

The Importance of Using Authentic Materials in EFL Classes

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"Las ideas y conclusiones aportadas en la tesis de grado, son responsabilidad exclusiva del autor".

"Artículo 1 del Acuerdo No. 324 de octubre 11 de 1966, emanada del honorable consejo Directivo de la Universidad de Nariño".

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RESUMEN

La importancia del uso de materiales auténticos en clases de inglés donde este lenguaje es usado como una lengua extranjera se ha venido masificando en los últimos tiempos. El estudio del idioma en cuestión ha llegado a ser una parte muy importante en el mundo entero y San Juan de Pasto no es la excepción. Con la invención del internet, el uso del idioma inglés se ha incrementado en una manera significativa. De este modo en Pasto, la cual es una ciudad en la que se enseña el inglés como una lengua extranjera, los profesores un importante reto con el fin de enseñar este idioma de una forma natural y auténtica.

Los materiales auténticos para la enseñanza del inglés brindan a los profesores de este idioma, herramientas importantes que les permitirán llevar consigo lo que es más deseado por ellos y sus estudiantes, "lenguaje auténtico". Para aprovechar los beneficios que aportan estos materiales el profesor debe saber exactamente que hacer con ellos.

Una de las ventajas más importantes de estos materiales es su disponibilidad de este modo todo maestro alrededor del mundo puede hacer uso de ellos y así junto con los textos de inglés logra el objetivo perseguido por toda estudiante y profesor de idiomas, la comunicación fluida y auténtica.

ABSTRACT

The study of English language has become a very important part of life in the whole world and San Juan de Pasto is not the exception. With the invention of the internet, the use of English language has increased in a significant way. Chatting, sending emails, searching information are daily activities in almost all the world. In this way in Pasto, which is an English as a foreign language (EFL) setting, teachers, face an important challenge in order to teach English in a natural and authentic way. Authentic materials have emerged as very important tools in these last years in which teachers claim for authentic language in classroom interaction. In ELT field there are many references that can be found in relation to authentic materials and their importance in an English language environment. These references, books and journals, contain exhaustive information and explanations of why authentic materials should or not should be included in lessons, how can teachers make use of them and what the instructor can extract in order to satisfy the necessities that students possess.

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The study of English language has become a very important part of life in the whole world and San Juan de Pasto is not the exception. With the invention of the internet, the use of English language has increased in a significant way. Chatting, sending emails, searching information are daily activities in almost all the world. In this way in Pasto, which is an English as a foreign language (EFL) setting, teachers, face an important challenge in order to teach English in a natural and authentic way. The use of non-authentic materials "text-books" is a general rule in almost every institution in this city. Harmer (1991) explains that non-authentic materials are materials written especially for language students. He also adds that the artificial language used in non-authentic materials makes the language very different to the one they encounter in a real life situation. Consequently the study of authentic materials has become an important element of English language teaching (ELT). Nowadays, an important effort is made in order to implement discourse from real world in the language classroom environment to ensure that classroom content reflects the target situation (Johns, in Snow & Brimton, 1997). Richards (2001), cited by Carter and Nunan, pointing out the importance of authentic language through the use of authentic materials in the

classroom, states that the style of communication within the language classroom must be as close as possible to the style of communication that occurs in natural settings outside the classroom.

Unfortunately after trying to find important information about authentic materials in some libraries in Pasto, it was possible to realize that little attempts have been made in order to provide English teachers with the optimal knowledge about how to teach a foreign language in a natural and authentic way.

The present work will consider the relevance of authentic materials in the process of teaching and learning English as a foreign language. It will also supply teachers with important information in order to make their experiences in the classroom an enjoyable experience. The research paper is organized as follows: (a) authenticity, (b) authentic materials; (c) non-authentic materials, (d) kinds of authentic materials, (e) advantages and disadvantages of authentic materials, (f) selecting authentic materials, (g) using authentic materials and (h) authentic materials and E.L.T skills.

