

The Duality of Authenticity in ELT

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to find out the dual-perspectives on authenticity in English language teaching.

Problem: The concept of authenticity has generated quite a ripple in ESL/EFL classrooms. Contrasting perspectives have emerged over the years in reaction to this concept. Some regard authenticity as an inevitable part of teaching as it provides students with opportunities to interact with reality in the classroom itself, whereas, some others consider it an ambitious construct and suggest approaching it with caution.

Method: In order to verify these perspectives, a survey of literature has been done to trace the genesis of authenticity and its various facets.

Conclusion: As a result, we have found that a balanced outlook on authenticity is required by the teachers to promote better teaching-learning experiences.

Keywords: authenticity, semi-authentic text, text authenticity, learner authenticity, task, task-cycle, task authenticity, pedagogic task.

Introduction

The teaching-learning situation underwent a paradigm shift after communicative language teaching (CLT) came into existence in the late 1970s. The behaviourist theory was replaced by cognitive theories, linguistic competence gave way to communicative competence, and the nature of materials changed dramatically from artificiality to authenticity. Since then, judicious use of an unaltered text from the real world has been believed to provide meaningful learning experiences. As a result, textbook writers have relied more on authenticity than selection and gradation of grammar items in order to bring real world and classroom closer to each other than it used to be. This concept of authenticity has been introduced by the experts who recommend materials such as timetables, application forms, announcements, recipes, advertisements, greeting cards, literary works, newspapers, reports, brochures, catalogues, songs, movies, and web resources with a view to linking language classroom to the reality of the outside world.

The Concept of Authenticity

Constant urge by the proponents of CLT to focus on real world communication has brought along with it a need to equip students with skills required for real world performance. So, authenticity has come to life to provide students with materials as available in the real world without making any change whatsoever. The concept has emerged with a popular perception that “the more authentically the classroom mirrors the real world, the more real the rehearsal will be and the better the learning and transfer will be” (Arnold, 1991, p. 237). Therefore, retention of the original look, feel, content and language of the materials is believed to facilitate authentic language use by the students present inside the classroom. Brosnan, Brown and Hood (1984) have placed the importance of authentic text on language as they believe that the authentic language of the

text is natural and hence can easily connect students to the real world. This language sample with the naturalness of form, appropriateness of cultural and situational context (Rogers & Medley, 1988), on the one hand reflects reality, and on the other hand motivates students to communicate without any inhibition (Gatbonton & Gu, 1994). In brief, authenticity collocates “with desirable qualities such as purity, originality and quality” (Mishan, 2004, p. 219). The by-products of the practice are known as process syllabus (Breen, 1985), procedural syllabus (Prabhu, 1987), and task-based syllabus (Long & Crookes, 1992).

The perception that anything imported into a classroom from outside world is authentic has been opposed by as many researchers as those who support it. Some feel that authenticity is too broad a concept and perhaps even immaterial to language teaching (Chavez, 1998). Some others suspect the very purpose of authenticity as they are of the opinion that authentic material does not always generate authentic response, nor do the unauthentic materials always fail to generate authentic response (Wallace, 1992). It is argued that if a text lends itself to successful learning outcomes, it can be regarded authentic; and authenticity is not an attribute of the text but of the response it generates from the students.

In the midst of this debate, attempts have been made to introduce alternate terms. Robinson (1980), for example, has proposed the term “realia” instead of “authentic material”, while Widdowson (1978) has substituted authenticity with ‘genuineness’ and has reserved authenticity to the interpretation of the text by the students. He has said, “Genuineness is a characteristic of the passage itself and is an absolute quality. Authenticity is a characteristic of the relationship between the passage and the reader and it has to do with appropriate response” (p. 80).

We, therefore, find that the attempts made to define authenticity, on the one hand, have deepened its complexity, and have widened its scope, on the other. The complexity has deepened due to the plethora of attempts made to define authenticity from various perspectives. Interestingly, this variety has led to different types of authenticity.

