

Authentic activities in language learning: Bringing real world relevance to classroom activities

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Abstract: Maintaining essential contextual conditions in TESOL classroom in order to achieve authenticity have been the target for many researchers. During this process, however, the difficulty and complexity of real life tasks have been disregarded. As a result, knowledge gathered at school through decontextualised school type activities often remains ‘inert’ and thus learners cannot transfer their knowledge in the target language to novel contexts. This paper argues that school-type tasks that do not mirror real life activities have negative effects on students’ developing robust knowledge, and suggests that the critical characteristics of authentic activities are the key to achieve authentic authenticity.

Contexts for learning languages

English as the global language of today’s world is being taught and learned in a number of different contexts. Some people learn English from their parents as their first language (as mother tongue) and some people learn it as another language (L2). Learning another language can be in the target-language community, which is referred to as English as a Second Language (ESL), or in a non-English speaking community, which is referred to as English as a Foreign Language (EFL). As there is teaching in both learning environments, they are called Teaching English to the Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

Learners in ESL environment have an advantageous position over EFL learners. This is because their learning is not confined to the classroom and they have the opportunity to access the authentic use of the target language outside the classroom. This in turn helps learners develop their language skills further (both in terms of learning and practicing the language features that are learned in the classroom), and they can become fluent speakers of the language.

On the other hand, EFL learners are confined to the learning activities in the classroom and “even the best face-to-face learning environment outside the target language country can only produce simulation since the setting can only be as authentic as its native speaker teacher” (Felix, 2002, p. 7).

In this paper, we argue that contrary to Felix’s argument, the authenticity of the language experience is not confined to the language skills of the native speaker teacher. We contend that a balance of authentic and complex tasks, coupled with opportunities to speak to experienced and developing speakers of the language can provide significant opportunities for language development in the EFL classroom.

Schooling and its effect on students’ performance

Schools are the formal places used to transfer bodies of knowledge and skills to students and thus schooling has become a culture in itself. However, learning designs, such as learning resources, activities, interactions and objectives, in many formal education systems orient towards abstract and decontextualised forms of teaching, rather than exploring knowledge as a tool (Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2010). For example, focusing on form rather than using the target language for communication purposes is one of the major and

common problems while learning a foreign language (Van den Branden, 2006; Willis, 1996). Willis (1996), for example, argues that while a learner is acquiring another language, s/he naturally focuses on meaning; however, “in classrooms, many speaking activities involve students in producing a given form or pattern, or expressing a given function, rather than saying what they feel or want to say” (p. 7). Van Gorp and Bogaert (2006) suggest that “focus[ing] on linguistic knowledge as a goal in itself, [and] leaving it up to the learner to create or search for opportunities for their functional use” (p. 80) hinders learners from becoming fluent users of the target language, being able to communicate in it and reaching to the desired competence level. Therefore, learners must be given opportunities to be exposed to the authentic use of language if it is aimed to use the target language like a native speaker (Harmer, 2007, pp. 47-48; Willis, 1996, pp. 11-14).

Maintaining essential conditions for authentic interaction in the classroom is another problem. In many language classrooms teachers nominate the topic, control the turn-taking to speak and/or to answer the questions, decide on how to do the activities and evaluate the responses of the learners (Van den Branden, 2006; Willis, 1996). This ‘inauthentic’ structure not only limits the learners’ freedom and creativity but also reduces the motivation of the learners.

Learners’ interaction with learning resources, such as texts, in many classes is also inauthentic. Learners are usually given some texts to read followed by comprehension and/or referential questions. In the real-world, however, people do not read to answer comprehension or referential questions but to gather information in an area of interest (Breen, 1985) or to solve problems (Jonassen, Howland, Moore, & Marra, 2003). During this information gathering process, the reader/s choose texts that they have interest in and read to develop their knowledge further or to do critical reading. They may also use this knowledge in the future, for example, while producing their own texts, whether it is an essay, report or an article, or they might recall it while discussing the topic in social or academic settings.

Lebow and Wager (1994) argue that teachers in school often give learners low-level work consisting of recognition and reproduction of memorized information or practice of isolated skills and do not supply contexts for functional uses. The main target for students, for this reason, becomes passing tests rather than making connections to the world around them (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989a; Clayden, Desforges, Mills, & Rawson, 1994; Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990a; Herrington, et al., 2010; Perkins, 1999; Pugh & Bergin, 2005). As a result many students find it difficult to apply their knowledge outside of school and thus knowledge remains *inert* (a term used by Whitehead, 1932).

