'Authentic' Spices and Translanguaging in the Multicultural Classroom

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Abstract

The efficacy of using authentic materials within the framework of Task-Based Language Teaching is well-documented (Guariento & Morley, 2001; Nunan, 2004). Such materials allow learners to encounter and use language for real-world purposes by providing them with the tools required to "engage … in the kinds of cognitive processes that arise in communication outside the classroom" (Ellis, 2003, p. 336). This paper describes the use of a graphic text on spices from a brochure on Ayurveda to teach an integrated-skills lesson on reading comprehension, speaking and vocabulary to a group of multicultural, multilingual EFL adults. With the use of translanguaging, the lesson enables students and teachers to discover cultural and linguistic commonalities and differences vis-a-vis cuisines and culinary practices. The use of first languages provided students with a sense of ownership and helped to develop "the weaker language in relationship to the dominant one" (García & Wei, 2014, p. 64).

Keywords: authentic materials, task-based materials, translanguaging, ESL/EFL context

Introduction

Knowledge of more than one language is to be viewed as a rich resource and an advantage enabling learners to encode experiences in multiple codes and literacies. By motivating students to engage their whole beings in interacting with texts, we create opportunities for minority learners to fairly engage in literacy practices and provide them access to a knowledge base that helps them access better education and a better life.

Translanguaging creates a socio-political space to transform themselves. The presence of translanguaging in classrooms make classroom spaces real, full of contradictions and unpredictabilities which mirror the actual nature of real-life language use.

During the 1970s and as late as the last decade, much of the work on biliteracy centred around the concept of bilinguals possessing two separate language systems. All the while, reading and writing of texts was clearly visualized as engaging in two different languages. Literacy researchers are now beginning to acknowledge that processes of reading and writing must be viewed across languages. The linguistic ecology of the learner needs to correspond with the learning experience in class as well. In pedagogical terms, one of the simplest ways of bringing the two ecologies together is to opt for *authentic* materials.

Authenticity

Authentic texts are those that have been created to achieve specific social purposes in the language community where they were created. As an awareness of the need for communicative competence and the skill to use language in the real-world increased, attempts to simulate this real world in the classroom fuelled the use of authentic materials. The use of authentic materials would enable the learner to bridge the gap between classroom knowledge and their capacity to participate in real world events (Guariento & Morley, 2001).

According to Widdowson (1998), even material that has been prepared by the teacher can serve an authentic purpose: "Contrived language has to be such that learners will learn from it and develop the capacity for authentication that they can exploit when they encounter actually occurring language in the real world" (p. 715). The purpose of using the language of the real-world within the classroom is to make the learning experience itself authentic for the learners. Pedagogical tasks that are created to equip learners with the tools to participate in real-world tasks will "engage learners in the kinds of cognitive processes that arise in communication outside the classroom" (Ellis, 2003, p. 336) and provide them with situational and interactional authenticity (Ellis, 2003).

The notion of authentic materials is deeply embedded in task-based language teaching and learning. In task-based learning, real-world tasks are central to the learning process. While a number of definitions of task

exist, Ellis' (2003) definition best captures our conceptualization of task: "A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real-world" (p.16).

Nunan (2004) holds that a task has a meaning-focus and requires the learners to comprehend, manipulate, produce or interact in the target language. Through interaction, learners focus on meaning and form and this promotes the acquisition of language through the use of situations that are relevant and interesting. Tasks with real-world applications can help to bring talk, action, and text together (Guariento & Morley, 2001). A task-based approach using authentic materials helps a language teacher in a multilingual classroom to engage in pedagogic practices that extend the learners' view of self, leading to new identities. This gives way to more inclusive learning processes and approaches to learning as explained in the Figure given below.

Figure: How Authentic Texts Contribute to Transforming the Self
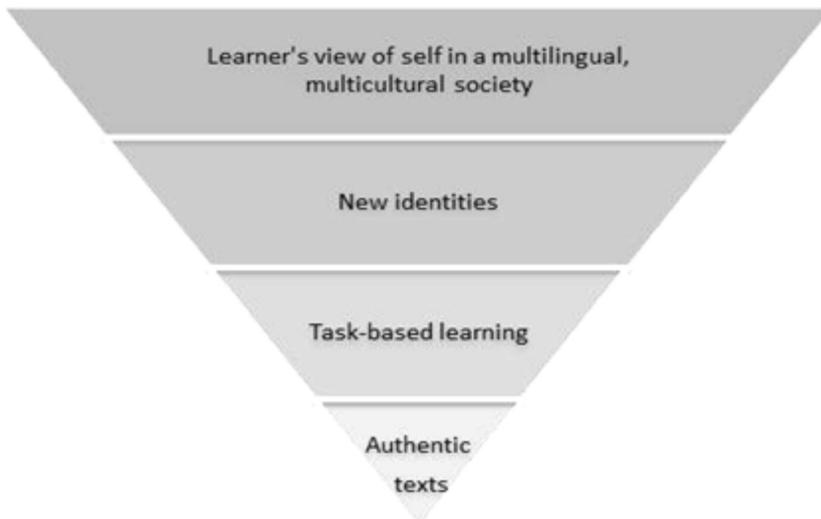
Translanguaging and Multilingual Education

