Chapter 22. Quality through Authenticity in TESOL: Critical Issues Facing Teacher Education

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Biography

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Abstract

'Quality assurance' is a term very familiar to the business world or manufacturing industry but rarely applied to the field of TESOL. This chapter will discuss QA from the perspective of authenticity in language learning, considering the extent to which standards of quality are being met within our profession. The chapter will outline seven common definitions of authenticity – (i) language produced by native speakers (NSs) for native speakers; (ii) language produced by a real speaker/writer for a real audience, conveying a real message; (iii) the ability to think or behave like a target language group in order to be recognized or validated by them; (iv) the types of task chosen; (v) language assessment; (vi) the qualities bestowed on a text by a reader/listener in a process of 'authentication'; (vii) a personal process of engagement between teachers and students in the classroom – and discuss the

opportunities and challenges that this context-bound, multidimensional concept create for the language teaching profession.

Key words

Authenticity; quality assurance; multimodality; discourse analysis; social semiotics; communicative competencies

Introduction

Quality assurance (QA): "A program for the systematic monitoring and evaluation of the various aspects of a project, service, or facility to ensure that standards of quality are being met" (Merriam-Webster dictionary)

'Quality assurance' is a term very familiar to the business world or manufacturing industry but rarely applied to the field of TESOL. Here, 'quality' is taken to mean 'fit for purpose' in a particular context, considering the various stakeholders involved in second language education – students, teachers, educational institutions or the wider community. We will discuss QA from the perspective of authenticity in second language learning, assessing the extent to which standards of quality are being met within our profession and consider the challenges and opportunities afforded by a closer inspection of what it actually means to be authentic in TESOL.

Definitions of authenticity

The concept of authenticity, although widely referenced in the ELT literature, is often poorly understood and the wide variation of definitions that exist 'reflect both its significance and ambiguity' (Trabelsi 2014: 670). At least seven more nuanced meanings commonly crop up in the research literature, with authenticity associated with:

(i)   The language produced *by* native speakers (NSs) *for* native speakers (e.g. Little, Devitt & Singleton 1989);

(ii) The language produced by a real speaker/writer for a real audience, conveying a real message (e.g. Morrow 1977);

(iii) The ability to think or behave like a target language group in order to be recognized or validated by them (e.g. Kramsch 1993);

(iv) The types of task chosen for classroom activities (e.g. Guariento & Morley 2001);

(v)   Language assessment choices (e.g. Lewkowicz 2000);

(vi)   The qualities bestowed on a text by a reader/listener in a process of 'authentication' (e.g. Widdowson 1978);

(vii)   A personal process of engagement between teachers and students in the classroom (e.g. van Lier 1996)

Definition 1, evoking the notion of 'the native speaker', may seem out of step with contemporary attitudes in TESOL which recognize the importance of English as an International Language (EIL) and value all varieties, irrespective of whether they come from Kachru's (1985) inner, outer or expanding circles. As English has spread across the world it has naturally evolved into a multitude of dialects which can differ in pronunciation, intonation patterns, grammar, vocabulary, spelling and conventions of use to the extent that 'it becomes ever more difficult to characterize in ways that support the fiction of a simple, single language' (Strevens 1980: 79). However, inner circle varieties of English (e.g. British, American, Australasian) still tend to predominate in internationally marketed textbooks and language teachers and their students continue to voice a preference for what they see as 'standard' forms of the language (e.g. Mishan & Timmis 2015: 38). In addition, NS discourse offers a rich, varied, and readily accessible source of potentially motivating multimodal language input for teachers to exploit in the classroom. In this sense it is undeniably fit for purpose, facilitating teachers' preparation of bespoke materials which can satisfy their learners' needs in terms of both topic and language content. On the other hand, NS discourse is ungraded and can be culturally opaque and therefore difficult for learners to 'authenticate' (see vi). Instructors will require training in discourse analysis in order to be able to effectively identify useful features of natural language and adapt texts (written or spoken) to the classroom context.

