WHY USING AUTHENTIC WRITTEN MATERIAL IN THE EL2 CLASSROOM? REASONS AND EXAMPLES

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Abstract

The present paper summarizes the main kinds of authentic materials to be employed in the ESL classroom. Therefore, newspapers, magazines, letters, advertisements and non-prose texts (everyday notices, maps and charts) are analysed in didactic terms considering some activity types as well as the possible benefits and drawbacks as far as teaching is concerned.

Key words: Teaching English, authentic materials, newspapers, advertisements, maps.

Resumen

El artículo resume los principales tipos de materiales auténticos que se pueden emplear en la clase de inglés con alumnos de secundaria. Para ello, se recogen ejemplos de actividades especialmente motivadoras en las que se utilizan materiales como periódicos, revistas, cartas, anuncios y textos no prosaicos (noticias, carteles, mapas y cuadros). Del mismo modo estas actividades son analizadas en términos didácticos valorando las posibles ventajas y desventajas que pueda conllevar su utilización.

Palabras clave: Enseñanza de Inglés, materiales auténticos, periódicos, anuncios, mapas.

1.   INTRODUCTION

The main aim of the present paper is to give an account on the essential procedures to use with authentic material in English language teaching.

Generally speaking, the reading skill is essential in our everyday life, and of course, in the academic one, since, as HARMER (1998, 68) points out, it constitutes a real exposure to writing and it provides "opportunities to study language: vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and the way we construct sentences, paragraphs and texts". Thus, the English teacher has to take advantage of that skill, but, as it occurs with the other receptive skill (listening) he cannot forget that communication is one of the essential purposes when learning a language, and he has to make the students aware of that.

Text selection is an essential task on the part of the teacher, and this, as SPRATT, (1985, 64-65) explains, has to be done "according to the student's interests (…) the authenticity of language (…) and the variety of formats, register and text organization". In the same way, ÁLVAREZ, BROCA & BRUNTON (1994) point out that secondary students are fond of reading songs, comics and magazines, and information "not available in Spanish". (BRUNTON, 1995).

Taking these ideas as a referent, this paper is precisely focused on this aspect, as far as choosing authentic, non-authentic or simulated material will have an important effect on the part of our pupils.

1.1. WHY USE AUTHENTIC MATERIAL?

Authentic texts are "those which are designed for native speakers, they are real texts designed not for language students, but for speakers of the language in questions." (HARMER, 1991).

On the other hand, non-authentic texts present us with certain features which indicate us their *artificiality* such as well formed sentences all the time, unvaried language (the use of a certain tense or vocabulary); in fact, on most occasions some materials are not created for the sake of reading in itself, but for teaching a specific structure or vocabulary item. On some instances, such lack of real-like texts may provoke the reader's incapacity to face real texts, such as a newspaper, a map, or an advertisement.

However, there are many teachers that tend to reject authentic materials, mainly because learners won't be able to understand them properly, the vocabulary will be too difficult and the structure will be "convulsed and the style will finish them off" (HARMER, 1998). Then, certain teachers claim that different text types should be employed according to the purpose, that is to say: special texts for teaching grammar and vocabulary, and real-like ones for the reading skill in itself.

So, as this debate is still open, Harmer provides a conclusive view that may be of interest here by introducing a third text type, the so called *authentic- simulated,* that imitates the authentic one in the following way:

> "A balance has to be struck between real English on one hand and the student's capabilities on the other. (…) We may want to offer texts, which, while being like English, are nevertheless written, or adapted especially for their level. The important thing is that such texts are as much like real English as possible". (HARMER, 1998).

2.   AUTHENTIC WRITTEN MATERIALS: EXAMPLES, ACTIVITIES AND ANALYSIS

The following section tries to give account of the main authentic materials available. It is important to bear in mind that the activities presented for any reading text can be done with these type of passages (reading comprehension questions, summarizing, skimming, scanning...) but, in this account, only a few original activities will be reproduced.

2.1.Newspapers and magazines

According to GRUNDY (1993, 8) one of the main reasons for introducing newspapers in the English classroom is that they not only constitute authentic material, but also, our responses to the information given are authentic. In that sense, another essential reason for reading them is to enable the student to get in touch with certain cultural clues of the given country. Nowadays, the importance of online press can also help us to introduce a greater variety of materials as well as a direct source of information of students. Therefore, it has to be understood that the activities that will be presented below also serve with online newspapers.

