

## Using Authentic Materials to Develop Students' Oral Competence: Moving Away from 'Product' to 'Process'

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### **Abstract**

One of the key challenges faced by several Indian teachers in government schools is their reliance on prescribed textbooks as resources for developing students' language proficiency while largely neglecting a plethora of authentic materials that they may easily use to build learners' communicative competence. A major cause for this perhaps is the fact that teachers often find themselves hamstrung in situations where prescribed textbooks are imposed upon them giving them little scope to venture beyond them. This paper discusses some techniques of adapting authentic materials for ESL teachers in low-cost government schools that they can use for developing the communicative competence of students with 'Beginner to Pre-intermediate' level of proficiency. All the ideas expressed are a result of classroom transactions reported here. They are presented to enable ESL teachers to involve their students in the 'process' of language learning without overtly focusing on its 'product'.

**Keywords:** authentic material, communicative competence, input, supplementary language teaching materials

### **Introduction**

When I first stepped into the ESL classroom of a state school in West Bengal in the year 2000, the only resource I found teachers relying on was the prescribed textbook. The book (a mix of prose and poetry) followed a specific set format - lessons followed by end-of-the-text comprehension questions, a few grammar activities (often unaligned with the content

presented) and some writing exercises (with no suggested methodology on how to go about it). Moreover, the book devoted no section to develop students' oral competence. The assumption of such a textbook model is: teachers are to do all that is required to make the students read and write by mastering grammar rules. All language development is directed towards the growth of print knowledge. Now, after a long gap of 20 years, the problem still persists with many Indian ESL textbooks used in government schools focusing more on structured questions instead of providing a variety of contextualized tasks and activities to aid the learning process. For instance, the prescribed textbook used in government schools in West Bengal titled *Bliss* (2014) is a case in point as is evident from the syllabus and spread of tasks found in it. Clearly, the focus is not on the "process" of language learning but on the "product".

As a result, students are hardly engaged with the lessons in the textbook; they are bored with the same repetitive 'remembering' techniques (the first level of cognitive challenge from the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy, 2001), which promise neither excitement nor interest to suit their palette. In addition to this, the affective filter (Krashen, 1982) is high in such learning environments which further acts as a barrier in developing speaking skills of learners. ESL students from low socio-economic status dwell in challenging contexts and for them the classroom is a primary source of comprehensible input. So to develop ESL proficiency, they need to encounter new words, phrases and sentences in a variety of contextualized settings and perform activities that have clear communicative content (Canale & Swain, 1980). As a language teacher, thus, I have felt a perceived need to provide my students with numerous exposures to learn new vocabulary in meaningful ways for which authentic materials available in our immediate surroundings can be very helpful.

### **What are Authentic Materials?**

Authentic materials, as a construct, developed as part of the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, which was a conscious move away from structuralism. The CLT approach necessitated one to use real life materials as valuable target language inputs without structuring them or tweaking them for textbook use – the idea was to get students have a feel of authentic use of the target language (English) and therefore get motivated to use it. Gilmore (2007) compares what he calls "[t]he

contrived materials of traditional textbooks” with “[a]uthentic materials, particularly audio-visual ones, which offer a much richer source of input for learners and have the potential to be exploited in different ways and on different levels to develop learners’ communicative competence” (p. 103). That is, by implementing different kinds of authentic materials, students are introduced to language used by real speakers rather than scripted, simplified and /or contrived material. This in turn better prepares them for the language they are likely to hear and use outside the L2 instructional environment. Similarly, Richards (2001) identifies two types of materials, i.e. authentic materials (unprepared teaching resources such as texts, photographs, video clips etc.) and created materials (textbooks and other specially developed instructional resources). He also stresses that classroom activities should in all probability mirror the real world. Authentic exposure to language takes place when it is used in a natural way while students are reading articles from magazines, newspapers, journals, listening to audio-video recordings on the web, watching television shows, movies or hearing the news bulletin in English and reading chunks of words or sentences in pamphlets, advertisements, brochures, posters, notices, and the like. McDonough & Shaw (1997) define authenticity roughly as the world outside the classroom in their selection of language material and designing activities and methods used in the classroom. For instance, if lessons were centred on comprehending a menu to place an order, students would focus more on content and meaning rather than the form. It would offer students a valuable source of real language input. Furthermore when students are exposed to input that includes language forms they already know, combined with some new elements or features, just beyond their current level, acquisition of these new elements or features of the target language, in theory, takes place because the material serves as comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982).

