

AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN TEACHING ENGLISH: A RECONSIDERATION OF EXISTING DEFINITIONS

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ABSTRACT

The use of authentic materials in EFL has long been acknowledged to be advantageous to learners as they provide real-life experience in the language classroom. However, many of the existing definitions which most teachers are utilizing to select appropriate teaching resources present a strong bias toward the notion of “native speakers’ production”. This brief paper aims to call for reconsideration of defining “authentic materials” by pointing out that the English language no longer belongs to the so-called “native speakers”, stating the fact that a growing number of non-native speakers are using it to communicate purposefully every day. It is argued that the language that those speaking English as their second or foreign language create can perfectly be employed as teaching materials in EFL/ESL classrooms because such language presents real communication among English language users in the 21st century whether they speak it as their mother tongue or not. By discussing those points, the paper goes on to recommend a theoretical framework on which more suitable criteria for choosing authentic materials can be built on to conform with the teaching context of this century.

Keywords: authentic; material; native; non-native; production

INTRODUCTION

The use of authentic materials in the language classroom has been widely considered to be beneficial to the language learners in different aspects. Efforts have been made in investigating the advantages that the authenticity of language materials may bring and positive results have been reported. Harmer (1994) states that authentic materials can provide great benefits to learners in the production and acquisition of language with a boost in their confidence in real-life use. Additionally, Peacock (1997) claims that learners’ levels of on-task behavior, concentration and involvement can be increased by using authentic materials greater than employing artificial ones.

Placing too much emphasis on the characteristic of authenticity in choosing teaching materials, some researchers and teachers, however, tend to take the authority of native speakers in the production of the selected materials for granted. Accordingly, they avoid employing those not produced by native speakers in their research and teaching practice.

This paper, which attempts to recommend a more balanced perspective on this issue, is going to examine some definitions of authentic materials before discussing the notion of native speakers within the dramatic popularity of the English language worldwide in this 21st century. Furthermore, it argues over the belief that materials can only be produced by the native speakers of English, and makes endeavor to complement existing definitions to harmonize with this current century teaching context to eventually recommend some principles which can be employed for choosing teaching resources.

DEFINITIONS OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS: THE COMMON BELIEF

The definition that can cover virtually all aspects of authentic materials is still debatable among methodologists (Rahman, 2014). Many researchers and practitioners have, through their teaching and researching experience, provided different definitions on what can be classified as “authentic materials”.

Morrow (1977) states, “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 sort.” Cook (1981) defines those as real examples of language produced by native speakers. Harmer (1994), in his influential *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, stresses on the realness of certain materials by stating that authentic materials are those written for native speakers of the language with the real purpose. Similarly, Bacon and Finnemann (1990) also provided a definition putting emphasis on the production of and the intention for native speakers. Sanderson (1999), while maintaining an analogous viewpoint in understanding this kind of materials, claims that a newspaper article written for a native-English-speaking audience is a very classic example in this. More recently, Kilickaya (2004) stresses on the “exposure to the real usage of the everyday life language” and how the materials are used by native speakers for their own purposes in daily life.

It can easily be understood from the presented viewpoints of classifying what are authentic materials and what are not that, together with the omission of the pedagogical purposes in adapting the materials, those authors seem to overemphasize on the existence of what is indicated as “the production by native speakers”. These many cited definitions have presented a prevailing belief among English language teachers that only native-speaker-produced materials can be of satisfactory quality to be utilized as authentic materials. Whether or not this belief is appropriate in the dramatically changing context of English language teaching in this century is still to be discussed. The consequence, however, has arisen with some researchers employing only definitions that indicate the native-produced materials in their practice. Murray (2015), in his research on the attitudes and perceptions of teachers in using authentic materials, only adopts the definitions provided by those who differentiate the materials produced by native speakers. Akbari and Razavi (2016), while examining how EFL teachers view the employment of such materials in language classrooms in Iran, assume the definition which recognizes native speakers as the producers of the used text while other definitions does not.

