

Authentic Texts and the Use of Dictionaries in the EFL Classroom

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Introduction

Foreign language teachers are able to assist their students in becoming self-sufficient readers through building schema, making them aware of cultural differences, and by helping them realize reading is an active engagement between reader and text. Once students are prepared in this way, they are able to read more independently of teachers, dictionaries and language texts (Carrell et al 1988). One step in guiding Japanese students towards this autonomy is to help them become less reliant on their dictionaries, to introduce them to authentic materials and to provide time in class for “free reading.”

Dependence on Dictionaries

EFL teachers are divided in the debate over whether dictionaries should be used in a reading class. There are those who allow students to use them at will and those who believe they should be banned altogether. Luppescu and Day (1993) claim, “These views are not based on any empirical evidence”(277), however three studies at the University of Haifa and Ben Gurion University of the Negev concluded that “less proficient students lack the language skills to benefit from the dictionary, whereas more proficient students know enough to do without it” (Bensoussan et al 1984:270). One may deduce from this that lower-level students need to be trained in how to use a dictionary until they gain enough skills not to need one.

Japanese students however, regardless of language ability, are taught to directly translate each word in a sentence with considerable help from their dictionaries. Furukawa (2007) says this method “is the main reason that most Japanese students have not achieved a good ability to speak, write, listen to and read in English”(2). In 1979, a survey of 342 Japanese university students found that nearly all consider their dictionary to be their most valuable reference in English study and the only one which they used every day. This indicates the profound level of dependence ESL students in Japan have on their diction-

aries (Baxter 1980).

Why is this dependence objectionable? Day and Bamford (1988) assert that “part of fluent and effective reading involves the reader ignoring unknown words and phrases or, if understanding them is essential, guessing their approximate meaning. Fluent reading is hindered by a reader stopping to use a dictionary” (93). Luppescu and Day (1993) discovered that the use of dictionaries doubled the time it took Japanese university students to read a short story – obviously inhibiting their reading fluency. Many scholars and educators agree that dependence can also cripple their self-confidence and guessing ability (Bensoussan et al 1984; Broadhurst 1979; Prowse 2002) and can actually impair comprehension due to choice of the wrong definition (Macnamara 1972; Kitao and Kitao 1982). Baxter explained that in a Japanese-English dictionary, the words are related only by “translation equivalence” and as that is “not a definition” (1980:330) misinterpretations are common. Day and Bamford (1988) call for a prohibition of dictionaries because the students “must break the habit of looking up every unknown word” (93). Dupuy et al (1996) agree, suggesting that the students spend more of their time reading and less time looking up words.

Authentic Materials

Scholars’ definitions of ‘authentic materials’ differ in terms of exclusivity (Bacon and Finnemann 1990; Jordan 1997; Rogers and Medley 1988), labels (Geddes and White 1978; Widdowson 1990), and categorical systems dividing materials into different levels of authenticity (Rings 1986).

For example, Bacon and Finnemann (1990) affirm that a text “is considered authentic when it is produced by and for native speakers of the target language” (469). Jordan (1997) asserts that authentic text is anything not specifically created for pedagogical use. Rogers and Medley (1988) more inclusively state that authentic materials are merely “language samples... that reflect a naturalness of form, and an appropriateness of cultural and situational context that would be found in the language as used by native speakers” (468).

Geddes and White (1978, in Omaggio 1986) created two separate definitions for classifying authentic materials. A text written by and for native speakers is labeled “un-modified authentic discourse” (ibid:128). However, text specifically written for educational purposes yet containing “un-modified” characteristics is considered “simulated authentic discourse” (ibid:128). Widdowson (1990) considered ‘authentic’ material to be only that which is used as intended by the writer. He called ‘genuine’ material that which is originally meant for native speakers, but used in a different manner (i.e. as part of a lesson). Rings (1986) created sixteen differing degrees of authentic speech asserting that “native speakers’ spontaneous conversations produced for their own purposes (no knowledge of being monitored)” as the ‘most authentic’ and “composed conversations printed in textbooks” (207) as the ‘least’.

In this work, authenticity is defined as text written by and for native speakers, but that is used in a variety of ways in the classroom that may not have been originally intended by the author. It also includes material that may be altered for educational purposes (i.e. shortened, glossed, words taken out for cloze exercises, etc.).

In the literature, there are numerous opinions about how authentic materials can and should be used, however even critics such as Walz (1989) commend the trend of their employment in foreign language classrooms (Secules et al 1992). Day and Bamford (1988) criticize simplified texts which “can be poorly written, uninteresting, and hard to read, and can lack normal text features such as redundancy and cohesion” (57). Authentic materials, especially newspapers and advertisements, contain repeated vocabulary which is excellent for reinforcement (Blatchford 1973).

