

The times they are a-changin': Strategies for exploiting authentic materials in the language classroom

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Introduction

*There's a battle outside
And it is ragin'.
It'll soon shake your windows
And rattle your walls
For the times they are a-changin'.
(Bob Dylan 1964)*

For many teachers, authentic materials have great appeal as sources of language input for the ESOL classroom. Like Bob Dylan's lyrics above, they are motivated by a genuine desire to communicate ideas or emotions and, as a result, often have the power to affect us at a deeper level than contrived texts whose primary function is often to display lexico-grammatical features of the language. Gilmore (2007a) and Woodward (1996) see a growing sense of dissatisfaction with current practices within the language teaching profession: a battle between proponents of contrivance and authenticity is raging in the academic journals, and the walls and windows of our classrooms shaking with the expectation of change. It would appear that we are on the verge of a paradigm shift, but the fundamental question facing us is what, exactly, we should shift *to*. One possibility is a syllabus structured around communicative competence models (see Figure 1), aiming to exploit the wealth of authentic materials now readily available to teachers world-wide (through media such as the internet, television and DVDs) to develop learners' linguistic, strategic, pragmalinguistic, sociopragmatic and discourse competencies as well their language skills.

This chapter begins by outlining some of the reasons for reducing the role of textbooks in the curriculum, or sometimes even abandoning them altogether. This is not meant to suggest that there is never a place for textbooks – good quality publications will often meet the needs or interests of a particular group of students and save the teacher a lot of time. Furthermore, many modern textbooks already incorporate authentic material in some form so that the distinction between 'authentic' and 'contrived' is becoming ever more blurred. However, learners tend to find teacher-prepared authentic materials more motivating, and the richer input they provide also allows a focus on a greater variety of discourse features, therefore developing a wider range of communicative competences. I further suggest some strategies for selecting appropriate authentic materials for the language classroom and for exploiting them effectively through principled task design. I end with an example to illustrate how this can work in practice.

<insert Figure 1 here>

Context

The materials and approaches discussed here evolved from classroom-based research carried out in the Japanese university system (Gilmore 2007b). Of course, each teaching context has its own unique characteristics and these, in turn, generate different learner needs. Japanese university students, for example, often have good receptive knowledge of English grammar or vocabulary (linguistic competence), particularly of more formal registers, and they tend to perform well on ‘paper tests,’ but they rarely have the ability to personalize and activate this knowledge in actual communicative activities. Much class time is therefore devoted to improving learners’ listening and speaking skills in less formal contexts, more appropriate for conversation with friends, as well as developing their confidence to repair talk when communication breakdown occurs. Readers will have to consider which components of the communicative competence model need developing in their own learners and select materials and tasks which best meet those goals.

Curriculum, Tasks, Materials

What Is Authenticity?

Authenticity means different things to different people. Each definition has implications for syllabus design and classroom practice, so it is important to be clear exactly what kind of authenticity we are interested in before selecting materials and developing tasks. Table 1 gives a brief overview of different perspectives on authenticity and their implications for classroom practice.

<insert Table 1 here>

In this chapter, I focus principally on exploiting authentic *spoken text* in the classroom and define authenticity in the same way as Morrow (1977) as “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” (p. 13). In particular, I exploit extracts from films and TV programs in language teaching, which, although lacking some of the characteristics of spontaneous spoken discourse, are much easier to access and are often far more entertaining than the humdrum conversations of everyday life.

Why Not Use Textbooks?

It would be unrealistic to suggest that authentic materials replace textbooks in *all* teaching contexts: many teachers lack the time, and others the experience, to create their own syllabuses from scratch, and a well-written textbook may serve an excellent foundation for a course. Nevertheless, there are many reasons for a greater use of authentic materials in the classroom. Authentic materials are increasingly easy access worldwide through the internet and on alternate media. Search engines allow us to locate texts or images efficiently, and these can be readily copied and pasted into Word documents. Video material on sites such as *You Tube* (<http://www.youtube.com/>) or the BBC’s *Video Nation* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/>) are conveniently categorized into themes and provide learners exposure to a wide variety of accents, solidly contextualized through the visual medium. On-line encyclopedias, such as *Wikipedia* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page) are excellent sources for student projects,

essays or presentations. Music, movies and podcasts can be downloaded through providers such as *iTunes*, and the lyrics (<http://www.getlyrical.com/>) or scripts (<http://www.script-o-rama.com/>) are also often available. On-line corpora such as the *British National Corpus* (<http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>) or the *COBUILD Concordance and Collocations Sampler* (<http://www.collins.co.uk/Corpus/CorpusSearch.aspx>) allow learners to examine real concordance lines, extracted from word banks comprising millions of words. English language movies are widely available through television networks and video rental stores – DVDs are particularly useful since they provide easy searching through chapters and the option of subtitles in English or the students' mother tongue.

