

CEFR Webinar Series 2021 – Number 2

**Digital agency in social practice and language education:
The CEFR Companion volume and online interaction**

4 March 2021, 16.00 – 18.30 (CET)

Presenter: Bernd Rüschoff

Background reading 2

This is a short text addressing the issue of authenticity, as authenticity is an important feature of innovative and stimulating ELT practice. It is also relevant when considering the use of digital tools and digitally contextualized social practices. Authentic language use and authentic language in use play a major role in are seen as logical consequences of current deliberations concerning the aims of language learning and methodologies impacting on ELT classrooms. Authenticity, however, is not to be limited to content. Authentic tasks and activities, embedded in purposeful and genuine and relevant learning contexts, are of potentially even greater importance. Both the use of traditional print and audio-visual media and digital tools and social practices can contribute to genuine settings for ELT.

AUTHENTIC LANGUAGE USE¹

BERND RÜSCHOFF

Abstract

Authenticity is an important feature of innovative and stimulating ELT practice. Authentic language use and authentic language in use play a major role in and are seen as logical consequences of current deliberations concerning the aims of language learning and methodologies impacting on ELT classrooms. Authenticity, however, is not to be limited to content. Authentic tasks and activities, embedded in purposeful and genuine and relevant learning contexts, are of potentially even greater importance. Both the use of traditional print and audiovisual media and digital tools and social practices can contribute to genuine settings for ELT.

Keywords

ESL/EFL, Intercultural Communication, Language in the Classroom, Second Language Acquisition, authenticity, data-driven learning, language learning technology, learning aims, materials, methodologies

Framing the issue

Authenticity is key to successfully achieving the aims currently associated with language teaching. Initially, the discussion of authentic language use focused very much on the use of authentic materials in the ELT classroom. It was felt that exposure to real discourse and un-doctored samples of the target language, that is, authentic language in use, were beneficial for language learning. Gradually, the concept of authentic language use also embraced the idea of non-simulated, genuine, purposeful, and real-goal oriented language use in the classroom. This is referred to as learning authenticity. Finally, learner authenticity was added to the equation, focusing on the idea that materials and learning initiatives need to be authenticated, that is, made real, given purpose and adopted by the learners themselves.

In order to properly frame the issue, it is necessary to briefly consider the aims of language learning. Communicative competence no longer fully covers all the skills, competencies, and levels of awareness that a modern language classroom aims at developing and supporting. Recently, the term “agency” was introduced to refer to the overall aim of language teaching, a term closely connected with the issue of authenticity and authentic language use. Language learning aims at empowering learners to become active and competent agents in using a target language. Agency is more than the knowledge of rules and vocabulary and the ability to utter well-formed, grammatically correct sentences. Agency is all about functional awareness, that is, the choices one has when selecting a turn of phrase in order to appropriately perform a given communicative function. It is also about linguistic awareness, as learners do need to have a certain level of knowledge about structure as well as the ability to keep, in Hallidayan terms, an appropriate balance between function and form. Furthermore, agency embeds a general kind of language awareness, going beyond functional and linguistic knowledge and empowering learners to integrate the target language into their personal mental and communicative system. Intercultural awareness, of course, is a key part of this level of awareness, as in today’s global village language use is embedded in inter-cultural encounters almost constantly. Finally, learning awareness is an important part of agency. Language learning has become such a fundamental part of education in the age of globalization that successful learning requires learners to be able to draw on a fully developed set of appropriate strategies and learning skills when faced with a linguistic or communicative challenge while acquiring a language.

1. *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*. Edited by John I. Liantas. Published 2018 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Agency in a methodological and very practical sense needs purpose. Thus, proponents of authenticity suggest that language learning needs to be based on materials as well as learning scenarios and contexts which learners experience as personally relevant and within which they feel a real need to act and become involved in a given task. This, in very broad terms, is what authenticity is all about. Authenticity embodies the idea of presenting learners with authentic language in use, of fostering authentic language use, and of considering both learning and learner authenticity when selecting materials and planning classroom practice. It has become accepted over the years that authenticity cannot be limited to occasionally replacing the text- book with a sample of “real language,” but that true authenticity always necessitates the inclusion of authenticity of language, authenticity of task, authenticity of learning situation, and authenticity of interaction. In addition, authenticity also requires personal processes of engagement by teachers and learners, based on opportunities that permit them to make authentic materials and authentic language use personally relevant, that is, learner authentic (Lee, 1995). A term that covers all aspects of such a real-life approach to materials and content as well as tasks and classroom interaction, reflecting the discourse on authenticity over the past decades, is what Mishan (2005) labels an “authenticity-centered approach.”

