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ABSTRACT

A discussion of authentic materials for English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction focuses on the necessary balance between authenticity and comprehensibility. A variety of definitions of authentic materials offered in the literature are considered, and then compared with published ESL materials that are claimed to be authentic. A new definition is proposed: materials are authentic if they are unaltered language data and are produced by and for native speakers of a common language and not for second language learners of that language. The assumption that all authentic materials are acquisition-rich input, either immediately comprehensible or comprehensible after a process of negotiation of meaning, is then examined. It is argued that while comprehension is a necessary and customary requisite to acquisition, it does not necessarily lead to comprehension, and it is the responsibility of the classroom teacher to make language samples useful. Teachers are invited to consider their motivations for using authentic language, and whether "contrived" language samples can be at least as valid and useful learning materials as those drawn directly from authentic sources. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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# What Makes Materials Authentic

Thomas W. Adams

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The relentless push since the mid-1970s towards communicative approaches to language teaching has brought along with it what some might characterize as a trend and others as a stampede supporting the use of authentic sources of language data in ESL textbooks and in classroom materials. And yet, I have always wondered precisely what my colleagues mean when they refer to authentic materials. The expression is more than a little loaded, isn't it, thereby all but guaranteeing its acceptance. After all, implied by the logic of disjunction is the notion that which isn't authentic is ipso facto artificial or contrived. And who in their right mind would want that for their students? Widdowson (1978: 164) provides a fictitious example of a passage that most of us would probably view as contrived:

Ali and Bashir are brothers. Every morning they get up at five o'clock and wash their hands and face. They have their breakfast at six o'clock. They have an egg and a banana for breakfast. They had an egg and a banana for their breakfast yesterday morning. They are having an egg and a banana for their breakfast this morning and they will have an egg and a banana for their breakfast tomorrow morning.

Widdowson claims that this passage is recognizably contrived because it "does not carry conviction as actual language behavior." It constitutes "linguistic data without being language data" in that it conforms perfectly to linguistic rules of well-formedness, yet it is difficult to imagine circumstances in the "real" world that would yield actual speech or writing of this sort. And even if we could imagine such circumstances, learners are apt to tire soon of materials that lack intrinsic interest. As Allwright & Bailey (1991) colorfully put it: "There comes a point when the learners no longer wish to talk about the fictitious Robinson family that lives nowhere in particular, with a stupid dog and two boring children."

Widdowson's point is not difficult to accept, but I'm not sure that we can always easily distinguish linguistic data created expressly for the second language classroom from language data lifted directly from the "real" world, in large part because our intuitions concerning the rules of social usage and the norms of interaction are notoriously unreliable (Wolfson 1989). Let me put a little test to you, and see if you can guess whether one, both, or neither of the following two samples have been lifted from the "real" world:

### Sample A

1: I'm looking for the Vet clinic. Any idea where...:

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- 2: The Vet Clinic...yeah...you're almost there. Straight ahead. Just two blocks ahead, only...
- 1: But that street's a one-way.
- 2: Yeah. You're gonna hafta...maybe the best thing to do is make the first right ...that's 33rd Street... and go up one block...to the traffic light and turn left...and go around until...
- 1: A right, then a left?
- 2: Umm. Then another left and you're there.
- 1: Thanks, bud.

### Sample B

- 1: How do I get to the Vet Clinic?
- 2: The Vet Clinic? Oh my God. It's far, but, um. It's on...It's Shaw Lane is right, if you keep going up here you'll hit Shaw Lane and it's going that way. But go a little bit more and then cross the parking lot and it goes that way.
- 1: Um hum.
- 2: And then you cross the road and just follow that sidewalk all the way down. If you keep following it you'll see a sign that says Vet Clinic. But go all the way down there and cross the road and just follow the sidewalk down.
- 1: Okay
- 2: Okay?
- 1: Thanks a lot.

Sample B is a transcription of an audiotaped spontaneous conversation (from Scotton & Bernsten 1988); Sample A is contrived. If you think both carry "conviction as actual language behavior," then why is Sample B preferable to Sample A in the minds of many? Well, because it has the virtue of being the authentic one, of course! And that is why some definitional clarity would be helpful. However, it is here that the waters begin to muddy.

As a first step, I looked to the literature for help. Various definitions have been proposed over at least the past twenty years, some of which appear below:

Materials which were originally directed at a native-speaking audience (Wilkins 1976).

