

## Authentic Textbooks in Enhancing Communication in EFL Classes



### Linguistics

**Keywords:** communicative acts, authentic material, language level, text.

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### Abstract

This article deals with the importance of using authentic textbooks and materials in EFL classes. It is part of my research study on communication problems with EFL students in Albania. One of the things that plays an important part in enhancing communication is the role of textbooks and other additional materials that are used in English classes. The importance of textbooks stands in the fact that their authenticity should meet the needs of our students. But do the textbooks offered accomplish their aim? What criteria should be followed to choose English textbooks? Do they help students to use the English language outside the classroom? What do we understand by authentic Text? What is the role of authentic Text in communication? These and other issues are treated to define and see solutions. It is given an overview of literature and findings of this study when the research problem is treated within English classes in elementary and high school.

### 1. Introduction

In the new era of globalization, communication plays one of the most important roles. Being an international language, English is spoken everywhere in the world. Being an English teacher sometimes is our experience that in most of the cases leads us to which method to use. In our classrooms we use a variety of materials to teach English as a foreign language, but one of the most important materials that is the basic one and we use it for instruction are *textbooks*. To overcome the difficulties in communication, we have to expose our students to the real language or situations which are provided by the use of authentic materials. How do we deal with them sometimes differs from one teacher to another because it depends on the variety of things that are offered, on the language level and on the teaching methodology. Texts play the most important role in learning a foreign language and it should help students to learn and not to forget things. A mechanical way of exercises offered is not helpful. Our success as teachers depends a lot even on the text that we use. Sometimes we expect a simplified text but in reality are very complicated and we need time for ourselves to understand, than to explain it to our students how to use it.

### 2. Literature Review

A question rises above all to all of us –Which text? Sometimes a text is so complicated up to the point that it reflects student's attitude toward English. They feel frustrated and a complicated text does not help them to study, they do not feel motivated. When we want to study something, we want our text to be interesting, up to date and offering a lot to students. We do not want a text that is dull, that has more grammatical exercises than exercises that offer communication. For the purpose of the study I have focused in these questions and the most important from the last question.

- What kind of texts should we use?
- Which are the criteria's for selecting a text?
- Who should choose what text to use?
- What is the role of authentic materials in enhancing communication?

From my point of view as a teacher I should be focused first on the last question. A teacher should choose a text because it is the teacher that knows the needs of his/her students. Nowadays there are offered different textbooks and the possibility of choosing but this has its own advantages and disadvantages. A teacher evaluates a text according to the needs of students but sometimes even if there are a lot of possibilities of choosing they do not offer what is expected. From my point of view and my experience a good teacher needs at least six months to evaluate properly a variety of textbooks offered to them.

Apart from that there are other points that should be taken in consideration as for example:

1. Will these textbook lead me to the attainment of my course objectives?
2. Is this book so arranged that it will enhance student learning? Is it easy for the teacher to use?
3. Is the content accurate and accurately presented?
4. If I use this textbook will it help my student later for the high school level or university level?
5. How authentic is the communication in the book? Does the language seem true to life and accurate? Is the information given here up to date?
6. Is the author competent in the field?
7. Is the level suitable for the class you are teaching?
8. Does this book cover all the skills you want to teach (e.g. listening, speaking, reading, writing) in a way you want to teach them?
9. Are there extra materials (cassette, workbook est.? How helpful are these extra materials?

Sometimes a text may be dull; it may lack the basic information that is essential for a beginner or for a newcomer to understand what he is studying. (Clark, 1991)

### ***2.1 Criteria for selecting texts***

Which are the criteria's for choosing a text? It is very important for every teacher to put some questions before choosing a text even if there are for example 3-4 texts offered to him/her. (Wallace, 1992) As I mentioned previously it doesn't matter if we teach in an elementary or high or university, the most important thing is to choose the right text. We should try to find challenging English text that fulfill some criteria such as:

- Be a vehicle for teaching specific language structure and vocabulary.
- Should offer the opportunity to promote key reading strategies.
- Should be at the appropriate language level (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2).
- Should be authentic, that is a naturally occurring text, not specially written for pedagogic purposes (as most of the text do).
- Should be exploitable to the classroom so lead to a range of classroom activities, especially to communicative language.
- Deal with themes and issues relating to the everyday lives of the readers (feelings, emotions, anniversaries est.)

