

A Critique on Authentic Materials for Effective ESP Materials Design

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Abstract

Prof Widdowson's insightful coinage 'communicative incompetence' refers to the adequacy of schematic representations required by readers to make sense of texts of varied focus. His argument is that even the proficient users of a language may fail to adequately deduce the pragmatic meaning of texts even if they are written in 'simple' language. This position has significant pedagogical implications especially in the context of ESP. ESP contexts give importance to communicative context and purpose of communication, and construct texts that generally follow the conventions of discourse communities. Often the readers are forced to learn the conventions of communication to be part of the communities. These communicative conventions when practiced consistently by communities to fulfil certain purposes generally become authentic materials for pedagogues. The questions are whether these texts qualify to be pedagogic models of instruction; if so how best can we make use of them? This paper in the light of current discussion, critiques the views proposed by various experts in the field, both for and against 'authentic materials', and aims to suggest ways that can help ESP teachers design effective materials.

Key words: genre analysis, authenticity, corpus, ESP

Introduction

Establishing the Context of ESP in India

This section discusses the current trends of teaching English in India. Language development practices in the higher education institutions are found to have sublimated into narrowed-down views of teaching English to train the learners to speak English like 'native' speakers. A further conspicuous development in the direction is to view teaching oral communication skills as merely teaching them to produce the sounds of English and pronounce English words in the way the native speakers do. Such a narrow-angled view of communication skills as 'spoken' English together with the most abused view of communicative language teaching have been guiding teachers to channel their resources exclusively to teach English for speaking. Learners are made to speak and only speak, and teachers are asked to facilitate and only facilitate.

This model of English instruction has caused considerable imbalance in the academia that the prevalent gap between the *haves* and *have-nots* is widening day-by-day. The observable differences in proficiency, at the school level, do not seem to

hamper one's chances of getting a seat in a reputed institution though, at higher levels of education, the uncharted gaps between the individuals do strongly affect their chances of pursuing their academics as well as career options. It is here the difference between *haves* and *have-nots* becomes clearly perceptible.

It doesn't mean that all the 'haves' possess the knowledge of all the sub-skills at their disposal. While one set of learners exhibit acceptable levels of performance on some speaking activities, the same students fail to convincingly produce written texts in other activities. It was evident through classroom based observations that, students who came from some respectable regional medium background schools outperformed more than once the students from elite English medium schools on grammar tests, while the latter scored relatively very high scores on Vocabulary Size Tests. This gap is appalling! These noticeable gaps in the use of English prevail across all four skills as well. Some students, whose competence in comprehending *Big Bang Theory* (most popular tv show) is similar to a native speaker of English, fail to comprehend the academic lectures in their subject classrooms: They fail to relate the relevance of the content with their background knowledge. Similarly many students who successfully comprehend academic lectures are not able to share their views in group discussions. This communicative incompetence is pervasive and every student should know his weaknesses to be able to function well in various communicative acts.

English Teaching (ELT) at Higher Education

The practice of English teaching is now at crossroads. The teachers are confronted by a multitude of issues, preferences, and concerns: they have to strike a balance between the ideological pursuits of higher education and the institutional interests of employment opportunities while simultaneously promoting quality education to maintain international standards. Skewed perceptions of communication skills as one-size-fits-all spoken English will cause problems of wastage of resources and will twist the process of evaluation too. Given the fact that there is great disparity among the entrants in terms of using English, courses that address the individual language needs and are pitched at their level of competence be offered. We feel, the students whose entry level proficiency across all aspects is found to be below the threshold level should become the core groups to take the 'comprehensive' bridge courses while the ones with identifiable gaps in specific skills study 'specific' need-based bridge courses. However, it has to be ensured that every

attempt at this level should be directed at preparing the learners to cope with the demands, and not just engage in a mere coaching of rules of grammar or practicing pronunciation. The biggest challenge of English instruction at higher levels of education is not so much with objectively awarding reasonable marks; but to ensure that, the students apply their English language knowledge and skills. In order to ensure 'real' communication we also need to carefully examine the notion of what is 'real'.

Authenticity: Real or Genuine?

Professor Henry Widdowson is a renowned applied linguist. His contribution to the field is significant in terms of both theory and practice. His approach to applied linguistics is primarily pragmatic and emphasises the importance of learner engagement with meaning. One of his notable arguments is about the necessity of using "authentic" materials in the language classroom. In the last twenty or so years various positions with reference to what constitutes 'authenticity' have been discussed and debated. Authenticity of materials in the current research refers to two broad perspectives: the nature of the input texts that the learners are expected to work out, and the nature of the interaction between the text and the interpreter. While the former is the corpus linguists' perspective where their principles of language and language analysis are applied in language pedagogy, the latter is by experts such as Henry Widdowson, Adrian Holliday and Guy Cook. This paper provides insights into both the perspectives and discusses the credibility of arguments proposed in the present ESP contexts.

Corpus Based Language Teaching and Authentic Materials

Corpus pedagogues argue that the language for instruction should be drawn from *real* language in use[1]: language which primarily is used in certain communicative context by its users to fulfil certain communicative purposes. For example, research article on thermodynamics or molecular biology or applied linguistics, or a stretch of discourse that takes place at a hair cutting saloon. The justification for the relevance of using corpus in teaching and learning include that it presents language as it is used in real communicative contexts and provides the users with access to more than an instance of word/ phrase use across a range of text. These texts are 'genuine' to the extent that they have *not* been tampered to suit the classroom conditions. Un-tampered texts provide better insights about the texts the learners are supposed to produce.

