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Exploiting authentic texts in the language classroom

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Technology has overwhelmed us with choices, ‘impelling the issue of authenticity of texts and interactions to the fore in language pedagogy’ (Mishan 2005: ix).

A working definition of authenticity...

‘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: 13).

Outline

- Reasons for using authentic materials
- Guidelines for selection and exploitation of authentic materials
- ‘Hands on’ practice of materials design

Why not just use textbooks?

Many advantages to well-written textbooks:

- Save teachers time which would otherwise be spent locating, preparing, photocopying & distributing materials.
- Can provide a package of materials: textbook, workbook, teacher's book, resource book, tests, class CD/DVD, online interactive activities.
- Have a supportive & educational role for inexperienced teachers (language awareness, materials design, etc.)
- Often have attractive layout with colour images.

Why use authentic materials?

- (i) Ease of access: Technological advances have provided (EFL) teachers & students with easy access to authentic materials via the Web.

Why use authentic materials?

(ii) Textbooks produced for the international market often fail to address local needs & interests:

KK: We used the Inside English worked on Section 3, Dancing... It seemed that most class mate weren't interested in this topic. Class was almost dead. It was very sleepy class.

NI: Topic about dance was not interesting for me. Most of Japanese don't always dance. Also my partner and I don't dance. Therefore there isn't nothing to speak and we couldn't have a lively conversation.

(Gilmore 2007b: 58)

Why use authentic materials?

(iii) Internationally marketed textbooks tend to be bland & sanitised in the interests of sales:

Textbooks often present a world to students which is 'safe, clean, harmonious, benevolent, undisturbed, and PG-rated' (Wajnryb 1996: 1)

Why use authentic materials?

- (iv) Authentic materials are more likely to connect with learners' (*and* teachers') emotions or imaginations, leading to sustained deep learning (SDL).



Schumann's (1997) stimulus appraisal system:

- Novelty
- Pleasantness
- Goal/need significance

Why use authentic materials?

(v) Authentic materials often provide *richer input* which can:

- More effectively meet the varying interlanguage needs of learners.
- Develop a range of *communicative competences*.

The communicative competence model

Linguistic competence: Lexical, syntactical & phonological knowledge.

Pragmalinguistic competence: A knowledge of how to convey communicative intent appropriately in a given context (e.g. register, speech acts).

Sociopragmatic competence: A knowledge of what is socially or culturally appropriate in a given speech community (e.g. social conventions, taboo topics, non-verbal communication).

Strategic competence: A knowledge of verbal or non-verbal strategies for conversational repair (e.g. hesitation & circumlocution strategies).

Discourse competence: A knowledge of how to produce unified, cohesive & coherent discourse in different genres (e.g. anaphoric reference, letter layout, topic shading in conversation). (Gilmore 2007a; 2011)

Guidelines for selecting authentic materials

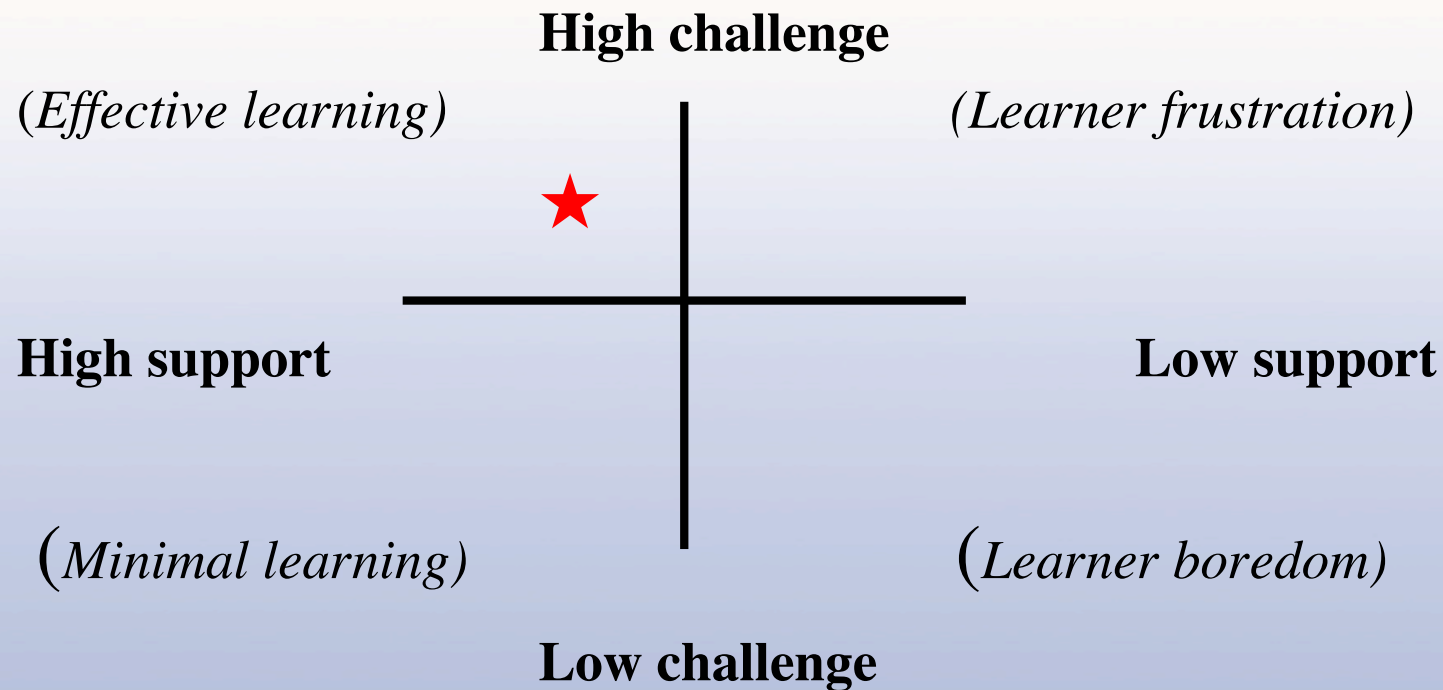
- Choose interesting texts.
- Identify & meet learners' needs (needs analysis?).
- Provide learners with a variety of topics & tasks.
- Choose materials which can develop a range of communicative competences.
- Select texts of appropriate difficulty (see next slide).
- Use audio-visual materials as well as more traditional audio-only or text-only input.
- Select texts which can 'stand alone' in the class.
- Provide transcripts for spoken input.
- Select materials which can stand the test of time.

