Book review

Designing Authenticity into Language Learning Materials

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Intellect Books, Bristol, UK
ISBN 1-84150-080-1
Paperback 224 pages
230x174mm
Published November 2004
Price £19.95, $39.95

This book aims to be 'a comprehensive approach to exploiting authentic texts in the language classroom' (p. ix). By 'text' Mishan does not simply mean a piece of written or spoken discourse; but a 'cultural product'. She explores how seven audio, visual, graphic and printed cultural products can be used in language classrooms as a basis for authentic input and for authentic tasks, providing not only a rationale for their use based on second language acquisition (SLA) research findings and on sound pedagogical theory, but practical, classroom tasks for a range of levels, which language teachers can use as a resource as written or adapt to their own teaching/learning situations.

The book is divided into two parts. The first three chapters of Part One establish the rationale behind what Mishan calls 'the authenticity-centred approach to language learning materials design' (p. 67). Chapter 4 then takes the theory and applies it to the construction of a 'task authenticity framework' whose purpose is to guide and rationalise the design of authentic materials for language learning, where 'materials' is understood as the combination of the text used plus the activities which are based on it. The practical applications of the task authenticity framework (and of the authenticity-centred approach established in Chapters 1-4) are developed in Part Two of the book. In a series of seven chapters Mishan explores how Literature, The broadcast media, Newspapers, Advertising, Music and song, Film and Information and communications technologies (ICT) can best be exploited for language learning materials and provides sets of classroom tasks most suited to each type of text.

Part One. The theoretical grounding.
The first chapter presents the historical background to the concept of authenticity in language learning and teaching. Mishan shows us that the use of authentic materials for communicative purposes has been around for centuries and she classifies the many precedents into three broad groups which she terms 'communicative' approaches, 'materials-focused' approaches and 'humanistic' approaches.

Given the ongoing efforts to establish common standards of second language learning in multilingual environments and the search for defining and assessing levels of language proficiency in terms of communicative competence (see, for example, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages developed by the Council of Europe (2001), or the Proficiency Guidelines developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 1986), Mishan's discussion of the notion of communicativeness and its relation to authenticity, is a useful summary of current thinking and trends. She notes how 'our perceptions of authenticity are beginning to shift to accommodate the nascent linguistic varieties' (p. 19) emerging from the use of Internet technologies, and suggests a set of criteria (on p. 18) by which to assess the authenticity of texts for language learning materials.

The second and third chapters develop the arguments in favour of using authentic texts for language learning. Chapter Two does this by examining some of the recent SLA
research evidence on how the use of such texts impacts on various affective factors (relating these to autonomous learning practices which, as Mishan has earlier noted, 'are subtly displacing' (p. 10) Communicative Language Teaching), input factors and language processing factors. The evidence from SLA research set out in Chapter 2 is then drawn on in her development of the pedagogical rationale for using authentic texts in the next chapter.

In Chapter 3, Mishan introduces three terms which she feels encapsulate the pedagogical arguments for using authentic texts in language learning: culture, currency and challenge. She points out that 'culture and language are indivisible' (p. 44), but argues that many ELT coursebooks designed for the global market are not as effective as they could be due to (amongst other reasons) cultural and geographic distance of the content. Her main point in the section on culture is that 'texts and materials should be culturally and experientially appropriate for learners' (Prodromou, 1988: 76, cited on p. 54). This is one of the advantages offered by the authenticity approach; namely, teachers can design their own materials to suit their own learners, taking into account their (the learners') background knowledge and preferred learning styles. Fortunately, she goes on to suggest ways of doing this later in the book.

Nearly twenty-five years ago, Nuttall (1982: 20) pointed out that many language teaching courses use texts 'which deal with over-familiar topics ... recounting facts that have long been part of the reader's general knowledge', and argued for using texts which 'have a message that is fresh and interesting' (ibid.). In the second and third sections of Chapter 3, Mishan echoes Nuttall's complaint, although her arguments are more developed. By currency Mishan means more than just 'up-to-date-ness' and topicality. The term also refers to relevance and interest to the learner. Mishan notes how commercial interests have diluted the authenticity of the language in many ELT coursebooks and discusses how we might go about building a more learner-centred, text-driven syllabus based on authentic texts. As regards her notion of challenge, Mishan argues that authentic texts can be, and should be, used in different ways depending on the proficiency level of the learners, thus it is the task which is graded rather than the text, allowing even low-level learners access to stimulating materials which produce genuine reaction and interest. Morever, access to authentic texts (and remember that 'text' can mean a range of material from songs to literature, films to e-mail, television programmes to corpora) is now facilitated through the Internet and related technologies. 'There are', says Mishan, 'myriad ways of maintaining text and task authenticity while providing a suitably gauged level of challenge at any proficiency level (p. 63).