Definition 2 sees authentic language as any discourse derived from genuine communicative events, as opposed to the contrived models often presented to learners in textbooks which tend to distort or provide only partial representations of the L2 across a wide range of discourse features including lexicogrammatical choices, interactional features of contingent talk, pragmatics and generic structure (Gilmore 2015). Proficient NNSs of English are valued equally to NSs from this perspective and may actually provide better language models for the classroom since: (i) they represent a more realistic goal for learners to aim at; (ii) the 'linguistic accommodation' (adjustment of verbal or non-verbal communication style

according to other participants), often seen when interlocutors from different cultures interact, might result in more comprehensible input; and (iii) if the interaction is sourced from the learners' own culture, the topical content might be more accessible, relevant or interesting to them. However, samples of this kind of language are usually more difficult to obtain than the NS discourse available through the Web and may rely on teachers recording/transcribing interaction themselves which is a difficult and time-consuming process (for example, 1 hour of classroom interaction is estimated by van Lier (1988: 241) to take around 20 hours to transcribe).

Definition 3 relates to the concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) which Byram & Fleming (1998: 12) describe as 'the acquisition of abilities to understand different modes of thinking and living, as they are embodied in the language to be learnt, and to reconcile or mediate between different modes present in any specific interaction'. Rather than teaching the language stripped of its cultural associations, this approach recognizes the importance of 'cultural authenticity' and encourages students to see the world from different perspectives so that they are better equipped to mediate between their own culture and that of any particular target community they wish to integrate in to. In this sense, it moves beyond restricted lexical or grammatical descriptions in the classroom to also consider aspects such as non-verbal communication (e.g. inter-personal space, gestures) or pragmatics (e.g. face threatening acts (FTAs), politeness conventions) – aspects rarely touched on in language textbooks but from which misunderstandings can often lead to more serious consequences than any kind of linguistic problem (e.g. Wajnryb 1996). However, this kind of material can be difficult for teachers to access and adapt to the classroom context. It will often require audiovisual input which clearly exemplifies different behaviors across cultures or instances of cultural misunderstandings, communication breakdown or conflict – genuine examples of which are rarely captured on camera. Films, sitcoms, TV commercials, etc. are useful sources for illustration but cross-cultural communication is not normally the original focus in these materials so creative adaption by teachers will be necessary (e.g. Gilmore 2010).

Definition 4 is concerned with task authenticity and the extent to which the activities designed into second language classes address the projected or known real-world needs of students. In this context, tasks such as asking for directions in a role-play activity or taking notes from a university lecture might be considered more authentic than substitution drills or grammar exercises. However, this oversimplifies what is, in reality, a complex situation:

(i) The classroom context creates its own authenticity and highly controlled pedagogic tasks can be justified as important intermediary 'skill-getting' steps in the journey towards 'skill-using' and the ultimate goal of intercultural communicative competence (see Rivers & Temperley 1978: 4).

(ii) Predicting exactly what future tasks a particular group of students will need to perform is likely to be extremely difficult, unless it is a clearly defined ESP context such as 'English for medical professionals'.

(iii) It takes a rather utilitarian approach to language learning and tends to favor purely functional needs over learners' affective needs. Listening to, and understanding a song, for example, although arguably of limited use in the 'real world' could be a highly meaningful and enjoyable task for some students.

For educators wishing to build quality into their task design they must firstly ensure that the right level of challenge and support exists in classroom materials by balancing text and task difficulty. Mariani (1997) describes the outcomes of different combinations of these two variables in the following way:

High Challenge

(Effective learning)   *(Learner frustration)*

High Support ——————|—————— **Low Support**

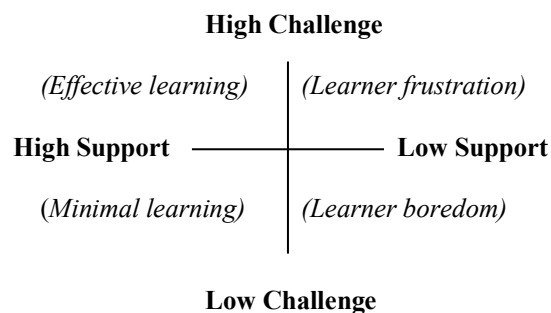*(Minimal learning)*   *(Learner boredom)*

