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Making it real: authenticity as a process

Abstract

The notion of authenticity has been an important and often controversial term in language education for the last thirty years (Widdowson 1979; Breen 1985). In the last few years, the debate related to authenticity has resurfaced. It has been a central part of the debate between Waters (Waters 2009; Waters 2009) and Simpson (Simpson 2009) in this journal and it has also been discussed in several other recent publications (Gilmore 2007; O'Donnell 2009; Roberts and Cooke 2009). We feel that part of the problem is that authenticity is often conceptualised as simply a matter of bringing a text into a language classroom and that many of the issues related to authenticity can be resolved with a more sophisticated understanding of the term.

The view that we would like to develop here is that Waters argues that authenticity has been imposed by applied linguists in language teachers and that this has, in some sense, led to a disempowerment of language teachers and there is something slightly dispiriting in the view of the language classroom as a second rate version of what happens outside the classroom. However, we share Simpson's doubts about whether this is the influence of applied linguistics (2009: 432). There is relatively little applied linguistic research on the impact of authentic language on language learning and much second language acquisition research seems to draw on constructed language data (e.g. Pienemann 2006). However, we do think that the discourse related to authenticity is problematic in at least two ways. Firstly, the concept of authenticity is used to justify more than it should and secondly, and more fundamentally, it is based on a product view of authenticity which leads to a lack of clarity when the term is used in language education. Both of these factors mean that the role of pedagogic decisions in the use of authentic language can be obscured.

Water's comments on the dangers of treating authenticity as a moral imperative and there is a sense in which authenticity has a kind of halo effect. Waters identifies commentators who link authenticity to native speaker texts and motivation and he himself sees authenticity as obliging teacher to use texts that are too hard for their learners.

The principle of authenticity for language samples is that we should use texts which are not designed for language teaching purposes. This principle emerged in the 1970s from concerns with the constructed texts that were produced as part of audio-lingual and situational methods of language teaching which now read slightly oddly. Language samples which emerged from non-language learning contexts are a better representation of language use outside the classroom. We find it hard to argue against this view but it is important to recognise the limits of the principle. For example, it says nothing about whether the producers of the language are native or non-native speakers. Authentic language is produced by both groups of language users.

A similar point can be made about motivation and level of difficulty. Both motivation and level of difficulty are a function of the interaction between particular texts and particular language learners. What is motivating for some users will be boring for others, what is easy for some language learners will be difficult for others. Authenticity says nothing about the motivational properties or the level of difficulty of a language sample.

The principle of authenticity indicates that contrived texts are less useful for language teaching but does not indicate which particular authentic text language teachers should use in the classroom. When teachers select a particular authentic text, they will consider factors

such as whether a particular text is motivating or at the right level of difficulty or whether learners will need to deal with native, non-native speakers or some combination of these. The principle of authenticity does not preclude pedagogic decisions by language teachers. Indeed, we would argue that a proper understanding of authenticity highlights where pedagogic principles should be applied.

The second argument relates to the conceptualisation of authentic language samples as products is a less obvious issue but this conceptualisation means that we see teachers' roles as taking authentic texts from one context and moving them into the classroom. This view has become so normal that it has not been explored to any great extent but we feel that it has been reinforced by the success of corpus linguistic investigations of authentic text products in producing descriptions of the grammar and vocabulary of many languages, particularly English (e.g. Sinclair 1987; Rundell 2002; Biber, Leech et al. 2003; Carter and McCarthy 2006). These descriptions represent one of the major, if not the major, advance in language description, over the last quarter of a century but, while some teachers will give their students authentic language products so that they can produce their own language descriptions, generally authentic language samples are used as a way of using the language. Students are primarily expected to read or listen to such texts rather than to exploit them as the basis of the development of their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Knowledge is possibly more easily related to product views of language and skills to process views.

There are relatively few discussions of authenticity as a process but Widdowson was clearly thinking on these lines in the last 1970s, albeit in a rather negative way.

I am not sure that it is meaningful to talk about authentic language as such at all. I think it is probably better to consider authenticity not as a quality residing in instances of language but as a quality which is bestowed upon them, created by the response of the receiver (1979: 165).

Widdowson sees the central aspect of this as what the writer or speaker intends.

Authenticity, then, is achieved when the reader realizes the intentions of the writer by reference to a set of shared conventions (1979: 166).

We would want to query the extent to which reading, or listening, can be seen as the realization of the writers or speakers' intentions rather than the outcome of some kind of negotiation between writers/speakers and readers/listeners. But, leaving this point aside, readers and listeners do more than interpret their interlocutors' intention. Field points out that, when we listen:

what reaches our ears is not a string of words or phrases or even a sequence of phonemes. It is group of acoustic features ... We must not think of the words or phonemes of connected speech as transmitted from speaker to listener. It is the listener who has to turn the signal into units of language (Field 2008: 127).

Similarly, what we think of as letters on a page or on a screen are just marks until we bring our knowledge of language to those marks. The process by which we treat "g" and "g" as the same and "p" and "q" as different has become so automatic that we do not even recognise there is a process. For the same reason, we think of texts as simply physical objects but texts are created by an interaction between the physical marks or on the paper or the sound waves in the air, what we might call the text product, and language users. When a teacher brings an authentic text product into the classroom and learners read it or listen to it, there is a new text and the authenticity is to be found in the degree of similarity between the text process in its

original context and as the text process in the classroom. This implies a more extensive role for teachers than simply that of porters bringing the text product into the classroom.

So White (1998: 61-62) suggests that a teacher reading a newspaper article might be pedagogically more effective than playing the recording of someone telling a story because this enables a degree of interactivity that is more similar to how the conversation originally took place. The reading is in some ways more authentic than the recording. In a different way, authenticity can serve to identify pedagogic gaps in language classes. Field (2008) describes the pre-listening stage of a typical listening class as having a focus on providing linguistic and world knowledge. These kinds of knowledge are elements in many psycholinguistic models of the listening process and can be seen as an attempt to make the listening more similar to listening outside the classroom, that is making it more authentic. However, this analysis also reveals that there is relatively little teaching of listening going on in such classes. In many reading and listening classes, there is too much focus on making what happens in the classroom as authentic as possible and not enough on helping learners to develop their skills so that they can read and listen independently.

This conceptualisation of authenticity also has wider implications as it sees language users as a necessary part of language and so is hard to reconcile with a Saussurean (Saussure de 1974) view of language as comprising a signifier and a signified. It fits in better with a Peircean view (Pierce 1965; Young 2008) of language as something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity (Pierce 1965: 135). This change in the conceptualisation of language moves us towards a view of the language classroom may help not as a kind of second rate version of the outside world but as a place with its own legitimacy (Breen 2001) and in which learners and teachers may work towards the development of what Simpson (2009:432) describes as authentic voices.

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