Types of Authenticity

Initially, authenticity was considered an attribute only of the text used in a classroom. Later, it has been realised that the primary concern of teaching-learning situation is not only on getting to use original text but also on helping students use language in real context. The real language use by the students can in no way be guaranteed by authentic text alone. The context of learning goes beyond the nature of materials. It is probably imprecise to presume that a text remains the same when it is taken out of context as Grellet, Maley and Welssing (1983) have asked, “How authentic is a text when presented out of its original context?” (p. 7). In fact, the original context of authentic material no more remains the same when it is used in a classroom because the text is recontextualised as a teaching text. In support of this assertion, Wallace (1992) has corroborated that any text “brought into classrooms for pedagogic purposes they have, arguably, lost authenticity” (p. 79). To give an example, if students want to get a demand draft, the situation demands them to go to a bank, collect appropriate form, fill in, and wait their turn until requested to collect the demand draft. All this can never happen for real in a classroom and everyone knows that a classroom can never be a bank. Therefore, teachers try to simulate reality to allow the students to role play the actions required. Here, the three important factors viz., location, participant and the material are not real. Firstly, the action does not take place in a bank, secondly, the participants are not real but

role-played, and thirdly, the material which is the only authentic factor despite being real can never be the same since the other two factors are unreal.

Alongside this understanding of the fluid nature of authentic text while recontextualised, we need to recognise that the text and the students have a real purpose awaiting them outside the classroom. It is this purpose which makes authentic material appropriate for classroom use. Therefore, in an instructional setup it is the students' purpose that determines whether or not a text is authentic. In this regard, Clark (1989) has said that "the notion of authenticity has become increasingly related to specific learner needs and less concerned with the authentic nature of the input materials themselves" (p. 73). Widdowson (1978) has also contended that authenticity can only be achieved by relating the text to the teaching-learning process because students' use of the available information is of primal importance; thus looks at authenticity as an act of interpretation (Widdowson, 1979). Davies (1984) has augmented this by saying that "It is not that a text is understood because it is authentic but that it is authentic because it is understood" (p. 192). So, care has been taken to make the purpose authentic by placing the thrust on language use.

Consequently, the notion of authenticity has branched out to accommodate different types of authenticity. Breen (1985) has proposed three authenticity types, such that of task, language, and situation. Guariento and Morely (2001) have listed four broad schools of authenticity which depends on a genuine purpose, real world purposes, classroom interaction, and learner engagement. Going through these two classifications, we have considered four authenticity types for our discussion: *text authenticity*, *task authenticity*, *learner authenticity* and *classroom authenticity*. It is to these types of authenticity we now turn with a view to discussing the opposing perspectives on which the concept has been approached.

Text Authenticity

The term text authenticity is equivocal to authentic material used for pedagogic purposes. It is believed that authentic material provides opportunities for students to see, experience and perform functions through text which is realistic in nature. The textbook writers preferred to retain language as found in the original text to that of the modified version which was in vogue prior to CLT. So the text is not “simplified to take account of the linguistic abilities of the addressee” (Morrow, 1977b, p. 26). Allwright’s (1981) statement stands a testimony to the attitude of writers on simplified materials. He has said, “Use no materials, published or unpublished, actually conceived or designed as materials for language teaching” (p. 173).

Many theorists have tried to define authenticity. Nunan (1988) has said that authentic material is “produced for purposes other than to teach language” (p. 99). Little, Devitt and Singleton (1988) have defined it as a text which is “created to fulfil some social purpose in the language community in which it was produced” (p. 27). According to Tomlinson (1998) it is “A text which is not written or spoken for language teaching purposes” (p. viii). Thornbury (2006) has echoed the same by stating that “A classroom text is authentic if it was originally written for non-classroom audience” (p. 21). Crossley et al. (2007) has considered all text-based articles intended for the target audience as authentic texts.

In the definitions given above on text authenticity spanning three decades, two visible *don'ts* transpire. Firstly, the text should not have been written primarily for pedagogical purpose; and secondly, no compromise should be made to alter the text to suit students’ background. Not all researchers favour these two don'ts. Some are of the opinion that students need not be introduced to the language complexities unreasonably. They advocate introduction of genuine simplification in the text to facilitate

comprehension. Kim (2000) has stated that authentic materials can be used with intermediate and advanced level students only. Studies suggest that unwanted complexities in the text would frustrate, confuse, and demotivate students unnecessarily (Guariento & Morely, 2001). The need for simplification, therefore, is deemed essential for the beginners as the text is originally written for fluent users of the language. Ur (1984) has felt that to expect the same degree of language proficiency and cultural awareness from the beginners would be appalling. Bacon (1989) has argued that since we expect the real world communication to be comprehensible, the real language must also be intelligible, informative, truthful, relevant and sociolinguistically appropriate. This is vital to Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis in which he has argued that for comprehension to take place, input has to be just above the current proficiency level (i+1) of the students.

