

9. THE CREATIVE USE OF AUTHENTIC DOCUMENTS WITH ARTISTIC VALUE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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Abstract: *Authentic documents have been intensively advocated as effective tools for foreign language education, and enthusiastically embraced by foreign language teachers. The present contribution reviews advantages and limits in using authentic documents in language classrooms, but also advocates for the creative use of such documents which also have artistic value, namely comic strips, photographs and films, audiobooks based on literary texts. A general introduction for each of these authentic documents is provided, as well as some didactical suggestions which may support language teachers in their attempts to create stimulating learning activities.*

Key words: *learning tools and materials, artistic value, foreign languages teaching and learning*

1. New and old in the debate on authentic documents

Although intensive efforts have been invested towards the creation of innovative tools for language education, authentic documents still remain a central theme for debates in the field, and numerous training courses for language teachers address the issue. At the very heart of the continuous debate lies the name of the discussed learning tool itself – *authentic* document. Beyond any doubt, the international debate over authentic document it is far from absolute novelty, as it started and intensified since early twentieth century, with the apparition of the phonograph, and later of the tape, tape-recorders and slides; audio documents are also traditionally used in teaching and learning of foreign languages, being viewed as a sources or reference materials in learning pronunciation and enriching vocabulary.

Authentic documents are currently opposed to documents produced for the foreign language classrooms, especially textbooks based on various pedagogical approaches. Authentic documents are considered genuine creations, designed for a variety of purposes and therefore less didactically biased, meant to entertain, to inform, and to stimulate deep aesthetic or emotional experiences. Although analyzed as a contradictory pair, “authentic” and “manufactured” documents are currently mixed in language textbooks, and therefore teachers’ work in searching, choosing and applying became a lot easier. However, the richness and diversity of authentic documents deserves further attention, and may stimulate innovative didactic approaches in language education.

Language educators attempt to define authentic documents as “real life” and “natural” materials which can be used for didactic purposes. Authentic documents are somehow a living proof of the value of language in communicating thoughts, emotions experiences. Meanwhile, they include specialized vocabulary, reinforced grammatical structures, and diverse topics and themes which transform them in important factors for encouraging learning

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of foreign languages and cultures (Berwald, 1987). Educators who assert that it is important to use activities and materials connected with learners' lives outside of school, which are therefore learner-contextualized, also stress that using real life materials supports the transfer of acquired knowledge and skills to real life contexts. Authentic learning materials are not used only with advanced students, but also with beginners, as they can have an important role in motivating task engagement. Authentic materials also promotes learners' part or full responsibility for the choice of learning materials, although didactic practices based on application prepared by teachers remain frequent. This alternative in the use of authentic documents can also foster learners' autonomy, and this is even a more important aim for their future lives than foreign language proficiency (Duda & Tyne, 2010).

This type of discourse opens a new debate: if used in the classroom, therefore selected and transformed for didactic purposes, a document remains authentic? (Puren, 2012). Answers to this question are not an easy task, but at least learning tools with artistic value (literary texts, videos and films, photographs, comic strips, music etc.) are more likely to remain authentic, even when produced by students in the classroom. Moreover, we support the optimists' voices who claim that the use of authentic document makes language teaching and learning more effective, if not more motivating, and consequently we support the use of authentic documents especially in language classrooms. Thus, Chavez (1998) argues that authentic documents are perceived by students as easier, interesting and stimulating learning materials, while Gilmore (2007) asserts that authentic documents sustain high levels of task-orientation and engagement, based on a study focusing in teaching and learning English as a foreign language.

The present contribution aims to highlight the importance of using authentic documents with artistic value in language education, for their formative impact which goes beyond learning a foreign language, and facilitates broader aesthetical and cultural experiences, and thus contributes to overall students' personal development.

2. Some authentic documents with artistic value and foreign language didactics

In addition to the literary texts, which are themselves authentic documents, language teachers have impressive potential resources of authentic documents to be creatively employed in the classrooms, easy to be stored and retrieved electronically, available on-line or off-line; the advancements of technologies opened a new window in language education, especially by facilitating continuous access to authentic documents. A wide variety of authentic documents are nowadays accessible, and teachers may select those which meet learners' needs, styles and other relevant individual characteristics. Media materials (TV and radio productions, web-based media) are somehow preferred by language educators, but teachers should be aware of their advantages and disadvantages (Porcher, 2004). On one hand, the media are

aimed at both a community and an individual, media tools are to be found at any time, because of their diversity can satisfy everyone's taste, one can see and hear various speakers native and non-native such as children, elderly, men, women, and most native speakers, they stimulate linguistic, but also cultural interests. On the other hand, there are also significant drawbacks such as lack of interactivity (except the case of web-based media products), the failure to pay attention to the shortcomings of users, permissiveness, lack of adaptation to learners' progression.