As to authentic texts and other so-called “realia,” these are on the one hand generally referred to as materials not specifically designed for classroom use but as materials created for real communicative and social purposes in the real world. Still, some—for example Chavez (1998)—point out that such “realia,” when imported into a classroom are taken out of their original contexts and are no longer addressing their intended target group, and they therefore almost automatically lose their authenticity. Unless, of course, when such “realia” are integrated into genuine, meaning- and purposeful classroom practice. Widdowson (1978) very early in the debate distinguished genuineness from simple authenticity by stating that authenticity can only become genuine (and learner authenticated) practice by the way in which users, situations, and materials interact and relate. Learning authenticity and learner authenticity are frequently used to label this, and more recently, this aspect of authenticity has been referred to as personal processes of subjectification by the learners. (MacDonald et al., 2006) The concept as a whole is best reflected in the way Mishan (2005) defines the central premises of the authenticity-centered approach as both “the use of authentic texts” and “the preserving of ... authenticity throughout the procedures in which they are implicated.”

Making the Case

Considering the above, the question arises as to why and towards what aim authenticity should be a guiding principle for materials selection, task design, and classroom practice. The idea of authentic language use follows the assumption that learners, when working on real-world tasks based on genuine, real-world materials, will not only develop a better and more reflected understanding and awareness of the target language but also gradually gain more insight into learning as such, thus developing a strategic framework based on their individual dis- positions towards learning. Research suggests that traditional, rather inauthentic transmission-models of learning cannot foster the skills and competencies needed to successfully communicate in a target language context. Current thinking in ELT methodology proposes knowledge construction rather than simple instruction as an appropriate paradigm for language learning. Language learning is regarded as more than the simple learning of grammatical rules or the acquisition of vocabulary. Such a social constructivist paradigm expands the scope of more traditional communicative approaches, which since the early 1980s have aimed at balancing focus on form with a stronger focus on meaning and interaction. Consequently, concepts of authenticity and authentic language use almost naturally evolved over the same period of time. One of the most influential milestones in this evolution towards fostering more learner-inclusive, competency-oriented, and authenticity- centered approaches is the development of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) by the Council of Europe in the 1990s. The CEFR defines and assesses language competencies and full linguistic and intercultural competence on the basis of so-called “can-do” descriptors. This was an important step in the process of developing the

purely communicative and functional class- room into an environment which focuses on socially and culturally contextualized learning and genuine, authentic interaction and language use in language teaching.

From a theoretical and methodological perspective, it has become evident that both appropriate and processable input and genuine, purposeful output production play an important part in supporting language learning. Stephen Krashen is a name closely associated with deliberations concerning the role and types of input, whereas the principle of output orientation and the need for learners to become engaged in processes of producing output was originally put forward by Swain & Lapkin in 1995 with their output hypothesis. Both these aspects have had some impact on the debate on authenticity when thinking about materials and tasks. The basic notion of the output hypothesis is that learners develop linguistically as well as cognitively through mental processes of “negotiating,” either individually or cooperatively, what they need or want to produce in the target language in a comprehensible way. Creating learning contexts with learners becoming engaged in negotiating meaningful and comprehensible output fosters their cognitive and linguistic growth through processes of reflective and collaborative learning. Such learning experiences are also perceived as more authentic by language learners. More recently, Swain (2006) coined the term “languaging” to further stress the need for authentic and productive language use in the ELT classroom. A classroom based on this principle almost naturally develops into an environment in which language learning events have a genuine and authentic purpose rather than more traditional models with their controlled acts and planned sequences of presenting, practicing, and finally producing language items.

