

The authenticity continuum: Towards a definition incorporating international voices

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Why authenticity should be represented as a continuum in the EFL classroom

Introduction

The choice of what materials to use in the language classroom is perhaps one of the most fundamentally important and difficult decisions teachers and those responsible for choosing textbooks are faced with. Authenticity is often seen as a desirable component in the content we select and adapt for our language learners, and it has been shown that authentic materials are more motivating, even for low-level learners (Peacock, 1997). The term authentic is often used to describe materials which were not originally designed for the purpose of language learning, but that were designed to have some purpose within the target language culture, such as a newspaper or novel. An unfortunate consequence of this is that authenticity is still often defined in reference to the target language's 'native speakers' or L1 community, particularly in EFL contexts, or what Kachru (1985) would label the Outer Circle communities. In other words, where English is taught as a foreign language, both teachers and students often regard 'native-speakers' as being the ideal model and therefore an example of authenticity. For example, Tan (2005) criticises corpora investigations of learner English for holding the view that authentic language use is equivalent to 'native-speaker' usages. She goes on to criticise not only corpus research but also textbook publishers for still not taking into account 'the inextricable link between language and culture' (2005: 127). In the academic world, culturally embedded notions of authenticity relating to 'native-speakers' have been challenged for decades (Smith, 1976). And yet I would argue that in mainstream textbooks

and in most EFL language classrooms the native speaker still retains a 'privileged position' (Clark & Paran, 2007: 407). As Widdowson (1996: 68) puts it:

Authenticity concerns the reality of native-speaker language use: in our case, the communication in English which is realized by an English-speaking community. But the language which is real for native speakers is not likely to be real for learners [...] They belong to another community and do not have the necessary knowledge of the contextual conditions which would enable them to authenticate English in native-speaker terms. Their reality is quite different.

Although Widdowson's comments were made almost twenty years ago, and despite the fact that international varieties of English are now afforded more credibility as its future comes to be defined 'by the trends in the use of English as a second language' (Graddol, 2003: 157), many L2



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English teachers themselves still have efficacy issues as a result of their not being L1 speakers (Reves & Medgyes, 1994; Moussu & Llorca, 2008). Further, even when L2 teachers are made more aware of the importance of international and 'non-standard' (i.e. L2) varieties of English they may still be reluctant to move away from L1 models in their class (Suzuki, 2011). As a result, authenticity as experienced by learners in EFL contexts still features an element of culture from the target language community, but how does this L1 embedded definition of authenticity apply to modern language learning materials, especially now in an era of shared global culture? It is interesting to note that in Peacock's (1997) study, authentic materials are not explicitly defined but are clearly based on an idea which is target culture-specific. The concept of culture is central to the very idea of language, and yet culture is a problematic term, as Dörnyei & Ushioda (2009) and Pavlenko (2002) have demonstrated, because in today's global society cultures can appear amorphous, perhaps now more so than at any other stage in human history. These issues have resounding implications for language learning and teaching. As a result, the definition of authenticity is becoming less clear-cut, as society moves further into an era where language and culture share a more homogeneous status, particularly within the context of English as a global language. In this paper, I set out to examine authenticity in keeping with the emergent contexts of English language learning around the world. Building on existing arguments in the academic literature (Hung & Victor Chen, 2007), I propose that authenticity be considered as a continuum which attempts to bring together the various different aspects that contribute to authenticity. By this I mean that authenticity is partly a socially constructed shared experience and partly a sense of validity which comes from the individual self about the teaching/learning situation.

Authenticity – what is the 'real' definition?

Authenticity has been considered an important aspect of language teaching for many decades. Despite having a long history and a broad set of references in the literature, authenticity continues to arouse controversy and debate; there have even been debates as to whether authenticity is even possible in the language classroom, see for example Widdowson (1978). It does, however, seem that researchers and practitioners agree that for the most part authenticity is something beneficial and

thus desirable in the classroom (see for example Pinner, 2013a, b), although I would argue that this is possibly because the term *authentic* is loaded with connotations. If one thing is branded authentic and another is branded as inauthentic, clearly the inauthentic item is less desirable in ordinary circumstances. I would not want to be told that my Swiss watch was inauthentic, or that my relationship with a friend was inauthentic. Likewise, it seems apparent that a student would not want to hear that the language they were producing or learning from was inauthentic either.