Before narrowing the debate to the boundaries of authentic documents with artistic value frequently used in language education, we attempt to list some types of tools that are often used in language classrooms: apart from literary texts, language teachers also use postcards, photos, comic strips and cartoons, songs, tourist brochures, recipes, advertisements, newspapers, magazines, films, television and radio programs, webpages and blogs, bus or subway tickets, and the enumeration can continue.

In the following lines we focus on opportunities (certainly not all possibilities) of using comic strips, photos, films, and audiobooks as authentic documents with artistic value and adaptable to language classrooms. The choice of these authentic documents for a more detailed discussion is based on several considerations: firstly, we it was our intention to cover both traditional (e.g., visual aids such as photos or pictures and films) and new learning materials (e.g., comic strips and audiobooks), and secondly, we attempt to include in our analysis real-life learning materials which stimulate learners both visually and additively, as these two ways of planning for learning support may end in developing complementary language skills (listening, pronunciation, reading, writing etc.).

Comic strips have the great merit to solicit learners to read, watch and to reflect on all contents presented. Their pedagogical value was heavily contested over time, and rigid voices argued that entertaining nature of comics eventually may lead to cognitive stagnation. However, recent works promote comic strips as educational materials especially in language education, because they are appealing to individuals of all ages and reflect authentic language and culture (for detailed argumentation of both positive and negative views see the contribution of Davis, 1997). The didactic use of comic strips was additionally supported by the development of corresponding industry (i.e., the production of comic magazines and books) which flourished in the last decades of the twentieth century.

A number of recent studies highlight beneficial effects of using comic strips in language education (e.g., Chiera-Macchia & Rossetto, 2011; David-West, 2012). Thus, Chiera-Macchia & Rossetto (2011) present the results of a study investigating the use of this authentic document in a guided writing experience in secondary school Italian language learning. The authors planned a group interactive task which asked students to use images and text sequences to create a comic strip. Their findings revealed that visual support may support

foreign language learning, especially for today's students who are under the heavy influence of what is called visual communication.

In a didactic work, David-West (2012) emphasized the role of comic strips and cartoons in teaching English as a foreign language to middle-high intermediate and advanced university students. The approach described in the cited contribution is based on a contemporary mixture of characters, language and cultures, which enable students to get closer to American culture. In a similar study, Megawati & Anugerahwati (2012) proposed comic strips for the teaching of writing in English and their intervention was based on a collaborative classroom approach which included planning, implementing, observing and reflecting. The results showed that effective use of comic strips can contribute to improving students' writing skills, but require proper teachers' preparation and lesson planning.

Some examples of language education activities based on these authentic documents include: clearing the title and asking students to give themselves several possible titles; remove one or more thumbnails and ask them to redo them; delete the last vignette, so that students rethink the end; cut the thumbnails and have students put them in logical order; remove bubbles containing all the words of a character and ask them to rewrite these bubbles; imagine an interview with illustrator; introduce another character in the story; give the comics to a single group of students and ask them to tell the story to another group; present the first thumbnail and offer students to imagine a continuation; imagine role play between the characters of the comic strip; give feedback on the designs - faces of the characters, their clothes, the colors etc.

Photos or pictures are exclusively visual materials and they can serve as triggers for speaking and developing skills in oral communication. Starting with photographs of writers, for example, teachers can stimulate students to talk about themselves or to each other. This type of activities is based on students' previous knowledge and skills. The use of pictures and photographs in general may have various objectives: enriching the vocabulary, developing comprehension skills - reinforced by activities with a visual intuitive support, and familiarization with cultural elements (Wilbershied & Berman, 2004; Bush 2007). Even if the photos are important tools for teaching foreign languages allowing the integration of cultural elements, their use is sometimes associated with superficiality (Bush, 2007). However, we can reduce the risk by organizing, classifying and archiving photos that will be used in educational activities based on various criteria (e.g., teaching contents such as vocabulary, singers, stories, writers etc.).

