

# How to Increase Authenticity in the EFL Classroom

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Authenticity in English teaching is a much-discussed issue, especially in terms of how authenticity relates to the use of English in EFL environments. Although authenticity in the past has been mainly used to refer to characteristics of texts that are created for use outside the classroom, current understandings of authenticity go beyond this simplistic definition to include concerns about the authenticity of the tasks used in the classroom, the ways both teachers and learners authenticate the language, texts and tasks used in the classroom, and the social beliefs about what is authentic. This paper describes different facets of authenticity and then presents some practical ways English language teachers working in EFL environments can increase authenticity in their own classrooms in terms of each of these facets.

英語教育における真正性は特にオーセンティシティーが EFL 環境での英語の使用にどのように関係するかという点で、よく議論される問題である。これまでの真正性は、主に教室の外で使用するために作成されたテキストの特徴を指すために使用されてきたが、現在の真正性の理解は、この単純な定義を超えて様々な懸念を含んでいる。一つは教室で使用される課題の信憑性、また、教師と学習者の両方がどのように言語、テキスト、課題の真正性を保つか、最後に何が本物であるかについての社会的信念に基づく問題視されている。この調査では、真正性のさまざまな側面について説明し、EFL 環境で働く英語教師がこれらの各側面に関して自分の教室での真正性を高めることができるいくつかの実践的な方法を示唆する。

What most teachers think of when talking about authentic materials in the classroom are materials such as newspapers or films, which are usually not part of the regular syllabus. While materials such as these have often been used as examples of authentic language use, authenticity in the classroom is much more complicated than simply bringing a film or newspaper into the classroom. This paper will explore the idea of authenticity as part of a process of authentication

by language learners and teachers. Broader social ideas about what is and isn't authentic will also be touched upon, and finally how authenticity in the language classroom can be increased will be examined.

## **Authentication by learners and teachers**

The concept of authenticity has come to be viewed as a process rather than a characteristic of a particular text or task (Pinner, 2014; Pinner, 2016; Van Lier, 1996). This process of authentication is characterized by the user granting legitimacy to a particular piece of language, language variety, language text, or language task through recognizing it as a credible, legitimate example of the language. The process of authentication therefore involves issues of prestige and power. Language varieties, language texts, or language tasks that have been acknowledged as being authentic are seen as reflecting the most typical, sought-after traits of the language and therefore gain prestige in the eyes of language users. In the field of sociolinguistics, Coupland (2003) argued that “because authentic things are ratified in the culture, often occupying prominent symbolic positions, they have definite cultural value. They are revered and endorsed as mattering” (p. 419).

An example of the process of authentication might be when language learners view the language used in television programs as being more authentic than the language presented in the textbook. In this case, learners may perceive the television program as being a more desirable model of the language due to its perceived authentic status. The process of authentication can therefore be thought of as both an individual act of perceiving a piece of language as authentic, and an act of accepting wider social beliefs about the authenticity of the language. Broader social perceptions will be discussed further in the section on social authenticity. It should be noted that perceptions of authenticity are subjective and may change depending on the context in which a language learner finds themselves. Therefore, it is possible that the same television program may be perceived as less authentic by language learners if it is presented in the language classroom in short, decontextualized segments.

Language varieties are also authenticated by language users and learners. An

example of this is how American English has become equated with standard, native-speaker English in Japan and is the variety which most Japanese people strive to emulate. This variety has come to represent authentic English for many Japanese people, and it has the prestigious honor of being the model used for compulsory English education in most schools. Beliefs surrounding native-speakerism have an impact on beliefs about what is authentic in terms of language (Pinner, 2019). Therefore, when thinking about the relative authenticity of the language classroom, it is also important to think about how native-speakerism may influence learners' reactions to the language and texts used in the classroom.

Unfortunately, users of language varieties which differ from the variety which has been granted authentic status may feel disempowered by the low status and power that they perceive to be associated with their language variety. Kubota (2016), writing about the difficulties of revitalizing heritage languages, commented that "fixed authentication creates a feeling of shame and reluctance to learn or use a . . . language among . . . youths, who lack the ability to use a *correct* form of the language" (p. 483, emphasis in original). By defining and legitimizing one language variety or aspect of a language as authentic, users of other varieties, as well as second language (L2) learners of the language, can become disempowered because they may view their variety as deficient.

Teachers in English as a foreign language (EFL) environments can help to address this issue by providing students with information about the wide variety of Englishes used in the world today and the growth of the use of English as lingua franca by L2 speakers of English (Galloway & Rose, 2017). Within this context, use of resources from the students' first language (L1) often occurs, and it is one way that language users may choose to authenticate their language.

