Inauthentic Authenticity or Authentic Inauthenticity?

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Abstract

Many complaints about the lack of authenticity in the language classroom fail to distinguish and define different kinds of authenticity. It is commonly assumed that there is some sort of global and absolute notion of authenticity in which all the different kinds must be simultaneously and completely present. While there are relatively clear definitions available of what is meant by authenticity in relation to teaching materials and texts, there is much less agreement about what constitutes authenticity of context and of task or activity. This paper explores different notions of authenticity. A crucial point that is often overlooked is that the classroom has its own authenticity. For most learners the classroom is a very real and authentic place. The paper explores the implications of this for the notion of authenticity in the language classroom.

The question of authenticity in the language classroom is much discussed, but even a cursory reading of the relevant literature will bring to light a confused and contradictory picture. It is not surprising that many teachers (and teacher trainers) are themselves thoroughly confused. In part this is because there are different types of authenticity, and these are not always clearly distinguished. In many discussions it is not clear whether we are dealing with authenticity of language, authenticity of task, or authenticity of situation.

Breen distinguishes four types of authenticity.

1. Authenticity of the texts which we may use as input data for our learners.

2. Authenticity of the learners own interpretation of such texts.

3. Authenticity of the tasks conducive to language learning.[-1-]

4. Authenticity of the actual social situation of the language classroom. (Breen, 1985, p. 61)

Complaints about inauthenticity or artificiality often seem to ignore all these different types of authenticity, assuming that there is some sort of global and absolute notion of authenticity which can only exist if all the above types of authenticity are simultaneously present. But authenticity is clearly a relative matter and different aspects of it can be present in different degrees.

It may be helpful at this point to look at a few definitions of authenticity. Here are some definitions of authenticity of text or teaching materials:

An authentic text is a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort. (Morrow, 1977, p. 13)

Authentic texts (either written or spoken) are those which are designed for native speakers: they are real texts designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language in question. (Harmer, 1983, p. 146)

A rule of thumb for authentic here is any material which has not been specifically produced for the purposes of language teaching. (Nunan, 1989, p. 54)

Wilkins (1976, p. 79) talks in similar vein about authentic materials as being materials which were originally directed at a native-speaking audience.

So far, then, there does not seem to be very much difficulty. But many make the point that text authenticity is all very well, but much more important is what is done with the text. In other words, what happens when the other types of authenticity defined by Breen are brought into play? Hutchinson and Waters make the point well when they say that Authenticity is not a characteristic of a text in itself: it is a feature of a text in a particular context. Therefore, they say, A text can only be truly authentic, in other words, in the context for which it was originally written. And, they conclude, We should not be looking for some abstract concept of authenticity, but rather the practical concept of fitness to the learning purpose (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 159).

Widdowson makes a similar point when he talks about authenticity not as a quality residing in instances of language but as a quality which is bestowed upon them, created by the response of [-2-] the receiver. He further maintains that we do not recognize authenticity as something there waiting to be noticed, we realize it in the act of interpretation (Widdowson, 1979, p. 165).

Kramsch (1993, pp. 178-184), following Breen and Widdowson and taking up many of the same themes, has a useful discussion of the various possible meanings of the word authenticity. She also points out, as does Widdowson (1990, pp. 46-7), that we have to distinguish between language-learning activity and language-using activity. As Widdowson says, inauthentic language-using behaviour may well be *effective* language-learning

behaviour (p. 45). Kramsch concludes that all pedagogy is an artifact of educational discourse (p. 184) and that we need to measure what goes on in the language classroom, not against some problematically defined criterion of authenticity, but against whatever communicative and cognitive goals are accepted as appropriate in a particular educational context.

Some writers, then, think of authenticity as essentially residing in a text while others think of authenticity as being, in some sense, conferred on a text by virtue of the use to which it is put by particular people in particular situations. Even if we move away from looking at the authenticity of language texts toward considering the authenticity of language use, the question of relativity and interpretation come in. Bachman, for example, points out (1990, p. 310) that "instances of language use are by definition context dependent and hence unique." Stevenson elaborates:

When one claims that this is real, another will quickly ask "to whom, in whose eyes, where, when, with what intent, at what level of proficiency, perceived level of proficiency, and so on?" It's a more or less affair, dependent upon this and that (...) (1985, p. 43)
So we see that authenticity of texts or materials can be clearly defined, but when we go beyond the text, authenticity is very much a matter of interpretation. This would appear to be one source of much of the confusion surrounding the notion. Those who persist in looking for an absolute kind of authenticity have been misled by the apparently straightforward way in which materials authenticity can be defined. At the same time, in the communicative era, there is a widespread feeling that what goes on in the classroom must reflect "real life." All this gives rise to statements such as the following, all taken from comments by teachers on an in-service course engaged in an exercise in evaluating textbooks and other teaching materials. (These teachers were non-native speakers of English, teaching English in their own countries, in either EFL or ESL situations.) [-3-]

The question "Who is this?" is very rarely used in a realistic situation. Moreover, wanting to know who a person is immediately after being told his name is also unnatural.