That authentic materials can be more motivating is also a common argument in calls for greater authenticity in language learning. Gilmore (2007) states that authentic materials are generally seen to be more interesting, hence more motivating. Further, Peacock (1997) in a study involving elementary learners of English, found that authentic materials were more motivating and produced more on-task involvement. There is wide agreement that authenticity is a good thing. What is under debate, even after many decades of theoretical discussion and analysis, is what exactly constitutes *authentic* materials or language. Widdowson (1978) famously makes the distinction between *authentic* materials and *genuine* materials. Here, genuineness relates to an absolute property of the text whereas authenticity is relative to the way the learner engages with the material and their relationship to it. This is related to what Hung & Victor Chen (2007: 149) refer to as *extrapolation techniques*, which they point out assume 'similarity between abstracted concepts and the actual phenomena'. In other words, removing something from its context, extracting a learning material and leaving the reason for engaging with it behind endangers the concept of authenticity. Widdowson believes that authenticity should be defined as 'natural language behaviour' (1990: 45) and he goes on to state that it is hard to see how it could be defined in any other way. The problem with defining authenticity, as many who have attempted to do so have pointed out, is that any definition of authenticity has to remain conceptually loose in order to encompass the many situations and contexts in which authentic language arises. The problem here is that for teachers in EFL contexts, such academic descriptions of authenticity may be difficult to grasp, and teachers may look at their textbooks or learning materials and wonder to what extent these materials are authentic. As stated earlier, because of the strong connotations of the word 'authentic', teachers using materials which they believe to lack authenticity may find this leads to efficacy issues.

1. Native	•the language produced by native speakers for native speakers in a particular language community
2. Real	•the language produced by a real speaker/writer for a real audience, conveying a real message
3. Self	•the qualities bestowed on a text by the receiver, in that it is not seen as something inherent in a text itself, but is imparted on it by the reader/listener
4. Classroom	•the interaction between students and teachers as a 'personal process of engagement'
5. Task	•the types of task chosen
6. Social	•the social situation of the classroom
7. Assessment	•specifically the 'target language use domain' which is connected to the validity of language tests to be able to connect test-tasks to uses in the real world
8. Culture	•culture, and the ability to behave or think like a target language group in order to be recognised and validated by them

Figure 1. Gilmore's eight inter-related definitions.

In a state-of-the-art article, Gilmore (2007: 98) identified eight inter-related definitions of authenticity from the literature. These are presented in Figure 1.

Gilmore, in summarising the definitions of authenticity, captures some of his frustration in writing about it when he asks whether the term ought to be abandoned completely as it faces the danger of being 'too elusive to be useful' (2007: 98). However he decides rather to limit the definition to objectifiable criteria following Morrow, who states that authenticity is 'real language produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message' (1977: 13). This definition is certainly agreeable in that it encompasses both the source of the text and the function, but the definition is dependent on the term 'real'. The question that must then be asked is what constitutes 'real' language?

As Widdowson's (1996) comment cited earlier in this paper shows, the term 'real' is often used to refer to 'native speakers' or the target language community, however, as I have shown, this is highly problematic. Due to the somewhat overlapping areas of culture in today's developed societies, where cultures 'continually influence each other' (Pavlenko, 2002: 280), any 'native speaker' grounded definitions are untenable, especially for English. This is not just because the majority of English speakers are L2 speakers (Graddol, 1997), but also the majority of English teachers are L2 speakers. Current estimates place the figure

at around 80% of EFL teachers being L2 speakers (Braine, 2010). Furthermore, the aims and motivations of many language learners are not necessarily specific to integrating with a particular culture, but in fact people learn English in order to be part of a wider voice, in order to have a key to unlock global communication (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). Perhaps then, the term 'real' refers to what Morrow (1977) indicates in his definition as there being a genuine function or purpose in the interactions, beyond merely speaking for the sake of it or practising a drill. This is echoed by Tomlinson & Masuhara's definition, which states that authentic materials are 'designed not to transmit declarative knowledge about the target language but rather to provide an *experience* of the language in use' (2010: 400, italics added).