Appropriation of relevant linguistic resources from the L2 can occur, as well as reinvention of some of those resources, to better reflect the user's identity. Canagarajah (2013), in his book on translingual practice, gives an example of a dialogue between two businesspeople in which the meaning of the word "blowing" is negotiated and comes to mean that a cheese is off or bad. This word, with its new meaning, is used by the businesspeople in several interactions and comes to be an accepted, normal term in their conversations. This example shows

that authentication can be a very context- and time-specific act. This aspect of authentication is therefore about recognizing a specific way of using language as “a legitimate expression of social identity... [rather than viewing] nativized English variants as incorrect and deficient” (Guido, 2012, p. 221).

Authentication can therefore be both an empowering and disempowering phenomenon. In the EFL setting, teachers can take advantage of the empowering characteristics of authentication by encouraging learners to negotiate local ways of expressing their identities and environment through the L2. By acknowledging the dynamic and context-dependent nature of what people view as authentic, teachers can help learners to envision the possibility of their own language variety becoming authentic.

## **Social authenticity**

Of course, learners as and teachers are situated within the ideologies of specific social groups and contribute to these social ideologies (Ushioda, 2020). For example, Seargeant (2005) points out that authentic English in Japan is often positioned as being outside of Japanese society; it is typically seen to be in the domain of native English speakers rather than something that can occur in a non-native speaker context. Non-native speakers may hold views which prevent them from imagining themselves as authentic speakers of an L2. In the Japanese context, some have argued that “Japanese people may define their continued weakness in English as part of a cultural narrative of Japaneseness” (Toh, 2015, p. 127). Teachers in EFL environments therefore need to be sensitive to the social ideologies surrounding their classroom and not assume that a local English variety or authentic texts drawn from the local environment will be welcomed unquestionably by students.

An additional concern could be the social reality of the classroom and expectations of what teaching should look like. Because the classroom represents its own “valid reality where language is both learned and used and experienced” (Pinner, 2016, p. 167), complications surrounding authenticity should not be dismissed. For example, students may expect language teachers to behave in certain ways and the lesson to follow a certain structure. It may be that certain

“institutionalized educational enterprise[s], and in particular . . . the classroom, force certain ways of speaking [and performing] upon us which prevent [authentic interaction]” (Van Lier, 1996, p. 158). This could be especially true in cultures in which teacher-fronted lessons are the norm.

Nevertheless, since “learners need rich and authentic input and meaningful interactional feedback as well as opportunities to produce and modify output” to successfully acquire language (Mackey, Ziegler, & Bryfonski, 2016, p. 113), teachers should strive toward creating a classroom environment which allows for authentic interaction. It is therefore important to remain sensitive to the existing social and cultural ideologies surrounding the language classroom and remain aware of how these ideologies might affect learner responses.

## **Text authenticity**

Authenticity is equated with the real world, and in that sense texts such as newspapers or films, which have been created for L1 use, may appear to embody authenticity. However, teachers will soon realize that films and newspapers are used in the L2 classroom in ways that often do not reflect how these materials are used in the world outside of the classroom. For example, a film is usually too long to use within the timeframe of a single lesson, so films are frequently cut into manageable chunks. Authenticity therefore depends not only on the origins of the material but also on whether it has been subject to any sort of manipulation. Language teachers may avoid using authentic texts because of the difficulty of the language used, the length of the text, or the suitability of the topic. However, if language learners themselves find a text intrinsically interesting, they tend to tolerate a certain amount of ambiguity (“An interview with Brian Tomlinson...,” 2021). Even when full-length, unsimplified authentic texts are used in class, students are often asked to answer comprehension questions and fill in worksheets rather than engage in an activity that more closely mirrors what we would usually do after using such a text in “the real world,” e.g., discuss a film or book with friends or on social media.

Authenticity is therefore about more than simply bringing a certain type of material into the classroom. Teachers need to be concerned about how the

materials are used, perceived, and chosen. One way of ensuring that language learners are interested in the texts is to allow them to choose which ones they wish to study.

## **Task authenticity**

On the one hand, language learning tasks may be thought to be authentic if they reflect tasks that are carried out in the world outside the classroom. For example, doing a role-play task of ordering food reflects a situation that we often experience in our lives when we visit restaurants or cafes. This type of authenticity is what Ellis (2003) termed *situational authenticity*. On the other hand, Ellis argued that even tasks which do not reflect real-world situations could have *interactional authenticity* if they elicit the types of language and behavior that are often used outside the classroom. Ellis (2003) gave the example of an information gap task in which students describe pictures to each other to discover differences between the pictures. Although they are unlikely to perform this task in real life, the negotiation skills required are something that could be used in real-world interactions.

In addition to situational and interactional authenticity, the authentic task should be designed so that the students have sufficient awareness of the original context (linguistic, social, cultural, and historical) in which a text would be used, or which a task is designed to reflect (Besse, 1981; Lee, 1995). Authentic texts drawn from one country, such as a newspaper from the United States, may lack authenticity as perceived by students from another country such as Japan, who lack the political or social background knowledge to understand the newspaper articles. This lack of background knowledge will then hamper the degree to which learners are able to express themselves in response to the article. Likewise, a role-play activity on helping tourists navigate a complicated metropolitan train system relies on students having knowledge of the train system used and therefore may be inappropriate for students from rural areas that lack such a system. This is not to say that learners will be unable to deal with novel content. Rather, the point is that content of which learners have little background knowledge will require a lot more pre-task preparation before learners can be ready to respond

to the content in an authentic fashion.