Pedagogical Implications

The basic idea of authenticity is to change traditional classroom practice with its focus on language instruction and mechanical, form-focused learning into genuine learning experience based on dynamic and collaborative interaction geared towards real-world goals. This concerns all levels, including input or materials, task or activity, and output or production. From a current perspective, language classrooms have moved away from instructional settings with their focus on mechanical practice towards learning communities, allowing for dynamic interaction with a focus on meaning and reaching genuine goals. Such classrooms aim at fostering cooperative and interactive processes of meaning making as well as negotiating comprehensible output. At the materials level, ELT classrooms as learning communities integrate as much as possible authentic language in use in all shapes and forms. Additionally, at the task level, these kinds of ELT classrooms afford and engender authentic language use as a matter of principle.

As to its pedagogical implications, authenticity is to be considered in terms of approach and methodology as well as materials selection and exploitation. Task-based and project-oriented settings are regarded as suitable frameworks for learning which stimulates genuine languaging and assists the development of agency and awareness. How then, can classroom practice best be approximated to the real world? One way of achieving this is a move away from formal exercises with their explicit focus on structure and form towards meaning-focused tasks. By definition, task-based language learning (TBL) is an approach which serves as a practical starting point for teaching and learning with a clear focus on genuine, meaningful and purposeful activities. According to Ellis, a task orientation in the language class- room can be realized by establishing a work plan, which has a focus language processing, pays attention to meaning as well as meaning making, and is informed by the need to achieve and produce an outcome (Ellis, 2003, p. 16). TBL encourages learners in real-world-like contexts to employ a range of skills and competences and become engaged in a range of cognitive processes. However, true authenticity also necessitates that the process of establishing a work plan is a collaborative effort in which teachers and learners are jointly involved. This potentially includes the selection of topics, materials, and the way tasks are set and dealt with.

As to tasks which encourage the learner not to focus explicitly on the structure and the rules of the new language, numerous publications describe activities and settings, in which authentic language use towards genuine communicative goals are available. Richards (2001, p. 19) suggests activities such as jigsaw tasks, information-gathering, opinion-sharing and information-transfer, and reasoning-gap activities, which all necessitate intensive and potentially authenticated processing of input as well as task engagement on the part of the learners. After all, authenticity and genuineness, or—according to Richards (2001, p. 23ff.)—meaningful communication, “results from students processing content that is relevant, purposeful, interesting and engaging.”

Consequently, an authentic classroom necessitates careful selection of materials and appropriate design of activities. Sets of criteria for choosing appropriate materials have been suggested over the years, for example Lee (1995), of which the following are often referred to as most relevant. Suitability of content, motivational capacity, as well as relevance to learners’ life experiences and language needs are considered as key, because learners can only authenticate any type of “realia” for their learning if textually authentic materials fit such a profile. Compatibility with learning aims as well as intended skills and competency development is also an important factor. Additionally, appropriateness concerning the teaching approach informing a lesson plan as well as planned tasks and activities is a factor that needs consideration. As to tasks and activities, teachers need to reflect their level of authenticity and the question of whether these contain real and genuine opportunities for learner and learning authenticity. As to authentic assessment and evaluation, TBL also suggests a shift of focus from paying attention exclusively on product towards also considering the actual learning processes and skills and competencies activated by the learners.

Returning to the practicalities of finding and integrating authentic language use into language teaching, digital technologies play an important role. At the materials level, digital technologies offer access to a wide variety of genuine samples of language use created for real communicative purposes. Such materials, texts, and media lend themselves to genuine authentication by the learners, as digital tools as sources of information, as well as means of communication and socializing are very much part of the learners’ real world. Digital technologies afford easy and flexible access to authentic materials in various modes and multimedia realization. With regard to authentic materials, literary texts also offer much potential for authenticity in language learning as they offer insights into samples of cultural practice rooted in the special cultural context of a target language community. This is key for a language classroom that aims at fostering intercultural communicative competence in addition to traditional skills and linguistic competencies. Literature in all shapes and forms, including films, graphic novels, and cartoons, also leaves a lot of room for learner authenticity, as they can bring their own responses to a text and are not limited to simply reporting something inherent in a text itself. Gilmore (2007) refers to this as another key ingredient of authenticity and authentic language use.