Authenticity and Context Dependency

Professor Widdowson (Widdowson H., 1987) has reservations about the value of such an approach to ELT or ESP. He argues that for any language user to make sense of a text, he or she should have adequate schematic knowledge of the code as well as the contexts and discourse conventions. He says: "If the text does not textualise a discourse relationship between first person intention and second person interpretation then it remains inert as a linguistic object." [2]. Also, once the text is devoid of its context and becomes a part of corpus it loses its authenticity and only becomes "partially real" (Widdowson

H., 2000). In the words of Guy Cook [3] corpus fundamentally "obscures context". Keeping all these problems in view Widdowson [2] puts down the following points for our appraisal

- Simplicity of language is not to be equated with accessibility of meaning.
- Someone's inability to authenticate the text, their pragmatic incompetence, has nothing to do with their competence in the language.
- Communicative incompetence is *inescapable* and is just as evident in native speakers as in non-native speakers of a language.
- Communication is achieved when there is a measure of convergence between the worlds of the first and second person parties.

The key views are that no single learner or user can interpret a text in the way the writer intended unless the interpreter shares the common knowledge of the writer's beliefs, culture, code, conventions and knowledge of the field. And one's inability to not to interpret the text in the way the writer intended does not reflect his or her language ability.

Text, Context, and Authenticity

According to Widdowson our learners are potential members who wish to be inducted as legitimate members of a discourse community. Discourse communities generally accord membership only on those who have mastered the ways the discourse is created and used in achieving the purposes. Being novice practitioners of discourse conventions these learners need to be inducted in a specific way. It should be made clear here that the process of inducting a learner is not straightforward.

If we consider authenticity as a quality bestowed upon texts and created by the response of the reader and not as the quality of texts or as the unsimplified texts the scheme should consider the learner factors that influence interpretations. These factors include the knowledge of the learners of the ways the discourse is created and the cultural knowledge required to interpret the discourses. In fact the list includes more. In this perspectives, learners move from known to unknown, general to specific, and simple to complex where they are introduced to the conventions of the texts and their genres and cultures. On the other hand, if authenticity is conceptualized a property of texts, the textual factors such as standardization, real contexts are considered.

Standardization and Authenticity

Ever since computers and World Wide Web became part of our regular modes of communication and referencing, the boundaries between various cultural or ethnic communities were blurred. What exists now are discourse communities which engage in specific forms of discourse creation. These communities set out, implicitly or explicitly, certain guidelines or standards for the members to follow. These standards are simply referred to as conventions, which include the selection and use of register, move structures, textual patterns, fonts, referencing and the use of grammar, in addition to content and context preferences. While standardization as a norm is severely criticized for it promotes

hegemony, generally members of the communities strive hard to reach the expected levels of competence in using all the conventions mentioned above.

Corpus linguists promote text oriented pedagogy. In other words they aim to inform the learners with the possible ways one can manipulate the discourse conventions to achieve their communicative intents. Context-dependent pedagogues argue that the texts, used as either models or language learning tools, should first enable the readers to comprehend the conventions, which in subsequent attempts promotes discourse creations.

Genre Based Pedagogy: A Meeting Point

Hyland (2007) is a prominent figure in advocating genre-based language learning and teaching. He refers to genres as abstract and socially recognized ways of using language. He is of the opinion that genre based teaching and learning represents the changing views of what constitutes discourse and of learning. Language instruction, according to him should be targeted, relevant and supportive. And by helping teachers to build their courses around texts that their learners will need to produce in certain contexts we can experience the effective implementation of it. Genre based pedagogy (GBP) provides, for example, the learners entering academia with diverse linguistic, cultural and social backgrounds with appropriate writing schemata for their studies [4]. He opines that genre based pedagogy is robust in terms of its theory and research and can bridge the gap between their existing writing skills and the required skills. According to Hyland (2007) the key principals of GBP are:

- Writing is a social activity
- Learning to write is needs-oriented
- Learning to write requires explicit outcomes and expectations
- Learning to write is a social activity
- Learning to write involves learning to use language

OALD and Genre Pedagogy

As discussed above, in contexts where learners have the potential to make sense of complex patterns of discourse creation they can be taught the ways the genres are created across disciplines using Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (8th or 9th Editions)[5]. OALD typically structures genres into specific academic contexts. These contexts include: writing a comparison essay, writing an argument essay, writing longer essay or dissertation, writing a review of a book or film/movie, writing formal letter, writing academic emails...

A careful examination of the list of genres included in OALD will tell us that the genres discussed here provide broad categories of what constitutes each of the contexts. For example, while writing a comparison essay the writer can consider the following moves:

Paragraph 1	Introduction: first sentence: catch readers' interest Second & third sentences: definition of two types of assessment Fourth sentence: indicate scope of the essay
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Paragraph 2	Similarities 1, 2, 3
Paragraph 3	Differences 1, 2, 3
Paragraph 4	Conclusion

These moves are general and are not static. Every time the writer prefers a specific move he or she proposes to introduce a specific purpose. Therefore, a preference for a specific move indicates to the preferences of the writers in terms of their intentions. This structural progression of any text can be identified with the help of a corpus database. One can also identify the required and the optional stages of a specific genre with the help of corpus tools. Once a large database of specific genres is compiled it becomes easier for the teachers too to design classroom materials. OALD is a useful tool in this regard.

Conclusion

Text creation and membership into discourse communities can be achieved with the help of both the approaches discussed above. What a teacher has to do is to strike a balance between both the approaches: select instances of real language or genres that are linguistically, culturally, and socially close to the learners and apply techniques that best enable the learners to understand the textual progression of texts. Authenticity proves to be a useful concept only when it best serves our teaching and learning purposes. Whether we conceptualize it as either text or as process, what is important is to what extent our use of the concept in a specific way helps our learners, because our main objective is to facilitate the process of learning.

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