### ***2.2 The notion of authenticity***

Speaking about authentic text let's consider Meinhof. A strict interpretation of authenticity 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*". As soon as texts, whatever their original use, are brought into classrooms for pedagogic purposes they have, arguably lost authenticity. (Meinhof,1987)

To address this problem Meinhoff suggests a framework in which the learners participate themselves in the collection and selection of texts. In these contexts I may say that knowing the needs of our students or even asking them what are their likes and dislikes we can collaborate to give them the best textbook. To have authentic texts we should make use as much as possible to English newspapers, magazines that provide a good resource of the real language that is used in everyday life. To achieve the maximum of success while applying CLT a great importance should be given to the use of authentic materials. To overcome this problem, so to expose students in the natural language, in a variety of situations, CLT itself imposes the use of authentic materials in English language. (Larsen, 2008)

Before choosing a material there must be considered two factors:

- *The role of authentic material in enhancing communication*
- *Authentic materials and cultural information*

*What is meant by authentic material?*

One of the main goals of the Communicative language Teaching is the use of authentic materials in class and exposure of students to the real language in the classroom as much as possible. Although class is not a situation of "real life" authentic materials occupy an important place. Authentic materials give readers the opportunity to receive real information and to know what is happening in the world that surrounds them. Obtaining information from a real text is very motivating because increasing their interest in exposing them in real language. They also reflect changes in language use (i.e. something that does not happen with textbooks and give students real proof that language is real and it is not studied only in the classroom. "Authentic texts can be motivating because they are evidence, the language used for purposes real life by real people. (Nuttall, 1976)

We can have a look at how Breen considers and categorize authenticity. According to his point of view authenticity may include: "Terms of how speakers of the language are involved in speaking, frequency of speaking." Breen also states that authenticity can be categorized by the use of tasks that lead us in learning. In other words criteria and authenticity depends on: various text, different students, different purposes, different classes. (Breen, 1985)

From the above criteria presented, in my opinion before choosing a text teachers can evaluate such things. First of all authentic texts are defined as 'texts of real life that are not written for pedagogic purposes (Wallace: 1992:145). They are written for authentic speakers and contain real language. They are materials that are produced to fulfill some social purposes in the community in contrast with non-authentic texts that are designed to learn language. (Peacock: 1997:144) Widdowson explains the difference between the word "*original*" and *authentic*.(Widdowson, 1978) In the first example he refers to the language of a native speaker, while the authentic he understands a response to local language speakers to the language itself. Authenticity is an interaction between the reader and text. According to Goodman reading is an interaction between language and thought. (Goodman, 1982)

**2. 3 Assessing text difficulty and teaching students to use textbooks***How to use textbooks*

When a new text is introduced, it should be pointed out the importance and tools given by the author at the beginning and the end of the text to help students study it. Everything helps from the table of content, index, glossary, chapter introduction, chapter summary. Students are helped by using these devices to organize their reading and thinking to set up the aims of their study.

*Dealing with a difficult text*

It often happens in our classes to face the difficulties that our students find to use textbooks. The question that everyone raises is simple: *How will we teach our students to deal with a textbook?* In my opinion is that first of all we should consider the language level of our students than using new techniques and strategies of teaching and new methodology. The problem must be seen first of all to what our students call difficult. When there is a new text there are some problems. For someone are new words in a lecture or new words in a reading text. For some others is the complicated grammar or many long and complicated sentences. We must evaluate the situation. In most of the cases words are learned in the context so we should teach our students new strategies of learning.