Factors influencing text difficulty

- Text length
- Lexical density ($LD = L/T \times 100$)
- Type-Token ratio ($TTR = \text{Types}/\text{Tokens} \times 100$)
- Proportion of low vs. high frequency vocabulary (e.g. Nation's Range Program)
- Grammatical or syntactical complexity
- Text genre (static vs. dynamic; concrete vs. abstract)
- Number of elements present (characters or events) & ease with which they can be distinguished from each other
- Assumed background knowledge
- Speech rates (Normal = 150 w.p.m.)
- Type & variety of accents
- Amount of visual support offered (Gilmore 2007a; 2009)

Developing tasks for authentic materials

- Ensure success by selecting texts & tasks which provide appropriate levels of challenge & support



(Mariani 1997: 4)

Developing tasks for authentic materials

- **Pre-listening/reading tasks:** stimulate interest; clarify difficult vocabulary; provide background information to facilitate comprehension.
- **While-listening/reading tasks:** focus on meaning before shifting to form, to avoid overloading learners' language processing systems; gist tasks precede intensive tasks.
- **Post-listening/reading tasks:** 'Revisit' material from a new perspective (recycling lexis; focusing on target discourse features; extending into speaking or writing skills activities).

Developing tasks for authentic materials

The text itself suggests the task:

- Meaning focus: What meanings would a native speaker extract from the text?
- Form focus: What discourse features are highlighted in the text? (Often become apparent in the intensive work of transcription).

Developing tasks for authentic materials

- Vary task design to encourage accuracy, fluency or complexity.

Preparation time & task repetition affect the accuracy, fluency & complexity of learners' output (e.g. increasing preparation time encourages greater complexity; decreasing preparation time encourages greater fluency).
(Skehan 1998; Bygate, Skehan & Swain 2001)

- See also Sinclair's 'Idiom Principle' vs. 'Open Choice Principle' (e.g. Sinclair 1991)

Today's Task

- In groups of 3 or 4, choose one of the following authentic texts and work together to design a set of pre-, while, & post-activities for Intermediate/Upper-Intermediate level 1st year university students. Justify your design choices.
- CUP prizes for the winning group!!!

1. Secrets & Lies (Mike Leigh)



Hortense, a young black woman who was adopted as a child, visits a social worker, Jenny, to begin the process of tracking down her real mother...



2. My Secret Life: Mark Watson

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/>

My Secret Life: Mark Watson, comedian, 31

Interview by Holly Williams, Saturday, 16 April 2011

1 **A life in brief...** Mark Watson was born in Bristol in 1980. He studied at Cambridge, and has
2 regularly appeared at the Edinburgh Fringe, on radio and TV, including hosting the panel
3 show Mark Watson Kicks Off. Watson is Chairman of Respect FC, aiming to unite fans and
4 players against the ugly side of football (respectfootballclub.com). He is the author of four
5 books; his novel Eleven is out in June, when he also embarks on a country-wide Request
6 Stops stand-up tour. Watson lives in London with his wife and son.
7 **My parents are...** one of the most steady forces in my life.