Authenticity

Authenticity is relatively, a new concept in language teaching. Therefore some attempts have been made to revise and

clarify the narrow perspective of this topic. In language teaching there is an especial effort to engage students in a meaningful use of language inside the classroom (Johns in Snow and Brinton, 1997). But, how can it be done? Because some ELT researchers believe that there is considerable confusion associated with the idea of authenticity, they consider that in numerous discussions is not evident when writers are dealing with authenticity of language, authenticity of task or authenticity of situation. In this case the idea of authenticity absolutely defined as an abstract concept once and for all, is not accepted among some scholars. Instead they recognize that authenticity is a function of the participants, the nature of the interaction, the language, the use, the setting and the interpretation the participants bring to both the setting and the activity (Tatzuki, 2006).

Cooperative learning, task based learning, content based learning and multiple intelligences have been taken as examples of language practice in ELT field which show the way to authentic interaction among students inside the classroom. These approaches also called integrated skill approaches were very important because they promoted authentic language, natural interaction, the richness and complexity of language and the learning of real content instead of language forms. Thus English

language had become a real way of interaction in the classroom and teachers could easier follow the progress of his/her students in their skills (Shomoossi and Ketabi, 2007). By the other hand, in the case of depending in one aspect of authenticity would not be enough for communicative purposes and as consequence problems would begin to appear. One of them could be reduction in learning performance and thereby communication, which is the most important feature when talking about language teaching, could reduce its valuable characteristics. For this reason researchers propose some criteria which help to clarify what authenticity means. First, the quality, the appropriateness, and naturalness of the language rather than the source and purpose of the sample should be taken into account. At the same time it is of great importance the teacher, the learners and the context. Second, how authentic can be the texts? Texts are considered textually authentic when they are produced to fulfill some social function in the language community in which they were written, instead of being written for teaching purposes. However the last definition is considered too broad even immaterial to language teaching by some authors (Martinez, 2002; Shomoossi and Ketabi, 2007). Third, Widowson (1978) established two different terms in language field genuineness and authenticity. The author distinguishes

genuineness as a characteristic of the text or the material itself and authenticity which refers to the uses to which texts are put. Thus a text can be genuine but authenticity can be created through the use the teacher makes of the material (Cook, 1989). Fourth reality and real-life; according to Tatzuki (2006), real-life is what students can find outside the classroom and for her reality is what can be imported into the classroom or what is called realia. In other words what make the activity inside the classroom real or unreal is the quality of the situation not the materials used. Fifth, the difference of authenticity of texts and authenticity of learner interpretation of materials used in the classroom; authenticity of text refers to tasks used for language learning and authenticity of learner's interpretation of materials refers to how authentic the social situation among students and the teacher is (Shomoossi and Ketabi, 2006). Sixth, learner authenticity which is a characteristic of students when learning English is possible only if they feel positive about materials the teacher expose to them, and react to them as pedagogically intended (Tatzuki, 2006).

Authentic Materials

Authentic materials have emerged as very important tools in these last years in which teachers claim for authentic language in classroom interaction. In ELT field there are many references that can be found in relation to authentic materials and their importance in an English language environment. These references, books and journals, contain exhaustive information and explanations of why authentic materials should or not should be included in lessons, how can teachers make use of them and what the instructor can extract in order to satisfy the necessities that students possess. In language teaching literature it is possible to find some definitions of authentic materials. Some authors define these elements as important e innovative elements that have been produced in the language community, in this case an English community, especially to fulfill some social purpose (Martinez, 2002). In other words Harmer (1991) defines authentic materials as materials that are designed for native speakers. He also emphasizes that they are real texts not for language students but for speakers of the language.

