



# The Role of Authentic Materials in the English Language Classroom

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## Abstract

There are five pillars of education: the teacher, the taught, teaching materials, teaching methodologies, and testing procedures. These pillars are interdependent, and together, they serve the purpose of the education system. One of the pillars is the teaching materials, without it, the education system would collapse, so the focus of the present paper is on teaching materials, especially, authentic materials. In the beginning, it is discussed why teachers are highly dependent on textbooks, and how it is affecting the current education system. Further, it explores how authentic materials are created and implemented in English language classrooms.

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## Introduction

*"The textbook is, in fact, the heart of the school and without the ubiquitous text there would be no schools, at least as we know them."* (Ian Westbury, cited in Oakes & Saunders, 2004) They are at the heart of educational enterprise as they offer students "a rich array of new and potentially interesting facts and open the door to a world of a fantastic experience." Textbooks are considered key components in language programs. It is a medium through which Curriculum aims and objectives are achieved. They help teachers in teaching by supplementing teachers' instruction, and training inexperienced teachers in planning and executing lessons in the classroom. However, it is observed that most teachers have become text-dependant. They restrict their interaction to the content between the two covers of the textbook, yet their text dependence is justifiable. The examination system is the main determinant. It is the engine which pulls everything else. It determines the way teachers deliver their goods in the classroom. It influences the way students study because parents are interested in high scores in the examination. They want

their children to be eligible for admission to engineering or medicine. Therefore, they are not interested in the development of the language skills and linguistic creativity of their children. Consequently, students aim at obtaining higher grades or percentages. Keeping in view this goal, they resort to rote memorization. Administrators, such as principals, aim at excellent results so that their schools would gain popularity. The parents, administrators and students expect teachers to help the students score excellent marks in the examination. As a result, the teacher has neither the freedom nor the will to cross the limits of the textbook. The textbook becomes a course book and a force-book. It never becomes a source-book or a resource-book. Teachers and students look upon the prescribed text as a holy book. Quite often the human players (teachers, parents, students, administrators, evaluators) look upon deviations from the textbook as sins. They religiously follow the contents of the textbook.

## Making of Authentic Materials

Textbooks are considered the main source books, but they cannot cater to the needs of all learners. Teachers look for supplementary



materials to fulfill the needs of the learners. It is considered that the supplementary materials teachers use in the classroom should be authentic. Authentic material, according to Widdowson, is a material designed for native speakers of English used in the classroom in a way similar to the one it was designed for (Widdowson 1990). For example, a teacher wants to teach the topic 'pollution' in a classroom. The teacher can use a radio news report on 'Pollution' and allow the students to discuss the topic by giving examples of their city. Teachers can use newspapers, magazines, radio, television, etc. as authentic materials.

While selecting authentic materials, teachers should know the criteria for selecting them. After going through the opinions of many language scholars, we get the following criteria for selecting authentic material;

**Needs:** authentic material should satisfy the needs of the learners. Needs may vary according to the age and socio-economic background of the learner, so one has to take care of these factors while selecting the material.

**Real language use:** the language used in the authentic material should be related to day-to-day life. Learners should feel that they are learning something useful.

**Motivation:** motivation, according to Crookes and Schmidt,(1991: 498-502): interest in and enthusiasm for the materials used in class; persistence with the learning task, as indicated by levels of attention or action for an extended duration; and levels of concentration and enjoyment. It is important to keep students motivated throughout. Only using prescribed text books, teachers may not keep students motivated all the time. However, authentic materials can increase the level of concentration and enjoyment, and keep them motivated.

**Cultural:** learning a language is not merely learning grammatical rules, vocabulary items and pronunciation of these items, but knowing the underlying culture of the language to get the meaning across. Cultural content provides exposure to a living language that foreign language students lack. Culture is not something consisting of facts to

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be learned, but a helpful tool to make learners feel the need to speak and use the target language. Learning about a culture does not mean accepting that culture. It is highly desirable that the role of culture in materials is just to create learner's interest towards contents and language.

Finally, it can be said that using authentic materials is a relatively easy and convenient way of improving not only learners' general skills but also their confidence in real-life situations.

### **Using Authentic Material in the English Classroom**

A textbook is a fabricated teaching material. It is designed with a view to teaching and learning. The one-act-plays, stories and essays included in a textbook may be authentic materials. In other words, poets, story writers and playwrights do not write creative literature for classroom teaching. Textbook writers use their creative writing for language teaching. That is why a poem, a story or a one-act-play have questions set on it. A textbook may have pre-reading, while reading and post reading, comprehension questions, grammar, and vocabulary exercises and so on. Sometimes textbook writers create stories, conversations, etc. for language teaching. Such purposefully created materials (cannot help being artificial and fabricated) are artificial or fabricated materials. On the other hand, newspapers, radio news bulletins, movies, TV serials, documentaries, animated stories, and animated cartoon films are authentic materials. Similarly, crossword puzzles, letters to editors, jokes, folk stories, anecdotes, newspaper cartoon strips, English songs, etc. are authentic materials. In short, the difference between authentic and fabricated materials can be described in the following way. Authentic materials are real life speeches, writings and use of language in social cultural and interpersonal contexts. These materials do not have a teaching purpose. On the other hand, materials which have teaching and learning as goals are fabricated materials. Let me illustrate this point at length with the help of a poem and a cartoon. First let's have the poetic illustration. When God at first met man

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Having a glass of blessings standing by  
Let's, said he, pour on him all we can  
Let the world's riches, which dispersed lie  
Contract into a span

So, strength first made way  
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honour,  
pleasure  
When almost all was out, God made a stay  
Perceiving that alone of all his treasure  
*Rest* in the bottom lay

For if I should, said he  
Bestow this jewel also on my creature  
He may adore my gifts, instead of me  
And *rest* in Nature, not the God of nature  
So both should losers be

Yet let him keep the *rest*  
But keep them with repining restlessness  
Let him be rich but weary, that at least  
If goodness lead him not  
Weariness may toss him to my breast.  
.....George Herbert

In this poem George Herbert plays with the word 'rest'. Let us note that Herbert did not write this poem for classroom teaching. He wrote it because he was inspired and because he could not probably control the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity. A text book writer may fabricate a passage or a nursery rhyme in which S/he may use the word 'rest'. S/he may do so with a view to deliberately contextualizing the word 'rest' so that the three meanings of that word become clear to the language learner. Thus, there are two ways of teaching language: (1) deliberate contextualization of linguistic items to teach language, (2) authentic and unintentional

contextualization of language items to teach language. The latter refers to authentic materials. Thus, the teacher may highlight the three different usage of the word *rest* (peace of mind; relax and forget; remaining gifts).

The teacher may use the following cartoon by R.K. Laxman to bring home the fact that many words have several meanings. Once an interview was in progress. It was an interview for the post of a teacher of English. As soon as the candidate entered the hall, one of the interviewers requested the candidate to draw a chair and be comfortable. Surprisingly, the applicant did not know the various meanings of the word 'draw': draw water from a well, draw money from a bank, draw a line, draw a curtain, etc. he knew only one of these several meanings and that was 'draw a picture'. Therefore, he picked up a piece of chalk and drew a picture of a chair on the floor and sat down. The interviewers were surprised. Understandably, the candidate could not get the position.

Thus, the materials which were originally produced for purposes other than teaching can be exploited with the view to teaching the English language.

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