In addition to this, GARCÍA and BEJARANO (2001,16) claim that newspapers may be a means to teach human values in the classroom, such as solidarity, trust, charity, obedience…

Notwithstanding, apart from newspapers, magazines can be included here, since they may be a way to connect with the student's interests: we can take magazines for young people talking about their music idols, social matters, cinema, even beauty or sports. Obviously, any activity proposed in relation to newspapers may be applicable to this medium.

2.1.1. Activities

-Headlines: Headlines are a good way to create expectations and make students want to read, creating a real communicative need. Some examples of activities with headlines are enumerated as follows:

1. Guessing what a headline refers to.
2. Compare different headlines on an item of news to see the difference among newspapers (creation of a critique reader).
3. Brainstorming the ideas suggested by a headline.
4. Match the headline with the right article.
5. Create headlines for articles.

-Help wanted Ads: This particular part of a newspaper is useful in order to introduce vocabulary related to employment, specially the typical abbreviations and words used in such medium. Some examples of activities using help wanted ads are enumerated as follows:

      1. Find out suitable employments.

      2. Skimming: answer specific questions: "Is the payment for x good?" "Is the job x full or part time?"

-Articles: Dealing with articles both skimming and scanning activities can be done. Depending on the purpose different types of activities can be done: personal response, questions, speaking and writing. Some more examples are enumerated as follows:

      1. Examine in detail a newspaper and evaluate it in relation to its usefulness (sensationalist, objective, boring, good for business).

      2. Talking about the stories students would like to read in a paper (and create them, if possible).

      3. Search for differences between national and English newspapers.

      4. Jigsaw reading: mixing the same story taken from two newspapers and trying to order it and separate both papers.

      5. Invent extra information on a story (a conclusion, biographical data) inserting it in the appropriate place of the article.

      6. Values debate on a topic of their interest.

      7. Expand an article into a TV news-report or interview. It is a way to make the readable text something "touchable", in a sense.

-Pictures: Pictures are not exclusive from this medium, and, as a consequence, they may be employed in advertisements, comics, diagrams, instruction sheets…

      1. Match pictures and stories.

      2. Invent biographical data on a person in a photograph.

      3. Interview with a picture.

      4. Finding pictures for stories (drawing and using different types of materials).

      5. Predicting articles and headlines for a picture.

2.1.2. Advantages and disadvantages

The main advantages of using newspapers and magazines may be:

-Authentic format.

-Interesting subjects.

-Teaching human values.

-Creative work.

-Source of new vocabulary items as well as colloquial expressions.

-Creative activities (on some occasions) implying variety of subjects and skills.

-Visual aids.

-Familiarisation with the medium of press written in English and its features.

On the contrary, the following disadvantages can be also mentioned:

-No good models for writing (journalistic style and certain uses of language, which are not very well regarded).

-They tend to be time consuming.

-Need for material (variety of newspapers, photocopies or online materials with the subsequent online connection and computers).

2.2.Advertisements

The use of advertisements may be useful in relation to both receptive skills, since there are good examples of this in television, radio and press. Sometimes they are presented in textbooks, and they may introduce creativity in the classroom. Even more, in a deeper sense, they contain a great deal of rhetorical language, and they may be an interesting way to set up notions such as metaphor, simile, comparison, irony…
In that sense, GARCÍA AND BEJARANO (2001, 17) point out that this kind of medium can be sued to teach students certain moral clues underlying marketing.

2.2.1. Activities

Considering the ideas already mentioned, advertisements can be used to teach human values by means of ethical dilemmas. Together with them, the visual component of advertisements can be analysed (description, relationship with the text or with the

product…). Here, most activities already mentioned in relation to pictures in press are applicable.

For creative classes, the creation of an advertisement from existing ones, or dealing with new products (project work) may be a really profitable task in which both written and oral skills may be employed.

Finally, an interesting activity related to productive skills may be representing an existing advertisement or a new one (sort of role-play) in which some students of the classroom may be involved.