In terms of *films* based on literary and non-literary texts, reflections are close to those related to audio books. We may use the films, but also encourage students to read novels and books, in order to have a complete and correct view of the subject. A debate may arise due to these two activities - reading and viewing - starting with the choice of actors and continuing with the comparison of some scenes from the movie with the corresponding extracts from the literary texts. In a contribution about multimedia authentic documents, Vandergrift

(2007) drew attention to the fact that they facilitate the development of listening comprehension in a foreign language. It recommends an evaluation centered on films by systematic observation or self-assessment instead of a summative evaluation with tests, and this recommendation is founded on research showing higher levels of anxiety among students during test-based assessments.

The role of *multimedia* in teaching foreign languages goes beyond the simple development of listening skills, as noted by researchers (e.g., Harrison, 2009). The use of foreign artistic films opens a window towards language and culture. Harrison (2009, p. 90-92) offers a short instructional guide for using artistic films in the teaching foreign languages (his example is designed for learning and teaching Italian as a foreign language). What caught our attention in reading this guide it is precisely the fact that it offers examples of complementary assessment methods such as systematic observation and self-evaluation, which are far more “friendly” for students than traditional assessment strategies and methods.

A more innovative approach than watching a film in the language classrooms is to encourage students to produce photographs and videos themselves. Goulah (2007) and Hsiu-Ting (2009) emphasize that this type of activity allows both the contact with a foreign culture and the development of creativity, critical thinking and collaboration between students.

Audiobooks are popular among youth, but they are regarded with suspicion by adults, especially if they are used without written support. They do not replace the written text in language classrooms, but may stimulate the interest for reading and facilitate the comprehension of oral communication. According to some researchers (e.g., Wolfson, 2008) using audiobooks with the aim to improve reading skills is similar to reading aloud, but the latest approach becomes overwhelming for language teachers if used on a regular basis (Beers, 1998). Audiobooks stimulate not only the development of reading, but also the skills of reading comprehension, as they may be also analyzed through tones of characters’ voices, quality in transmitting the message etc.

Audiobooks are even more authentic than other documents, as most of them are not designed in order to be used in teaching. Nevertheless, they can be used as additional didactic tools in studying literary texts. Students can be offered an audio-book next to the written text, or listening and reading may be balanced and stimulated altogether, etc. Because there are currently no teaching grids designed to guide listening to literary works, we advocate for presentations of full written texts next to the audio document, especially in the case of poems; in this latter case, the use of audio-books is particularly motivating and moving.

Authentic documents highlighted in the present work share the high potential in bringing enjoyment and even humor in learning situations, as well as bridging the gap between the classroom environment and learners’ real lives, their experiences and preferences. They all can contribute to enhanced motivation, engagement and satisfaction in foreign language teaching and learning.

3. Concluding reflections

Although a variety of educational resources are nowadays available for teachers in general, and for foreign language teachers in particular, there still lots of classrooms where teachers rely almost entirely on textbooks. Learning materials included in the textbooks often have no relevance to learners' real lives outside of school, and this lack of contextualization leads to poor engagement and eventually underachievement. Getting foreign language materials and teaching aids closer to students' does not necessarily mean to be more superficial, to ignore historical and cultural issues or to embrace shallow approaches which keep the learning process at a rather low level.

These generous purposes need innovative teaching and learning tools, especially for language teachers who teach languages other than English, which recommends itself as an important acquisition for academic, work and life future of all youngsters. And what could be more seductive than the use of less conventional learning materials such as comic strips or audiobooks integrated with traditional visual and audio aids as the photographs and films? All these lively and authentic learning materials are without any doubt more enjoyable than teaching and learning materials provided in textbooks, as they reflect better real life preoccupations, are richer in cultural and – if designed so – artistic nuances, meanings and significance. Beyond authenticity, all discussed learning materials are suggested as didactic factors with positive influence on learners' autonomy and motivation, especially when they are directly involved either in producing or in choosing teaching and learning aids.

Despite international research-based findings suggesting the role that authentic learning materials could play in various educational activities, and especially in foreign language, some teachers still ignore or underused them. Delays in adapting teaching and learning resources to learners' needs, profiles and expectations for the future may undermine all good intentions of foreign language professionals in schools, moreover those of teachers of foreign languages which seem less appealing for the moment. Foreign language classrooms and lessons may offer unique opportunities to know diverse cultural values and products, and we have to admit that authentic materials are some of the most valuable teaching aids in this regard.

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