Digital technologies not only serve as sources of content but can also be used to instill genuine and purposeful authentic language use, either by using their numerous communication and interaction modes, using for example mail, chat, forum, and any kind of social networking on the Internet, or by exploiting the various options for producing in public and “publishing” for an audience, such as blog, forum, pod- and video-casting, Twitter and Facebook. Collaborative writing projects with the use of wikis and similar tools have also become very popular. Digital tools, accepted as genuine and relevant in the learners’ real world, also offer tremendous potential in terms of providing authentic access to authentic language by involving learners in research-like initiatives, such as webquests and the like. Such research-driven learning scenarios have a long tradition and have been practiced ever since the advent of the first personal computers, which is why issues concerned with authenticity have been addressed from the start in debates on the potential for using digital tools in language learning. Data-driven learning is one such time-tested method, where learners are encouraged to decode and process vocabulary, grammar and meaning in context on the basis of context and concordance lists. Such lists are created by accessing large text databases, so-called text corpora, which have become more and more easily accessible on the Internet. These kinds of learning initiatives are very much rooted in task-

based learning and also show that authenticity can also be put into practice when focusing on form and the acquisition of linguistic awareness.

Finally, content language integrated learning (CLIL)—that is, the teaching and learning of a foreign language integrated into the teaching of content subjects—is becoming more and more popular, as teaching a subject through a foreign language fosters authentic meaning, negotiation meaning, and communication. Such a concept almost naturally leads to a learner-inclusive and task-oriented classroom. The dual-focused nature of CLIL fosters *per se* the usage of the foreign language as a tool to communicate and work on content matter in a functional and authentic way with true real-world connection when dealing with the tasks and problems a subject raises (Sudhoff, 2010, p. 33).

References

- Chavez, M. T. (1998). Learner's perspectives on authenticity. *IRAL* 36(4), 277–306.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Gilmore, A. (2007). State-of-the-art article: Authentic materials and authenticity in foreign language learning. *Language Teaching*, 40(2), 97–118. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0261444807004144>.
- Lee, W. (1995). Authenticity revisited: Text authenticity and learner authenticity. *ELT Journal*, 49(4), 323–8.
- MacDonald, M. N. et al. (2006). Authenticity, culture and language learning. *Language and intercultural communication*, 6(3&4), 250–61. doi:10.2167/laic252.0
- Mishan, F. (2005). *Designing authenticity into language learning materials*. Bristol, England: Intellect
- Richards, J. C. (2001). *Curriculum development in language education*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. C., & Rogers, T. S. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Sudhoff, J. (2010). CLIL and ICC: Foundations and approaches towards a fusion. *International CLIL Research Journal*, 1(3), 30–7.
- Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (1995). Problems in output and the cognitive processes they generate: A step towards second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 16, 371–91. doi:10.1093/applin/16.3.371
- Swain, M. (2006). Languaging, agency and collaboration in advanced second language learning. In H. Byrnes (Ed.), *Advanced language learning: The contributions of Halliday and Vygotsky* (pp. 95–108). London, England: Continuum.
- Widdowson, H. G. (1978). *Teaching language as communication*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Suggested readings

- Boulton, A. (2010). Data-driven learning: Taking the computer out of the equation. *Language Learning*, 60(3), 534–72. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9922.2010.00566.
- Breen, M. P. (1985). Authenticity in the language classroom. *Applied Linguistics*, 6, 60–70. doi:10.1093/applin/6.1.60
- Duda, R., & Tyne, H. (2010). Authenticity and autonomy in language learning. *VALS-ASLA Bulletin suisse de linguistique appliquée*, 92, 86–106.
- Gilmore, A. (2010). Catching words: Exploiting film discourse in the foreign language classroom. In F. Mishan & A. Chambers (Eds.), *Perspectives on language learning materials development* (pp. 110–148). Oxford, England: Peter Lang.
- Pinner, R. (2013). Authenticity and CLIL: Examining authenticity from an international CLIL Perspective. *International CLIL Research Journal*, 2(1), 44–54. Retrieved from www.icrj.eu/21/article4.html.
- Pinner, R. (2014). The authenticity continuum: Empowering international voices. *English Language Teacher Education and Development (ELTED) Journal*, 16, 9–17. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0266078414000364>.
- Reppen R. (2010). *Using corpora in the language classroom*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.