2.2.2. Advantages and disadvantages

The main positive points in advertisements may be the following:

-Interesting for young people.

-Variety of style and rhetorical language.

-Visual support.

-Teaching of human values.

-Creativity.

On the contrary, some drawbacks may be:

-Need for material.

-Time consuming.

2.3. Letters

The importance of including letters in this analysis goes hand in hand with the fact that letters are an authentic format of language that appears every day in our lives. It is certain that letter writing is taught in textbooks with all the possibilities it shows (formal, informal…).

This type of text enables teachers to make all sorts of activities related to reading or writing, always using established patterns, but, with the possibility of studying any sort of vocabulary and many fixed expressions.

In addition to this, it is worth mentioning electronic mail (as it should be internet as a source of authentic material) that is a special type of it that is becoming even more

popular and is even getting its own code, and, it is for certain that it is a good way to introduce English.

2.3.1. Activities

The typical reading comprehension activity may be used together with the typical activity of writing a letter to a friend or to a letter in the textbook.

For stronger classes students can also play games such as jigsaw letters in which there are some scrambled parts of letters or simply some parts of some letters are missing and students have to guess the missing parts, invent them or put them in order.

All these activities may have a real counterpart if students have real penfriends to write real letters to.

2.3.2. Advantages and disadvantages

The major advantages of this kind of texts are:
- Everyday format and situations.
- Vocabulary and structures practice.
- No need for material.
- We may combine reading and writing and obtain good models for the latter.

Some disadvantages that can be mentioned are the following:
- Students tend to reject writing letters without a real purpose, since it is not communicative: we have to achieve a real purpose and audience for it (penfriends).

2.4. Non-prose texts: Everyday notices, graphs, labels, comics.

The major reason for teaching these particular sorts of texts is that they are realistic and that students will find them everywhere if they go abroad (and on some occasions even in our country). They are not only useful for academic purposes, but also for specific ones (engineering, business…), and, at the same time, they constitute a type of reading material that is not commonly seen in textbooks.

2.4.1. Maps

Different sorts of maps can be used such as maps from public transportation, cities, and roads. Their traditional use is that of giving directions, establishing routes…
In addition to them, tourists' sheets, can be added because they not only contain maps, but also information about the places to visit in a given city…The activities to do with them will depend on their features (for instance, if they are from a museum we can create different situations from those related to a city).

2.4.1.1.Activities

The classical activity type is that of practising listening and speaking activities related to the lexical field of giving directions, for example by means of a role play. This activity is related to the students' real life because if can happen to anyone in a touristic place.
Another original role-play may be that of interpreting the role of a city or a museum tourist guide. This kind of role play may also force students to learn some cultural elements of a determined place.
 A very original type of task is that of creating a city map or a propagandistic sheet of it. This activity may be a really creative one and even competitive if a contest is created among the members of the class. This task may be especially profitable with young students.

2.4.1.2.Advantages and disadvantages (also applicable for charts, graphs and tables)

The main advantages may be the following:
- -Everyday life situations.
- -Creative.
- -Students can give their personal opinion.
- -Variety of vocabulary involved.

The main drawbacks may be the following:
- -Sometimes, they rely too much on visuals rather than on the text.
- -Complicated for some students.

-Graphs and tables are not really motivating for many people, whereas maps may be.

-Certain activities are rather time consuming (e.g. drawing a table or chart taking as a reference certain data).

2.4.2. Charts, graphs and tables

As SILBERSTEIN (1948, 38) points out, charts, graphs and tables are not only useful in technical prose, since they are commonly employed even in newspapers and magazines, and sometimes it is necessary to interpret them, using the appropriate vocabulary. Thus, they may be a good means to combine reading and writing and to introduce interdisciplinarity in the English classroom.

2.4.2.1. Activities

A basic kind of activity that can be done with everyday notices is the typical: "Where would you find the following notices?" in which students have to identify the place in which some notices can be found. Together with this, they can also rewrite the notices in standard language.

Graphs and tables are an interesting way of introducing social and natural sciences in the class by means of activities like interpreting the meaning of tables; depending on the age and level of students they can be asked for interpreting more complex tables or even writing a commentary as a sort of conclusion for one. In the same way, this activity type may be really profitable in bilingual schools in which all subjects can be taught in English.