Inert knowledge

Perkins (1999) suggests that “inert knowledge sits in the mind’s attic, unpacked only when specifically called for by a quiz or a direct prompt but otherwise gathering dust” (p. 8). He also notes that even though it is hoped that the majority of gained knowledge at school is aimed to be used actively outside school, it remains inert. Students are unable to make connections between what they have learned in school subjects to the world around them. Having knowledge and being able to use it are two fundamental things that indicate that an educational practice has accomplished its aim by equipping learners with the required tools instead of merely facts. However, traditional schooling and thus many curricula orient towards the transfer and retention of knowledge as *knowledge reproduction*, which is done in an abstract and decontextualised form (Brown, et al., 1989a; Herrington, et al., 2010). For many students and teachers, passing exams is the sign of having the relevant knowledge. However, even though passing exams to some extent may show the success of students at school, students still may not have the ability to use a domain’s conceptual tools in a novel context. Thus, knowledge gained in school remains *inert* and students are not able to apply their knowledge to real-world problems outside of school.

Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989a) emphasise the importance of the separation between ‘knowing and doing’. Their analogy is based on conceptual knowledge being similar to a set of tools and thus they argue that it is very common for a person to have the knowledge but be unable to use it when relevant. They point out that people may have those old-fashioned pocket knives which have a device for removing stones from horses’ hooves and be able to talk wisely about horses, hooves and stones but they would not know how (or generally have the opportunity) to use this device on a horse. Therefore, they endorse the idea that

“knowledge is situated, being in part a product of the activity, context, and culture in which it is developed and used” (p. 32). If activity, context and culture are separated, learning will be decontextualised. Nowhere is this more relevant than in language learning.

It is very common for language teachers to see their students talking about grammar rules wisely but be unable to use them in communicative activities, let alone in unstructured, ill-defined novel contexts outside the classroom. Johnston and Goettsch (2000), for example, argue the difference between understanding (knowing what) and production (knowing how) in language education. For example, in this extract, they report how an ESL teacher articulated the transfer problem:

They oftentimes don't understand the rules. They just read a rule and go, 'OK, I've read this since I was eleven years old. I have read it a million times back in my country and here.' And they're still not using it right. They all know they need to use the third person singular 's' but half the class still doesn't use it. They use it in the grammar exercises, but they don't apply it while they are speaking or writing. (p. 456)

Larsen-Freeman (2003) contends that while language learners can cope with the presentation and practice sections of a lesson, they struggle at the production stage which is the more communicative part of a lesson that necessitates transfer of knowledge. She indicates that despite the fact that students understand and thus know a rule, they are not necessarily able to apply it. Hence, their output may be inaccurate and/or disfluent. She notes that “students can recall the grammar rules when they are asked to do so but will not use them spontaneously in communication, even when they are relevant” (p. 8), a clear indication of inert knowledge. Therefore, she suggests that if it is aimed to help language learners overcome the inert knowledge problem, then grammar should be thought as something people *do* rather than people *know* (p. 143), a suggestion that aligns well with the construct of authentic and situated learning.

Authentic learning: Learning and enculturation

The foundation of situated learning is embedded in the apprenticeship system of learning, which does not necessarily require formal instruction (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning is a process of enculturation (Brown, et al., 1989a) where the authentic activity and social interaction are the central components of learning (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989b). An apprentice acquires the relevant knowledge in that community and its culture by taking “peripheral participation” and gradual increase of involvement in the direct and central practice of the activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Some key examples include the training of midwives, tailors, carpenters and builders.

Proponents of *learning in situ* suggest that robust knowledge develops within the context of ordinary practices of that culture, and those ordinary practices are referred to as authentic activities (Brown, et al., 1989a; Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves, 2003; Herrington, et al., 2010; Lave & Wenger, 1991). One criticism made is, those skills and knowledge gathered in school type of activity and/or context can only be interpreted in the school context and cannot be applied in novel contexts when relevant. Thus, it is argued that any type of learning activity in school should mirror ordinary practices of that culture as closely as possible.

Griffin (1995), for example, emphasises the importance of enculturation and authentic activities in education and notes that:

Students learning math or foreign language skills are not being enculturated in those skill areas, but are receiving exposure to the culture of those skill areas *as they are interpreted in the school context*. Consequently, tasks completed in school are often different from those completed in nonschool situations. (p. 66)

Clarke (1989) exemplifies some tasks from language course books, such as *Headway*, that are designed to be used along with authentic materials. However, he argues that none of these activities are authentic since they do not have any relationship with the communicative purpose of the text. When authentic materials are used, electronic or paper based, the goal should not be answering comprehension or vocabulary questions but

rather a communicative objective (Clarke, 1989; Gilmore, 2007; Swaffar, 1985). The communicative objective may be comparing, informing, persuading, analysing, reporting or instructing, and it makes the author’s goal and message explicit to the readers. This provides information exchange between the author and the reader.

