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Title:

Effective EFL Education Through Popular Authentic Materials

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Bio:

Caroline C. Hwang was born in Taiwan. Her first exposure to English during her childhood was overhearing her grandparents from Shanghai occasionally speak the language. Following years of traditional English instruction in Taiwan, she went to the U.S. and began her real acquisition of the English language. She obtained her M.A. in Comparative Literature and her Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from the University of Texas at Austin. She taught in universities in the U.S. and also worked in England. Twenty years of stay in English-speaking countries has proffered her enormous pleasure in the language and the culture(s). She is eager to share with EFL learners the joy of "living in the English language." Dr. Hwang is currently an associate professor at National Taipei University of Technology.

Key Words

natural language acquisition, authentic, current, exposure, language input

Abstract:

The problem of overemphasizing English grammar created by the examination-driven education system in Taiwan has long been identified, but there are other deficiencies that curriculum planners are not fully aware of. As a redeeming measure, substantial input of authentic materials that are pegged to learners' levels and interests naturally increases their sensitivity to and competence in the target language. Furthermore, current popular materials, such as clips from mass media and best-selling essays/short stories, have been found most appealing because of their realistic, ready-to-use language and relevance to learners' mindsets and experiences. Once students are hooked on authentic materials, which trigger the process of natural language acquisition, effective EFL education can be realized.

I. Introduction

In Taiwan, a traditional examination-driven education has made middle- and high-school English teachers admired for their ability to explain grammar rules. Many cram schools have made a fortune by doing this as well. As a result, students in Taiwan are pampered by being spoon-fed rules, some of which are obsolete, and at the same time their appetite for acquiring and using English as a natural, living language is spoiled. In general, the students of English have been "indoctrinated" to the point that unless a certain usage is clearly explained, they subconsciously reject it. As they keep pressing "why," teachers take pride in reasoning through decontextualization (Shrum and Glisan 1994:23) rather than striving for genuine proficiency through acquisition and internalization. This situation has created a variety of deficiencies in the English education in Taiwan.

II. A Variety of Deficiencies

1. A Thin and Flat Repertoire with No Range

As the term "communicative competence" has snowballed in popularity in Taiwan's English teaching circle, a proliferation of imported EFL/ELT textbooks have introduced

this island to conversational expressions. Jaded with memorization of rules, learners embrace oral training as the sole purpose for English learning. The variety of English styles, i.e. the range between formal and informal usages, is seldom brought to the attention of students. As a result, their English repertoire is thin and flat. Fossilization in the form of "phrase book English" (Nunan 1999:154), stilted and superficial language used in phatic communication, is prevalent.

2. Pompous Sounding Gibberish

Pursuing advanced academic degrees in an English-speaking country, especially in the U.S., has been a popular trend for students in Taiwan. However, with the deficiency in knowledge of English stylistic variations as well as how/when/where to use the different styles, those who come back to Taiwan with higher degrees from English-speaking countries tend to produce a mixture of slangy and academic English. The mild cases would be awkward pairings/groupings of words and the worst ones could be pompous sounding gibberish. It is because of staying mostly in the classroom and the library while studying in an English-speaking country, that they still lack exposure to the realistic use of English in the main-stream society.

3. "Living in Ancient Times"

College students of English literature in Taiwan arduously study classical English literature. Granted, classical literature is something to be treasured and relished as well as to be read for gaining passive knowledge, but it is nothing to be the base of active communication. This distinction is seldom made clear and consequently these non-native English majors' lexicon and styles in English tend to be out of sync with what is needed for effective modern-day communication. English literature curricula in Taiwan boast of being comparable to those in English-speaking countries, oblivious to the fact that their students are devoid of K-12 (kindergarten to 12th grade) native-speaking English education, where ample contemporary materials are assimilated. In other words, Taiwan's English literature curricula can thus be equated with teaching ballet to an infant who can barely crawl.

III. Examples of Successful EFL Instruction/Learning

1. An Experiment That Merits Attention

Based on a strong personal interest in reading magazines/best-sellers and watching TV while living in the U.S., I experimented with adopting these types of authentic materials, instead of EFL textbooks, in my classes. In retrospect, my own college English speech and writing classes in Taiwan many years ago, which supplied "formulae" but not exemplary models, proved to be largely fruitless. With this awareness of the importance of authentic models, I have made a point to incorporate them into my own teaching. As it turned out, feedback from my students indicated that they felt gratified being treated as mature, intellectual individuals, since authentic materials were made for native speakers of English. This practice of mine could be corroborated by Shrum and Glisa (1994):

Empirical studies have confirmed the positive results gained by listeners and readers who are given opportunities to interact with authentic oral or written texts.
(p. 116)

Videotexts...bring the living culture right into the classroom. (p. 117)

The use of authentic materials is also in tune with "the natural communication task," defined in Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982):

A natural communication task is one where the focus of the student is on communicating an idea or opinion to someone rather than on the language forms themselves. In such situations the speaker subconsciously uses the grammar rules acquired to convey the message. (p. 247)

I further encouraged my students to utilize the vocabulary and expressions they had learned from authentic materials in their own production of English. It is my experience that output-based tasks can activate the input stored in receptive memory and thus transform

knowledge into skills. They were also asked to take in texts by chunks for the purpose of boosting their collocational competence (Hill 1999).