Internationally produced textbooks often fail to address local needs: materials selected by teachers for their own teaching context give them greater control over the syllabus and are more likely to meet learners' interests and needs. Textbook materials are also often extremely dull: sometimes this is because they have been contrived to display particular language features rather than to entertain, at other times it is because the content has been kept deliberately bland and sanitized in order not to offend differing sensibilities in the worldwide market (Wajnryb 1996). Authentic materials, in contrast, are frequently more motivating for both teachers and their students since they can be crafted to meet local needs and interests and are not subject to the constraints placed on textbook writers. According to Schumann (1997), three important components of our 'stimulus appraisal system' (which determines to what extent we engage with input) are novelty, pleasantness and goal/need significance. Authentic materials chosen by teachers and learners themselves are more likely to be positively evaluated on these criteria and lead to sustained deep learning.

Textbook materials frequently fail to develop a range of learners' communicative competencies since they are often organized around a 'graded' structural syllabus, with lexico-grammatical features sequenced according to perceived difficulty. Although this "generates clear and tangible goals, precise syllabuses, and a comfortably itemizable basis for the evaluation of effectiveness" (Skehan 1998, p. 94), syllabuses like this are not supported by language acquisition research and tend to develop learners' linguistic competence at the expense of other communicative competence components (Nunan 1996; Skehan 1996).

Selecting Authentic Materials for the Language Classroom

Despite the many advantages of authentic materials over textbooks, exploiting them successfully is no easy matter and requires teachers to have thorough language awareness and a clear sense of their learners' interests and needs. Below are general guidelines teachers will find useful for selecting authentic materials.

Choose Interesting Texts

Learning another language is hard work and students will have little compulsion to engage with texts that do not catch their imaginations. Since classroom time is limited, creating interest encourages students to explore materials in more depth. For example, by showing learners key scenes from movies, and also making the complete versions available for self-access, we can encourage them to devote more time to language learning outside of the class.

Identify and Meet Learners' Needs

The knowledge and skills students acquire in the classroom are directly related to the kind of input they receive and the tasks associated with them. Learners who only read newspaper articles are likely to become proficient at reading about current affairs, although they may, for example, remain incapable of making a hotel reservation on the telephone. Viewing the curriculum in terms of the kinds of communicative competencies and skills needed provides teachers with a systematic approach, ensuring that learners receive the knowledge and skills to operate successfully in a target speech community. A needs analysis (e.g., Ellis & Sinclair 1989, p. 10) is therefore a good place to begin planning a course.

Provide Learners with a Variety of Topics and Tasks

Since the individuals who make up any class will have different needs and interests, and will be at different stages of interlanguage development, a variety of topics and tasks is the best way to ensure that all of their needs are satisfied to some extent. Schumann's stimulus appraisal theory (1997) suggests that variety is an important factor in maintaining interest.

Select Texts of Appropriate Difficulty

Many different factors combine to influence a text's difficulty – some of these are characteristics of the texts themselves while others depend on the learning context in which they are used. Gilmore (2007a) identifies such factors as:

- Text length
- Lexical density
- Proportion of low vs. high frequency vocabulary
- Grammatical or syntactical complexity
- Text genre (static genres, such as descriptions, are easier than dynamic ones, such as narratives, or abstract ones, such as political debates)
- Number of elements (characters or events) in a text and how easily they can be distinguished from one another
- Quantity of presumed background knowledge or idiomatic language
- Speech rates
- Type and variety of accents
- Visual support offered (video/still images, realia or transcripts)

