Principles of Authenticity in Second Language Instructional Materials Development: A Social-constructivist Perspective

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Abstract

The literature of curriculum development includes processes and principles followed by various authors in developing language instructional materials. A principle most commonly emphasized in the literature is authenticity. The use of such terminologies as genuine texts and authentic use (Widdoson, 1978), natural language (Bell & Gower, 1988), authentic materials and interaction (Nunan, 1988), the need for authenticity (Hall, 2005) is clear evidence of the supreme importance of authenticity in L2 instruction and materials development.

Keywords: authenticity, instructional materials, social-constructivist perspective

INTRODUCTION

The definition of the term 'authenticity' as applied to second language instruction has been a subject of great debate in the past four decades. The inception of this can be dated back to the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the 1970s (Mishan, 2005). The present paper provides a brief review of various aspects of authenticity and concludes with a discussion of a social-constructivist approach to authenticity in L2 instructional materials development.

TEXT AUTHENTICITY

The issue of text authenticity in L2 instruction can be dated back to Widdowson (1978) who applied the term 'genuineness' as a characteristic of the text. Nunan (1999) defines authentic materials as spoken or written language data that has been produced in the course of genuine communication, and not specifically written for purposes of language teaching.

As a leading figure in L2 materials development, Tomlinson (2003a, p. 5-6) refers to the distinction between authentic texts, i.e. 'texts not written especially for language teaching', and 'teacher-made texts' (or rather 'author-made'), i.e. those especially written for the coursebook, containing simple vocabulary and structures but not necessarily felt by competent users of English to be contrived. He further argues that the authenticity of texts is enhanced through efficient use of graphic devices such as typography and visuals.

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Elsewhere, Tomlinson and Masuhara (2018) posits that "an authentic text is one that is produced in order to communicate rather than to teach" (p. 32). He further maintains that an authentic text is not necessarily produced by a native speaker and it might be a simplified version of an original text which aims to facilitate communication.

Along the same line, discussing types of authenticity, Newby (2000a) elaborates on authenticity of text as well. By authenticity of text, Newby (2000a) means spoken, written and graphic form used in textbooks and which the students read, hear or see. Following Widdowson (1978), Newby (2000a) uses the term genuine and defines 'a genuine text' as "one that was originally created for a non-pedagogic purpose but which has been 'borrowed' by a textbook writer." (p.19)

Similarly, Richards (2001) distinguishes between authentic and created materials. And he lists the advantages of authentic materials as follows:

A-They have a positive effect on learner motivation. B- They provide authentic cultural information. C- They provide exposure to real language. D- They relate more closely to students' real--world needs. E- They support a more creative approach to teaching.

Regarding the disadvantages of authentic texts, he argues that: A- Created materials can also be motivating. B- Authentic materials often contain difficult language. C- Created materials are built around a graded syllabus and provide a systematic coverage of teaching items. D- Using authentic materials is a burden for teacher (i.e., choosing them and designing activities require time.).

TASK AUTHENTICITY

For Tomlinson and Masuhara (2018), "an authentic task is one that involves the learners in communication in order to achieve a context-based outcome rather than just to practice language or produce output" (p. 32). Tomlinson (2012) states that "the task does not have to be a real-life task, but can be a classroom task which involves the use of real-life skills in order to achieve not just communication but a non-linguistic outcome" (p. 162). As an example, he maintains that one member of a group can get the others to draw a replica of a drawing that she has been shown. He believes that if authentic texts and tasks are not used, the learners cannot be prepared for the reality of language use.

Regarding task authenticity, Guariento and Morley (2001) identify four broad schools of thought: 1) authenticity through a genuine purpose 2) authenticity through real-world targets (i.e., real-world tasks) 3) authenticity through classroom interaction 4) authenticity through engagement. This posits that authenticity depends on whether or not the student is engaged by the task. This reflects Widdowson's (1987) concern with learner response to the text.

Along the same line, Newby (2000b) uses the term 'authenticity of behavior' to refer to task authenticity. Newby (2000b) maintains that authenticity of behavior involves 'the tasks, language activities and exercises which students perform and also the texts that they themselves produce' (p. 21).

Moreover, Newby (2000b) makes a distinction between pragmatic authenticity and process authenticity. Newby (2000b) equates Pragmatic authenticity with Widdowson's

phrase (1990, p. 46) 'normal language behavior in pursuit of an outcome' and states that oral or written texts should be "firmly embedded within a (simulated) context, in which roles, settings, text types and purpose are clearly defined" (p. 21).

