

CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what you know and deepen their understanding of issues of interest in the ESL field.

Authentic Classroom Material

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Often EFL teachers strive to get “authentic” materials from English-speaking countries such as newspapers, videos, menus, and pictures because they believe that such materials will increase motivation and promote language learning. However, with the continued growth of English learning and the many contexts in which it is learned, it is time to consider what authentic materials means in the context of language learning and teaching.

Proponents of communicative language teaching (CLT) often encourage language teachers to use authentic materials as a resource for two main purposes: first, to increase students’ motivation by including “real” examples of language use; and second, to illustrate how English is used in English-speaking countries. It is important to note that CLT became popular due largely to a rise in the immigrant population in English-speaking countries. In such contexts, texts written for native-speakers are readily available in the environment and students have countless opportunities to experience using English outside of the classroom. Even though CLT, with its emphasis on the use of authentic texts from the “real” world, was originally designed for English-speaking countries, currently many foreign language teachers are being encouraged by their Ministries of Education to make use of CLT in their classrooms.

Few have disputed the value of using authentic texts. However, one major challenge to their use was made by Widdowson (1998). Widdowson’s major objection to the use of “authentic materials” (i.e., any text designed for native speakers) is his belief that a text needs to serve a meaningful communicative purpose. What makes a text real or authentic is that it is meaningful and appropriate to “a particular set of contextual conditions” (p.712). In other words, a newspaper is real or authentic when it is read by individuals who read it to get news on local and world happenings

Let us take an example. A language teacher, believing in the value of using “authentic” materials, could bring to her classroom a menu taken from a restaurant. Typically menus are designed for customers for the communicative purpose of placing an order in a restaurant. By bringing the text into the classroom, the contextual conditions for placing an order in a restaurant have been lost and hence, the text no longer serves an authentic purpose. What makes a text real or authentic in the context of a classroom is that it serves a communicative purpose for a particular group of learners at a specific moment in time. A menu taken from the “real” world cannot and should not be

considered authentic merely because at some past moment in time it served the purpose of ordering a meal.

Similarly, by taking a text out of the context for which it was intended and placing it in an entirely different social context with another purpose, educators are using texts in an imaginary way. Authentic classroom materials need to serve the central purpose of a language classroom, namely, to promote language learning. In order to do this, the materials need

- to be appropriate for the language level of the learner,
- increase the learner's proficiency in the language,
- be motivating for the learner, and
- be relevant to the particular classroom and social context.

In designing such materials, teachers need to consider questions like the following:

- What do I want my students to learn from this activity and why?
- Are most learners in my class ready to learn this aspect of the language?
- What topics are of interest to my learners?
- How can I create the conditions for learners to engage with a text and/or other learners to promote their language proficiency?

Clearly the individuals who are in the best position to answer these questions are classroom teachers who know their students' language level, interests, and are fully aware of the role of English in the students' lives, communities and future needs. Knowing this, teachers can design tasks and conditions that will encourage students to meaningfully engage with a text or with other learners. These tasks are the ones that are truly authentic ELT materials.

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