In relation to the purpose of authentic materials, Cook (1989) describes it as a "real purpose" like giving information about any kind of activities in a certain society. This

informative action could be as simple as a joke and as complicated as a newspaper. The availability of authentic materials is one of the most important characteristics because in this way teachers around the world can make use of them easily but which would be the advantage of authentic materials if teachers do not know exactly how to use them properly in order to bring to their students a real language. According to the question proposed above, Spelleri (2009) emphasizes that the comprehension of authentic materials is the main goal in English teaching today and additionally, she states that no matter who, where or at which level is the process of teaching, all of the students need and want to move from the protection of the E.S.L and E.F.L. textbook to a real situation of interaction with English native speakers. In consequence, it is very important to contemplate the way teachers will use authentic materials in order to improve their classes, engage students' attention and enjoy the process of teaching and learning. Some authors affirm that authentic materials complement English classes by enlivening the class and creating a more positive attitude towards learning. Spelleri (2009) admits that she never failed to notice a particularly engaged look in the students' eyes when they explore into authentic materials. She adds that they also hit the activities with pleasure.

When Sam Shepherd (2004), a teacher in New Zealand, comments that using authentic materials is one of the main supports of an imaginative and motivating higher level course, but rarely features at levels lower than intermediate, what he is saying is that authentic materials are difficult to use for beginners and that a kind of fear will panic students when faced with language that is very unfamiliar. On the contrary Ch. Kelly, L. Kelly, Offner and Vorland (2002) insist that authentic materials can be effectively used in the ESL classroom. Confirming what the authors say, Spelleri (2009) asserts that she did not have to wait until students were advance to use authentic materials in her classes and what is important at that point was careful selection and good planning of the material she was going to use in the classroom. In this way authentic materials would be materials that can be used in the classroom in a way similar to the one they were designed for; in fact many teachers around the world are using them in order to reach the main goal in an E.L.T. class which is "communication" (Widowson, 1990).

Non-authentic materials

Rodney Jones (1998), an E.S.L. teacher in China, from his own experience when teaching a group of young teachers of technical subject at Luoyang Institute of Technology, declares

that texts available were severely limited and most of the essays in the textbook, *English for today*, were neither relevant, nor challenging to the learners. He adds that texts the students had to deal with in their work and the topics they covered were remote and boring to these young men and women whose interests ran more toward contemporary issues, politics, economics and science. He reports that non authentic materials and the method used were clearly doing nothing for the student's proficiency as they hardly had any time to attend to meaning or speak spontaneously.

At the end of his experience, he adds that after dealing with those problems and as soon as the students were confronted with authentic materials and communicative tasks, they began to focus less on structures and vocabulary. He explains that because the texts contain idioms, slangs words and technical terms not included in their dictionaries, they had no choice but to make use of alternative reading strategies. And because the students had chosen the texts themselves, they were much more inclined to pay attention to the content.

From James' experience, it would be important to consider the roll of non authentic materials in E.L.T. Berardo (2006)

explains what non authentic materials are. In her own words she states that:

Non authentic materials are specially designed for language learning purposes. The language in non-authentic texts is artificial and unvaried, concentrating on something that has to be taught and often containing a series of "false text indicator" that include: (a) perfectly formed sentences (all the time); (b) a question using grammatical structure, gets a full answer; (c) repetition of structures very often does not "read" well.

The artificial nature of the language and structures used, make them very unlike anything that the learner will encounter in the real world and very often they do not reflect how the language is real used. (2006).

The author points out that the language is artificial, therefore, the student is going to have some problems when he/she faces a communicative real situation trying to practice what he/she has learnt in the classroom.

According to the Common European Framework, "The language learner is in the process of becoming a language user" and that "language in use varies greatly according to the requirements of

the context in which it is used, language is not a neutral instrument of thought like, say, mathematics." It is easy to realize that a language is not a static system of communication and that the learner takes an active role in this system in any situation in which he/she could be involved. It is at this moment in which authentic materials gains more importance in an EFL context because what teachers and students' desire is to face a real language not just false language structures. Authentic materials are produced for real life, for out-of-classroom context, with real language and by real speakers for a real audience (Harmer, 1991).

Kinds of authentic materials

Because authentic materials are easily found in any community around the world it is necessary to establish a specific organization in order to help teachers to find without difficulty what may serve as source material for lesson planning. Oura (2001) gives a tentative organization of authentic materials that EFL/ESL teachers can use in their classes.