García, Skutnabb-Kangas & Torres-Guzman (2006) view a multilingual school as an agency which exerts "educational effort that takes into account and builds further on the diversity of languages and literacy practices that children and youth bring to school" (p. 14). Translanguaging,

a more recent perspective on such issues, challenges the basic idea of viewing language as a static entity and sees language as a process rather than a thing. The root 'languaging', signifies a continuous process and not a passive noun.

Lin (2005) describes the use of code switching practices in classrooms as "local, pragmatic, coping tactics and responses to the socioeconomic dominance of English in Hong Kong, where many students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds with limited access to English resources struggled to acquire an English-medium education for its socioeconomic value" (p.46). We need to draw links between language and identity helping the learner to bridge the gap between their experiences and learnings from the outside world and the experiences within (Blackledge & Creese, 2010).

The Study

In this paper, we describe how we used authentic materials with Foreign Language learners of English and capture the lessons from the experience. The English and Foreign Languages University conducts part-time and full-time proficiency courses in English for learners from both ESL and EFL contexts. One such course is the International Training Programme run by the Ministry of Human Resource Development. As a part of this programme, every year, approximately three hundred adult professionals holding key positions in Governmental and non-governmental organizations from various countries such as Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Syria, Palestine, Mozambique, Mongolia, Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Belarus, Sudan, attend a three-month intensive proficiency programme in English with a view to improving their overall skills in the language. Based on a placement test that assesses their proficiency in Speaking, Reading, Writing, Grammar & Vocabulary, they are assigned to one of three groups: Basic, Intermediate and Advanced. Though they are divided into these three broad groups, the ability levels within the groups vary leading to a considerable amount of heterogeneity within a group. For example, within the Basic Group, some students may be at an extremely basic level (can speak in short simple phrases and write simple sentences) while others may be at a more advanced level (can speak and write short simple sentences). Students who come from countries like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan use Russian as a link language to

communicate among themselves while others from countries like Ivory Coast, Mozambique use French. However, English is the only language that they can use to communicate with the rest of their peers and their teachers. This compels them to produce the language with whatever resources they have at hand. They also receive a fairly large amount of input in English through their interaction with students enrolled in other courses at the University.

Material Used

The material used consists of two parts: a graphic, representing the spices used in Ayurveda that was extracted from a brochure on Kerala, which was to serve as a pre-reading activity and a reading passage on home remedies using herbs and spices found in kitchens across India (Raman, Shankar & Mukhopadhyay, 2014). The rationale for the choice of materials was determined by the students' interest in the use of spices by Indians, the extensive variety available in the supermarkets in Hyderabad that they visited and the one question always on their minds—"Teacher, why Indians use so much spice? Everything, spice, spice spice!" Spice jars containing almost all the spices in the graphic were carried into the classroom to provide a multi-sensory experience especially since many of them were familiar with certain spices like pepper, cloves, and mace but did not know what cinnamon, cardamom and many of the other spices used in Indian cuisine were.

Classroom Transaction

As a pre-reading task, the graphic was projected using an LCD projector and the students had to identify as many spices as they could. They were encouraged to use their own languages for the purpose. The English equivalents were supplied, where necessary, by the teacher and were put up on the board.

The spice jars were then circulated around the class so that students could actually feel, taste and smell them. This, initially unplanned exercise, turned out to be an important activity as it encouraged students to speak extensively about food, culinary terms and processes. The following classroom discourse captures this:

> A student (from Tajikistan) takes a pinch of cumin, examines it carefully and asks:
>
> Student: "Teacher! What this be in English?"
>
> Teacher: "Cumin."
>
> *The student looks confused and continues to rub it in her palm and smells it. She then speaks to her friends in Russian and Tajik, possibly checking the name of the spice in those languages. After some time, she calls out:*
>
> Student: "Teacher! This I know! My country we use for meat, pilaf."
>
> Teacher: "Yes, in India too we use it while cooking meat and pulao."
>
> Student: "I no get name in English, teacher, but in my country, this we call *zeera*."
>
> Teacher: "Ah well! In India too, we call it *zeera* in Hindi, *jeera* in Telugu."