Furthermore, Newby (2000b) maintains that pragmatic authenticity has a sociolinguistic orientation. Whereas, process authenticity is of a psycholinguistic nature and is concerned with the mental processes employed in language comprehension and production.

AUTHENTICITY AS INTERACTION

A point of concern is the fact that authentic texts and tasks replicating real-life situations do not necessarily lead to genuine interaction. Thus, authenticity of materials needs to be considered from the perspective of the learner in terms of learner-text interaction. Distinguishing between 'genuineness' and 'authenticity', Widdowson (1978) emphasized the reader's significant role in text comprehension, and the importance of authenticity in L2 instruction. "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 has to do with appropriate response." (Widdowson, 1978, p. 80). Accordingly, elsewhere Widdowson (1979, p. 161) considered genuineness as a quality of texts, and authenticity as an attribute 'bestowed' on texts by the audience. In other words, Widdowson's concept of authenticity is concerned with the importance of the interaction between the audience and the text.

Following Widdowson (1978), Bachman (1990) introduces an approach to defining authenticity that he calls interactional/ability' (IA) approach. He defines authenticity as "the interaction between the language user, the context, and the discourse" (p.302).

Similarly, Prodromou (1992) and Trabelsi (2010) have also raised the issue of authenticity in relation to the learners' culture. What might be authentic for learners from one location might not be authentic for others. This indicates that authenticity is not a feature of the text or the task but a matter of the learner's interaction with the text and the task.

As widdowson (1978) puts it, 'authenticity' refers to the response of the user to the text, and notes that "such a response can occur without the material being genuine" (p. 80). In this regard, he argues that simplification within the conventions of a given language field does no damage to authenticity in this sense. Conversely, a 'genuine' text does not necessarily lead to authentic response, i.e. engagement. As Prodromou and Mishen (2008) put it, authenticity has to have a sort of 'end-user' validation; it does not stem solely from the originator. In other words, as Van Lier (1996) maintains authenticity "is basically a personal process of engagement" (p.128).

In the same line, Newby (2000b) proposes personal authenticity. According to this view, authenticity is a mental construct or an attitude held and developed by the student. In other words, rather than being a product of texts or tasks, it is the process of engagement or interaction with materials and with language.

CONSTRUCTIVISM

Constructivism can claim a long and prestigious heritage: Dewey, Piaget, Bruner, and Vygotsky, are all the leading contributors to constructivism (Jordan, 2004). As Brinner (1999) puts it, according to this theory, learners construct "their own knowledge by testing ideas and approaches based on their prior knowledge and experience, applying these to a new situation, and integrating the new knowledge gained with pre-existing intellectual constructs" (p.2).

All constructivists are unanimously in total opposition to the idea of objective truth (Jordan, 2004). Constructivists propose the view that "contrary to common sense there is no unique "real world" that preexists and is independent of human mental activity and human symbolic language" (Bruner, 1986, p.95).

As Brown (2007) maintains, we may think of two branches of constructivism: cognitive and social. In the cognitive version of constructivism, there is emphasis on the individual constructing his own view of reality. As Slavin (2003) argues "Learners must individually discover and transform complex information if they are to make it their own" (pp. 257-258). For Piaget, "learning is a developmental process that involves change, self-generation, and construction, each building on prior learning experiences" (Kaufman, 2004, p. 304). Along the same line, Lincoln and Guba, (1985) posit that "there are multiple, often conflicting, constructions and all (at least potentially) are meaningful" (p. 85).

In contrast to cognitive constructivism, social constructivists sees knowledge solely as the product of social processes of communication and negotiation (the "social construction of reality") (Lincoln, 1990, p. 144). As cited in Kaufman (2004), Vygotsky , as a social constructivist, advocated the view that "children's thinking and meaning-making is socially constructed and emerges out of their social interactions with their environment" (p . 304).