Thus, the term is defined here from a social-interactive viewpoint which does not omit the issue of culture from the definition by imagining it to be a clearly defined and closed off community from which we can simply extract samples of 'real' language. The definition also, quite succinctly, provides us with a framework from which it is possible to disregard what, by implication, constitutes inauthentic language – namely the transmission of declarative knowledge. Instead, authenticity is understood to mean that the linguistic source material is directly linked with the linguistic output of the students and that it is not contrived purely for the purpose of explaining or demonstrating an isolated aspect of the language.

Rather, it is designed to give the users an experience in which they will be exposed to the target language (in this case English) and have a reason for using it. In many ways, this definition is an extension of Morrow's (1977) which emphasised *realness*. Even these early definitions like Morrow (1977) and Widdowson (1978) place the emphasis on language not for language's sake but using language as a 'tool' for other meaningful exchanges, which shows that the focus of authenticity has been distancing itself from the 'native-speaker' definition for some time. Despite this, authenticity remains culture-bound (Matsuda, 2003; Tan, 2005; Suzuki, 2011), and perhaps as a result there is still very much a gap between L1 and L2 speakers of English. As Clark & Paran (2007: 407, italics added) explain,

[t]he native speaker still has a privileged position in English language teaching, representing both the *model speaker* and the ideal teacher. Non-native speaker teachers of English are often perceived as having a lower status than their native-speaking counterparts, and have been shown to face discriminatory attitudes when applying for teaching jobs.

It is for this reason that realigning the concept of authenticity to fully include L2 varieties is essential in order to move the mainstream of EFL learners and teachers into a position that aligns with the current status of English as an international language. Interestingly, it is not just specifically L1 users of English who are maintaining their privileged position, but in fact many L2 users also share the prejudice against themselves by elevating the native-speaker model and native-defined concept of authenticity, specifically being self-conscious of language usage errors (Moussu & Llorca, 2008). This process is called 'self-discrimination' (Reves & Medgyes, 1994) and this reduces self-image which subsequently damages actual language performance, thus creating a downward spiral in teacher efficacy, self-image and motivation. L1 English teachers may often make a mistake with the language or not know how to answer a question, but this rarely impacts on their self-image (at least for experienced teachers) whereas when a non-native speaker or L2 English teacher makes a mistake or reveals that they 'do not know everything about the English language, their teaching abilities are often immediately questioned' (Moussu & Llorca, 2008: 323). It is my belief that such 'language error nit-picking' and elevating the status of 'native speakers' stems from the central concept of authenticity, since authenticity is

a vital and established aspect of the language teaching tradition (Gilmore, 2007). It seems that the concept of authenticity is in need of being realigned in order to offer a more inclusive concept which incorporates L2 speakers of English more overtly.

The persistence of culturally embedded definitions

Perhaps the simplicity of the native-speaker definition of authenticity is one reason for it being hard to shake off. One possible flaw in the wider definitions described above is that they are too broad, and almost any of the discussions taking place in the language classroom could therefore be viewed as authentic. The teacher asks the student 'what's your name?' and the student replies with their own name, and this would count as authentic. Personally, I do not find fault with this concept; to deny that authentic language can take place in the language classroom without any native speakers being present is to deny the very validity of teaching and learning in the classroom context. My argument is that the issue is not so much in the definition of authenticity, but in the way authenticity is viewed as a kind of linear spectrum with two binary options at either end; this newspaper comes from the UK and is therefore fully authentic whereas this textbook was written for use in the classroom and is therefore not authentic, and the language we produce in the classroom is somewhere in the middle. Because, as Gilmore (2007) points out, the concept of authenticity supports multiple definitions which are inter-related, authenticity might be better viewed as a continuum; one which takes into account the purposes of the discourse and the context in which it takes place. This concept is not a new one (Hung & Victor Chen, 2007), and indeed distinctions have already been made between authentic language in the classroom and authentic language outside the classroom (Widdowson, 1978). It has also been proposed that authenticity be defined in respect to the reason for its being used, what Coyle *et al.* (2010: 5) refer to as 'authenticity of purpose'. By viewing authenticity as belonging to a scale on a continuum, students and learners are encouraged to make their own decisions about how authentic something is, and therefore authenticity becomes an individually validated and socially mediated concept.