In Chapter 4, Mishan's preliminary discussion of the notion of task in the context of language learning is drawn from several influences, ranging from genre and discourse analysis to work on task-based learning. Having set the scene, in which the focus of authenticity is on the task and not only on the text, she constructs what she calls the 'task authenticity framework' which is based on three sets of parameters: (1) Guidelines for task authenticity, (2) Communicative purpose, and (3) Task typologies. The guidelines for task authenticity (on p. 75) can be used either 'as a sort of checklist to be applied selectively while conceiving and designing tasks' (p. 75), or as 'a a set of criteria for evaluating the authenticity of learning tasks produced by others' (ibid.). That each of these parameters is based on research and on pedagogical practice (Mishan's own as well as that of others) comes through very clearly. Mishan is also aware of the fact that taxonomies, classifications and typologies are really only 'crutches' to help us get about, not to restrict or dominate our activity. And they should never be regarded as exclusive. She notes that the set of seven communicative purposes she identifies is not exhaustive but will provide 'sufficiently broad categories to enable the materials developer/task designer to assign a fairly accurate communicative purpose' (p. 79) to a chosen text, while the taxonomy of task typologies she works out on pages 83-92 is based on the 'broad linguistic, cognitive and/or physical activity/ies they entail' (p.92). Thus, despite, and because of, the theory, the task authenticity framework is allowed a certain flexibility in its practical application as 'any experienced teacher knows that no amount of theorising can predict what happens in the classroom' (p. 93).
Part Two. The resource section.

Chapters 5-10 each deal with a different kind of text, respectively, Literature, The broadcast media, Newspapers, Advertising, Music and song, and Film, and each is divided into two sections. In the first section, Mishan discusses the pedagogical issues involved in using the specific kind of text for language learning. This discussion is then summarised and condensed into a set of 6-8 principles which, together with the references for further reading she provides, are intended to act as a 'quick reference guide' to using the cultural product for language learning/teaching. The second section of each of these chapters is designed to be 'a practical teaching resource' (p. 95). It contains classroom tasks which could either be used as supplementary material on existing courses or as the basis of a learner-centred, text-driven syllabus.

The structure of Chapter 11, which deals with ICT, is rather different. There are separate sections on three technologies, chosen on the basis of being the 'most used for language learning' (p. 242); The Web, E-mail, Corpora and Concordancing -although later we learn that the corpus and the concordancer 'are probably the ICT systems least exploited for language learning' (p. 256). No summarising set of principles for the use of ICT is provided - perhaps because of the relative newness of the technologies, perhaps because of the greater degree of learner autonomy made possible by working online, or perhaps because teacher control is maintained through the task, and the design of authentic tasks is covered at length in Chapter 4. Mishan does, however, discuss the pedagogical practices emerging from these technologies, as well as the effect the new varieties of language arising from them may have on the concept of authenticity. Like the previous chapters in Part Two of the book, this one concludes with a set of carefully described tasks for use in the classroom.

No review of a resources book would be complete without some discussion of the tasks presented, so to the question: Do the tasks work? my answer is: Well, there are 162 of them and the editor of The EUROCALL Review is not prepared to give me the twelve months or so I estimate I would need to try them all out. All I can say is that the few I have tried fully engaged, absorbed and stimulated my students. I would add, though, that the resources Mishan offers us are not, in fact, limited to the tasks. They also include numerous checklists, criteria, summaries, principles and guidelines for use, not to mention the task authenticity framework itself, as well as the benefit of her practical experience and knowledge of theory.

Mishan states that the book is 'in affectionate homage' (p. xi) to her teaching background, and this affection, together with a certain underlying humour, comes through in her writing. We can sense that Mishan has enjoyed writing this book, and that she enjoys teaching and devising materials. In another excellent book, Urquhart & Weir (1998: 234) point out that teachers "... need a sound grasp of practical matters and an educated framework on which to base and to evaluate their methods". It is clear that Mishan has both these requirements in abundance. Designing Authenticity into Language Learning Materials will provide its readers with an opportunity to extend and develop the latter, and a basis on which to acquire the former.

To be truly 'comprehensive' it seems to me that the book needs some discussion of evaluation. Yet even if it stopped at the end of Part One, it would still be well worth reading. It goes on, however, showing us the task authenticity framework 'in action' in the database of classroom tasks, making the book a valuable source of ready-made materials as well as, and perhaps more importantly, a source of ideas and good practice based on sound, pedagogical principles and evidence from recent SLA research, and from which teachers can also derive ideas with which to design their own materials suited to their own teaching/learning situations.

References


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