As a result, authentic text is used in two ways in a classroom. One way is to effect no change whatsoever while using the text – the content, language, format and layout remain just the same. This is a hardliner's take on text authenticity and simplification is done only by adjusting the difficulty level of the task and not the text. Another way is to modify the text slightly to pre-empt unwanted difficulties students would face with the material. Such text is called *semi-authentic* text.

Task Authenticity

Task emerged into the scene when teaching practices concentrated more on memorising and practising linguistic details and paid less attention to the communicative functions of the target language. Such type of rote learning of language structures during the pre-communicative era prepared students to respond mechanically to limited situations. This language practice, Perkins (1993) observes, did not help students transfer that knowledge about language to other situations. So, task came into existence to remedy this handicap by relating learning experiences to “real life situation” (Bachman, 2000, p.

13) and teachers were suggested to use classroom activities that “parallel the ‘real world’ as closely as possible” (Clark & Silbertstein, 1977, p. 51).

The notion of task is still evolving. The acceptance of the fact that there has not been a comprehensive definition on what a task is (Long & Crookes 1992) reflects the evolving nature of this concept. However, Breen (1987) has tried to capture the essence of task by defining it as “a range of workplans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning – from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision-making” (p. 23). Nunan (1989) is of the opinion that task is a communicative work in which students are involved in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. Richards, Platt and Webber (1985) has defined task as “an activity or action which is carried out as a result of processing or understanding language” (p. 289). Newmann and Wehlage (1993) have said that tasks prepare students on activities they encounter in the office, at home, or any other social contexts.

When does a task become authentic? Cronin (1993) says that a task is authentic when it concerns real-world relevance. Apart from real-world relevance, authentic task has to consider feasibility and sustainability to learning goals while used with students and they are achievable through what Willis (1996) has called task cycle which has been introduced primarily to help teachers have a pattern for task implementation, on the one hand, and achievement of learning objectives, on the other. We, therefore, understand that authentic task is meant to provide opportunities for language use in such a way that students shed inhibitions while using the language. The opportunities include taking right decisions, presenting persuasive opinions, filling in the missing data and resolving

problems. These are popularly known as reasoning-gap, opinion-gap, information-gap, and problem-solving tasks – all of which come under the communicative paradigm.

Differences of opinion are found in the use of task since some strongly suggest that a task should aim at providing exactly what is expected of the real world, whereas, some others believe that students can be trained to use language communicatively in real world for which liberties can be taken to deviate from the original function. Hence apart from authentic task, pedagogic task has wrestled itself into being.

Gatbonton and Gu (1994) have defined pedagogic task as “classroom activities designed to promote the knowledge and skills necessary to handle real world tasks or placement tasks” (p. 16). Breen (1987) has defined it as “any structured language learning endeavor which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task” (p. 23). Here again, as in with the previous authenticity type, theorists deviate from the reality jinx in order to facilitate better learning conditions. These deviations, though may not resemble authentic purpose at the micro level, are intended to prepare students to meet the communicative demands of the world.

Learner Authenticity

Any authentic material is used in a classroom along with a diligently prepared task only to promote learner authenticity which is a process of learning intended to help students make better use of language by interacting with resources available to them in the classroom. Van Lier (1996) has believed that authenticity is not necessarily a quality of material from the real world, but it is very essentially an attribute of students’ self determination and commitment to understanding. In other words, authenticity is a process of personal engagement through which students involve in what Morrow (1977a) calls “authenticity of response”.

Achieving learner authenticity is not an easy process because mere student-participation alone is not an adequate requirement. In fact, students must be genuinely interested in a task and see personal relevance in it because learner authenticity depends much on students' attitude towards the materials used (Lee, 1995). This suggests that "The learner will re-define any text against his own priorities, precisely because he is a learner" (Breen, 1985, p. 62). This calls for a careful analysis of learning objectives to lead student-priorities towards the communicative end of the real world.