If in a reading part they have a lot of new words they should read first for taking a general knowledge and than reading with purpose and trying to get the meaning from the context. We learn new words through reading and do not learn words in order to read. Sometimes we consider the length of the sentences. As Fry states:" To understand a text takes as criteria the length of the sentences." (Fry, 1977) The basic assumption underlying any readability formula is that meaning is in the print in the text. One of the primary things that we as teachers should do is to show

them how to do it. For a child is difficult to read a text so show them how to do it. It's good to give the purposes of this text, what do we expect from them, what are the things that children should learn and how to learn them.

#### ***2.4 Matching textbooks to language levels***

In planning to use a text in an English class, teachers should be clear about their goals. In practice teachers draw from each perspective, to greater or lesser extent, depending upon their learning intentions for their students, the text selected and the activities designed to use with that text. Teachers who are managers of learning recognize in general that a number of methodological options exist, but they are guided in particular moment by a compass consisting of a set of values, some knowledge and experience, and a commitment to learning outcomes. (Larsen, 2008)The simplest way to find whether a book is too difficult for individual students is to have each student first read it aloud and then tells what he/she has read.

#### ***2.5. Authentic materials and cultural information***

Authentic materials facilitate students' motivation, recognition of the pragmatic use of language, cultural identification. Teachers generally think that the use of authentic materials increases motivation, but there are also those who think that these materials reduce motivation because they are difficult. (Peacock, 1997) However, if students are not motivated by material, they must negotiate with the teachers for other materials .using the real language enrich student's vocabulary. Materials that are not based on real culture of the students bring them to an artificial interpretation and do not facilitate the input and integration of English culture. The more students read, the more they become good readers.

Always we must have clear objectives in mind when using authentic materials. Apart from authentic materials we should use additional materials such as: *Class Library* to have effective teaching and learning we should use various material. Each English class should have its own library. All kinds of materials such as magazines, extracurricular books, brochures, pamphlets adapted to the age and language level of students should be used whenever possible to perform different tasks. (Goodman, 1982)

### **3.The Study**

#### *Research methods*

To conduct the study about communicative problems that our students encounter in English classes, it has been followed the line of literature research and practical side of it by observing English classes, experimenting. Before the observation, questionnaires and interviews were made to teachers and students concerning methodology, techniques and strategies used in the teaching and learning process, interviews about the texts and cultural information in English classes.

#### *Participants*

Participants of this study are students and teachers of elementary and high school in Vlore. After the questionnaires and interviews was made the data collection and analyses based in them, observations and literature review. The number of participants is about 300 students and 30 teachers. The age varies from 10- 18, and the experience of teachers is from 5, 7, 8, 12, 20 years. The interviews and questionnaires are made to different age and classes, according to the intent and inner focus of the questions.

#### *Results and discussion*

Opinions and beliefs of teachers on authentic texts and materials used in classroom are very important. In this section, we will have a look at the role of text in language acquisition, the importance of adapting authentic

materials for the acquisition of skills and communication abilities. The concept of texts was thought to begin with a few questions dealing with teachers' expectations and thoughts.

Some research questions for this concept are: Are you satisfied with the texts you use? Where only 23 responded that they were satisfied, 27 % Very satisfied 23 % Somewhat 27 % A little 24 % Not at all 16% of teachers. Should it be changed? A small part answered this question by commenting that it is generally good, but deals rather with the linguistic structure than enhancing communication.