Low Challenge

Figure 1 Likely outcomes of varying challenge and support in the language classroom

Effective learning is only likely to take place in high challenge/ high support conditions, but beyond this we also need to consider whether learners will be willing to engage with the selected materials and tasks. Schumann's (1997) stimulus appraisal model of language learning hypothesizes that learners continuously assess input across five criteria: novelty, pleasantness, goal/need significance, coping mechanisms and self or social image. Positive appraisals of input are predicted to encourage greater cognitive effort and engagement, leading to more learning, while negative appraisals result in avoidance. In terms of task design, teachers should therefore try to: (i) build in variety; (ii) ensure that tasks are interesting and relevant to students' lives; (iii) provide the right balance of challenge and support; and (iv) ensure that tasks do not lead to loss of face in the classroom.

Definition 5 relates the notion of authenticity to methods of language assessment, where *situational authenticity* refers to the extent that test tasks mirror target language use (TLU) contexts and *interactional authenticity* refers to the level of naturalness in the patterns of interaction encouraged by the task. It is quite possible to have one type of test authenticity without the other; for example, oral examiners' responses in the Cambridge IELTS exam are carefully scripted in an attempt to standardize test conditions. If participants fail to understand prompts during the test, examiners are instructed to repeat them once verbatim, without any of the accommodation strategies such as rephrasing, elaboration or grammatical/lexical simplification which tend to occur in genuine interaction (Filipi 2015). Of course, the test environment itself imposes a certain level of artificiality on the process, as examiners try to evaluate learners' proficiency quickly and fairly and test-takers try to maximize their display of the required L2 knowledge and skills in a limited period of time, but nevertheless QA as it applies to assessment should aim to reflect 'real world' language use and discourse patterns as far as possible. Test characteristics (particularly with 'high stakes' tests) can have a powerful impact on classroom practices, as teachers experience pressure to prepare students for upcoming exams (an effect known as 'washback'), but by incorporating authentic texts and tasks into the assessment process we can encourage positive washback:

> 'If we want people to learn to write compositions, we should get them to write compositions in the test. If a course objective is that students should be able to read scientific articles, then we should get them to do that in the test. Immediately we begin to test indirectly, we are removing an incentive for students to practise in the way that we want them to' (Hughes 2003: 54).

Definition 6 relates to Widdowson's (1978: 80) often cited distinction between 'genuine' and 'authentic' texts:

> 'Genuineness is a characteristic of the passage itself and is an absolute quality. Authenticity is a characteristic of the relationship between the passage and the reader and has to do with appropriate response'.

In other words, any text (whether genuine or contrived) which learners can engage with and learn from can be seen as serving an authentic pedagogic purpose. Indeed, it is quite possible that materials contrived for a specific group of students, from a particular culture at a known

proficiency level have a greater potential to be authenticated than texts originally intended for a native speaker audience, which because of their low frequency vocabulary, idiomatic language or culturally opaque references run the risk of becoming 'pragmatically inert' (Widdowson 1998: 710) both for learners and the non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) who make up the majority of trained EFL or ESL teachers around the world (Moussu & Llurda 2008). Quality in TESOL from this perspective relies, for example, on material writers and teachers having a deep understanding of: (i) learners' current linguistic level, needs and interests; (ii) differences which exist between the host culture and the target culture; and (iii) discourse features in the L2 which are likely to be problematic.

Definition 7 focuses on the quality of the engagement occurring between students and teachers in the classroom, where authenticity involves a search for personal meaning and is 'a context-bounded, multi-dimensional and dynamic process of interpretation, validation and (co)construction of a text, a task or a lesson in general (Külekçi 2015: 318). This social constructivist view of language learning sees knowledge and meaning as being socially situated and collaboratively constructed through the interaction which occurs in the classroom (e.g. Williams & Burden 1997). Texts, tasks, learners, teacher and broader contextual factors (emotional, physical, social, political or cultural) all combine in complex ways to create a unique and constantly changing environment where learning, we hope, can take place. Scaffolding occurs at both macro and micro levels in the classroom: at the 'designed-in' level, careful selection and sequencing of materials and tasks by the teacher helps to ensure that learners can engage with the input, while at the 'interactional' level, as the lesson unfolds, teacher and students interact contingently and in less predictable ways, to co-construct meaning (Hammond & Gibbons 2005). QA from this perspective is only possible retrospectively, after detailed analysis of classroom interaction from recordings or transcripts and student/teacher reflections on what has occurred during the lesson.