Select Audio-Visual Texts

Audio-visual materials, taken from web-based sources or DVDs, should often be given priority over the more traditional (audio-only or text only) materials typically used in language classrooms. Visual elements can provide learners with an enormous amount of additional pragmatic information on the context in which the discourse is situated, the speakers' ages and social positions, or the relationships between different participants (Brown & Yule 1983). Contextual details dictate the kind of speech acts and non-verbal communication speakers employ and can be used to sensitize learners to language variation in English (pragmalinguistics) as well as the behavioral norms in the target

speech community (sociopragmatics). Being able to watch the speakers as they talk also supports learners' listening comprehension since, as Brown and Yule remind us, the "extra articulatory effort" (ibid, p. 86), reflected in mouth movements, facial expressions and gestures, provides valuable information on which words are content words (those carrying the key information).

Select Stand-Alone Texts

With spoken texts, post-listening activities in the classroom will often involve intensive language work on various aspects of the discourse, 'frozen' in the transcripts. This means that relatively short video extracts, of up to around 10 minutes for intermediate or advanced learners, are most suitable and these should be accessible to students without the need for excessive introduction or contextualization in the lead-in stages. In other words, scenes that rely too much on earlier events in the plot should be avoided unless the teacher can quickly summarize them. Heavily edited extracts, with frequent cuts, should also be avoided since the rapid changes in speaker and context are likely to increase comprehension difficulties.

Maximize Accessibility in Transcripts

In order to facilitate the intensive language work suggested for post-listening stages, and to encourage learners to become 'mini conversational analysts', transcripts should be made available to students. These can often be located on-line or extracted from DVDs using OCR (optical character recognition) software such as SubRip (<http://zuggy.wz.cz/dvd.php>). Decisions have to be made in terms of how much detail to include in the written representation of speech. A 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) could include phonological, turn taking, or non-verbal communication features, as well as the actual words spoken. However, too much information can be off-putting for learners so it is usually better to keep transcripts simple on pedagogic grounds, unless there is some particular reason to include more detail. Besides, many of these details students will notice themselves and may even be asked to mark on their own transcripts, as adding back the missing detail while reading the transcripts is a useful classroom activity in itself. Transcription lines can be numbered for ease of reference and double-spaced to give students space for note taking on discourse features of interest.

Select Materials that Stand the Test of Time

Finding and preparing authentic materials that fulfill all of the above criteria can be a time-consuming process so select texts that can be re-used over many years with different classes. A 'materials bank' can be built up, with different teachers sharing their transcripts, and careful categorization of the files, detailing the topic, context, extract length and key discourse features, can be helpful to teachers for easy access. The transcripts can also be used to build up a corpus, using software such as Wordsmith Tools (Scott 1996). Such corpus linguistic tools allow teachers to quickly identify word frequencies in the materials bank, as well as texts where particular discourse features occur.

Developing Tasks for Authentic Materials

Of course, selection of appropriate texts is only the first step in the process of exploiting authentic materials in the classroom – tasks then need to be created to suit the level and needs of the learners. Below, are some suggestions for effective task design:

Ensure Success

It is possible to adapt authentic materials to different proficiency levels by varying the *task*, rather than the *text*. Mariani (1997) describes classroom activities in terms of the level of challenge and support they provide. Support can come from a variety of sources: the teacher, other students, reference materials, or through careful task design. Different combinations of these two factors result in different learning consequences as represented in Figure 2 (Gilmore 2007a, p. 112, adapted from Mariani 1997):

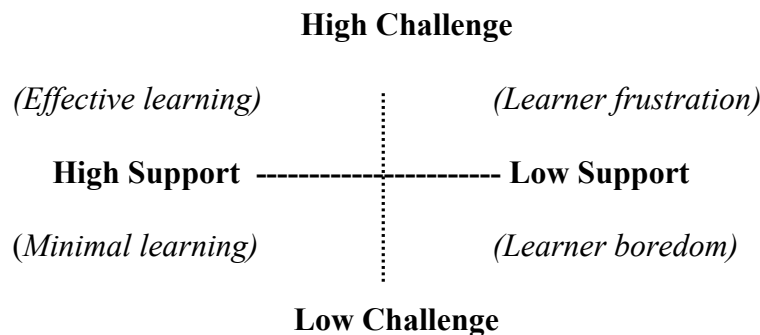


Figure 2 Variation in Instructional Challenge and Support

Effective learning is most likely to occur when materials and tasks provide both high levels of challenge and support. Even when texts are too difficult for learners, there is no reason why they should feel de-motivated by them, as long as the tasks are achievable and students acquire new knowledge in the process. Indeed, it might be beneficial for learners to become tolerant to only partial comprehension since even native speakers experience this at times – textbooks, which tend to expect 100% comprehension, run the risk of over-protecting students from the uncertainties of the real world.