In an attempt to get closer to reality, students are made to imitate roles and functions identical to that of real world, yet we tend to overlook the fact that reality includes concerns, worries, suspicions and other psychological issues associated with real communication. Nonetheless, little effort is invested so far in understanding the nature of such psychological issues discerning the fact that they are hard to stimulate. For example, while debating with peers, students may have worries and excitements but while debating on the same issue in real context, their worries and excitement would vary from that of debating with their peers in an academic setting. So, whatever effort one puts in to meet authenticity, simulation of variables resembling real life function at least at the psychological level is beyond the limits of the text, task and teacher. Again, we see that authenticity on students' part is debatable as it is with the previous types.

Classroom Authenticity

In an ESL/EFL context, classroom plays a vital role in providing language input and probably it is the only place where students interact in English. The texts, tasks and students converge here primarily to import real world into the classroom. Seeing authenticity as a quality of realness is one thing, says Cooper (1983), and considering it as a product of quality interaction is another important perspective. The former focuses on real world communication and the latter takes cognizance of the fact that in a classroom

what matters the most is the quality of language used by the students. Therefore, authenticity is considered an attribute not only of the outside world but also of a classroom as Taylor (1994) has observed, “The classroom has its own reality and naturalness. Participants in the language classroom create their own authenticity there as they do elsewhere” (p. 5). So a classroom need not be considered artificial as it is like any other place real since it has its own purpose of learning. In the least of possibilities, even if authenticity of the classroom is doubtful, the imaginative faculty of students should never be as they are capable of necessitating their own authenticity. Ellis (1993) has supported this view and suggests that a genuine learning purpose can help students readily accept classroom as real.

Task meant to promote genuine learning experience requires proper planning since the unexpected is always possible when authentic task meets classroom reality. A well-conceived task on an interesting text may fiddle out, whereas, a mediocre one would spring up a surprise; and on either occasions, whether negative or positive, teachers are the major causal factor. Therefore, it is believed that success depends mostly on teachers’ simulation of meaningful learning environment, as Newmann and Wehlage (1993) have stated that it is up to the teachers to create classroom learning conditions that suit genuine task demands. Although the post-method perspective suggests different learning environments, classes are held mostly in the classroom. Hence authentic setting can mostly be arranged within the four walls of a classroom and the facilities available in a classroom vary from one institution to another. It lies with the expertise of the teachers to foresee feasibility of the task demands so that the text, task and the learners converge for meaningful interaction.

Implications for Teaching

We have discussed the divergent perspectives of authenticity especially between those who advocate authenticity as the only effective means of learning a second language and those who encourage a viable middle ground between authenticity and artificiality. Not only do the researchers differ on the importance given to authenticity ranging from text to classroom but also have opposing viewpoints on each authenticity type, such as, authentic text versus semi-authentic text, authentic task versus pedagogic task, real-group anxiety versus peer-group anxiety and real-world authenticity versus classroom authenticity. Availability of a wide range of perspectives is welcoming, whereas, having contrastive opinions on the same may confuse the teachers.

Interestingly, a close reading of the available literature has helped us understand that the objective of these two opposing schools is just the same vis-à-vis to train students to communicate in real world using the target language. The difference lies in how they recommend going about achieving this objective. In order to minimize this conflict it is better to see authenticity as a continuum – real-world authenticity on the one end and pedagogic authenticity on the other end. This would let teachers maintain a balanced perspective while they can choose from the best of what is proposed by both schools. They can combine authentic text and pedagogic task, or can use semi-authentic text along with authentic task and so on. Everything depends on the teachers' expertise to properly purpose pedagogical techniques along with authentic thoughts to enable students prepare themselves for the real-world communication.

Conclusion

It is nourishing to consider authenticity as a touchstone to classroom learning experiences but it is not always advisable to consider it an inevitable part of every activity. As a theory, authenticity has revolutionized the way teachers look at second

language learning vis-à-vis facing and using authentic language through texts as found in real world. Nonetheless, suggesting to bring outside world unscathed into a classroom and shutting the door outright on anything short of authenticity may only widen the gap between theory and practice because authenticity sounds convincing as a concept whereas when put to practise, the latter perspective could convincingly assist authentic prospects - be it semi-authentic text or pedagogic task or peer-group anxiety or classroom authenticity - all these attempt to prepare students to communicate in the real world. Therefore, authentic or otherwise, it is up to the teachers to use ideas constructively than blindly follow them.

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