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Relevancy, Authenticity, Comprehensibility and Selection of EFL Materials

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Abstract

In order to select or create materials for classroom use, it helps to consider factors through which to make decisions. In this paper three factors-relevancy, authenticity and comprehensibility-are discussed and illustrated in relation to the decision making process about what materials to use in the EFL classroom. In question form, teachers can benefit from asking, "Does the material meet the needs and interests of the students?", "Is the language in the material used in real-life settings outside the classroom?", and "Will the material be comprehensible to the students, and if not, can the language be made comprehensible through negotiation with the students?"

A major part of a second/foreign language teacher's job is to provide students with materials through which they can gain in their linguistic and pragmatic abilities in the language. In order to select or create such materials it helps to consider factors through which to make decisions, and three factors—relevancy, authenticity, and comprehensibility—appear to be an important part of the decision making process. If materials are relevant to students needs and interests, are authentic, and are comprehensible to the students (or can be easily made so), language learning is possibly enhanced. In this paper the factors of relevancy, authenticity, and comprehensibility are considered, especially as to how teachers can make use of them as a means through which to select or create materials for classroom use.

Factor One: Relevancy

When selecting or creating materials for classroom use, one question worth asking is, "Does this material meet the needs and interests of the students?" Asking this question gives recognition to the idea that students enter second/foreign language programs for different reasons. Some students have educational goals; they study to pass entrance exams or to develop academic skills for university success. Others study for occupational or professional reasons, such as gaining the language skills needed to do international business, to work in the tourist industry or to attend professional conferences. Often, in combination with educational and occupational goals, students want to be able to socialize with native speakers of the language they are studying or to simply be able to

enjoy and understand literature (newspapers, journals, literary works) in the language.

Recognizing that an understanding of students' needs and interests is important, some curriculum designers in Thailand have done research on the needs of specific groups of students. For example, Wangstotorn *et al.* (1981) and Pongpaew, *et al.* (1988) (as reported in Wangsotorn, 1988), researched the English writing needs of government officials in Thailand. Likewise, Rattanapinyowong *et al.* (1988) researched the kinds of tasks university students at Mahidol University needed to do in English, especially medical students.

This approach to understanding needs of students in specific fields can provide the means through which materials can be selected or created before the students study. For example, Wangsotorn (1988) reports on a "bi-modality approach to program design", including the kinds of materials used in the program, based on research into Thai government officials' need to be able to write business letters, reports, articles, memos, notes, personal letters and social invitations and so on.

Jenks (1981), Johns (1985), Munby (1983), Nunan (1988a) and Yalden (1983, 1987) point out that in addition to curriculum designers, teachers, as syllabus designers, can also be active in discovering the needs and interests of students as a base from which to make decisions about course content. They suggest that during the first class meeting teachers have students complete questionnaires[1] (in English or the students' native language). These questionaires include questions about goals, interests, study habits, and language learning history. (See the appendix for an example of a questionnaire based on the ideas of the above educators).

The initial questionnaire is simply a way to begin to understand the students' goals and interests. As the course goes on, students discover new interests, and often they set new goals. As I point out elsewhere (Gebhard, 1987a, 1987b,) to clarify and learn more about students' needs and interests, the teacher can use on-going informal interviews and direct observation. For example, it is possible to observe (and keep a journal about) the kinds of reading materials students carry with them, as well as what students tell each other and the teacher related to their "real life challenges". Based on this new information, additional materials can be introduced which are relevant to the students' specific needs and interests.

Factor Two: Authenticity

Besides asking whether or not materials meet the needs and interests of the students, teachers can also ask, "Is the language in the material used in real-life settings outside the classroom?" This question refers to both language used in ESL/EFL texts (i.e., dialogues), tapes for listening practice, and commercially produced video tapes for language teaching.

Porter and Roberts' (1987) study of EFL listening materials provides an emphatic statement about how stilted materials can indeed be. After analyzing commercially-made listening materials used for EFL teaching, they discovered that what students listen to is not "natural" language. Intonation "resembles that which indulgent mothers use to babies', (p. 177); enunciation is done with excessive unnatural precision; speakers use

complete sentences, avoiding normal fragmentation of linguistic structures; speakers take equal turns, instead of the normal one-sided interaction; there is an absence of attention signals normally found in conversation; vocabulary is "disengaged from the particularities of everyday life" (p. 178); there is too much information which makes explicit reference to objects, people and experiences than would normally be there in authentic situations.