After a few years of exposure and activation as such, my students feel empowered by seeing "the woods" rather than "the trees" as well as by being able to communicate in English on a greater variety of topics. Copious authentic usages come with the great potential to break students' habit of producing Chinese English (a.k.a. "Chinglish"). Better students even ask for more materials of the same nature. At this point, resource-based learning and student autonomy is in place, just like that described in Shrum and Glisan (1994):

Students process information in meaningful ways, take responsibility for their own learning, and become independent learners. (p. 27)

2. "A Miracle Student"

At one time, I was unexpectedly surprized by the command of English exhibited by one student in my Linguistics class in which none of the aforementioned materials were used. This student, a freshman, out of a total of approximately 180 students (in my three Linguistics classes), was the only one who gave extensive and reflective answers to the open-ended essay questions on his examinations. His smooth and in-depth writing stood out among his classmates' incomprehensible English-words-in-Chinese-structure/expression sentences. Later I found out that this "miracle student" followed the same route of traditional Taiwan's English education as his classmates and had never studied in an English-speaking country. But, for many years he had read English magazines on popular music out of interest. Apparently, the elusive "English Language Environment" is comfortably attainable to learners with this common-sensical idea for language learning.

Hence, the pivotal notion of Krashen's Natural Approach (1983) or the premise of "Back to the Basics" in the U.S. education circle IS an important key to successful learning. This

student has demonstrated that constant pleasure reading of current authentic materials in English afforded him a near-native intuition.

IV. Recommendations and Implications

1. Why Current Popular Authentic Materials?

English textbooks, authored by educators rather than professional writers, tend to carry a preaching and patronizing tone. The authors and their readers are inherently not on the equal footing. The textbook English, written from the perspective of talking to a "foreign" (namely, "outsider") audience, can hardly avoid contrivance. This has been pointed out by Shrum and Glisan (1994):

Unfortunately, many language textbooks contain poorly motivated and illogically sequenced texts and dialogues that do not reflect real-world language or situations, although they usually contain multiple examples of the grammar being presented. (p. 28)

This problem with EFL textbooks is further evidenced by research in the recently thriving field of Corpus Linguistics. For example, both Mindt (1992) and Kennedy (1998) have stated:

A comparative study of authentic language data and textbooks for teaching English as a foreign language has revealed that the used of grammatical structures in textbooks differs considerably from the use of these structures in authentic English. (Mindt, p. 186)

On the basis of a comparison between a corpus analysis and the linguistic devices taught in textbooks...there can be a significant mismatch between normal use of English and what is taught to second language learners. (Kennedy, p. 284)

Mindt (1996) has also made such a wake-up call:

There is obviously a kind of school English which does not seem to exist outside the foreign language classroom. As a result, learners who leave their school surroundings very often find it hard to adapt to the English used by native speakers. Learners who communicate with native speakers constantly have to reshape their linguistic behaviour in those areas of the language which were not taught properly. (p. 232)

The last sentence in the above passage is what I can personally testify to - During the constant process of discovering the main-stream usages of English in the U.S. and in the U.K., I had to UNLEARN a fair amount of the English I was taught back in Taiwan. Nevertheless, even after my twenty years of living and working in English-speaking countries, the earlier years of English instruction in Taiwan was so ingrained in me that it still "haunts" me from time to time.

Granted, carefully written EFL/ELT materials are instrumental in laying a foundation for English learning, but by no means should they be overvalued if the student has a hearty aspiration to achieve near-native proficiency. Authentic materials, on the other hand, teem with stimulating and informative manners of communication that are conducive to interactive learning. In fact, this captivating quality is also essential in L1 acquisition, as depicted by Krashen (1989):

Reading for genuine interest and pleasure may be the single greatest educational tool available. When the second-grade teacher reads E. B. White's Charlotte's

Web to the class, the book often disappears from the school library, from the local public library, and local bookstores. Some children read Charlotte's Web fifteen to twenty times and memorize it! (p. 109)

This is exactly what we need—a self-created "English Language Environment." This endeavor is even more strategic in EFL learning, where no built-in day-to-day contact with the language is provided.

Among authentic materials, I prefer current popular ones, because they are superior in relevance to learners' lives here and now as well as in display of easy but realistic, ready-to-use language. These materials include best-selling essays/stories, TV news-magazines, talk shows, etc. One caution to be exercised, though, is that at the introductory stage the humor and way of thinking in these materials have to be universally appealing, because peculiar remarks/antics could cause frustration in less experienced learners. Nowadays Taiwan imports many current award-winning films and TV shows, especially from the U.S. Some of them are acclaimed for their clever, avant-garde manipulation of linguistic/cultural idiosyncrasies, which usually fall flat on students in Taiwan. Therefore it takes discretion and empathy to select appropriate authentic materials that are pegged to learners' levels and interests.