1. Authentic Listening/ Viewing Materials: TV commercials, quiz shows, cartoons, news clips, comedy shows, movies,

- soap operas, professionally audio-taped short stories and novels, radio ads, songs, documentaries, and sales pitches.
2. Authentic Visual Materials: slides, photographs, paintings, children's artwork, stick-figure drawings, wordless street signs, silhouettes, pictures from magazines, ink blots, postcard pictures, wordless picture books, stamps, and X-rays.
 3. Authentic Printed Materials: newspaper articles, movie advertisements, astrology columns, sports reports, obituary columns, advice columns, lyrics to songs, restaurant menus, street signs, cereal boxes, candy wrappers, tourist information brochures, university catalogs, telephone books, maps, TV guides, comic books, greeting cards, grocery coupons, pins with messages, and bus schedules.
 4. Realia (Real world objects) Used in EFL/ ESL Classrooms: coins and currency, folded paper, wall clocks, phones, Halloween masks, dolls, and puppets, to name a few. (Realia are often used to illustrate points very visually or for role-play situations.)

Advantages and disadvantages of authentic materials

Researchers in E.L.T agree that authentic materials like other materials used to improve the quality of language teaching

in the classroom have advantages and disadvantages when using them.

In relation to the advantages of authentic materials some authors establish the following.

According to Martinez (2002) in non-authentic materials or textbooks incidental or improper English almost always is not included causing in language learners a false perspective of real language. By the other hand changes in English language could be reflected in authentic materials so that students and instructors both can understand them in the right way. Authentic materials can also bring enjoyable situations to the classroom because they contain topics of interest to students and they can also encourage reading for pleasure including a wide variety of text types and language styles not easily found in traditional teaching materials. When talking about skills these kinds of materials could be used to practicing mini-skills, such as scanning or micro-skills of listening, including listening to news reports and identifying the names of people or countries. The author also remarks that authentic materials are practical and real and have an intrinsic educational value because they provide valid linguistic data. Relative to practicality authentic materials have a very positive advantage because the

same piece of material could be used in a different way if the tasks are also different.

Probably the most important advantage according to some researchers it is what EFL students mainly need, exposure to real and authentic world intercultural discourse. They include contextualized language learning through the use of resources and activities the instructor can use inside the classroom (Kilickaya, 2008).

Similarly Kelly, Kelly, Offner and Vorland cited by Su-chin (2009) when using authentic materials they realized that these materials increase students' comprehension skills and oral and written performance. They also appreciate that authentic materials enliven the EFL class exposing students to cultural features and generating a deeper understanding and interest in the topic. The authors establish four points in relation to the advantages when using authentic materials. They say that authentic materials (a) give the students the opportunity to practice English, (b) help the students gain confidence in their English ability, (c) expose the students to cultural differences and customs, and (d) help the students develop their ability to find pertinent information quickly.

By the other hand Su-chin (2009) citing ELT authors establishes some advantages for authentic materials. She argues that applying authentic materials in the classroom teachers can stimulate the process of natural language acquisition. Thus providing students with an interesting opportunity to transmit authentic cultural information, and promoting among them communication and understanding across culture. In this way authentic materials become a bridge between classroom and real world introducing life-like scenarios into the classroom as a result facilitating cultural adaptation, language comprehension and language use. Authentic materials can also have a positive effect on increasing students' motivation in all levels of a language teaching environment because they are mostly realistic, ready-to-use and relevant. In essence these materials can easily lower the degree of anxiety when students face new situations in using the target language.

Authors have also noted that authentic materials have some disadvantages when making use of them. Researchers argue that authentic materials are difficult for lower level students because they could have a hard time when facing difficult and unneeded vocabulary which might not fit the students immediate needs. Also beginners can have problems with grammar accompanied with too many structures when decoding texts and they could

become less motivated. Martinez (2002) establishes that authentic materials are too culturally biased and they can force students when reading to focus on the code. For teachers when preparing a class presentation with authentic materials can be time consuming if special preparation is needed, the investment of time might not be possible. When listening to recordings of English speakers, students might encounter many different accents which can make the experience for the student really hard. In order to prepare an authentic class some teachers face difficulties finding suitable authentic materials and create their own communicative activities. Teachers also report some students' critics to authentic environment related to non academic and time wasting experiences (Kilickaya, 2008).