Include Pre-, While-, and Post-Listening Tasks

Pre-listening tasks are typically designed to raise learners’ interest in topics, clarify difficult vocabulary and provide any necessary cultural background knowledge to facilitate comprehension. These kinds of activities help students develop schemas and scripts for the scenes they are about to watch, which can support, or scaffold learning (Bruner 1983). One option, which I have found useful at the pre-listening stage, is to ask learners to first write and role-play their own versions of scenarios occurring on the film clip before they see the original versions. This not only helps comprehension in the listening tasks, but also encourages students to ‘notice the gap’ between their own interlanguage and the NS discourse, enhancing the acquisition of intake.

While-listening tasks focus on meaning first, before shifting to form, to avoid overloading learners’ language processing systems. While-listening tasks typically begin with gist questions, followed by more detailed comprehension questions to encourage effective processing strategies. Post-reading or listening tasks are designed to ‘revisit’ the

material in a new way. This can involve a wide variety of tasks, such as recycling vocabulary, focusing on target discourse features, or getting students to use target language in speaking or writing activities. By looking at the same material again from a new perspective, we increase the efficiency of the learning process – texts are often abandoned too quickly by teachers when the potential exists to ‘squeeze’ much more out of them, and valuable time is lost when we have to constantly set up or contextualize new input.

Let the Text Suggests the Task

After working closely on a spoken text to produce an accurate transcript, appropriate tasks often suggest themselves to the teacher/materials writer. Oral narratives, for example, might highlight typical features of narrative structure, such as shifts to the historic present to dramatize events. Songs might highlight features of rhythm (stress-timing) or rhyme (phonology) in English. Lyrics, like those from Dylan’s famous song that began this chapter, tend to stick in our minds as ‘fixed phrases’ which can be deconstructed for vocabulary and collocation analysis and acquisition.

Vary Task Design to Encourage Accuracy, Fluency and Complexity

Skehan (1998) illustrates how task design can affect the accuracy, complexity or fluency of learners’ output. By increasing the time allowed for preparation, for example, we can encourage greater complexity, while decreasing preparation time can encourage greater fluency. Teachers should therefore consider their learners’ needs and design activities accordingly. Japanese university students, for example, typically have very poor fluency as a result of excessive emphasis on accuracy at junior and high school. Therefore, I often design tasks so that they have little time to plan their output (for example, in role-play activities) in order to encourage them to develop greater fluency.

Assessment with Authentic Materials

Text-driven (Mishan 2005), ‘principled communicative’ (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell 1997) approaches rely on teachers and learners selecting materials and designing tasks for themselves, rather than relying on language coursebooks to meet all their needs. The syllabus for the course is therefore arrived at retrospectively, shaped by whatever materials are chosen for inclusion by the participants in the classroom events. Although this runs the risk of producing a syllabus that seems rather haphazard or chaotic, we can systematize it by preparing a checklist of items to be covered (perhaps organized around the key components in the communicative competence model presented above in Figure 1) and filling in any gaps towards the end of the course.

Sample Task Series

The following sample materials, taken from the movie *Secrets & Lies*© (Leigh 1996), illustrate how the guidelines given above shaped the choice of texts and tasks. In this scene, 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. The scene was selected because it met a number of the criteria for text and task selection:

Selection Criteria

The scene depicts events in the plot leading to one of the narrative peaks in which Hortense discovers her real mother is actually white. The narrative peak creates interest in the events and encourages students to engage with the materials. As with much authentic discourse, the meaning of utterances is often left implicit, and in this scene, learners have to infer meaning for themselves, which also helps to create interest.

The scene ‘stands alone’ and is comprehensible when extracted from the movie, requiring little in the way of contextualizing in the lead-in stages.

