



The use of authentic reading texts in teaching Vietnamese adult learners

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ABSTRACT: Reading is considered an important skill for Vietnamese adult learners, especially at work. In the past, the traditional method of teaching reading with outdated textbooks made reading lessons repetitive and tedious. Reading texts are chosen with a focus on teaching vocabulary and grammar. Nowadays, a number of teachers have shifted to authentic reading materials to make the lessons more practical and interesting. Authentic reading texts have become increasingly popular due to their various advantages. However, not many teachers have a thorough understanding of authenticity and how to exploit authentic texts. This paper will focus on the use of authentic texts in teaching reading to adult learners in Vietnam.

KEYWORDS: authentic reading, Vietnamese, adult learners, reading skill, authentic texts

I. INTRODUCTION

With the advent of Vietnam joining WTO in 2007, the role of English as an international language has become more and more important. Of the four skills, reading is considered the most significant for Vietnamese adult learners, especially at work when they mostly deal with papers and do not have many chances to interact in English. Thus, in recent years, teachers are paying more attention to the method of teaching reading. In the past, the traditional method of teaching reading with outdated textbooks made reading lessons repetitive and tedious. Reading texts are chosen with a focus on teaching vocabulary and grammar. I still remember spending hours of boredom in a reading class when the teacher distributed reading texts with reading comprehension questions and then simply checked the answers. After the course, my reading skill has not improved much and I become tired of reading. My case is not the only one. A vast majority of Vietnamese students find English reading lessons quite boring. Nowadays, a number of teachers have shifted to authentic reading materials to make the lessons more practical and interesting. Authentic reading texts have become increasingly popular due to their various advantages. However, not many teachers have a thorough understanding of authenticity and how to exploit authentic texts. This paper will focus on the use of authentic texts in teaching reading to adult learners in Vietnam.

A. THE NOTION OF AUTHENTICITY

There has been a controversy over the definition of authenticity. Meinhof (1987) gives a strict definition of authenticity that would include only “original pieces of written or spoken language which occurred naturally between native speakers and could therefore be accepted as “genuine communicative acts”. This is quite similar to Robin Scarcella and Rebecca Oxford’s notion of authenticity that “generally, authentic language is considered unedited, unabridged text that is written for native ... speakers” (cited in Richards, 1998, p. 54).

Harmer (2007) extends the definition to include competent speakers:

Authentic material is a language where no concessions are made to foreign speakers. It is normal, natural language used by native or competent speakers of a language. This is what our students encounter (or will encounter) in real life if they come into contact with target-language speakers, and, precisely because it is authentic, it is unlikely to be simplified or spoken slowly.

On the contrary, Catherine Walter “includes texts both “shortened” and “slightly adapted” in her “Genuine Articles” textbook”. While Widdowson (1976) claims that “authenticity is not a quality of text at all; instead “authenticity ... is achieved when the reader realizes the intentions of the writer”, Williams (1984) just states that “an authentic text is one written to say something, to convey a message” (cited in Richards, 1998, p. 54).

Nunan (1985a:38, cited in Nunan, 1988, p. 99)’s interpretation that “authentic materials are usually defined as those which have been produced for purposes other than to teach language” is probably the most commonly accepted (Nunan, 1988).



Candlin and Edelhoff (1982) classify at least four types of authenticity which play a significant role in language learning and teaching: authenticity of goal, environment, text and task. Another type of authenticity introduced by Nunan (1988) is “learner authenticity” which “meant the realization and acceptance by the learner of the authenticity of a given text, task, set of materials or learning activity.”

Badger, R.G. and MacDonald, M. (2013) points out that authenticity is not simply “the bringing of a text from a communicative event into a classroom” but relies on how similar it is used in the classroom and in its original communicative context”. They states that “texts are processes rather than products”. Texts are not just physical objects but “are created by an interaction between the ... proto-text, and language users”.