The dialogues in Textbook X are very artificial, because if the teacher and the pupils were in a real situation then the teacher would know the answers to his questions and would therefore not ask them. The questions that he asks are therefore not genuine questions.

The descriptions, language and even the story in Textbook X are generally artificial and not very authentic. The description on Page n is not very authentic because the question "What is John doing?" is not a genuine question, since assuming the learners have eyes they can see what John is doing without having to say "He is washing the car." The second question adds to the artificiality because, having been told that John is washing the car we are then asked "Is he washing the bicycle?"

Now it is easy to make fun of materials which are the object of such comments. The objection is that the language is artificial, or rather the use of language is artificial. It is not genuine. The complaint is that there is no genuine communication, there are no genuine questions, no real use of language. Widdowson tries to deal with this by making a distinction between "authenticity" and "genuineness." Talking about reading passages used in language classrooms he says:

To present someone with a set of extracts and to require him to read them not in order to learn something interesting and relevant about the world but in order to learn something

about the language being used is to misrepresent normal language use to some degree. The extracts are, by definition, genuine instances of language use, but if the learner is required to deal with them in a way which does not correspond to his normal communicative activities, then they cannot be said to be authentic instances of use. Genuineness is a characteristic of the passage itself and is an absolute quality. Authenticity is a characteristic of the relationship between the passage and the reader and it has to do with appropriate response. (Widdowson, 1978, p. 80)

Here, Widdowson seems to be using "genuineness" to refer to Breen"s first type of authenticity and to authenticity in the sense defined by Harmer and Nunan in the quotations presented above.[-4-] Perhaps this is a helpful distinction to make, making clear that there is a difference between the instances of language (texts) and the uses to which they are put. Unfortunately the fact remains that many writers, as we have seen, use the term "authenticity" to refer to the texts themselves. No doubt the failure to distinguish between genuineness and authenticity in this way has contributed to the confusion in the debate, but even if we are careful to draw this distinction problems remain.

The confusion is compounded by the wider issue of what some writers see as "naturalness," that is the question of whether or not an ESL text sounds natural, and whether or not there is a variety of language peculiar to ESL texts. It is conceivable, for instance, that a text could be "genuine" (in Widdowson"s sense, corresponding to Breen"s first type of authenticity and Harmer"s and Nunan"s defintion thereof), and not sound "natural." Or, a text could lack genuineness, and yet sound "natural," in the case of a text composed specifically for language teaching purposes. Considerations such as these lead us to the thought that Widdowson"s notion of "genuineness" is not perhaps as straightforward as it seems. If we look again at Morrow"s definition of an authentic text, quoted above, which we can presumably equate with Widdowson"s notion of a "genuine" text, we can see that this definition, taken in conjunction with the remarks of Stevenson, also quoted above, can easily be stretched to cover a text composed for language teaching purposes. Is not an ESL writer a real writer? Is not an ESL class a real audience? In such circumstances, is no real message being conveyed? As for naturalness, what is this? What sounds natural to one may sound unnatural to another. What may sound natural in one context may sound unnatural in another.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that much of this debate is sterile, since the only satisfactory position must be the relativist one of "It all depends." We would therefore do well not to worry too much about such matters and to concentrate instead on the use and interpretation of texts, which alone can make them "authentic".

To make sense of these issues a wider perspective is needed, and this can be provided by the more general, but in some ways parallel, distinction made by Wilga Rivers between "skill-getting" and "skill-using" (Rivers & Temperley, 1978, p. 4). This can be equated with Littlewood"s distinction between "pre-communicative" and "communicative" activities (Littlewood, 1981, p. 8, 1992, pp. 43-44). Widdowson's and Kramsch's distinction between language-learning and language-using activities is also similar (see above). Skill-getting and pre-communicative activities and tasks, while not perhaps "authentic in themselves, are nevertheless aimed at equipping learners with skills and knowledge which will enable them to put the language to authentic use. Keeping this distinction in [-5-] mind helps us to remain clear about what we are trying to achieve in the language classroom and how we are trying to achieve it.