An authentic text is a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort (Morrow 1977).

Discourse produced for nonteaching purposes or discourse produced for teaching purposes but having many features that are likely to occur in genuine communication (Geddes & White 1978).

Authentic texts (either written or spoken) are those which are designed for native speakers: they are real texts designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language in question (Harmer 1983).

Instances of spoken language which were not initiated for the purpose of teaching...not intended for non-native learners (Porter & Roberts 1987).

Language samples—both oral and written—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 (Villegas Rogers & Medley 1988).

Any material which has not been specifically produced for the purposes of language teaching (Nunan 1989).

Let us turn now to types of published ESL materials that authors consider to be authentic. If the water has been muddy so far, it becomes downright oozy from this point on. Authentic materials can refer to: 1] the writings of non-native speakers of English, but only if the materials were originally written in English (e.g., Turkenik 1995); 2] writings from countries where English is spoken as a second language (e.g., Lim & Smalzer 1994); 3] speech from scripted films and reports prepared for radio broadcasts (e.g., Mejia & O'Connor 1994; Numrich 1990); 4] works that have been translated into English (e.g., McCloskey & Stack 1993; Sage 1993; Sokolik 1993); 5] pieces that have been abridged or excerpted (e.g., Prince 1994); 6] passages that were written hundreds of years ago and in consequence do not reflect contemporary usage (e.g., Hillman 1990; Sokolik 1993); 7] passages that were written by native speakers, but primarily for a non-native speaking audience (e.g., Jason & Posner 1995); and 8] even writing samples from ESL students (e.g., Byrd & Bensen 1994; Markstein & Hirasawa 1994; Phinney 1994).

The question arises as to whether a definition so diluted that it includes all of the above instances would have much value to anyone. And so, I am left with proposing a definition that will doubtless satisfy no one completely: Materials are authentic if they are unaltered language data, and if they are produced by and for native speakers of a common language and not for second language learners of that language. Having put forward a definition, I should point out that at least several thoughtful writers on this subject have concluded that attempting any definition at all is foolhardy:

Let us therefore acknowledge that there is no such thing as an abstract quality "authenticity" which can be defined once and for all, and that authenticity is a function not only of the language but also of the participants, the use to which language is put, the setting, the nature of the interaction, and the interpretation the participants bring to both the setting and the activity (Taylor 1994).

There is no such thing as authentic language data. Authenticity is realized by appropriate response and the language teacher is responsible for designing a methodology which will establish the conditions whereby this authenticity can ultimately be achieved (Widdowson 1979).

By making the point that the classroom has its own integrity, its own authenticity, Taylor and Widdowson would be likely to take issue with my earlier definition of authentic materials, and—by extension—the wholesale use of these materials in classrooms. Taylor reiterates this position in making the following point:

[T]here is an assumption that what goes on in the language classroom is almost by definition “artificial”...and that we must therefore strive to make what happens in it as much like real life as possible. This is an assumption that must be questioned (Taylor 1994).

I contend that this assumption is seldom questioned—at least in the United States today. The adoption of authentic materials at all levels of language proficiency appears to be on the rise. Authentic materials are increasingly viewed as uniformly far superior to any materials that have been written expressly for the learner. A corollary of this view is that no bad or weak sources of authentic input are possible and that all are equally good. To find support for these contentions, let us turn to several claims made by materials developers:

The best language instructional materials are those that use authentic samples of speech. This is true even for very low-level students. (Mejia & O'Connor 1994)

Most authentic or unsimplified materials have been generally reserved for use with intermediate and advanced level students. However, students at lower levels stand to gain at least as much by exposure to well-selected authentic texts appropriate to their needs and abilities. (Huizenga & Thomas-Ruzic 1994)

The importance of using authentic (unsimplified) reading materials in the ESL classroom has long been recognized by applied linguists and educators alike. Unfortunately, such materials have been generally reserved for use with advanced students. (Swinscoe 1992)

Students need to encounter language that provides authentic, meaningful communication. They must be involved in real-life communication tasks that cause them to want and need to read, write, speak, and listen to English (Oxford & Scarcella, writing as editors for Heinle & Heinle's *Tapestry* series).