The text illustrates many features of authentic, unscripted spoken discourse (a characteristic of most Mike Leigh films), which can be usefully exploited in the classroom. In particular, this scene shows authentic listener responses in interpersonal discourse, important for Japanese learners who tend to be exposed to predominantly transactional language. The scene also shows how speakers typically employ ellipsis when there is a degree of shared information, also useful since many Japanese learners tend to be unnecessarily explicit.

The visual elements of the scene provide learners with useful sociopragmatic information about Britain. For example, Jenny, a government employee, takes a very informal approach to the interview, sitting next to Hortense rather than behind her desk, and eating chocolates as they chat. She also comments on the dilapidated state of her office in a way that might be considered improper in Japan.

The scene provides learners with an appropriate combination of challenge and support – the challenge is to deduce the topic of the conversation from the predominantly implicit language, but this is supported by the visual input and the comprehension questions, which lead students towards an understanding.

This film has the additional advantage that it can be re-used over many years without appearing excessively dated.

Task Development

The tasks accompanying the scene display the typical pre-, while-, and post-listening stages recommended for exploiting authentic material (See Appendix A for Student Materials). In the pre-listening stages, some of the lower frequency lexis (which is likely to be unfamiliar) is introduced and students’ interest is encouraged, by focusing on the movie’s title. In the while-listening stages, students are first asked to complete a gist listening task, where they try to reach a general understanding before answering more detailed comprehension questions, which encourage listening for specific information. In the post-listening stages, students are able to read the transcript to clarify any parts of the scene that still remain unclear after the listening tasks. The focus then shifts to specific discourse features highlighted by the text (in this case, ‘listener responses’ and ellipsis). Finally, the tasks involve students developing their speaking skills and fluency with role-play activities based on Hortense’s meeting with her real mother, and debates on the issues of adoption and freedom of information.

Reflections

The guidelines for selection and exploitation of authentic materials given in this chapter are meant to be sufficiently general to be applied to a wide variety of learning contexts. Many teachers, of course, will not have the freedom to design their own

syllabus and will be required by their institutions to use particular textbooks. It is hoped, however, that they might be able to supplement with authentic materials, by establishing thematic links, in order to develop a wider range of communicative competencies in their learners.

Developing materials from authentic sources can be an extremely time-consuming process so strategies for reducing teacher workloads, such as producing a shared 'materials bank,' need to be established institutionally. By working collaboratively, teachers can get valuable feedback on the success of their materials from others and hone their design skills further. Despite the investment of time and energy involved, I believe that it is well worth the effort: both teachers and learners will be more committed to texts that they, themselves, have chosen to work on, and this is likely to lead to higher levels of sustained deep learning. In addition, since it is the participants in classroom events who decide the course content, it is far more likely to meet specific language needs. As the title of this chapter suggests, the times are, indeed, changing and teachers need to seek new approaches and strategies to prepare their students for the challenges that await them in the (often hostile) environments of another culture's speech communities.