As Porter and Roberts point out, there is a massive mismatch between the chacteristics of the discourse we normally listen to and use in real life and those which are taught to students. As a result, students are unable to transfer what they study to real discourse situations. Thus, to rectify this mismatch teachers need to select authentic language material for students to listen to, view, and read.

In short, authentic materials and media, and language appropriate to their use offer students chances to gain competence in language they encounter in their lives outside the walls of the classroom. And, in order to provide authenticity, it is possible to select texts and tapes which are based on the concept of authenticity (See Gebhard, 1987c, for a bibliography of texts and tapes which use authentic language).

In addition, it is possible for teachers, following the advice of Fanselow (1980, 1986) and Nunan (1988b), to directly observe what goes on outside classrooms in different settings, bringing the observed materials and media, and language appropriate to their use, into the classroom. This is what Nicholas (1988) proposes teachers do to provide students with authentic listening practice. He suggests teachers bring childrens' games such as "Simon Says", songs and jokes, and bingo into the classroom, all which make use of materials found outside classrooms.

It is also possible to base materials selection around a specific theme. For example, when I was teaching in Thailand, students asked me how difficult it would be to rent an apartment if they were to study in a U.S. city. Out of curiousity, when I went to the U.S. to visit, I went around with a friend who was searching for a place to live. I discovered that he read bulletin board notices and classified ads in newspapers, studied street maps and contracts, used the telephone to ask initial questions and arrange meetings, as well as negotiated face to face and on the telephone with the landlord. Functionally, he asked for information, expressed attitudes such as approval, preference, and interest, expressed likelihood and agreement, used formulaic communications such as greetings, introductions, and regret, and so on. And each function required him to understand and be able to express much information. This was evident through observations of the content of his questions. He asked, "When is the apartment available?", "Can I paint the rooms?", "How much is the rent?", "Are utilities included in the rent?", and many other such questions.

There were many benefits from doing this observation. When I returned to Thailand and later when teaching in China and New York City, I was able to create classroom activities, supplemented with some of the materials I had gathered and filed (i.e., classified adds, maps, contract, transcripts and tapes of actual discourse). For example, I provided chances for students to do listening

comprehension exercises of selected tape recorded conversations between a landlord and my friend and to go through a role-play simulation of the process of renting an apartment which included reading classified ads, locating a street address on a map, talking with a perspective landlord on the phone, meeting the landlord and asking pertinent questions, and reading and signing a contract.

The point of the example on renting an apartment is that teachers can venture outside of the usual classroom materials (books, tapes, workbooks) to provide authentic materials through which students can have exposure to and practice in using language directly appropriate to real life situations based on students' real life interests and needs. And, there are unlimited possibilities as to the authentic materials, and language appropriate to their use, that can be gathered in Thailand. For instance, it is possible for teachers to observe and collect materials and language samples around what goes on in the tourist industry (hotels, tour agencies, airline offices, airports, shops), in academic settings where English is used (classrooms, libraries), in businesses (banking, industry) and in social settings (foreign parties, special foreign holiday events).

Factor Three: Comprehensibility

Besides asking if materials meet the real-life needs and interests of the students and are authentic, it is also possible to ask, "Will the material be comprehensible to the students?" and "If the language in the material is beyond the students' level of comprehension, can I make it comprehensible?".

During the past decade the ideas of Steven Krashen (1980, 1982) have become well-known. He theorizes that for second language acquistion to take place, the student must have access to and be able to make use of "comprehensible input", that is, language which makes sense to the student. Krashen further suggests that language input needs to be at the student's "i + 1", in which the "i" stands for the student's current stage of grammatical development and the "1" stands for language which is just beyond the student's present comprehension.

At a practical level, I have found that if the language used in and around materials and media is not comprehensible to the students, they often become frustrated, lose interest, or spend endless hours looking words up in a dictionary, devoid of the context in which they were presented. Thus, my aim is to select or create materials which are highly comprehensible to students, but add some new information.

One way to attempt this is to take authentic materials and to simplify them to a level of comprehensibility for as many of the students as possible. This is what the writers of the In Touch series (Castro and Kinbrough, 1980) have done. They present learners with authentic materials (notes, newspaper articles, textbook excerpts, cross-word puzzles, maps, advertisements, post cards, letters, application forms, college transcripts...), but they also simplify the language to their estimate of the students' level of comprehension. As the students work through the series of books, the language becomes more and more complex.