Canale (1983) says “maximum comprehensible exposure to the second language is crucial of basic knowledge and skills required for effective language use” (17). Other scholars, namely Harmer (1991), Albert (1980), Ricardo–Marques (1981) and Rogers and Medley (1988) express similar opinions. Williams (1984) wrote, “if the learner is expected eventually to cope with real language outside the classroom, then surely the best way to prepare for this is by looking at real language inside the classroom” (25). Beeching (1982) and Bacon and Finnemann (1990) claim authentic materials provide motivation for learning. Day and Bamford (1988) elaborate, describing them as “interesting, engaging, culturally enlightening, relevant, [and] motivating” (54). Terrell’s (1993) studies show that students gained confidence in the target language’s use after exposure to authentic materials in the classroom. Blatchford (1973) found their use in the classroom caused the students to “spontaneously ask questions” because “both the sense of threat and the level of self–consciousness are reduced from what may exist in a strict language classroom” (145). In addition, they were allowed to “take part in real tasks [and] learn useful information about how to exist in... English–language surroundings” (ibid:145).

Although many recognize their benefits, authentic materials are criticized for being too linguistically advanced and for often using uncommon language. Some complain that their use does nothing to contribute to academic or occupational objectives. They also point out that materials meant for native speakers originate from a cultural perspective that is confounding for students (McKay 1982). Omaggio (1986) cautions that unedited authentic materials are “random in respect to vocabulary, structure, functions, content, situation and length, much of it impractical for classroom teachers to integrate successfully into the curriculum” (128). Ur (1984) and Dunkel (1986) agree and reason that students will lose morale and motivation if confronted with extremely difficult material.

In response to these perceived faults, Povey (1972) asserted that exposure to the complexities of language through authentic material (such as literature) would improve all language skills. McKay (1982) adds that the simplicity of non–authentic materials is not helpful as “simplification of syntax may reduce cohesion and readability... and contribute little to the development of reading skills” (531). The

use of the authentic language does contribute to the students' objectives as it "fosters an overall increase in reading proficiency" and "may provide the affective, attitudinal and experimental factors which will motivate them to read" (ibid:530). Furthermore, instead of confusing the students, a new cultural perspective "may work to promote a greater tolerance for cultural differences" (ibid:531).

Agreeing with the benefits of authentic material use, but acknowledging the criticism, Armstrong and Yetter-Vassot (1994) explain that they should be used only when accompanied "with appropriate guidance from the instructor" (476). Byrnes (1985), Fish (1981), and Joiner (1986), in contrast to Omaggio (1986), denote that it is not the difficulty of a *text* that makes it 'impractical', but the difficulty of the *tasks*. Allen et al (1988) conducted an experiment that confirmed this view. Therefore, this essay proposes that carefully selected authentic materials, presented with graded tasks, are an asset to the development of EFL students' language skills.

Practical Use of Authentic Materials without Dictionaries

Krashen (1985) put forward his '*i + 1*' hypothesis asserting basically that students need to be reading material above their level of ability in order to gain new knowledge. In contrast, Samuels (1979) put forth his '*i minus 1*' hypothesis which believes that students need to be reading just below their ability for "automaticity training" (834). This work proposes that both theories, when used together (graded reading plus authentic materials), are a viable way of assisting students in gaining the needed skills to handle authentic readings successfully.

McKay (1982) warns that the focus of reading should be language-usage (such as comprehension questions or grammar exercises) *only if* certain language "impedes or highlights that experience [of interacting with the text]" (533). The reading would be better presented as a way to "gain information" and "enjoyment," otherwise, it would be "an inappropriate relationship between the text and the reader" (Widdowson 1979, in McKay 1982:533). Considering this, three general suggestions are offered to instructors who desire their students to become autonomous readers. First, the students' general knowledge must be methodically compiled to equip them with sufficient schemata to comprehend the text. Second, guided reading exercises (using graded and authentic material) that strengthen skills and lead the students to become more independent readers are key to reaching the third step: encountering authentic materials with little to no support from the teacher or dictionary. These encounters may be generated in the form of in-class 'free readings' where students are given the opportunity to use their new skills and read whatever they choose in an environment devoid of any pressure or expectations.

Schema

Readers' knowledge of a subject (schema) interacts with text and affects comprehension. This

'schema' is information that is used to interpret what they are reading (Brown and Yule 1983). To activate the schema before reading, activities where the students generate vocabulary and images through writing or discussion can be introduced.