Finally Su-chin (2009), citing Dumitrescu, highlights the wide range of contents because if they are not accompanied by textual aids they might be too challenging and discourage some students especially if they are beginners. The big amount of unfamiliar words, phrases and idioms would not make the teaching process easy in the classroom.

Selecting authentic materials

When selecting authentic materials for using them in the classroom is very important that the teacher have some specific

parameters in order to avoid an inconvenient situation. Cook (1981) suggests four parameters that can be useful in a teaching situation with authentic materials.

The first criterion is motivation. She says that the materials should be motivating and the activities that could be done with them should be also motivating. The second criterion is timeless quality. Authentic materials should not be too ephemeral. The teacher has to use things which are as up-to-date as possible, because if they are already of historical interest, there seems little point in using them. The third criterion is organization. The author argues that authentic materials have to be organized in some way and the obvious way to make a link is through themes. She adds that there is nothing worse than entirely disconnected bits of authentic language that are not linked to other aspects of the teaching. The fourth criterion is language and content. Taking into account that everything a native speaker says is by definition authentic, it seems a contradiction to censor what the speaker says. But there are many things native speakers say that are useless in a classroom. Some topics can also be objectionable in a teaching context like sexist or racist materials as authentic as they are.

For some authors, the most important reason for using authentic materials when teaching a language is making the student to get closer to its speakers, to understand them better and take part in their culture. To do this possible the teacher must increment motivation and interest in the student for learning the language Cook (1981). Therefore at this point of the discussion relevance of a creative teacher emerges. A creative teacher is defined by Homolova (2004) as a person who is able to use new unusual approaches, methods and materials in a professional and clever way. For this reason is imperative the teacher knows and understand what authentic materials are. Kilickaya (2008) in his own words establishes that most of the teachers throughout the world agree that authentic materials or texts are beneficial to the language learning process, but what is less agreed is when authentic materials should be introduced and how they should be used in an E.F.L. classroom. Therefore teachers have to learn how to apply authentic materials properly. The key to using authentic materials successfully is to not feel obligated to use them in the manner intended (Spelleri, 2009).

The use of authentic materials

From their own experience using authentic materials Ch. Kelly, L. Kelly, Offner and Vorland (2002), explains how a teacher can use those materials accurately. They say that is important to have an extensive collection of materials that include menus, maps, newspaper inserts, store advertisements, travel brochures, catalogs, phonebooks, real state pamphlets, and various pamphlets of sightseeing and tourist information. Authors also say that using a set of materials is particularly appealing. A set, they clarify, could include a map, a travel guide, a menu, a store advertisement from the same town, all of which are combined to immerse the student in a multidimensional English experience. Ch. Kelly et al give some suggestions when preparing a class using authentic materials: a) make sure that you have enough copies of the materials to be used, so that each student or pair of students can have a copy to use it, b) not to use material with too many pages, unless the pages are clearly numbered for easy reference; c) use hardy enough materials if you plan to use the same materials in more than one class, d) materials should be easily refolded and put back together, e) avoid materials with multiple pieces or pages, f) avoid material that could be easily old-fashioned, g) choose materials that are

appropriate for the students' level, and h) make certain amount of adjustments depending on the level of the class.

The authors explain how they use authentic materials successfully through years of experience in a learning environment. They report that at the beginning of their experience with authentic materials they began to handing out materials to each student and students have to work individually. But thorough years of experience teachers have realized that pair work is a better idea because students tend to work harder and be more enthusiastic. They gave each couple the authentic materials and a question hand out. What they noted more interesting was that students with more knowledge in English language was not necessarily the one who was able to deal with material in a better way. They also saw that students with different abilities tended to complement one another and contribute with individual strengths to complete the task in a successful way. To maintains students focused on the completion of the activity they declare that students were asked to give back the question handouts. The authors also state that teachers' personal anecdotes and other background information should be given to the students when they begin concentration on the materials. After the distribution of authentic materials teachers must give a brief explanation and indicate that some

important parts of the material like tables of content or a legend in a map must be taken into account. Additionally authors say that at this time difficult words, expressions, abbreviations and measures must be explained clearly. While students are working on the assignment, the teacher can help them by answering questions and commenting students' work. Teachers can also give hints to those students stuck on a particular question. When the time is finished teacher collects the material with the question handout and analyze the difficult questions with the class.