Castro and Kinbrough also supply visuals to help learners process meaning by adding cartoons, drawings, and photos to go along with print, and this is another way which possibly makes language more com-

prehensible to students. Fanselow (1980) calls this "adding mediums".

Fanselow's approach provides a means for teachers to manipulate the types of mediums through which they can have learners process language. These categories include the mediums of linguistic aural (speech), linguistic visual (print), nonlinguistic aural (bird chirps, the sound of water flowing, the sound of the wind in the trees...), and paralinguistic (gestures, eye contact, touch, distance/use of space...). For example, if the students are to read an authentic restaurant menu and the text (linguistic visual/print) is too difficult for the students, the teacher and students can bring in or draw pictures of the food on the menu (adding a nonlinguistic medium), bring in real food items for students to taste and smell (nonlinguistic), write a short description of different foods (adding more linguistic visual), act out how a particular food is eaten, such as how to eat a plate of spaghetti with a spoon and fork or Japanese ramen with chop sticks (adding a paralinguistic medium).

As a final note to this section I want to point out that selecting comprehensible materials is not always easy, especially when the materials are authentic. To be realistic, it isn't always possible to give all students materials which they can easily comprehend. And, although adding mediums, as Fanselow suggests, can make some materials more comprehensible, it is also the teacher's job to make the materials comprehensible through other types of negotiation. This is why Long (1987) emphasizes that the teacher consistently provide opportunities for students to clarify (i.e., "Is a grilled cheese sandwich cooked?") and check comprehension ("Did you say that a grilled cheese sandwich is made with butter, cheese, and bread?"). It is through the use of such communicative strategies that students can work their way through materials, gaining a clearer understanding of the meaning and building success in comprehending them.

Conclusion

In this paper three factors have been discussed which can be used to guide selection and creation of ESL/EFL materials for classroom use. When selecting or creating materials, such as textbooks, listening materials, and so on, curriculum designers and teachers (as syllabus designers) can ask the following basic questions: "Will the material meet the students' real-life interests and needs?", "Is the language in the material used in real-life settings outside classrooms?", and "Will the material be comprehensible to the students, and if not, can the material be made comprehensible by simplifying it, adding mediums and providing students with chances to negotiate the meaning?"

Notes

My reason to use a questionnaire is not only to learn as much as I can about the students' real-life interests and needs but also to provide material through which a lesson can be taught. Thus, I find it useful to create a lesson out of the questionnaire. For example, students can study the questionnaire silently while doing different tasks, such as noting down which words and phrases they want to learn more about. They can also interview each other, using the questionnaire, and they can also work in small groups listing all the jobs they can think of, interests they have which are not on the questionnaire.

Appendix

Questionnaire

GOALS

Write a brief description of the job you hope to have in the future.

Which English language skills do you think you will need in the future and would like to work on in this class?

SKILL	NO INTEREST	MUCH INTEREST
Using everyday talk	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5	
Using the telephone	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5	
Interviewing for a job	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5	
Completing Job applica.	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5	
Reading tech. reports	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5	
Reading tech. guides	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5	
Using a word processor	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5	
Writing tech. reports	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5	
Writing business letters	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5	
Writing personal letters	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5	
Other:_____	1 - - - 2 - - - 3 - - - 4 - - - 5	

INTERESTS

How much interest do you have in doing the following activities?

SKILL	NO INTEREST				MUCH INTEREST
Listening to the radio	1	2	3	4	5
Listening to music	1	2	3	4	5
Watching TV comedy	1	2	3	4	5
Watching TV News	1	2	3	4	5
Going to the movies	1	2	3	4	5
Reading newspapers	1	2	3	4	5
Reading magazines	1	2	3	4	5
Reading fiction	1	2	3	4	5
Shopping	1	2	3	4	5
Playing card games	1	2	3	4	5
Traveling	1	2	3	4	5
Talking with friends	1	2	3	4	5
Learning about culture	1	2	3	4	5
Other: _____	1	2	3	4	5

Study Habits

How do you learn best?

	No	A Little	Good	Best
alone				
pairs				
small groups				
class				
outside class				

How much time is available for study now?

per day _____

per week _____

Where do you like to do homework?

in a classroom _____

at home _____

at the library _____

outside _____

public places _____

other _____

Do you like to learn English by:

cassettes _____

games _____

talking _____

studying books _____

watching TV _____

video tapes _____

songs _____

Which of the above is the most important to you?

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