In addition to sufficient contextual knowledge, Mishan and Strunz (2003) and Guariento and Morley (2001) also suggested that authentic tasks should lead toward a definite communicative goal or outcome. Guariento and Morley (2001) argued that a “crucial aspect . . . of task authenticity is whether real communication takes place; whether the language has been used for a genuine purpose” (p. 349) as opposed to having students simply produce “language forms correctly” (p. 349). This aspect of task authenticity helps to define authentic tasks as different from language drills or language practice. When tasks have a real communicative purpose, the students feel a need to use the language to communicate in some way with others, and this output generally leads to a response from the people they are communicating with. It is important to note that authentic tasks allow for a wide range of responses by learners, rather than encourage the use of set phrases or set patterns of response.

## **How can we increase authenticity in the classroom?**

Although authenticity in language teaching is often assumed to relate only to the type of texts used in the classroom, it should now be clear that there are various facets to authenticity, which all contribute to authenticity in the classroom. In terms of text authenticity, teachers may want to supplement existing materials with materials which have not been created especially for L2 learners. This will give them a chance to be exposed to language as it occurs in the real world outside the classroom. In deciding which authentic texts to bring into the classroom, teachers should consider whether learners have the necessary background knowledge to be able to engage with the texts in an authentic manner, or whether this background knowledge can be easily supplied to the learners. If authentic texts are presented to students without provision of sufficient background information and language scaffolding, this “will likely result in frustration rather than increased motivation” (Zyzik & Polio, 2017, p. 7).

Texts should exemplify the varieties of English that learners are most likely to encounter outside the classroom. These types of texts will help students become

aware of the types of English they are likely to encounter in the present or near future. Additionally, authentic texts should ideally be used in class in a manner similar to how they are used in the real world. For example, needs analyses of Japanese businesspeople have shown that negotiating the meanings of various Japanese and English translations with L2 English-speaking businesspeople and L1 English speakers, both via email and orally, are important skills for international business in Japan (Aikawa, 2014; Lambert, 2010; Nakamura, 2014). Business email threads where meaning is negotiated could offer a jumping-off point for students to attempt their own email writing.

To ensure the tasks that learners engage in in the classroom reflect tasks that they will perform outside the classroom, teachers need to be knowledgeable about learners' current and future needs. A needs analysis of the kind introduced in the previous paragraph can be extremely useful for identifying which tasks are most necessary in the lives of learners beyond the language classroom (Long, 2015). Many educational institutions have students fill in questionnaires about their career paths upon graduation, and this information is usually available to the public for recruitment purposes. This type of data could provide insight into what types of work learners need to be prepared for. While this type of research has the benefit of offering teachers immediate insight into the fields graduates are heading into, it should be emphasized that texts and tasks which mirror language use in these fields are not guaranteed to be perceived as authentic by learners. This is largely due to learners' limited personal experience of working, which influences their beliefs about language use and subsequent authentication of classroom tasks. Tasks therefore need to be sensitively created to provide learners with sufficient background knowledge so that they can perceive the tasks as relevant to their own lives.

A final way of increasing authenticity in the classroom is striving to ensure that classroom interaction allows learners to adequately express themselves. Allowing time for natural chat and small talk in the classroom is one relatively easy way that teachers could increase authenticity. A classroom environment that respects learners' identities by offering learners opportunities to express their beliefs and opinions in the L2 can help to ensure that learners learn how to express their



authentic selves through the L2 (Ushioda, 2020). Learners who can function in various L2 situations but are unable to do so in a way that reflects their own sense of identity are likely to find L2 use demanding and oppressive, rather than challenging but engaging and thought-provoking. A personal example comes from a recent study-abroad program to the UK which I chaperoned. Although students in the program felt that they had lots of opportunities to communicate in English, about one third of them felt they could not adequately express their personal opinions and beliefs. These students all requested that future English language classes at the university include more opportunities for exploring personal viewpoints in English.

## **Conclusion**

The language learning classroom need not be seen as divorced from the real world. Authenticity in the classroom can be increased not only by introducing example texts from the world beyond the classroom, but also by ensuring that what learners are doing with the language inside the classroom reflects how they will be expected to use it upon leaving the classroom. In addition, learners and teachers can authenticate the language that is used both inside and outside the classroom by acknowledging the varied and dynamic nature of language and accepting a wider variety of language as legitimate and valid. The environment in which language learning takes place should also give learners the opportunity to freely express themselves through the L2 in a way that positively reflects and develops their own identity.

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