In relation to the question handout, they suggest, in order to authentic materials be effective, the questions must be well constructed to give students opportunity to practice English, help them gain confidence in their English ability, expose the students to culture differences and customs, and help students develop their ability to find pertinent information quickly.

They also divided the question handout in three main parts: the first part a tour question which contains easy multiple choice questions in order to the students gain an overview of the materials and confidence. The second part should contain cultural questions, these questions often lead to lively discussing because students must agree on what answer to write

and the third part should have more challenging and time consuming questions to enhance comparison in students' progress and students' critical thinking.

Authentic materials and E.L.T skills

"Because a student can utter a lot of sentences in a foreign language is not guarantee that he will understand them in the mouth of a native speaker" (Belasco in Herschenhorn, 1979). In essence the author emphasizes the unrestricted importance of real-life language in real-life situations inside the E.F.L. classroom. The student must practice the language in a wide range of contexts to develop functional competence (Musumeci, 1997). Therefore, from Musumeci's words it can be established that all skills must be practice appropriately in the classroom coupled with authentic materials in order to acquire what she calls functional competence. One of the meaningful benefits of authentic materials is the wide range of applicability related to language teaching. Listening, Speaking, reading, writing, pronunciation and more subjects related to the study of language can be influenced by authentic materials. Consequently, Berardo (2006) states that this kind of materials give the reader the opportunity to gain real information about what is happening in the real world and can proof that authentic language is used

daily for real life purposes by real people. Even though in this era of electronic communication people are less and less called upon to composed, Berardo (2006) maintains that for educational purposes authentic materials would stimulate writing because in school, writing is a way of life. On the other hand most teachers succumb to the temptation to do disconnected little grammar exercises going around the room calling on students one by one to pick the right answer. This repetitive condition, as Brown (2001) indicates, easily can change with the help of an authentic storehouse of teacher resource material. Even reiterative exercises can be structured to provide a sense of authenticity. In the case of listening, Ur (1996) refutes the idea of basing listening exercises mainly on passages that are read aloud and followed by comprehension questions, when, as he says, almost everybody know that very little of the discourse that people hear in real life is not read aloud and people do not normally respond by answering comprehension questions. Teaching pronunciation commercially produced materials to provide excellent sources for the presentation and practice of segmental and supra segmental features. Nevertheless, teachers should not overlook the rich sources available through the use of authentic materials, such as anecdotes, passages from literature, jokes, advertising copy, comic strips, and the like

(Celce-Murcia and Brinton-Goodwin, 1996). Finally, in relation to assessment, Bachman and Palmer (1996) define authenticity as the degree of correspondence of the characteristics of a given language to the features of target language task, thus when a teacher says that a certain task is authentic, he/she is saying that this task is likely to be ratified in the real world. The authors suggest the following points to ensure authenticity in a test: (a) the language in a test is as natural as possible; (b) items are contextualized rather than isolated; (c) some thematic organization to items is provided, such as through story line or episode; (d) tasks represent, or closely approximate, real world tasks.

The present research paper has tried to analyze most of implications of authenticity and the application of authentic materials in an E.F.L. setting. Also, how important would be for an English teacher to comprehend what authentic materials are and what kinds he /she has at hand to improve his/her classes , especially the adequate use of authentic materials in order to bring a highly motivating feeling to the students when facing a real language situation. Another important feature considered for English teachers in an E.F.L. environment is providing less experienced teachers with the opportunity to present teaching materials in a different and effective way, encouraging in this

way the most important characteristic in an E.F.L. class
"communication".

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