8 I'm the first-born son, so I had the status of golden boy –
9 well, my siblings certainly thought so. Fortunately we are
10 quite a cynical family, so they are gently mocking in a way
11 parents should be.
12 **The house/flat I grew up in...** was in Shirehampton in
13 Bristol. We had a really big garden which me and my
14 brother almost believed was an all purpose sports stage.
15 I'm slightly resentful that whoever lives there won't be
16 using it as a cricket ground.
17 **When I was a child I wanted to...** be a sports
18 commentator. It's a stereotypical wish to be a footballer; I
19 had the more pragmatic dream of being someone who watched.
20 **If I could change one thing about myself...** I'd like to be
21 more aggressively confident, without being a real idiot.
22 **You wouldn't know it but I am very good at...** capital
23 cities, flags of the world, and geographical trivia like that.
24 **You may not know it but I am no good at...** riding a bike. It's
25 quite embarrassing. I went to a local park with the in-laws and I
26 had to run alongside their bikes.
27 **At night I dream of...** Embarrassingly, I do dream a lot about football, and in really specific
28 ways. My wife finds it incredibly uninteresting when I wake up and say, 'Tottenham beat Arsenal
29 2-1'.
30 **What I see when I look in the mirror...** Mostly I notice that I am alarmingly, unhealthily thin.
31 **I wish I'd never worn...** I've always had fairly poor dress sense – now it's not a problem
32 because my wife calls the wardrobe shots. Anything I owned that was bad has been brutally
33 purged.
34 **I drive...** nothing at all. I'm not really interested in cars or bikes.
35 **My favourite building...** Flinders Street Station in Melbourne. It's not so much beautiful as
36 peculiar looking. It's covered in clocks – basically very eccentric.
37 **My secret crush is...** Peggy Olson from Mad Men. She's irresistible, it's the intensity of her
38 eyes. Normally it's older women though, which means they have to stay secret because it gets
39 really embarrassing.
40 **Movie heaven...** It's A Wonderful Life. Maybe not the best film ever made, but it is the film
41 that makes you feel warmest and most optimistic about mankind.
42 **A book that changed me...** 1984, because I read it when I was about 14 and it made me
43 realise it was worth bothering to read adult books. It convinced me it's possible to write a book
44 that still has political resonance 50 or a hundred years on.
45 **My greatest regret...** On a day-to-day basis, I regret that I changed my phone to Orange.
46 They should spend less money on those cutesy black-and-orange adverts and more on pylons
47 so they have better signal.
48 **My real-life villains...** The Pussycat Dolls. I'm pretty confident they are a force for evil; they
49 make terrible pop music, and are terrible examples for young girls. They make me unhappy:
50 it's just a step back for feminism, and for the world.
51 **The person who really makes me laugh...** My brother, and my wife. It's not a coincidence
52 that the people close to you are the people who make you laugh the most.
53 **My five-year plan...** The only plan that makes sense is to do what you're doing, better. Life
54 makes you look stupid if you have too definite plans.
55 **My life in six words...** A good effort with some reservations.

Ideas for Secrets & Lies

- *Phatic Language* (speech to promote human warmth): e.g. listener responses (Oh good; fair enough)
- *Ellipsis* (omission of elements that can be retrieved from the context): e.g. ‘Hello Jenny Ford’ = ‘Hello my name is Jenny Ford’
- *Sociopragmatic features*: e.g. Office layout; NVC; cultural variation in appropriate behavior
- Discussion: Adoption; freedom of information
- Script writing: What happens when Hortense meets her real mother? (Watch the film on YouTube)
(Gilmore 2009)

Student Script

1 INT: DINER: NIGHT

'Diner' is American English - since *Secrets & Lies* is set in England, it would be a 'cafe'.

HORTENSE is seated at a table by the window, staring at the passers-by outside. Save for an elderly couple at the table behind her and a group of raucous young men and women in the opposite corner, the place is nearly empty. HORTENSE looks at the large analog clock on the wall behind the counter, to her right - 15 minutes past 10. It is nearly closing time. A WAITRESS wiping the counter top comes into HORTENSE's view; their eyes meet and HORTENSE quickly looks away. ✓ Nice scene - setting.

A woman enters the diner; her gaudy-looking jewelry and her heavy make-up do nothing to hide the fact that she is probably in her late 50s. Her hair is a mess; strands have come loose from the bun at the top of her head. A few of the young women look at her and snicker. The woman is CYNTHIA; she looks over at the group of young men and women and immediately coolly dismisses them. CYNTHIA then spots HORTENSE, who is openly staring at her. CYNTHIA, with an almost imperceptible frown on her face, marches right to HORTENSE's table and sits down without waiting for HORTENSE to say anything.

CYNTHIA

(looks briefly at HORTENSE before rummaging through her handbag)
Hortense.