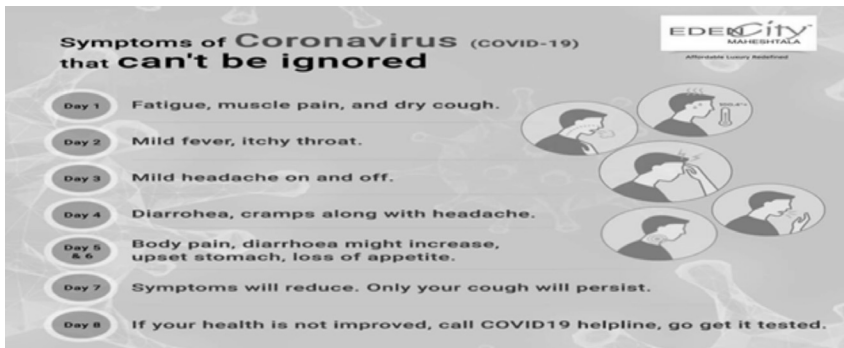
### **Benefits of Using Authentic Materials Based Activities/Tasks to Develop Students’ Oral Competence**

Speaking is at the core of ESL teaching yet it is a neglected area of language skill development as pointed out in the introduction. Egan (1999) states that using a language implies that the speaker is able to progressively ‘*perceive, understand, present, negotiate, persuade, hypothesize, and interpret*’ in that language (p. 279). As most lessons in our textbooks

do not integrate speaking, it is imperative upon teachers to incorporate oral activities as much as possible and to align them with the content taught. Students need extensive exposure to authentic language and oral practice to aid their language acquisition. In this section of the paper, I will present some examples of classroom transactions with my students to show the use of authentic materials to help develop students' oral competence.

### Speaking Activities Designed for Students Using a Leaflet on Covid 19

**Introduction:** First let us look at an example of an informative leaflet I have used to make my students practise oral competence. The leaflet is based on the symptoms of the current Covid-19 pandemic. All the activities were attempted as mini-group tasks with 3 to 4 members in a group in order to bring about collaborative learning.



(Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/edencitykol/photos>)

#### Task 1: Comprehension and Information Transfer

Given below is a chart with a few prompts. You need to fill the chart after reading the leaflet and discussing the answers with your group members:

Important information about the disease	Phrases denoting the actual symptoms
Starting signs	Dry cough...
Specific throat related problem one goes through	
Cramps are normally followed by	
Symptoms surfacing on Day 5	Appetite loss
When to get tested	

To help to connect the discussion on the leaflet and take it forward, I subsequently gave the students a short passage to read (see below) that gave some further information on Covid-19. They were to solve a vocabulary task by paying attention to words/phrases (nouns, verbs, adjectives) in context and by discussing them in their respective groups.

### Task 2: Comprehension and Vocabulary in Context

**Step1: Read the text.**

Coronavirus disease (COVID 19) is an infectious disease caused by a new virus. The disease causes respiratory illness with symptoms such as cough, fever and difficulty in breathing. COVID 19 spreads primarily through contact with infected persons when they cough or sneeze. The infection has spread to many countries around the world and become a pandemic. As the disease spreads around the globe, governments have imposed quarantines and travel bans at a massive scale. Scientists around the world are working on treatments and vaccines for COVID 19.

**Step2: Now fill the blanks with the words underlined in the passage above.**

- a) A..... keeps people away from others so they don't infect anyone in their area.
- b) ..... is a widespread disease involving the entire planet, affecting many people.
- c) ..... is a small submicroscopic agent that causes disease in humans, animals and plants.
- d) A disease that is ..... can be caught by being near a person who has it.
- e) The..... of Natasha's illness were that she ate little, slept little, coughed, and was always low-spirited.
- f) Say "bless you" when you hear someone .....
- g) COVID 19 is accompanied by fever, aches, tiredness, sore throat, and.....

Lastly, I created a prompt and shared it with my students in order to hold a final group discussion where students would integrate all the information from the above two tasks. This served like a consolidation phase.

### Task 3: Integrated Speaking

Read from the pamphlet given below and have a conversation with your group members.