The authenticity continuum

In order to incorporate the majority of speakers of English into the concept of authenticity whilst also

allowing for such important factors as motivation, autonomy and identity, I believe that authenticity might best be considered not as a binary set of absolutes, or even as a grey area with two extremes on either side, but as a continuum with both social and contextual dimensions, as represented in Figure 2. Please note that as this is a continuum, it is not intended to be linear but, borrowing from Wittgenstein (1953), rather it is designed to represent a landscape in which a position on one of the axes does not exclude the existence of the other. The horizontal axis represents the social dimension of authenticity, at one end the learner or *individual* and their needs, linguistic ability and motivation to learn, at the other the target language use *community*. This might be an L1 country such as the USA or UK, or it might be the international community where English is used as a tool for communication in multilingual contexts, or it could even be a workplace where English will be needed in order to interact with colleagues. The vertical dimension of the continuum is meant to represent the context of language use. The continuum presents the two contexts which are likely to be most relevant to language learning; the *classroom* and the *real world* where the communication takes place. Although the diagram of the continuum plots each dimension in a linear way, each aspect has a relationship and possible overlap with the others.

This might be a useful continuum when materials are being selected or adapted for the classroom because it invites both the teacher and the learner to question their relationship to the content being used and how it will relate to them and their personal learning aims. One purpose of the continuum is to allow for the importance of self and the

process of engagement with the materials and the language (van Lier, 1996). In this way, the continuum incorporates autonomy and identity, which Ushioda (2011) notes is vital in motivating learners. Ushioda (2011) advocates a *person in context relational* view of motivation in her paper, and in many ways the continuum tries to encompass both the individual identity of the learner and bridge that with the often distant reality of the target language culture. This is especially important in EFL contexts, where learners may not know much about the culture, often learning in compulsory language classes. In this respect, motivation and authenticity are closely related, and hence through experiencing the materials and language in a process of personal engagement, the students would hopefully find authentic materials more motivating if they can relate to them as individuals.

The continuum was devised as a way of guiding teachers and materials writers to consider tasks and learning materials from other dimensions and contexts, and as a way of *validating* those contexts. By demonstrating the multi-faceted nature of authenticity simply as a visual diagram, I hope to be able to communicate that there is no *best* material or type of material or even *best* model to learn English. It was also my intention that this idea should be communicated back to the learners, as quite often learners themselves view authenticity as something belonging to the realm of the target language community (Pinner, 2013a). By informing the students that the language they produce both inside and outside the classroom is valid and authentic I hope that this will help to empower learners in EFL contexts and enable them to engage more with the learning process. This would be a useful area for further enquiry and research.

In taking the view of authenticity as an abstract concept which has various degrees and can be approached in different ways, it is my intention to help break authenticity into what Gilmore advocated when he called for ‘objectifiable criteria’ (2007: 98). Although these reductions and compartmentalisations may seem to complicate the matter rather than to simplify it, I believe that doing so will actually help reflect the interactions of authenticity in the no longer clear-cut domains in which English is used throughout the developed world as a tool for international communication.

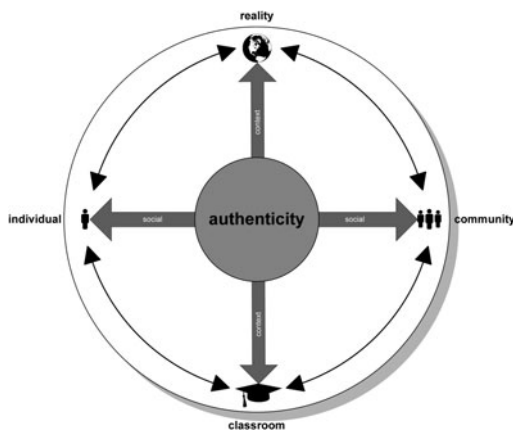


Figure 2. The authenticity continuum.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to provide a necessarily brief overview of the concept of authenticity, and

developed a continuum which can be used to recognise different aspects of authenticity and invite teachers and materials writers to consider authenticity from various perspectives. Authenticity is not absolute, as Widdowson (1978) pointed out, and it should relate to something real, as Morrow (1977) advocated. However, authenticity has a place in the classroom and it needs to be something that both learners and teachers can identify with and make sense of. I would suggest that a visual representation of authenticity as a continuum is a simple way of communicating these ideas and opening the concept up for renewed discussion as it relates to EFL contexts. ■

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