For example, students in pairs or small groups discussing a picture that is related to the reading and predicting what they think the story will be about will activate the schema and lead to more successful comprehension. Westhoff (1981) says that "reporting how the prediction was made is one of the most important parts of the learning process" and that to allow as many students as possible "to report at the same time, groupwork and pairwork should be used" (275). In these first exercises the students work in pairs, to give them a greater chance of coming up with the correct content schema, then as a group so that the instructor can insure the class as a whole has the correct schema before moving on to the reading. As shown in the study conducted by Anderson (1977), exchanging ideas also makes up for the differences in age, sex and interests of the students that can affect individuals' schema.

For better comprehension, introducing vocabulary before the reading not only improves the schema, but also eases the temptation to use a dictionary. In addition, words are best remembered if taught in topically related sets as opposed to simply giving definitions as a dictionary would (Langer 1981). To increase chances of correct usage and to better the students' understanding and memory, articles, accompanying verbs and full phrases should be given and the number of new words limited to those that are necessary for understanding key themes (Carrell 1984).

Prepare students for "cultural assumptions" by designing activities that spotlight possible misunderstandings (McKay 1982:531). Japanese students would make disparate assumptions about a story set in an American high school as the two cultures' experiences (schema) of school are dissimilar. A footnote, short background reading, or a brainstorming activity about the differences between the countries' high schools would alert the readers not to assume anything that might lead to misinterpretations.

If possible, create a syllabus with several themes that may be focused upon over a period of time. Students' schemata will increase (leading to better comprehension) and vocabulary will consolidate as words re-occur in the texts.

Guided Reading

Once the schema has been activated, the second step of practicing reading skills may begin. Lessons containing activities featuring text organization, managing unknown vocabulary without a dictionary, checking for comprehension and improving reading speed will teach the learners how to be self-reliant when addressed with authentic materials.

For students with L1s that are radically different from the L2, learning how texts are organized is an important skill to possess and should be focused on at the beginning of the lesson (Toyama 1977). Cut up a story, dialogue, or news article and have the students put it together in a logical order. This

makes them conscious of the L2's text structure and in turn creates more efficient readers.

An important part of becoming less dependent on dictionaries is to learn how to discern which unknown words are most important for comprehension and how to derive meaning from context. One example practicing this is to have the students 'boil down' a short piece of text to its basic meaning. For example, this sentence would be placed on the board: "*As it started to rain, the Ute woman carried her papoose into the teepee and both of them fell asleep.*" The students would likely not know the meanings of the words *Ute*, *papoose* and *teepee*. The instructor would cross out these words and ask the class to describe what happened. This is to demonstrate that even without knowing the definitions of the words the main idea may be easily understood. The students would then attempt to 'boil down' several other sentences on their own as the instructor monitored.

The second part of this activity would involve guessing the meanings of the unknown vocabulary demonstrated in various ways by the teacher. Using "Ute" as an example, it would be pointed out that the capital letter indicates a proper adjective describing the "woman". It can be assumed that, like "Japanese", it likely describes race or nationality. Likewise, the fact that she went into "the teepee" to get out of the rain and to sleep in, means we can assume it is something with a roof or covering – possibly her home. The students would try to derive the meaning of "papoose" as a class and the instructor would ensure they had used satisfactory thought processes. Finally, the students would try to determine the meanings of unknown words in the previously 'boiled down' sentences and share their ideas with the class.

To check for comprehension and integrate the new schemata, Carrell (1988) suggests several activities for post-reading including discussion, interpretation, review, relating to previous knowledge and reformulating knowledge. Discussing the text in pairs and/or small groups allows the students to share ideas, impressions and new schemata. The instructor is able to monitor and confirm the students have not misinterpreted.

Comprehension questions do not require any emotional or intellectual type of appreciation (Prowse 2002) and they "commonly require the learner to rummage round in the text for information in a totally indiscriminate way, without regard to what purpose might be served in doing so... Reading is thus represented as an end to itself, an activity that has no relevance to real knowledge and experience and therefore no real meaning" (Widdowson 1979:180). Thus, for example, instead of asking *what* the characters are doing in the reading, ask *why* they are doing it and what the readers would do if they were in the same situation (McKay 1982). This type of post-reading activity allows the students to relate the information to their own lives and experiences – much more satisfying than simply looking for a 'correct' answer, yet still allowing the teacher to check comprehension.

Improving students' reading fluency allows for more enjoyable reading and reduces their need to reach for the dictionary. Skills such as recognizing clusters of words and using context to deduct mean-

ing can be taught using relatively short texts, both authentic and otherwise.