Tables on social topics (cost of something, population, rates or food and so on) may work as well, if students are asked for comments on them or even simple questions after a quick scan.

2.4.3. Instructions sheets and product label information

The use labels and instructions sheets may be certainly as varied as their own nature: they are used to repair or prepare a device, to cook and to do many common activities.

Therefore, they are easy to prove students that English can be useful for their everyday lives.

2.4.3.1. Activities

A really profitable activity can be done with products label information since in almost all the products at home there are labels written in different languages, thus, it may be a means to introduce reading in their everyday habits. Thus, as SILBERSTEIN (1994, 28) points out, it may be useful to acquire new vocabulary items or reinforce others already familiar to the students.

In the same way, students can be asked to take food labels or instruction sheets (from food, from recipes, from any sort of machinery) written in English to use them in class, read them and explain (or revise) the vocabulary items.

2.4.3.2.Advantages and disadvantages

Some of the possible advantages may be the following:

-Variety of formats and vocabulary.

-Everyday life situations.

-Material available everywhere.

-Practice of structures (imperative in instructions, verbs...).

Some of the possible disadvantages may be:

-Activities do not seem to be very amusing.

-Time consuming.

-Not useful in terms of production (as a way of practising writing).

2.4.4. Comic strips

One of the most enjoyable ways of reading for young people is that of comic strips. Teaching the special features of this genre among our students may be profitable, and may make them want to read. Apart from this, we can take advantage of certain elements of comics, such as the visual aids that they offer.

Linguistically speaking, comics also offer certain positive properties, such as "slang, hip expressions, as well as a large assortment of morpho-syntactic elements that are set in a very natural context" (MUSIOL, 1995).

2.4.5. Activities:

Many activity types can be done with comics, ranging from the lowest to the highest level. In a very basic position students can reorganise the different vignettes in a comic strip or summarise one.

In a bit more complex level, they can fill in the balloons, which involves taking information from context and producing language.

With a higher difficulty, students can create their own cartoon as a project work. Here, creativity is also involved. In the same way, students can also make a role play based on a situation from a popular comic strip. This activity would be highly motivating because it includes reading, writing and speaking skills.

Finally, certain comics can be interrelation with literature, however, it is necessary to have the appropriate material, such as a version of a literary work in this format. The comic will seem to be more appealing and motivating to the students.

2.4.6. Advantages and disadvantages

Some possible benefits may be:

- -Visual support.
- -New register and vocabulary items.
- -Variety of style, topics.
- -Motivating.

Some possible drawbacks may be:

- -Time consuming.
- -Too much reliance on pictures.
- -Not good model for writing.
- -Need for material.

3.   CONCLUSION

Taking as a reference this paper, it is necessary to hammer home the idea of using authentic and authentic-simulated material in the English class, as far as it enables us to familiarize our students with real English and communication. Taking into consideration both listening and reading, this sort of material may be encouraging, depending on the topics and formats used (for instance, news tend to be more interesting than an abstract).

However, it is important to consider certain drawbacks that have been previously mentioned in the sections devoted to it in each specific material. Those possible problems are related, first of all, to the necessity for certain type of material (such as newspapers, sheets…) Secondly, it is necessary to bear in mind that some tasks are rather time consuming, not only on the part of the teacher, but also on the part of the student, and, on some occasions, the time spent is too much in contrast with the results obtained. Thirdly, certain types of authentic material do not seem appealing for secondary education students, as it is the case of instructions sheets, however, they may be useful as a teaching aid. Finally, it is important to bear in mind that certain texts are not good models for writing (comics, and even journals and magazines) and also that sometimes these texts present a great difficulty for the students and they should be adapted in order not to discourage our pupils.

Eventually, it is important to remark the idea of using other sorts of authentic material such as prose extracts, poetry and drama, for the only sake of reading them and getting in touch with literature, and to a certain extent, use the authentic materials already proposed in order to promote this (comics, articles…).

Just to put in a nutshell, we will retake an idea that we have already proposed, that of variety of texts and activities, as far as students need to study all sorts of formats, not only to avoid boredom, but also to analyse the variety of materials we are exposed in real life and to feel that learning English is not only something to do in class, but everywhere.

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