

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 they know and deepen their understanding of issues and interest in the ESL field.

Aloha from CAPE!

For this teacher talk, we have something special to share. Dr. Day, one of our esteemed University of Hawaii Professors and CAPE lecturer has written an article on reading methods. Many of you have had the pleasure of listening to one of Dr. Day's presentations in the workshop. For those of you unfamiliar with Dr. Day, he is a materials producer and expert on reading who speaks at conferences all over Asia and the world. He has contributed to many texts and is editor of the New Ways in Teaching Reading and author of Extensive Reading, to name a few of his many publications. We hope that you will enjoy this article and that it will inspire you to think deeply about reading issues. Hopefully you will gain insight from this article that might help you in your own teaching. As always, let us know what you think at cape@capeaoha.org.

Using Authentic Materialsⁱ

Richard R. Day

This is the first in a series of four brief articles on materials to teach foreign language reading. The topic of this first article is the use of authentic materials. The goal is to challenge the widely-held assumption that *authentic* (real-life) materials are preferable to other types of materials (*Non-authentic? Fake?*) in teaching foreign language reading.

The preference for authentic texts for all levels of foreign language reading instruction is pervasive. For example, Grellet boldly proclaims that "It is important to use authentic texts wherever possible." (1981, p. 7). The appeal that authentic materials have for teachers and for students, and the influence those materials have on students' ideas about reading, can be gauged from the "Introduction to the Student" in Walter's *Genuine Articles: Authentic Reading Texts for Intermediate Students of American English*, "All of the texts in the book are real samples of written English. . . . None of them was written especially for foreigners..." (1986, p. vii).

A graduate from the University of Hawaii's Master of Arts program in ESL told me, "All I heard in graduate school ten years ago was the need to use authentic materials, whether in teaching reading or listening or whatever. But at the time, I knew from my own experiences both as a second language teacher and learner that simplified materials worked. So I was confused. And ever since then, I have felt guilty using them."

Elsewhere (e.g., Day and Bamford 1998), I have argued that there is a *cult of authenticity* that originated with the communicative language teaching (CLT) movement

of the late 1970s. CLT argued that for language teaching authentic materials--those written by and for native speakers and not specifically for language teaching--were superior to materials especially written or simplified for language learners. And perhaps part of the cult status of authenticity is the idea that it is the very difficulty of texts that makes them worthwhile as tools in the teaching and learning of foreign language reading.

Perhaps authentic materials are preferred in teaching foreign language reading because teachers consider them interesting, engaging, culturally enlightening, relevant, motivating and the best preparation for reading authentic texts. As Williams explains, "if the learner is expected eventually to cope with real language outside the classroom, then surely the best way to prepare for this is by looking at real language inside the classroom" (1984, p. 25). I disagree completely with this position for students who are learning to read. It confuses the *ends* with the *means*.

Let's look at it another way, by comparing learning to read with learning to play the piano. The goal in both cases is to become fluent and skillful, and to be able to read or play material that proficient readers and pianists play. But we do not start with Mozart or Chopin or Liszt. Why? Because such pieces are simply too hard. Similarly, we should not teach students to read with material that is much too difficult for them.

Using authentic texts can actually hurt or impede foreign language reading development. Williams refers to the paradox that the use of authentic text with learners often has an effect opposite to that intended; instead of helping the reader to read for the meaning of the message, an authentic text at too difficult a level of language forces the reader to focus on the code (1983, p. 175). Rivers points out that "when average students encounter ungraded material too soon, they are usually forced back into deciphering with the aid of a dictionary, and valuable training in the reading skill is wasted" (1981, pp. 37-38). Nuttall, in a discussion of authentic materials, concedes that "linguistically difficult texts are unlikely to be suitable for developing most reading skills" (1996, p. 177).

Moreover, using authentic materials with beginning and intermediate students may discourage and frustrate them. This could make them dislike, and even hate, reading in the foreign language. Rivers observes that "rushing students too soon into reading material beyond their present capacity for fluent comprehension with occasional contextual guessing . . . destroys confidence" (1981, p. 260).

There was, in fact, some recognition of this problem in the writings of experts from the beginning, but often so indirectly stated that the point was lost. In *Developing Reading Skills*, when Grellet says "It is important to use authentic texts wherever possible" (1981, p. 7), it is the first part of the statement that makes the impact, not the last two words.

We are at a situation in foreign language teaching where teachers and students have come to see authentic materials as preferable to easy, simplified texts. The next article examines the role of simplified materials in teaching reading.

References

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i This is adapted from Day & Bamford (1998), Chapter 6

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Well everyone, that's all for today. Please take the time to give us the addresses of anyone else you think might be interested in receiving this newsletter of the CAPE Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk. And don't forget to write us with any comments you might have.

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ⁱ This is adapted from Day & Bamford (1998), Chapter 6.