The term “authenticity” dated back from the development of communicative language teaching in the 1970s (Widdowson 1979; Breen 1985; Nunan 1989; cited in Badger, R.G. and MacDonald, M. 2013). Since authenticity was first introduced, there has been no consensus on its interpretation.

II. ADVANTAGES OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

As Richards (1998, p. 54) points out: “Authentic texts – however defined – are used in language teaching because they are considered interesting, engaging, culturally enlightening, relevant, motivating, and the best preparation for reading authentic texts.”

Harmer (1998) and Hinkel (2005) assert that interesting and enjoyable reading texts can stimulate the learners and facilitate reading. According to Harmer (p.68), “some of the language sticks in minds as part of the process of language acquisition, and if the reading text is especially interesting and engaging, acquisition is likely to be even more successful.”

Hinkel (p.571) shares the same opinion with Harmer that:

Engaging in extensive reading behavior is a prerequisite for developing reading skills, especially at the level required for most kinds of formal education, and readers are most likely to engage in such behavior if they have access to texts that are interesting to them as individuals and relevant to their particular needs. Reading from this point of view consists of every individual reader developing a reading habit over time by reading texts of interest and value to him or herself and reading those texts extensively.

He also states that:

No one can teach someone else to read: The process is largely invisible and thus cannot be demonstrated, and it mainly occurs at the subconscious level and thus cannot be explained in any way that a reader could make conscious use of. However, anyone can learn to do it, just as anyone can learn to draw or to sing at minimal level of competence. Every normal human being is capable of learning to read, given the right opportunity and guidance. ... The reading teacher’s job is thus not so much to teach a specific skill or content as to get students reading and to keep them reading – that is, to find a way to motivate them to read, and to facilitate their reading of whatever texts they have chosen to read or been asked to read. (p.574)

Successful natural readers read for pleasure instead of responding to demands (Spiro, J., 2013). Thus, Spiro suggests that teachers should build an extensive reading space in the classroom with authentic reading materials such as magazines, newspapers, postcards, books exchanged or brought in by learners or colleagues.

In addition, according to Nunan (1988), the materials should be authentic since the focus will be on helping learners do in class what they will need to be capable of doing in the outside world.

As McDonough, J. and Shaw, C. (2003, p.91) note:

“The traditional way of organizing materials in a unit is generally to begin with a piece of specially written material, which is then “read” by the student. Such an arrangement essentially focuses on items of grammar and vocabulary that are then to be developed during the unit. This is inadequate if we are attempting to teach reading skills, as students are not being exposed to the variety of styles we would expect with a variety of texts – a scientific report is not written in the same way as a personal letter or instructions on a medicine bottle.”

and:

Another problem associated with these specially prepared texts, when it comes to the choice of topic, is that the learners are either presented with overfamiliar material that does not focus on what they can bring to the text, or the content is inconsequential for them. No real interaction takes place between writer and reader as the artificiality of the text means that no real message is being communicated.

McDonough, J. and Shaw, C. (2003) suggest that “teachers should provide students with a purpose for reading by supplying materials that stimulate interest and do not have an overfamiliar content”.

They claim that “A good many of the so called “traditional” reading materials do not provide readers with useful texts or effective strategies to improve their reading abilities.”



Traditionally, and this is borne out in many of the materials, the reader was seen as the “recipient” of information or as an “empty vessel” who brought nothing to text. This notion of “text as object” is now frequently discredited in reading circles as readers are not entirely passive. This “text as object” viewpoint regards the reader as having nothing to contribute to the reading process as such; the writer provides information for the reader who is seen as an “empty vessel” that merely receives information. We may liken this to a one-way traffic system in which everything flows in one direction only.” (p.92)

Nowadays, we saw a swift from “text as object” to “text as process”, fostering close interaction between the reader and the text.