The discovery of a shared lexis that perhaps travelled with its people as they moved across lands created quite a stir in class. A subsequent discussion revealed that what we in India call pulao (rice cooked with vegetables and a mix of spices), is known as plof, plov, pilav and pilaf depending on the countries from which the students come. Students soon began comparing cross-cultural culinary practices and discovered shared practices such as tenderizing meat using papaya, cooking meat on a stone, cooking meat and vegetables together and smoking meat using coal.

Since they often did not have the vocabulary or sufficient English to express these terms and processes, they were encouraged to use gestures and their own languages. The result of this was an animated class, buzzing with student exchanges in a variety of languages and an

increased effort to make themselves understood. They were asked to write on the board the terms in their own languages and see how these were different from or similar to other languages. The sustained effort to be understood saw them writing down English equivalents in their books and even memorizing the names right then and there. Some students even pasted the spice right next to its name to help them remember it! Driven by their desire to buy these spices in the local market, they began to write down the basic structures they would require for transactions with shopkeepers. While there was a clear focus on meaning, the focus on form was unconscious.

The reading text on Ayurveda which followed makes use of a number of herbs and spices displayed in the graphic. During the reading, students were encouraged to translate the words into their mother tongues. This helped them draw connections between the English and the mother tongue equivalents. Given below is an extract from the text:

> Nutmeg, known for its fragrance and flavour, is an excellent remedy for insomnia and other sleep disorders. Mixed with yogurt, it helps to stop diarrhoea, while nutmeg mixed with warm water is used to treat eczema. (Raman, Shankar, & Mukhopadhyay, 2014, p. 23)

Having activated the schema for nutmeg and its uses for baking, it was possible to encourage them to make comparisons with the uses of nutmeg in their culture. It also facilitated the process of leading them from familiar to unfamiliar words such as 'insomnia' and 'diarrhoea'. It also generated a keen interest in and discussions on Ayurveda centres and possible trips to Kerala. What was evident throughout the task was learner engagement and translingual practices that provided a sense of ownership of the language and helped to develop "the weaker language in relationship with the one that is more dominant" (García & Wei, 2014, p. 64). Informal post-lesson feedback from the students showed that they were able to use the language of the classroom fairly successfully in the real world. It is also worth noting here that what began essentially as a reading class soon evolved into a class that involved a large amount of speaking and vocabulary learning. Thus the use of authentic, task-based materials lend themselves quite naturally to the integration of skills, making for a more holistic language-learning experience.

Take-Away from the Class on Spices

- Bring realia to class and allow individual students to touch and feel the material and the texture. It allows the learning experience to be more concrete and here and now.

- Wherever possible, learners may be allowed to take with them the authentic material helping them develop a bond with it.

- Encourage students to make comparisons between first languages and English equivalents of words and concepts. This way, we help them explore not just the breath but also the depth of their lexicon.

- Do not expect this class to be quiet. Let go of your own notions of class control and noise levels. The more the discussion, the better the chances of the vocabulary being remembered.

- Incorporate real-life situations.

- If it's print material, retaining the colours and format of the original helps to bring a real-world feel to the activity. It works well if you use a projector to show them the material if making coloured copies for each student is not possible.

- As evident from the activity described in this paper, activity involving an authentic text often requires the integration of skills. Therefore, it allows us to break the barriers of skills being taught as separate systems.

Conclusion

The classroom experience detailed here shows that authentic tasks and translanguaging can promote language learning in a manner that is engaging and relevant to the real-time needs of the learner. Instead of using strictly monolingual English-only practices, embracing multilingual practices that respect the languages of the learners develops their sense of self and identity. The use of translanguaging, as seen here and as anecdotal evidence from the teaching experiences of a number of Indian teachers suggests that teachers have been instinctively using the local language as a strategy to not just cope with various aspects of communication in class but also as a pedagogical tool. While it is common for Indian teachers in semi-urban and rural settings to use the local language in classrooms, much of it has gone undocumented,

unresearched and unacknowledged. Teachers in our classrooms have commonly used it to summarize Shakepearean plots in local languages to capture the attention of learners, translate reading texts in order to facilitate comprehension and have opted for translating words instead of providing laborious explanations for vocabulary in English. The use of multiple codes, multiliteracies and authentic tasks facilitates inclusive learning practices and a transformed view of self.

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