it is fallacious to assume that texts need to be authentic in order to facilitate efficient learning: In fact, the opposite might be the case. We have already considered authentic texts that have been adapted for pedagogical use; and unscripted dialogues that produce semi-authentic language. There are also simulated-authentic texts and probably more hybrid varieties produced by blending the natural with the artificial.

I think that all of these attempts to include realism in the materials are valid. However, perhaps what needs to be made authentic is not the language itself, but the content of the materials. Too many textbook writers are trying to be novelists or journalists--which they are not. It is not our job to write fiction or documentaries, but to produce usable pedagogical materials that can help teachers prepare classes better and in less time. Learners will, according to my view, be able to relate to the content of textbooks better if this is real and authenticated as such. It does not mean that the texts have to be authentic, but the data on which they are based does.

How can authentic data be obtained?

Authentic data can only be obtained by research. This need not be highly rigorous scientific research because we are not trying to prove a theory but simply take samples from reality. On these samples, we can build our pedagogical materials.

It might be instructive to take a parallel example from our own field, that of the COBUILD project[4]. The object of this project was to produce a dictionary (and other materials) based on authentic data. A large number of authentic texts were scanned into computer memory and a concordancing programme produced concordances for every word to be included in the dictionary. Then human judgment entered into the process and co-workers examined the concordances to arrive at suitable dictionary entries. Actual samples from the data were used to illustrate uses of words.

Exactly the same approach can be adopted for the production of textbooks. However, instead of using a corpus of authentic texts as our data base, we can gather a collection of authentic data about human beings, their families, working lives, leisure pursuits and so on. We may be able to use actual samples of the speech produced by the subjects of our research, but this is not an essential part of the process. What is essential is that the content of the materials we produce be real and based on the lives of real people. It is also important that students be made aware of this reality.

What kinds of real data can be used?

The following is a list of possible types of data that could be obtained for the construction of a data base on which to design a textbook:

Data about real situations that have happened, or happen regularly.

Data about real people, their lifestyle, work profile, their family and so on.

Data about how people react to a certain situation and what they say in these circumstances.

Data relating to the naturalness of language to be used in the textbook.

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[4]The COBUILD project was a collaboration between a team of workers at the University of Birmingham, UK, under the leadership of John Sinclair, and Collins Publishers.

There are many other types of data that could be used depending on the precise nature of the endusers of the book and an analysis of their needs.

Why use real data?

Prabhu (1987: 49-50) discusses the concept of students' ownership of language. To what extent is the content of the language that students produce in class their own and to what extent is it put into their mouths by the teacher or textbook writer? Many teachers observe a dramatic change when practice in the classroom shifts from artificial content to personalized practice (mentioned above) in which the learner talks about herself, her family, her home town, her country or famous people she knows about. What is happening here is that the learner is communicating personal knowledge. The message produced therefore comes from the learner and there is a greater chance that the language used will **belong** to the learner. Compare this to standard drilling about a situation in a textbook and you will find that there is a considerable change in the quality of motivation. It would be limiting to base a course entirely on students' personal knowledge, but by using authentic data as the basis for textbook construction a similar enhancement to the learning process can be produced. The learner is aware that the content of the textbook is not invented but based on real life experience. It is like the difference between watching a soap opera and a documentary. The former may have more dramatic impact, but is of limited importance to the learner in the long term. The latter is more likely to find a connection with the learner's schemata of life experience.

Bridges between cultures

There are arguments for and against taking the authentic data simply from the target language community, if such a community can be identified. Data taken from the target group may provide the learner with valuable cultural information and be interesting in itself. However, in many cases, there is a danger of rejection, especially since we should remember that a large proportion of learners are sent to school and obliged to study English. It is the case now, anyway, that English is increasingly being used as a medium of international communication and few learners actually plan to spend time in the countries where it is spoken. It is also the case that data taken from an alien community may make the content of the materials difficult for the student to relate to in a personal way.

ESP and authentic data

As in the case of authentic texts, an ESP teaching situation makes materials based on authentic data much more likely to be relevant to students' needs and wants. In every sense, a narrowing down of the teaching situation makes the textbook writer's task easier when it comes to selecting content. Sadly,

there are a very large number of 'world wide' general English textbooks produced, editorial and authorial greed being a prime reason for this. It is, in my opinion, becoming less and less justifiable to produce books of this kind. Time will tell whether there is a change towards a more localized and specialized textbook.

Summary

The role of authentic tasks and texts in language teaching materials was discussed critically. An argument was made in favour of producing materials based on authentic data, rather than those containing authentic tasks or texts.

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