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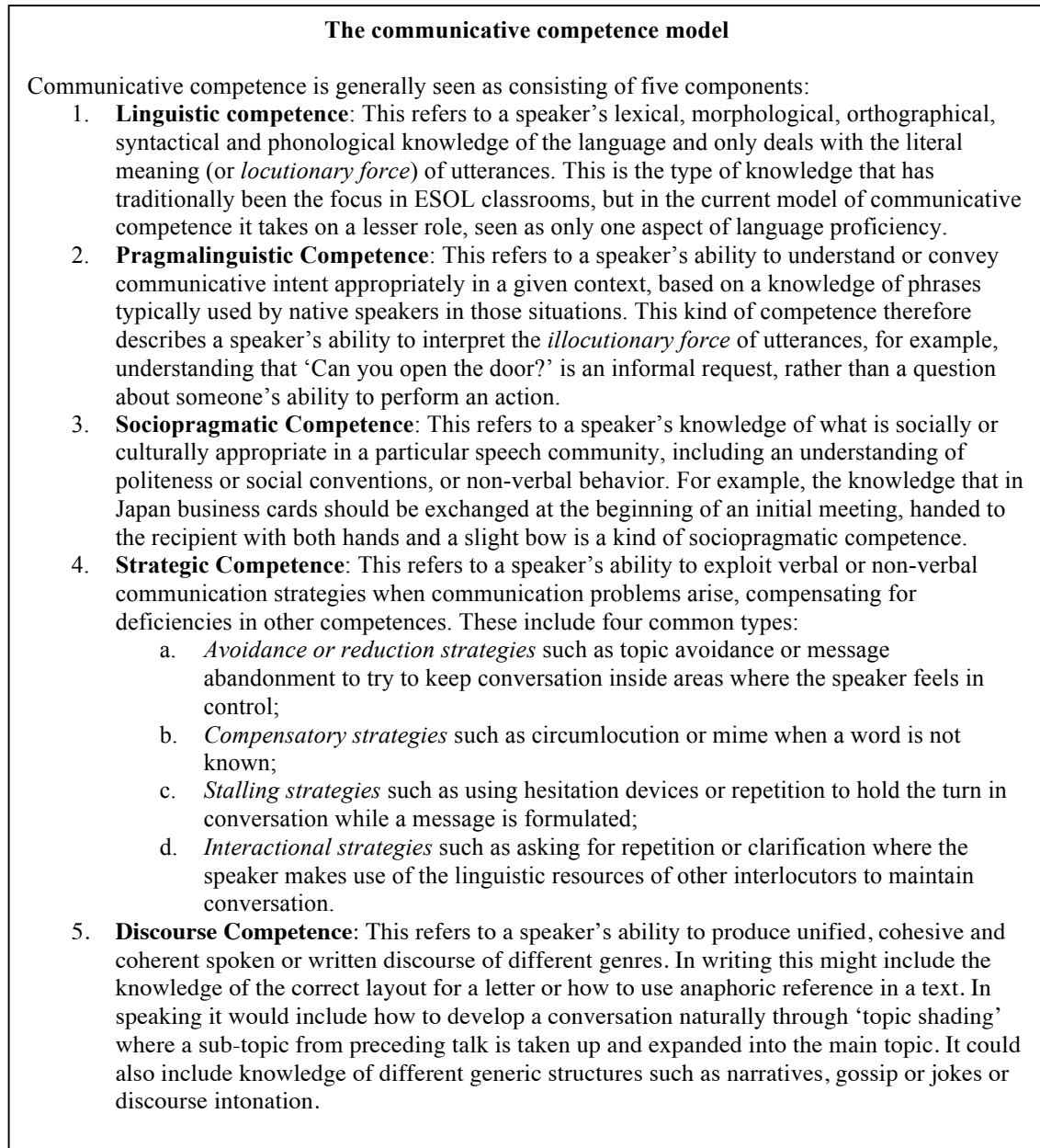
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<Table 1>

Authenticity As...	Assumptions & Implications
(i) The language produced <i>by</i> native speakers (NS) <i>for</i> native speakers in a particular language community.	(i) NS English is regarded as superior to NNS (non-native speakers') English – learners should try to mimic NSs and prepare themselves for communication in an English-speaking community.
(ii) The language produced by a real speaker/writer for a real audience, conveying a real message.	(ii) Authentic language is any communication of a real message – textbooks and materials using contrived language are inferior because their intent is often only to display language forms.
(iii) The qualities in a text as perceived by the reader/listener and not inherent in the text itself.	(iii) Any text is authentic if learners perceive it as such – the original purpose of the text is less important than the learner's 'authentic' response. Authentic and contrived texts are of equal worth for the classroom.
(iv) The interaction between students and teachers as a 'personal process of engagement'.	(iv) Authenticity reflects the learning that takes place within the classroom through student-teacher interaction rather than the materials used.
(v) The types of task chosen.	(v) Classroom tasks exploit materials in the same ways as their original intent (e.g. physically carrying out instructions from a 'how to' manual).
(vi) The social situation of the classroom.	(vi) The social nature of the classroom is authentic in itself – the focus is on exploiting this environment to develop meaningful relationships.
(vii) Assessment.	(vii) Tests should accurately assess learners' competence to perform real world tasks.
(viii) Culture, and the ability to behave, think like, or understand the target language group to be recognized and validated by it.	(viii) ESOL classrooms focus on different behaviors, values and ways of seeing the world as well as language itself.

Table 1 Different Perspectives on Authenticity with Teaching Implications

<Figure 1>



A. You are going to watch a scene from a film by the British writer and director Mike Leigh. What do the following expressions connected with secrets and lies mean?

