Authentic Materials and Their Impacts on L2 Learning

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Abstract
This article discusses an acknowledged definition of authentic materials and points out the effects of using them in learning a second language (L2). Many academics have purported the use of authentic materials in the L2 classroom as they are intrinsically more interesting or stimulating than artificial or non-authentic materials. This assertion, however, may not be sufficiently proven in practice. In fact, there is evidence that authentic materials could reduce the levels of learner interest, subject to the specific characteristics of materials employed and that they are not necessarily more interesting. Therefore, it is important that materials chosen for the classroom stimulate learners and this ramification on motivation should be one norm for the selection of materials to be utilised.

Getting to know authentic materials
How are authentic materials defined? According to Little et al. (1989) authentic materials are ones that are produced to fulfill some social purpose in the language community – that is, materials not produced for second language learners. Some plain examples of authentic materials are newspapers, songs, and poems. Other forms of publications or media such as television listings, articles, advice columns, and newspaper and magazine advertisements are also considered realia.

Introduction
Many ESL and EFL writers asserted that authentic materials inspire learners as they are inherently more motivating or interesting than non-authentic materials (materials developed particularly for language learners). Some advocates of this observation encompass Freeman and
Holden (1986), Swaffar (1985), and King (1990). Nevertheless, a few authors point out that authentic materials could reduce learner motivation because they are too difficult (Williams, 1983, Morrison, 1989 and Gilmore, 2007).

Some previous research studies

Some experimental research studies have been conducted to address the question of learner motivation from authentic materials. Gonzalez (1990) undertook research into the effect of authentic materials on learners’ attitude, motivation, and culture and language achievement. 43 students who studied Spanish as a foreign language participated in this study. Based on the findings, no statistically significant difference in motivation was found when realia were employed. Nonetheless, some comments in teaching logs used indicated that learners reacted somewhat positively to their use.

In another study, Kienbaum et al. (1986) researched the effectiveness of traditional second language learning using grammar-translation methods and texts, compared with the communicative approach using authentic materials. Both the linguistic progress and attitudes of participants were examined. Informants were 29 American college students studying German or French as a foreign language over 30 weeks. It was reported that no statistically significant differences between the control and experimental groups were detected. However, it was noted that all students were keen about and very well-motivated by the use of realia. Though questioned about its content validity of some of the items in the instrument used, the study accounts for the conclusion which recommends the use of authentic materials in college foreign language classes. The communicative teaching approach used with the realia was not referred to though as to what extent it was positive or negative to language learning. It is possible that the approving learner responses reflect the effects of the use of authentic materials to an undetermined degree.

In a more recent study, Peacock (1997) aimed to test the experimental hypotheses, which predicted that when authentic materials were used, levels of on-task behavior, observed motivation, and self-reported motivation would increase significantly. The participants in this study were Korean beginner-level students studying English at a university EFL institute. They were divided into two groups. One group/class contained 15 subjects, and the other 16. Both
groups were taught by the same teacher, doing similar activities, but with a different type of material. Both artificial and authentic materials were used alternately (artificial materials one day and authentic materials the next) as coursebook supplements with both two groups in experiment. There was no control group as the study focus was on the different materials in use at the time rather than differences between two groups. The results showed that authentic materials significantly increased learner on-task behavior and overall class motivation. With regard to self-reported learner motivation, there was no significant difference when learners used authentic materials. A very interesting and useful finding was that individual item analysis of the learners’ questionnaires (item 1: how boring or interesting are authentic and artificial materials?) for self-reported learner motivation revealed that learners found authentic materials to be considerably less interesting than artificial.

Conclusion

Based on the presented views about authentic materials and the literature on impacts of authentic materials on L2 learning, it is recommended that teachers of beginning to advanced EFL learners try appropriate authentic materials in their classroom, as they are likely to increase their learners’ levels of on-task behavior, attentiveness, and participation in the target activity more than artificial materials. However, it is to be borne that authentic materials may lessen the intensity of learner interest engendered by the materials used.

As one of Peacock’s (1997) findings signifies, learners in his study found authentic materials to be significantly less interesting than artificial counterparts. This stands in contrast to the large number of assertions to the effect that authentic materials are more motivating as they are more interesting. Thus, it may not be the case that realia are always more interesting. By and large, learners are usually more motivated by authentic materials, but not necessarily because they are more interesting.

Also, interest in the materials in use appears to be quite separate as a component of motivation from levels of attention or action and persistence with the learning task. As can be observed, almost all of the authors who assert that authentic materials motivate learners better rarely make this distinction between separate elements of classroom motivation. It is therefore
suggested that in classroom motivation research, treating interest in the materials in use and levels of attention and persistence with the task under study as separate components of motivation would result in a clearer insight into the meaning of the construct "motivation". Moreover, by doing this, a more precise image of the effects of different materials on learner behavior in the classroom can be illuminated.

Last but not least, further quantitative as well as qualitative research into this area of investigation with both homogenous and heterogeneous groups of learners could indisputably help pave the way for discovering and recognizing the effect of authentic materials on second language acquisition.

References