We have seen that within the field of social constructivism there is great emphasis laid upon the importance of social context. We are told that there are two aspects of social context which affect the progress and extent of learning (Pritchard, & Woollard, 2010): first, the systems garnered by the learner from his or her particular culture, such as language, the use of mathematical systems and logic, which develop throughout life; second, social interaction with more knowledgeable members of the community.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO AUTHENTICITY

In their social constructivist model of education, Williams and Burden (1997) have identified four key sets of factors which influence the learning process – teachers, learners, tasks, and contexts. They all interact as part of a dynamic ongoing process. The context includes: emotional, physical, social, political and cultural environments (p.43). Following such a social constructivist approach and adding the factors of materials developers and text to William and Burden's (1997) list, we may define authenticity as an ongoing process influenced by *learners, teachers, materials developers, texts, tasks , as well as contexts.*

First of all, we need an approach to authenticity in materials development that takes into account the unique contribution that each individual *learner* brings to the learning situation. As Newby (2000b) maintains, a more learner-centered approach will focus more strongly on personal authenticity, that is learner authentication. In this approach authenticity is considered as the result of the process of engagement or interaction with materials and with language. Borrowing ideas from social constructivists, as discussed by Willaims and Burden (1997, p 42), we can argue that learners' characteristics and feelings influence their interaction with the context and discourse, which is what Bachman (1990) calls interactional authenticity.

The L2 teacher, as the consumer of instructional materials, has a significant mediating role to play in authentication of materials. The concept of mediation as proposed by Vygotsky has to do with the part played by other significant people in learners' lives. The role of the mediator is to help the learner to learn (Williams & Burden, 1997). The same holds true about the process of authentication in the use of L2 instructional materials. The mediator can facilitate L2 learners' interaction with the given text and task through providing the required conditions. For instance, the L2 teacher, as the mediator can pre-teach the key lexical items, or the necessary cultural knowledge before the learners embark on a task. In other words, mediation enables the learner, to use Widdowson 's (1978) words, to respond to the text.

The materials developer has also a determining role in enhancing authenticity as defined in this paper (i.e., authenticity as interaction). When developing instructional materials, they need to consider such principles as using engaging content, natural language and personalized practice (Bell & Gower, 2011), being student-centered (Hall, 1995, cited in Tomlinson 2003b), and providing comprehensible input and ensuring affective engagement (Tomlinson, 1998), etc. Such principles pave the way for authentication to take place.

Although text authenticity or, to use Widdowson's (1978) term, text genuineness is not the target of social constructivist approach, we need to discuss it with regard to the social constructivist view of authenticity. As the goal is to enhance the learners' interaction with the text, materials developers need to choose texts with certain learners in mind. As mentioned above, Widdowson (1978) posits that 'authenticity' refers to the response of the user to the text, and he argues that simplification within the conventions of a given language field does no damage to authenticity in this sense. Similarly, Tomlinson (2012) maintains that an authentic text does not necessarily need to be produced by a native speaker, it might be a simplified version of an original text which aims to facilitate communication. This implies that a text resulting in the L2 learners' response and communication contributes to the authentication process, regardless of simplification, modification, and genuineness.

The next factor affecting authenticity is the task. A task is said to be authentic in two ways: First, if it matches the real world tasks (e.g., Bachman, 1990; Guariento, & Morley, 2001), and second if its use results in communication, interaction and the learner's engagement (Bachman, , 1990; Guariento, & Morley, 2001; Tomlinson, 2012). It is the latter meaning of task authenticity that is of our concern in social constructivist approach. Newby's

(2000b) process of authenticity may be subsumed under this second meaning of task authenticity. Process authenticity, having a psycholinguistic nature, is concerned with the mental processes involved in the accomplishment of a task, i.e., learner's engagement. Criticizing teachers who use easy tasks, Tomlinson (1998) states that tasks which 'push' learners slightly beyond their present proficiency, but which are achievable are stimulating and can build learners' confidence and motivation.

The last, but defiantly not the least, factor determining the nature of authenticity in L2 materials development and use is the context. As discussed above Bachman (1990) defines authenticity as "the interaction between the language user, the context, and the discourse" (p.302). The context is said to include, emotional, physical, social, political and cultural environments (Williams and Burden, 1997, p. 43). Many textbooks and materials fail to engage learners in EFL contexts. This is because what is authentic to the native speaker in the native language context is sometimes uninteresting or obscure to the L2 learner.

FINAL REMARK

Basically, social constructivism suggests that knowledge and social reality are created through interactions between people and particularly through discourse (Brown, 2007). In an attempt to approach authenticity from social constructivist perspective, the present paper identified six factors influencing the nature of authenticity defined in terms of interaction. These factors all interact in the dynamic ongoing process of authentication. This implies that authenticity is a complex (Breen, 1985) , unstable process rather than a fixed product. What is inauthentic to a given learner at a given time can become authenticated at a later time under the interactive influence of the various factors identified in the present paper.

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