These claims might well suggest that authentic input for learners at all levels of proficiency automatically constitutes acquisition-rich input, defined variously as input that comprehensible at the onset (e.g., Ellis 1990) or as input that initially is incomprehended but which becomes comprehended through a process of negotiation of meaning (e.g., Long 1983). And here it might be useful to recall that in the last couple of decades the focus of much of the research in second language acquisition has been on the internal mechanisms of the learners, specifically on the role of innateness. Only in recent years has the research agenda shifted somewhat to the role and the nature of the input to the learners. While some researchers, especially those from the innateness camp, argue that comprehension of input

isn't always necessary for acquisition to happen or even that input isn't always necessary for acquisition to occur (e.g., White 1987), many other researchers contend that if the input is not comprehended, then it has no chance to be integrated into the learner's language system, and as Gass and Selinker (1994) put it, "...it appears to serve no greater purpose to the learner than does that language that is never heard." Comprehension is therefore a usual and customary requisite to acquisition, although we can't say that comprehension necessarily leads to acquisition.

That being the case, can we in all earnestness suggest that learners—even those at high levels of proficiency—are able to comprehend many types of authentic materials, even when there are ample opportunities for negotiation? Nunan (1989) points out that "many low-level learners are traumatized when first exposed to authentic samples of language." For other learners who struggle unsuccessfully to understand language samples (authentic or otherwise) that are beyond their reach, the consequence may end in debilitating anxiety and frustration. And so, we are left with only two non-exclusive choices if we decide to use authentic materials: either we must select them very carefully or we must be very attentive to the way that we treat them in the classroom. These recommendations are implied in Breen's advice on the selection of classroom materials:

It has recently been argued that we need to expose learners to authentic texts so that they may have immediate and direct contact with input data that which reflect genuine communication in the target language. However, perhaps a relative distinction can be made between texts which represent rich examples of the target language in use, and those texts which may serve as the *means* through which learners can gradually uncover the conventions which underlie the use of the target language. The second kind of text may provide language data which—by whatever devices—more explicitly display the systems of knowledge (the specific rules, meanings, and conventions of language behavior) which generate communication in the target language. The guiding criterion here is the provision of any means which will enable the learner to *eventually* interpret texts in ways which are more likely to be shared with fluent users of the language (Breen 1985).

van Lier essentially echoes this advice in very straightforward words, and it is with his words that I will end this paper and invite discussion:

[W]e do not have to limit our judgments to the usual question of whether or not the materials were produced for purposes other than language learning, or if the activity is one that resembles activities that go on in the so-called "outside world." Rather our question now is: Am I using undistorted language sincerely to further language learning, to promote commitment and interest, and in ways that make my intentions clear to my audience? This means that language specially made up for the occasion, and activities invented for the classroom, can be authentic in far more valid and meaningful ways than some article clipped from a newspaper, a videotaped

conversation, or a student-student exchange about "what I did last weekend" (Van Lier 1991).

### ESL Textbooks Surveyed\*

1. Aquilina, P. (1993). *Timely topics*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
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3. Hillman, L. H. (1990). *Reading at the university*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
4. Huizenga, J. & Thomas-Ruzic, M. (1994). *Reading Workout*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
5. Jason, K. & Posner, H. (1995). *Explorations in American culture: Readings for critical thinking, writing, and discussion*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
6. Lebauer, R. & Scarcella. (1993). *Reactions: Multicultural reading-based writing modules*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Regents Prentice Hall.
7. Lim, P. & Smalzer, W. (1994). *Across cultures: Universal themes in literature*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
8. Markstein, L. & Hirasawa, L. (1994). *Developing reading skills, intermediate 1* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
9. McCloskey, M.L. & Stack, L. (1993). *Voices in literature*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
10. McKay, I.S. (1993). *Beginning interactive grammar*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
11. McPartland-Fairman, P. (1993). *Focus on health*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Regents Prentice Hall.
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14. Nunan, D. (1995). *Atlas 1: Learning-centered communication*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
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22. Swincoe, T. (1992). *Reading for real: An intermediate reading text*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
23. Turkenik, C. (1995). *Choices: Writing projects for students of ESL*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
24. Watkins-Goffman, L., Goffman, R. & Velazquez, C.V. (1993). *Making your point: A process approach to argumentation*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
25. Weckler, C. (1995). *Study skills for academic success*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

\*The textbooks were surveyed by Mara Blake-Ward, Leslie Nabors, and Juran Yun—all students in the TESOL master's degree program at the Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania.

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