For the same reason, I seldom use novels or poems for students' reading, because most of them feature highly stylistic writings that deliberately twist or even break linguistic conventions to achieve special aesthetic effects. They could be introduced to linguistically matured students, possibly after three years of intensive exposure to relatively straightforward yet delightfully engaging language and styles, free from abstruse vocabulary and convoluted syntax. As for specific contents, teachers need to "shop around" and make selections based on their own and their students' interests, because only interests can lead to a sustainable passion for this practice over the long haul. When learners truly enjoy authentic materials that are pegged to their levels and interests, they could be gradually "hypnotized into" the rhythm and pattern of the target language.

Also, the role of teacher would be transformed into a "coach," providing doses of lexical and grammatical explanations when students encounter difficulties in these areas. Once the students are hooked on these authentic materials, the process of natural language acquisition begins to set in.

2. Examples of Authentic Materials to Use

Books: e.g. *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* series, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* series

Magazines: e.g., *Reader's Digest*, *YM*, *Good Housekeeping*, *GQ*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *National Geographic*

Video/Audio:

- * MSN Video (MSN provides video clips from NBC news, etc.)
- * "Behind-the-Scenes" on cable movie channels
- * (Selected) films

The above list mainly consists of U.S. publications, because I am personally more familiar with them. Here I would like to solicit from colleagues in the EFL field appropriate authentic materials from other English-speaking countries.

3. Necessary Pedagogical Support

Although an ardent advocate of language acquisition, I do not discard the teaching of structures, simply because L2 learning is not identical to L1 learning, particularly in the case of late-teen and adult learners. In the U.S. most ESL teachers, overly trusting inductive methods, deprecate the value of any explanation of rules. Many Chinese/Taiwanese immigrant friends of mine complain that English is still nebulous to them after attending years of ESL classes in the U.S. And the discrepancy between native-speaking ESL teachers' perception and their students' expectation is illustrated in vivid detail in "The Mismatch between an American Instructor's Teaching Practice and Her Asian Students' Learning Strategies" (Min 1999:32). Native ESL/EFL teachers, no matter

how well-intentioned, often do not understand that it is far too late to ask their adult students to foster a tolerance for ambiguity.

To make my students comfortable with authentic materials, I do provide necessary pedagogical support for complicated sentences and unfamiliar phraseology. In particular, I call to my students' attention equivalent expressions that are different in syntax or wording/phrasing in English and Chinese. In my opinion, knowledge of grammar can serve as a guide in the beginning and as a reminder, or "monitor" as labeled by Krashen (1985), at a later stage of English instruction. But by no means should it be regarded as the "meat." For maximum effectiveness, "a program of instruction should contain two parallel streams, one devoted to exposing the learner to materials containing a reactively uncontrolled variety of linguistic elements...and the other devoted to a rather carefully developed sequence of instructional content" (Carroll 1974:140-141). In essence, "learning occurs through use of a continuum between subconscious, automatic processes and conscious, analytic processes" (Shrum and Glisan 1994:

V. Conclusion

Ideally, a foreign language classroom should consist of approximately 70% of abundant exposure (to stimulate subconscious language acquisition) plus 30% of conscious structure and usage explanation; 70% of student-oriented activities plus 30% of the teacher's demonstration. Yet the situation in Taiwan seems to be just the opposite. This is well articulated in Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) and could be redeemed by a fresh attitude:

Learning a second language can be exciting and productive...or painful and useless. One's efforts can end in the acquisition of native-like fluency or a stumbling repertoire of sentences soon forgotten...The difference often lies in how one goes about learning the new language and how a teacher goes about teaching it. To be successful, a learner need not have a special inborn talent for learning language. Learners and teachers simply need to "do it right." (p. 3)

With the frenzy induced by the newly installed childhood English programs in Taiwan, the time is ripe for us to "do it right" and change our course of direction away from fragmented English education to a cornucopia of realistic, ready-to-use language that is profuse in current popular authentic materials. Only the latter can trigger the acquisition process and materialize tenets such as top-down strategy and whole-language learning (Shrum and Glisan 1994:25). To achieve the desired effect, substantial intake of natural English needs to be implemented at all levels-in elementary, middle, and high schools as well as in colleges. Shrum and Glisan (1994) have provided empirical evidence favoring the early use of authentic texts to develop all-around language skills in young students:

In reading, Vigil (1987) found significant differences in comprehension with beginning language students who read unedited authentic texts. Not only did their comprehension skills increase, but there were also improvements in oral and written language performance. (p. 117)

As a matter of fact, many countries that are advanced in foreign language education have emphasized the use of ample authentic materials. Asian countries, especially those in the East Asia, are yet to catch on to this awareness. Only when EFL education makes a foray into the dynamism of popular authentic materials will it experience the power of being energized and see the effect of genuine communicative competence.

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