One more advantage of authentic materials is that they are genuine discourse. Christine Nuttall says authentic materials not only motivate students but “exhibit the characteristics of true discourse: having something to say, being coherent and clearly organized”.

Moreover, authentic materials also reflect the changes in the use of language and are updated. Ur, P. (1996) supports the idea of bringing authentic (or near-authentic) texts into classroom reading practice, especially with the advanced learners:

Ultimately we want our learners to cope with the same kinds of reading that are encountered by native speakers of the target language. As they become more advanced, therefore, it would seem sensible to start basing their reading practice on a wide variety of authentic (or near-authentic) texts, and on tasks that represent the kinds of things a reader would do with them in real life rather than on conventional comprehension exercises.

Advanced reading activities should therefore see the understanding of a text only as a preliminary step on the way to further learning or other personal purposes. (p.150, 151)

III. DISADVANTAGES OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

Firstly, authentic texts may be difficult if it contains too many new words and needs existing knowledge about the topic or culture. Harmer states that if we do not choose authentic material carefully, it can be extremely demotivating for students because they will not understand it. Richards also points out that authentic texts can hinder reading development if it is too difficult. This idea is supported by Williams, Wilga Rivers and Nuttall.

Edward Fry (1981, cited in Hinkel, 2010, p.567) has claimed that:

Readers who encounter more than one unknown word in twenty in a text will be reading at what he calls “frustration level” and will thus be unlikely to continue reading – a sobering thought for teachers of adult second language readers who want to read adult material but often lack the vocabulary required to do so successfully. Although reading remains the best means of acquiring a larger vocabulary, care must be taken not to immerse readers in texts that are lexically beyond them, which does in fact reduce reading to a kind of guessing game (Hinkel, p.567).

Furthermore, authentic reading materials can be culturally biased and may not suit the needs of learners.

Despite these constraints, the benefits of authentic materials still outweigh the drawbacks. Thus, teachers should make an attempt to minimize the disadvantages and exploit the benefits of authentic reading text.

IV. CRITERIA TO SELECT AUTHENTIC READING MATERIALS

Badger and MacDonald (2010, p.579) point out that :”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.” This point of view is similar to that of Blachowicz and Ogle (2001): “Materials should be chosen for motivation as well as instructional value.”

A. SOURCES FOR AUTHENTIC READING MATERIALS:

The list may include a newspaper, letters (personal and formal), booklets, leaflets, advertisements, labels on jars, tins and packets, magazines, the telephone directory, train timetables, and so on. As Blachowicz and Ogle note :”besides books, newspapers, magazines, standard print reference materials, and electronic materials are necessary to meet the needs of all readers.”

Nunan (1999) also adds newspapers on the World Wide Web, email messages, academic texts and some poems written by a colleague. However, if this list could be said to be representative of actual reading material, ELT materials in some contexts still have virtually none or very little in the way of newspaper articles, labels or



advertisements for students to read, but contain many examples of what we might call more “traditional” types of texts, especially longer stretches of narratives and descriptions.

Nuttall (1996) listed some factors in choosing authentic reading materials: suitability of content, exploitability and readability. The most significant factor is that the text is of interest to the readers and can motivate them to read. Thus, “quality of the texts” and “the way they are presented” are of great importance in selecting the texts. In order to choose the texts which are motivating and fascinating for students, we should find out what students like and actually read. Exploitability (facilitation of learning) is also an important criterion. In order to exploit the text, teachers must have the purpose of the reading lesson in mind and how to help students develop integrating reading skills. As Nuttall suggests, “authentic texts can be motivating because they are proof that the language is used for real-life purposes by real people. But the motivation may not survive if the text is used only for academic exercises.” (p.172). “Functional texts” (those with a clear practical purpose) can help solve this problem and integrate many skills as well. “Readability” refers to the combination of structural and lexical difficulty. Thus, to choose an appropriate text, we should assess the students’ level to know what vocabulary and structures they are familiar with. Presentation of the texts should also be paid attention to. The texts should look authentic and attractive, for example, a news story is made to look like a piece out of a newspaper. As Khang (2011, p.90) points out:

Due to the fact that not all authentic texts suit learners’ level and to promote the good sides of this kind of text, it is suggested that EFL teachers need to be aware of how to choose texts for their language teaching, especially for teaching reading. Edgar Dale and Jean Chall (1949) define “text readability” as “the easiness of elements in a reading text which the readers could understand and find it interesting.”. The teachers should consider readability in their classrooms to decide whether an authentic text is suitable to their learners. It is useful to concentrate on how to understand and possibly enhance the text readability depending on the teacher’s goals for the students although no teachers want the text to be easily understood right away.

Hinkel makes a point that: “Second language readers should be lexically prepared for any texts assigned and the texts should meet, or be taught in such a way as to meet, Krashen’s $i + 1$ standard for comprehensibility.”

Grellet, F. (1981, p.8): “Getting the students accustomed to reading authentic texts from the very beginning does not necessarily mean a much more difficult task on their part. The difficulty of a reading exercise depends on the activity which is required of the students rather than on the text itself, provided it remains within their general competence. In other words, one should grade exercises rather than texts”.

McDonough, J. and Shaw, C. (2003): “We also have to be able to assess the difficulty of the materials for our own learners and to grade them according to familiarity or topic, length and complexity of structure and possible number of unfamiliar words/expressions, as overloading learners with too much may involve them in decoding vocabulary at the expense of reading for meaning.”

Celce – Murcia, M. (2001) asserts that the choice of reading materials has an influence on the motivation to read and involvement with texts of learners. Celce-Murcia lists a number of factors in choosing appropriate text materials. First, the reading texts should complement students’ intellectual levels. Second, they should be at a proper level of difficulty. They should not be too difficult but still pose a challenge for learners so that they can learn something new and feel interested. According to Celce – Murcia, possible sources of difficulty for L2 readers are: “assumed background knowledge, cultural assumptions, demanding topics, grammatical complexity, length of texts, new conceptual knowledge, organization, unusual formatting, and vocabulary.” (p.190). Another recommendation provided for choosing appropriate text materials is that reading materials are supposed to be fascinating and coherently linked. Day and Bamford (1998) also suggest that reading texts should be “accessible, abundant, appealing and available” for students outside of the classroom.

B. HOW TO ADAPT AUTHENTIC TEXTS TO SUIT THE NEEDS OF LEARNERS.

McDonough, J., Shaw, C. and Masuhara, H. (2013) provide some recommendations to adapt materials including these techniques: adding, deleting, modifying, simplifying and reordering. Of these techniques, modification and simplification are frequently used with authentic texts. Modifying a text include rewriting and restructuring. Modifying materials refers essentially to a “modality change”, “to a change in the nature or focus of an exercise, or text or classroom activity” (McDonough, J., Shaw, C. and Masuhara, H. 2013, p.74). Another technique is simplifying according to sentence structure, lexical content and grammatical structures.



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As Nunan (1988, p.99) points out, “authenticity should relate to the text sources as well as to student activities and tasks” and “the materials should also foster independent learning by raising the consciousness of the learners and making them more aware of the learning process.”. Thus, Nunan suggests “building self-evaluation and assessment exercises into the materials themselves” (p.99).

V. CONCLUSION

Authentic texts play a vital role in helping learners acquire a second language successfully. Nevertheless, learners also cope with some drawbacks of an authentic text such as the level of difficulty or suitability. Therefore, the teachers should pay attention to the criteria for choosing an appropriate authentic text to bring into the classroom and how to modify and simplify it to suit the needs and ability of the learners. By carefully selecting the texts and adapting them, teachers can provide a useful and practical source of material for learning as well as motivate the learners to read more. Thus, teachers should gain a deep insight into authenticity and know how to exploit them in teaching reading.

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