Let us therefore acknowledge that there is no such thing as an abstract quality "authenticity" which can be defined once and for all and that authenticity is a function not only of the language but also of the participants, the use to which language is put, the setting, the nature of the interaction, and the interpretation the participants bring to both the setting and the activity. However, although this is a necessary condition for advancing the debate, it is not a sufficient one. We must also acknowledge that the classroom itself is a real place. In the above comments and in nearly all the discussion we have referred to so far there is an assumption that what goes on in the language classroom is almost by definition "artificial," not "authentic" in Widdowson"s sense above, and that we must therefore strive to make what happens in it as much like real life as possible. This is an assumption that must be questioned.

First of all, the notion of "real life" in this context is itself dubious. As Bachman (1990, pp. 9-10) points out:

(...) when we consider the great variety that characterizes language use--different contexts, purposes, topics, participants, and so forth--it is not at all clear how we might go about distinguishing "real life" from "nonreal life" language use in any meaningful way, so that attempts to characterize authenticity in terms of real life performance are problematic.
But more than that the classroom creates its own authenticity. Classroom language is a real use of language, and we cannot just dismiss the classroom setting and all that takes place in it as being by definition "artificial". As Glyn Hughes points out:
The classroom situation is often labelled "artificial". If artificiality can be measured statistically, it means that the 11 million schoolchildren in Britain spending 7 hours a day, five days a week, 40 weeks a year in school--a total of 15,400 million hours--are not engaged in some form of social interaction, and therefore, of course, the 50 million hours spent watching football matches is an even less genuine form of interaction. (Hughes, 1981, p. 7)
Although classroom discourse obviously has special features, nevertheless what goes on in a classroom is very real. This is a real use of language and we must not forget that classroom language is very real to the learner. We are all familiar with many aspects [-6-] of classroom language and of the language classroom generally, even outside the classroom. For example, there are many similarities between the language of the language classroom and parent/child language. We are also all familiar with the practice (criticised in the extracts above in the specific context of the language classroom) of asking questions to which the questioner already knows the answers. This happens throughout education (and also in other areas of life) and is a part of the educational context in which the learner lives. It is part of the classroom game which all learners are used to. Thus, we must recognize that the classroom has its own reality and naturalness. What happens there is just as real and natural as that which happens outside the classroom. Participants in the language classroom create their own authenticity there as they do elsewhere. In particular, we must not forget that the language classroom is above all else a *classroom*. What happens in a language classroom is not essentially different from what happens in any other classroom. Above all we must acknowledge that learners bring to the language classroom expectations and attitudes and knowledge derived from a wealth of experience of other classrooms. Among other things, this knowledge and experience enables them to distinguish between skill-getting and skill-using or pre- communicative and communicative activities and tasks.

I suspect that these objections to the artificiality of the language classroom date back to the beginning of the seventies and the beginning of the communicative movement. A distinction originally drawn by Widdowson may be partly to blame for the stigma attached to this

artificiality of the language classroom. In an early discussion of communicative language teaching he maintains that

We need to draw a careful distinction between two different kinds of meaning. One kind of meaning is that which language items have as elements of the language system, and the other is that which they have when they are actually put to use in acts of communication. Let us, for convenience, call the first kind of meaning signification and the second kind value. (Widdowson, 1972, p. 16)
He then suggests that much communicative language teaching does in fact teach signification rather than value, and gives a famous example.
Let us suppose that we wish to teach the present continuous tense.
The recommended approach will advise us to invent some kind of situation to demonstrate its meaning. One such situation might consist of the teacher walking to the [-7-] door and saying I am walking to the door, and then getting a number of pupils to do the same while he says He is walking to the door, They are walking to the door, and so on. Another might consist of the teacher and selected pupils writing on the blackboard to the accompaniment of comments like I am writing on the blackboard, He is writing on the blackboard, and so on. In this manner, we can demonstrate what the present continuous tense signifies and we can use the situations to develop action chains so as to show how its meaning relates to that of other tense forms. But what kind of communicative function do these sentences have in these situations? They are being used to perform the act of commentary in situations which in normal circumstances no commentary would be called for. Contextualization of this kind, then, does not demonstrate how sentences of this form are appropriately used to perform the communicative act of commentary. What is being taught is signification, not value. (Widdowson, 1972, pp. 16-17)