English and Japanese are written and read fundamentally differently. English uses the Roman phonetic alphabet where words are always written left to right. Japanese is written with a mixture of Chinese ideographs and two phonetic alphabets and can be read in several directions. The ideographs are easy to identify visually and the phonetic spellings rarely change unlike English (i.e. *to*, *two* and *too* or *threw* and *through*). This difference causes Japanese readers of English to place too much emphasis on reading one word at a time trying to recognize the meaning from the combination of letters. Native English speakers, however, are able to comprehend groups of four to five words in one eye movement (Weaver 1980 and Yoshida 1985). Thus it is important to periodically give the students exercises (see Appendices 1 and 2) to accustom them to recognizing words and groups of words as a native English speaker would. Use flash cards to practice quick recognition (signs of tense, possession, negation) and phrase-reading skills to predict what follows using logical indicators (but, if... then, therefore) (Blatchford 1973).

Japanese students waste time by re-reading the words several times (Takahashi and Takanashi 1984) and for every unknown word they usually write down the first Japanese translation they find in their dictionary regardless of context (Kitao and Kitao 1982). Timed readings and exercises that encourage the students to learn from context teach better reading habits. Another method of improving reading speed as well as to “establish the sound/symbol relation” (Blatchford 1973:400) is to have the students read silently while listening to the instructor read the text aloud (Prowse 2002).

Free Reading

For the length of an entire class period, and for several occasions each semester, allow the students to have free reading time. Assorted authentic materials such as magazines, newspapers, cookbooks and comic books are piled onto a table in the classroom and the students are given a few minutes to browse and select something that looks interesting to them. They are then to go to their seat and simply read while the instructor also reads – setting an example. Soft background music can help to create a more casual and comfortable atmosphere. After a predetermined amount of time, the students discuss or write about what they have been reading. They are then free to keep reading or to choose something new from the table. The students are told that they are able to use their dictionary which provides an excellent opportunity for the teacher to observe just how independent the class has become. In addition, the teacher may observe other reading habits such as speed and ability to concentrate. It is not only the instructor who benefits from this time as research proves reading for pleasure improves exam scores (Prowse 2002).

Choice of Authentic Materials

How should an appropriate authentic text be selected? Texts that have fairly simple vocabulary and themes are best. In other words, avoid something similar to a scientific journal that would involve highly specified words or topics that may even challenge a native speaker. Texts with less complex plot, characters, culture and style, such as novels for young adults, will be more successful than something like Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, as an extreme example (Kitao and Kitao 1982). In addition, choose themes that the readers can easily identify with and that are relevant to their lives and situations (McKay, 1982). Williams and Moran (1989) express the importance of choosing materials when they write, "Interest is vital, for it increases motivation, which in turn is a significant factor in the development of reading speed and fluency" (42). Prowse (2002), McKay (1982) and Blatchford (1973) all echo this opinion. Perhaps most importantly, "the pupils should enjoy what they read. A book that satisfies all other criteria but fails this one is a reject" (Bright and McGregor 1970:59).

Evaluation

Blatchford (1973) suggested testing only important points of a reading and never minor details. However, Prowse (2002) believes that testing students' reading at all merely obstructs their success. He considers success to be when the students voluntarily start to read on their own. How does one practically evaluate reading if not by tests or the usual comprehension questions? The students could keep reading notebooks where they record information such as titles, authors, characters, and their opinions of the readings to be checked periodically by the teacher. They could also write reports that briefly summarize the text as well as give their opinions about the topic, writing and/or view of the author (Day and Bamford 1988). Students may then share their reports so it will inform others of what would be good or not so good to read.

Conclusion

Through the calculated and regular use of authentic materials in the classroom, students will not only improve reading skills, but also increase their confidence and motivation. Independence from the 'habit' of looking up every unknown word they encounter also enables readers to become more efficient as well as more accurate in their interpretations and comprehension of their readings. Moreover, this new expertise will encourage students to read more, not only improving general language skills, but in the process opening themselves to new ideas, cultures, and a limitless amount of accessible information.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: A word recognition exercise from Stoller (1984)

Key Word				
see	sea	see	sew	saw
fin	fan	fine	fin	fun
cry	cry	fry	try	dry
on	un	in	an	on

Appendix 2: A phrase recognition exercise from Adams (1969)

Key Phrase: on the floor	
on the book	in the flood
on the bay	in the blood
on the door	on the floor
in the door	on the door
on the floor	on the flower
in the lore	in the flour
in the flood	on the floor