Conclusion
From the discussion above, it should be clear that describing quality through the lens of authenticity in TESOL is no straight-forward matter. The concept of authenticity has been problematized and complexified considerably since the 1970s and efforts towards quality assurance should consider the various dimensions outlined here and how they affect the different stakeholders in the education process (students, teachers, institutions and the wider

community). Some aspects of quality can be designed in to language programs at the planning stage, while others can only be evaluated through observation of lessons as they unfold.

Proposals for quality improvement in language programs

(i)   Multimodal input (text, images, sound, gestures, movement, posture, gaze, prosody, etc.) should be selected where possible because it can better illustrate the range of semiotic resources used in communication across different cultures and promote development of intercultural communicative competence. This, however, presents challenges to teachers in sourcing/adapting relevant material to enrich the largely textual content of traditional lessons and educational institutions which will need to invest in technology to bring online, digital environments into the classroom.

(ii)   Since language textbooks have been shown to typically provide learners with partial or distorted representations of the target language across a wide range of discourse features (e.g. Gilmore 2015), authentic materials should be incorporated into syllabuses to supplement in areas considered important, such as face threatening acts, oral narrative structure, or interactional characteristics of contingent talk. Initial or in-service teacher training courses will need to increase the emphasis on discourse analysis so that instructors can identify pedagogically useful features in authentic materials, which while always present are not necessarily obvious to the untrained eye. Students themselves can also be encouraged to take on the role of the discourse analyst in the classroom; collecting, transcribing and analyzing their own data (e.g. Riggenbach 1999).

(iii)   Task design should ensure a gradual progression in language courses from 'skill-getting' to 'skill-using', with a focus on the anticipated real-world needs and priorities of the target students. Task and material choice should also aim to satisfy Schumann's stimulus appraisal criteria to encourage greater cognitive effort and engagement by learners.

(iv)   Language assessment should try to mirror real or anticipated target language use contexts as closely as possible. This may, however, impose extra costs and burdens on educational institutions since the most convenient assessment methods, such as paper-based multiple-choice or gap-fill tests, tend to lack situational and interactional authenticity.

(v)   Teachers play a crucial role in facilitating 'classroom authenticity' through a deep understanding of their learners (e.g. their L1, culture, proficiency levels, needs and interests), as well as through the selection of appropriate materials and tasks, lesson staging, classroom management skills and interaction with students. Instructors should try to create an atmosphere of trust and belonging in classes so that students are encouraged to engage with the materials and each other. Since lessons often unfold in unpredictable ways, learning opportunities that arise spontaneously should be taken advantage of – Külekçi (2015) found that experienced teachers are more likely to go 'off-script' and deviate from their lesson plans to make activities more effective. Assessing the quality of classroom interaction is problematic in that each learner's experience in the class is unique and cannot be easily quantified. It will rely on direct observation of lessons (where participant behavior provides some indication of their level of engagement), microgenetic analysis of video recordings and transcripts of teacher-student or student-student discourse (which can suggest how L2 knowledge has been co-constructed), or participants' reflections on lessons through, for example, learner diaries or semi-structured interviews (e.g. Gilmore 2007).

Questions for reflection and discussion

(i) What models of English (e.g. NS, proficient NNS, inner/outer-circle varieties) are most appropriate for learners in your own particular context and why?

(ii) How do the language models represented in textbooks in your country compare with authentic interaction? If they differ, what effects might these differences have on language learning?

(iii) To what extent should language learning tasks replicate real-world tasks and how far do the tasks in your textbooks adequately prepare learners for their future lives?

(iv) What forces shape assessment choices in your country? Do test characteristics encourage the kind of classroom practice which will be beneficial to learners in their future lives?

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