Imagine that your friend is confined in home for fifteen days. You are a group of scientists. You have heard about the recent flu related illnesses, the common symptoms that people experience (see pamphlet). Let's say you have discovered a wonder drug that could cure Covid19! Think of the appearance of the drug - suggest a fictitious name, its ingredients (composition), dosage, possible side effects (if any) and how to take the medicine. In groups of four, discuss the drug. List the points. One of you in your group read out your findings in front of the class. Draw a diagram of the drug and its components as a pamphlet and paste it on the classroom wall.

## Outcomes

### *Teacher Observations*

When I used these activities through the three stages presented as three tasks, I observed that student participation was remarkably high. Most of them enthusiastically participated in the discussions and made a concerted effort to solve the tasks. Getting copies of real pamphlets raised their spirits; they got an instant desire to try out the tasks on their own. I observed that it helped in oral language production, as the use of authentic material created a natural environment of communication. Through these sessions the students selectively took in portions of comprehensible input and chose some of the appropriate linguistic forms to express themselves (e.g. use of *modals* to prescribe the wonder drug). The integrated tasks made it possible for the students to internalize what they read and use it to extend their discussions and thereby experienced a change in oral output.

### *Student Reflections*

As a consequence, by the end of the activity many of my students understood effectively the benefits of working with authentic materials first hand. This is aptly reported by one student:

*"Before the activity I never guess that I will do so much talk easily with my friends on corona topic."*

Another retorted, *"This is so much more interesting than book questions. We discussed Covid cases of our neighbours and friends. Best was the discussion on discovering a drug!"*

Students do not get a real life feel or a reason to genuinely interact, listen to and speak meaningfully due to the lack of such personalizing and authentic tasks. They end up losing interest quite easily when burdened with structured unitary exercises of textbooks with predictable answers. However it is important to note that authentic materials do not necessarily replace textbooks; they are constructive supplements for texts that call into play a student's emotional understanding and reactions to current life situations.

## On the Flip Side

Despite the above undeniable benefits of authentic materials, they have also been criticized for various reasons. To quote Sheldon (1988):

It is a cruel paradox that for students, teacher-generated material

(which potentially has a dynamic and maximal relevance to local needs) often has less credibility than a published textbook, no matter how inadequate that may be. (p. 238)

In Sheldon's view, published materials (textbooks) are more trusted than home-produced, photocopied teachers' resources, which are regarded as less valid. Perhaps this argument stems from the fact that for most school teachers adapting and using authentic material is a Herculean task. Teachers need to allot a significant amount of time to prepare lesson plans from authentic materials keeping in mind the mixed language abilities of their students. Many teachers are thus not interested in resource production of their own. Teachers also require adequate training in materials adaptation/production coupled with technology use so that they can realize the full potential of the materials in their classrooms. Unfortunately, in the state school system, teachers are not properly trained how to choose, adapt, evaluate and transact authentic materials according to their students' needs. Moreover, they do not have access to adequate technology to create listening and speaking activities based on authentic materials in order to give students sufficient practice. It is also difficult for teachers to obtain a range of audiovisual materials of an appropriate quality and length.

### **Conclusion**

Students' ability to communicate well is the end-goal of the teaching-learning process and teachers need to create an environment which is conducive for learning. Authentic supplementary materials are a major prerequisite for creating such an environment in the classroom. Most teachers find themselves pushed by the system to focus on the product instead of the process, whereas only a process-oriented classroom would promote in students the desire to explore the world beyond the textbook precincts. Based on my own experience, I can vouch that authentic materials have enormous potential if used effectively by us as and when necessary. Authentic materials should be designed in such a way as to incorporate a series of activities that would allow students to practise and reinforce meaning and forms of the target language. Teachers can orchestrate productive classroom discussions, use effective questioning skills and frame engaging tasks that would promote speaking skills using a range of authentic materials all around us such as newspapers, pamphlets, advertisements, pictures, etc. They help bring the content and

the subject matter closer to life and students make important connections between the classroom world and the world outside the four walls.

Since teachers in low cost schools have not received much training to use or transact such materials or develop tasks and activities around them, in-service teacher training programmes must be conducted for this purpose. I will conclude with a quote from Crawford (1995) that authentic materials “can scaffold the work of both teachers and learners and even serve as agents of change, provided they act as guides and negotiating points, rather than straightjackets” (p. 31). Thus authentic materials with supplementary tasks aligned with textbook content can become an indispensable component in the state run low cost schools, which otherwise lack in classroom aids and mostly do not have digital or library resources.

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