HORTENSE

(realizes she is staring and snaps out of it, embarrassed)
Yes, I'm sorr-

CYNTHIA

(finds a box of cigarettes in her handbag and cuts HORTENSE off)
Ah there we go. Got a light?

HORTENSE

No... I'm sorry. I don't smoke.

CYNTHIA

Oh you don't, don't you?
(turns to the counter)
Hey, what's a girl gotta do to get some service around here?

There is a few moments of awkward silence as they wait for the WAITRESS to come to their table.

Ideas for ‘My Secret Life’

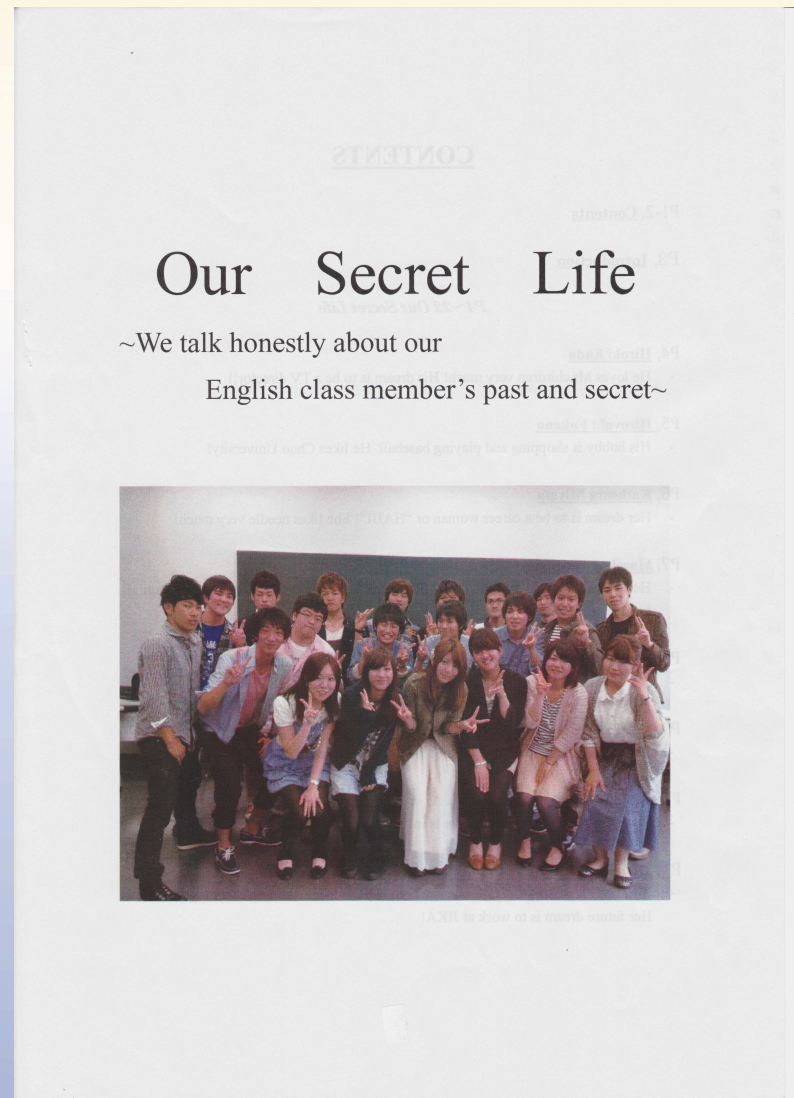
- WebQuest exploring ideas raised in the text:
 1. Where is Bristol (line 1)? Find the VisitBristol web site: what would you do if you could spend a weekend there?
 2. What do we mean when we say somebody ‘calls the shots’ (line 32)? Check the *Oxford Advance Learner’s Dictionary* online at (Hint: search for ‘call the shots’):
<http://oald8.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>
 3. Find some pictures of Flinders Street Station (line 35) on the Web and discuss your opinions of this building with your partner. Mark calls the station ‘eccentric’: Is this a positive or negative adjective here?

Ideas for ‘My Secret Life’

- Writing questions from Mark’s answers
- Writing newspaper articles:

You are going to interview another student in the class and write a newspaper article about their ‘secret life’. Decide what questions you can ask your partner so that you can write an interesting article – you can use some of the questions from Mark Watson’s interview or choose your own!

‘Our Secret Life’ Newspaper



Student interviews → The final product



Conclusions

- Increasing accessibility of authentic materials is expanding choices available to teachers.
- Using authentic materials to supplement or replace textbooks allows teachers to better meet learners' needs, increase variety & interest: *hopefully* leading to sustained deep learning (SDL).
- Authentic materials are better able to develop a range of communicative competencies in learners.
- BUT effective materials development can be time-consuming & requires both language awareness & an appreciation of factors affecting second language acquisition.

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