Mishan and Strunz (2003) argue that extracts from newspapers, magazines and books, and photographs, leaflets, advertisements and so on have been used to create authenticity. However, the use of these sources, according to the authors, could only bring “cosmetic authenticity” (p. 239) due to the fact that these authentic materials are followed by comprehension questions or vocabulary activities that make the original purpose of the text secondary (p. 240) and does not create authenticity in the task.

In school, teachers and learners are focused on covering the course requirements through school type of activities that lack depth, complexity, duration and relevance to the real world. Lebow and Wager (1994) argue that teachers in school give learners low-level work consisting of recognition and reproduction of memorized information or practice of isolated skills and do not supply contexts for functional uses. As a result of this, the main target for students is to pass tests rather than making connections to the world around them or using the new knowledge for problem solving.

Lave and Wagner (1994) compared the characteristics of school based learning activities to authentic activities and suggested that school activities are very different to real-life problem solving activities that actual practitioners do. Table 1 below summarizes their differentiation between the two forms on five dimensions.

Table 1: Real-life versus in-school problem solving (Lebow & Wagner, 1994)

Real-life problem solving	In-school problem solving
Involves ill formulated problems and ill structured conditions.	Involves “textbook examples” and well-structured conditions.
Problems are embedded in a specific and meaningful context.	Problems are largely abstract and decontextualized.
Problems have depth, complexity, and duration.	Problems lack depth, complexity, and duration.
Involves cooperative relations and shared consequences.	Involves competitive relations and individual assessment.
Problems are perceived as real and worth solving.	Problems typically seem artificial with low relevance for students.

It appears clear that there are important ideas here for teachers of EFL seeking to increase the relevance and effectiveness of language learning in their classrooms. Authentic learning principles can be used to guide the design of language learning activities, and these are discussed in the next section.

Authentic activities: Bringing the real world to the classroom

Drawing on their earlier work on authentic learning environments (Herrington and Oliver, 2000), Herrington, Oliver and Reeves (2003) suggested 10 characteristics of authentic activities or tasks that, when used as design guidelines, may provide the necessary and relevant conditions for bridging the gap between the classroom and the real world. Authentic tasks:

1. have real world relevance,
2. are ill-defined, requiring students to define the tasks and sub-tasks needed to complete the activity,
3. comprise complex tasks to be investigated by students over a sustained period of time,
4. provide the opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives, using a variety of resources,

5. provide the opportunity to collaborate,
6. provide the opportunity to reflect,
7. can be integrated and applied across different subject areas and lead beyond domain specific outcomes,
8. are seamlessly integrated with assessment,
9. create polished products valuable in their own right rather than as preparation for something else,
10. allow competing solutions and diversity of outcome.

Others (such as Tuttle 2007; and Rivers, 2010) have sought to create activities that are often fun, engaging and achievable within a classroom context, while also focussing on authentic aspects of language use. Closing the gap between real world and classroom tasks is the aim of the proposed study described in this paper. The study will explore the use of authentic tasks as described above in an EFL classroom context.

The study will target pre-university level EFL learners and focus on developing both language and academic skills. In this activity, the class becomes the editorial board of the school newsletter – *the English Preparatory School (EPS) Newsletter*, and thus students engage in roles of journalists and editors of this newsletter. Students work in pairs to collect and collate information and write their report, either on a given topic (as perhaps a journalist on a newspaper might be assigned a story for the day) or one of their own choosing. In order to complete this task, students will need to collect information from a variety of resources using a variety of data collection methods, such as surveys, interviews and literature review. They will then analyse this data and report it to real audience. While playing these roles, learners will have the opportunity to investigate the task and subtasks from different perspectives such as focusing on readers' expectations, developing authorship skills, cognitive and metacognitive skills, content and form. It is worthwhile to mention that anything that necessitates the use of language will be done in the target language. Therefore, students' online and/or face-to-face communication will be done in English. Moreover, students will be using the target language in the final product (the report) authentically as they are going to use a relevant genre, argumentative, persuasive or informative, in order to communicate their findings in their report.

Thus, the authentic task to be used in this proposed study aims to provide EFL learners with the necessary and relevant conditions to be able to use the target language in authentic contexts for authentic purposes and thus achieve “real” authenticity rather than merely “cosmetic” authenticity, and in so doing, helping to overcome the limitations of even the best face-to-face language learning/teaching settings. In so doing, language acquisition depends less for its authenticity in “its native speaker teacher” (Felix, 2002, p. 7), and more in the distributed nature of the activities students perform—and the resources that support them—across the whole learning environment.

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