- To keep a secret
- A closely-guarded secret
- A little white lie
- To lie through your teeth
- To have a loose tongue

Ask your partner some questions using these expressions, for example: ‘Can you keep a secret?’

B. Before you watch, match the following words from the scene to their definitions:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prison cell • Moaning on • Red tape • Have a shufti • An optometrist • To put something off • To pop in/back • Irreplaceable • Environment • Expectations • Under the impression • The snag 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To go somewhere for a short time • Official rules which are unpopular • To look at something • A small room to keep criminals locked up • Complaining • What you believe will happen • To think something • The problem • Physical conditions around you • An eye specialist • Impossible to replace • To change something to a later date
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C. In this scene, Hortense visits Jenny Ford ~ watch and try to find out what they are talking about. Who do you think Jenny Ford is?

D. Watch the scene again and answer the questions below.

1. What time of day is it?
2. What does Jenny keep putting off? How can Hortense help her?
3. Does Hortense live with anyone else?
4. When did Hortense’s mother die?
5. Did Hortense have a happy childhood?
6. Who is Hortense looking for?
7. What does Jenny give to Hortense?
8. Why do you think Jenny leaves the room?

E. Jenny Ford is a very sympathetic listener and uses a lot of 'listener responses' while she talks to Hortense. Read the script below and try to write in appropriate responses in the spaces. Then listen again & check your answers.

- 1 Jenny: Hortense, hello *Jenny Ford. *Nice to meet you. Come this way.
2 Hortense: Oh hi
3 Jenny: How are you? *All right?
4 Hortense: *Fine thank you.
5 Jenny: _____ Sorry about this prison cell, we've been moaning on about it for years but there you go. Have a seat, make yourself at home. Now, before we go any further, have you got any ID? Passport? Driving license?
6 Hortense: Yeah
7 Jenny: *Have to get used to all this red tape. Would you like a Rolo?
8 Hortense: No thank you.
9 Jenny: *You sure?
10 Hortense: Yeah. There you go (hands over her ID).
11 Jenny: Hm, *have a shufti. That's great Hortense thanks.
12 Hortense: Thank you.
13 Jenny: *You on your lunch break?
14 Hortense: Yeah, *an extended one.
15 Jenny: Have you had any lunch?
16 Hortense: No, not yet.
17 Jenny: No, me neither. So what do you do?
18 Hortense: I'm an optometrist.
19 Jenny: _____ that's one of those things you keep putting off and putting off isn't it? And I've got to the stage now with the Guardian crossword where I'm, I'm going like this so I think the time has come* don't you? I'll have to pop in, you can give me a test. Where do you live?
20 Hortense: *Kilburn.
21 Jenny: _____ *In a flat?
22 Hortense: Yes.
23 Jenny: Do you share*?
24 Hortense: No, I live on my own.
25 Jenny: _____ I lived on my own for about six years before I was married. It's all right* isn't it?
26 Hortense: Yeah.
27 Jenny: Right Hortense. Let's talk a little bit about you shall we? Now obviously you've been giving a great deal of thought to things and you've come to a decision which is good. But for me, the question is "Why now?"
28 Hortense: I just feel that it's the right time* that's all.
29 Jenny: _____ *You thinking about getting married?
30 Hortense: No.
31 Jenny: D'you have children?
32 Hortense: No.
33 Jenny: *You thinking about having children?
34 Hortense: No.

35 Jenny: _____ Are you sharing this with your parents? Do they know that you're here today and how do they feel about it?

36 Hortense: They're both dead actually... (the conversation continues).
(Reprinted with the kind permission of Mike Leigh)

E. In spoken English, we often leave out words when the meaning can be understood without them. This is called *ellipsis*. Look at the transcript above and decide what words are missing when you see an asterisk (*). For example:

Hello, *Jenny Ford = Hello, *my name is* Jenny Ford.

F. Hortense finds out that her real mother, Cynthia, is white but decides to contact her anyway. What do you think happens when they meet? Write a script and act it out with your partner. Don't forget to use listener responses and ellipsis where appropriate!

G. If you were adopted, would you look for your 'birth mother'? Why/why not? In Britain, children now have the right to find out who their real parents are ~ do you agree with this law? How is adoption managed in Japan? What rights do birth parents and adopted children have?