Now this may be artificial, as Widdowson says, in the sense that there is no genuine communicative value involved, but this probably does not matter very much, because learners understand the situation. They have common sense, they are experienced learners and they understand the conventions of the classroom. No doubt they recognize the artificiality of the classroom and of Widdowsons examples above, but at the same time they can extract and recognize communicative value, which, as Widdowson himself says, is not inherent in the language itself. They are capable of making the distinction between skill-getting and skill-using, between pre- communicative and comunicative activities. As users of language learners already know much about language and how to use it. As Swan (1985a, 1985b) notes, they can make use of the knowledge of language acquired as speakers of their L1 in their interpretation and use of the L2. Widdowson himself, in the first passage quoted above, acknowledges that authenticity is imposed by the hearer/reader, in other words by the participants in the discourse.

What I am maintaining, then, is that learners, in their capacity as knowers and users of language, are quite capable of extrapolating from the classroom situation, and that consequently we need not be worried about the so-called artificiality of the classroom situation. We need to remember that the language classroom is there to promote language learning. If we take activities where it is said that there is genuine communication, for example information gap type exercises, they are authentic in one sense, in that genuine communication take place, but the whole thing is still contrived, in the sense that it is aimed at language learning. This does not matter because the learners have the sense to know [-8-] what is going onthey are used to the classroom situation and to the kind of activities that go on there. They can distinguish between skill-getting and skill-using, as we have already noted

(and even recognise that these can go on simultaneously), they can create their own authenticity in the classroom. Widdowson himself again (writing much later) makes the point about the essential artificiality of pedagogy itself.

For the whole point of pedagogy is that it is a way of short-circuiting the slow process of natural discovery and can make arrangements for learning to happen more easily and more efficiently than it does in natural surroundings. That is what schools are for, whatever subject we are dealing with. Pedagogy is bound to be a contrivance: that is precisely its purpose. If what went on in classrooms exactly replicated the conditions of the world outside, there would be no point in pedagogy at all. (Widdowson, 1990, p. 163)

In other words, the so-called "artificiality" and "inauthenticity" of the language classroom, however we may want to define and measure them, are strengths, not weaknesses.

However, it must be admitted that the situation is in fact much more complicated than I have made out. I have been assuming that all learners understand or accept the conventions of classroom discourse, and it is by no means obvious that they always do. They bring their own agendas, their own understanding of the educational process in general and of the language learning process in particular to the classroom, and these understandings may or may not match those of the other participants. Also in language teaching the situation is often even more complicated because in many cases we may have to teach the language (the medium) and also at the same time the conventions of classroom discourse--the complication with language teaching is that language is often both the medium and the message. Nevertheless, the point remains that if learners do not understand or accept the conventions of the classroom and of classroom discourse, then this is not specifically a problem of language teaching methodology but a more general educational or sociological one.

This is the point that Basil Bernstein was trying to make in the late sixties and early seventies (Bernstein, 1971). Although he presented his findings in a very misleading way, in terms of elaborated and restricted code, which was much misunderstood, and which focused attention on the wrong things (on the signification rather than the value, in Widdowson's terms), there is no doubt that he was fundamentally right, in the sense that there is a culture of the classroom with its inherent discourse to which some learners are much better acculturated or prepared to accept than others. Edwards [-9-] (1980, pp. 37-38) makes similar observations in a somewhat more accessible manner.

What are the implications of the authenticity debate for language teachers? Two main points emerge. First, language teachers cannot isolate themselves from other great educational issues, such as the problem of the culture and discourse of the classroom, which concern them just as much as anybody. They have a great deal to learn from these issues, and also a great deal to contribute to them. Second, we ought not be too concerned about "authenticity in the language classroom." Let us have more faith and confidence in the sociolinguistic abilities and educational knowledge and experience of our learners. They are not the empty vessels or tabulae rasae that many language teachers seem to think they are, at least when it comes to dealing with questions of pragmatics and discourse and of language use. They can accept the artificiality of the language classroom (Ellis, 1993, p. 77 - fn.4). Presented with the right kind of tasks and materials, they can impose their own authenticity on what goes on there (Candlin, 1993). Let us accept that the language classroom has its own legitimacy, its own authenticity and reality, to which both learners and teachers contribute. Let us not deny our learners' own sense of the reality of the classroom nor underestimate their capacity to deal

with it and to play their role in creating it. It is certainly true that classrooms rely on the expectations, the goals, the roles, and the conceptions that participants bring to them, but the notions that language learners in particular bring with them include the sense that the language classroom is for learning language as well as for using it.

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