<p><b>Text criteria:</b></p> <p><b>I. Arrange the following criteria according to the importance in selecting a textbook in EFLclasses:</b></p> <p>Language level – opportunity for interaction of all language components – adoption to students' needs- suitable to students' age</p> <p><b>II. In what way are these criteria affected by the language level of students:</b></p> <p>a) Text should be a tool to teach specific language structures and vocabulary. Yes 52 %</p> <p>b) To provide an opportunity to use specific strategies for reading and communication. Yes 76 %</p> <p>c) Must present something that is familiar and of interest to the student. Yes 74%</p> <p>d) Must be at the same language level of learners. Yes 100 %</p> <p>e) It must be authentic, not to be written for pedagogical purposes. Yes 24 %</p> <p>f) It should be elaborative, then give the opportunity for the development of different communicative activities. Yes 78 %</p> <p><b>III. Does the text offer a lot of communicative exercises enabling students to communicate? Yes 35 % No 65 %</b></p> <p>What do students like of this text? What students do not like of this text? Cultural information Grammar exercises Varied Topics Writing exercises</p>
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Table I. Opinion of teachers about English text.

About the role of authentic materials in enhancing culture the comments are almost the same:

✓ *There is not enough information used and presented in the text. The use of authentic materials such as magazines, newspapers, films, pictures and photographs help our students identify information.*

*Discussion*

From the results above teachers are not too satisfied with the text offered, as they do not help a lot in enhancing communication. A good teacher should adapt it for his/her goals and at some extend even experiment with it by manipulating the text, using additional materials and preparing more communicative activities based on text. From the surveys, a great part of English classes does not have a class library, apart from that not all the teachers use other simple additional materials such as posters, brochures, magazines. Those that do that used them for different topics. About the use of additional materials we have these results:

- Posters 3%
- Magazines 6%
- paintings 24% (those presented in text)
- charts 18%
- leaflets 7%
- movies 0%
- music 35%

- photographs 25%
- internet 3%
- newspapers 0%
- novels 2%

As we can see there is a limited use of other authentic additional materials. Teachers may use a variety of these beginning with self-preparing used for functional activities such as flashcards, posters that help students understand and performing exercises. Even the use of films help English students a lot. Teachers may find interesting movies for example cartoons or teenager movies that are suitable to language level and age. For example *Ice Age*, *Aladdin*, *Tom and Jerry*, *Winx*, *Hanna Montana*, *Harry Potter*, *High School Musical*, and lots of others. Television programs including documentaries are very interesting the same fact stands for educational programs. For the purpose of this research in different classes I experimented different classes where students were presented with some of the films mentioned above practically including grades 6-7, 10-11-12. The results were amazing. In a class with 45 students (80%) of them participated willingly, curiosity to listen and watch cartoons and films in English language was to a great extend.

We can find useful to be used in our classes even personal photographs as for example draw and speak about your family tree (age 7-8 years old). Colorful crayons to present different things, to attract attention. The use of this objects varies according to the age of students, style, techniques, strategies and reasons, anyway those are a good tool to attract attention, especially to the age 8-12 or even 13-14. From the observations I noticed that a pupil of third grade was more concerned in speaking about his family tree if he had a family photograph, for this reason we should use them often. The students are involved emotionally so it helps them to speak a lot. They do it eagerly, because it allows them to speak about something they like. This reinforces motivation and faith.

The use of music in English also helps to develop listening and writing skills. Students feel relaxed when the atmosphere in class is nice. As example the use of music in grades 3 and 4 to deal with listening exercises, reinforcement of alphabet or even reinforcement of questions with Which, What, Why est. Music can be used for a filling gap exercise. The use of songs makes them enthusiastic.

### Conclusion

The text is the most fundamental means of foreign language learning. A well organized text offers a lot to students it promotes their learning, it motivates them. A text is the key to successful communication. A good text is that that accomplishes teacher's objectives that help to teach the four skills in a perfect way. A good text is that that offers the everyday language to students that is authentic and gives a lot of varieties. The use of authentic materials helps to overcome the difficulties in student's learning and communication.

When a text is chosen there are some criteria that should be taken in consideration such as the text difficulty and the language level. Teachers can clarify their intentions for the use of chosen texts and determine different ways to cater for student learning styles. A process such as this is a useful tool for teachers in planning an appropriate, rich and balanced English program for students. If the aims of teaching are met by the text chosen than we can say that it is the best text and we as teachers will take the rewards of our teaching.

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