It can be seen that the prevalent view in defining authentic materials has unconditionally adopted the arguable notion of “native speakers of English”, though with overemphasis, as a key factor in choosing authentic materials.

NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH: A CHANGING VIEW

The world is changing in a way that globalization is happening in every corner with profound effects, especially in the language people use. It is an incontrovertible fact that an enormous number of people here and there are learning English as a means to communicate with each other. Affected by this plain fact, the notion of native speakers of English is arguable changing in a more diverse way.

English is, beyond any doubt, the most common language in the world. The British Council (2013) reports that one in every four people worldwide speaks English, that is to say approximately 1.75 billion people around the globe use the language. It is the primary language of the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Ireland and New Zealand as well as many other small islands. English has also achieved the status of the global lingua franca, making it the first choice of foreign language in countries where it is not officially spoken (*Encyclopædia Britannica* online, n.d.). More widely used than ever, English now is not limited to everyday use in the mass media (newspapers, TV programs, magazines) or social interaction of its native speakers anymore. People whose first language is not English are beginning to use it for their various purposes, including touring, doing business, studying and

more. More than 70 countries employ English as the language of higher education with courses offered in English (North Carolina State University, n.d.).

It can be here inferred that countless texts, including lectures, business correspondence, contracts, announcements, assignments, discussion posts and many others are written in English by non-native speakers with very real purposes, which greatly contribute to the diversity of English language. Nault (2006) claims that many learners who learn English as a foreign language use it to communicate with non-natives. This means those people are producing real language materials that satisfy the level of effective communication every moment that they use English. The deep-seated belief of the authority of native English speakers, therefore, should need to be questioned. Regmi (2011) claims that if English language is made to be an international language in all respects, the notion of “native speakers” must be left behind. Zohrabi and Shah (2009) state that English should belong to those who use it to accomplish their personal goals, and therefore English should belong to the whole world, not only to some specific countries.

Arguments may arise that the context of global communication in this 21st century is changing in such a way that English is now spoken by many people of other languages, who produced real-purpose texts as well. The notion of English native speakers, therefore, should be reconsidered as English should not be the property of any certain people.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It cannot be denied that the advantages which authentic materials can bring is significant in getting English learners exposed to the real use of the language. Consequently, providing a definition on which the criteria for selecting the most suitable and effective materials can be constructed and developed is excessively crucial. However, there are still so many issues to consider and being too biased and over-serious about the production of what can be considered authentic materials may lead to the ignorance of a colossal amount of available data produced by the non-native but real speakers of English.

In the changing world of communication, information, cultural values and virtually every other thing, people are beginning to communicate using the same languages, especially English. Materials in English are not only created by native English speakers but also from those who are learning and using it every day. Those coming from the United States or Australia speak English with those from Vietnam, Japan or Greece, and they all accomplish complete understanding. Recordings of the conversations produced by those people can be perfectly employed as teaching material in an English classroom. Likewise, an email and its response between a Korean CEO and a Russian counterpart written in English, on condition that the two fully understand each other, can be a great sample in teaching English writing skills. Learners of English can benefit from those materials as much as from those produced only by native English speakers without the fear that they will learn the “wrong language” as those learners will eventually become the real speakers of this ever-evolving language.

English teachers, therefore, should put more emphasis on the pedagogical purpose when selecting teaching resources. The following questions may possibly help if satisfactorily answered in the choosing-process:

- a. Was the material created for a real purpose of communication?
- b. Is the material correct in terms of lexical resource and grammar?
- c. Does the material appropriately serve the teaching purpose?
- d. Should any modification be required?

In conclusion, it can be argued that the definition of authentic materials, while attempting to set ground for English teachers to develop their own criteria for choosing what is best to use, needs to become more flexible in a way that the changing environment of language use in the 21st century should be taken into

account. The assumption of “native speakers” should be understood differently and all those who use English for real communication purposes should have the authority in creating materials that can be employed as “authentic” in the English classroom.

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