Evidencias de investigación y docencia en el área de lenguas

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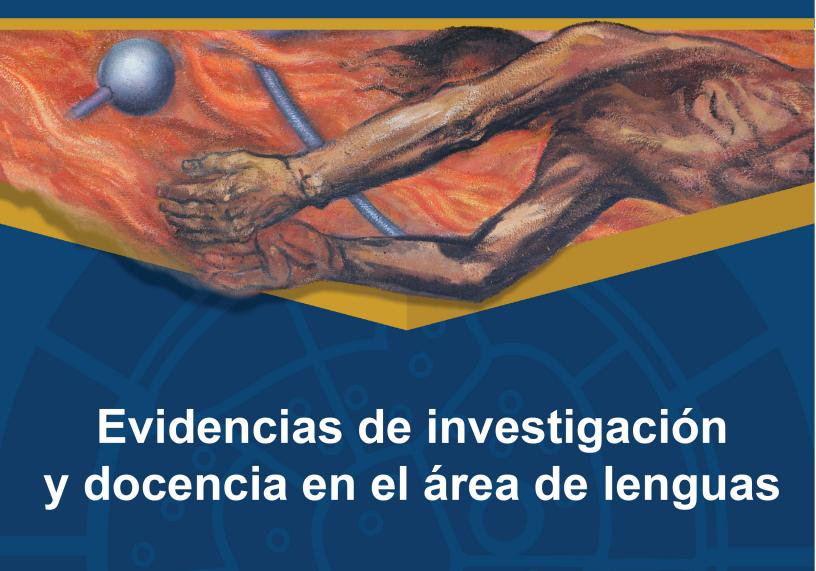Felipe Bustos Cruz
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The use of authentic material in the English lesson, a collaborative action research project

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Summary

Teachers of a foreign language commonly have as their main interest making students' learning processes meaningful. An important element in an English lesson is the use of authentic material, which may be a part of teacher's repertoire of teaching and learning techniques. Thus, it is highly desirable that the use of this material, as an important authentic input for promoting the learning process, is well supported by theoretical and methodological principles in order to develop students' English proficiency by means of working with real language.

This report introduces an action-research project focused on how teachers used authentic material in the English lesson. Moreover, a course was offered to teachers of English at FES Zaragoza, UNAM, from the collaborative work perspective in order to strengthen teachers' skills to select and exploit these kinds of resources, Teachers examined their own educational practice methodically through classroom inquiry and reflection. Consequently, they managed to articulate theory to practice and re-considered that exposing learners to real language entails the adjustment of beliefs and enhancing their teaching techniques to make learners use the target language as a means to face real situations. This brief overview of the research includes core elements of the theoretical framework, the description of the course features, as well as the participants' academic performance during the course.

Key words: *authentic material, collaborative action research, authentic exposure, reflective practice*.

Theoretical framework

Authentic material (AM) is defined by different authors as follows: Bacon & Finnemann in Akbary and Razavi (2015:106) state that authentic materials are texts produced by native speakers for a non-pedagogical purpose. For Peacock (1997:144), AM is the one produced to fulfill some social purpose in the language community. According to Gilmore (2007:98), an authentic text is a stretch of real language, a real speaker or writer produces, aimed at a real audience and created to carry a meaningful message. Whereas Carter and Nunan (2001:295) define it as an ordinary text not produced specifically for language teaching purposes.

Considering all these definitions, AM can be any piece of original information or utterance that people use to communicate meaningfully, whether it is spoken or written so that some audience listens to or reads it in the

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target language (TL). This piece of information may have an educational goal, such is the case of literature, whose language has not been modified to meet any readers' needs or used in a real context, but does not have vocabulary, grammar content, syntax, pronunciation, fluency or any demanding restrictions either. Moreover, AM can be expected to have very different external discourse features, some of which can be rendered as better input to motivate learners and encourage their language acquisition if they are exposed to language the way it is really used.

Features of authentic material

Materials to teach and learn languages must ideally have some general features such as being content rich in order to connect the learner to the target language, interesting enough for learners so that they feel encouraged to react to the material's pedagogical plan and use the target language. They present the following features:

In the words of Richards (2006) authentic materials provide cultural information about the target language so that learners are exposed to real language. According to Polio (2014) they can be reused, shared and applied in different teaching-learning activities, as for Guo (2012) they are not formulaic, nor limited.

Among different kinds of authentic materials here are some examples sorted into three categories:

Audio: radio commercials, news broadcasts, documentaries, phone messages, etc.

Visual: photographs, art works, signs with symbols, postcards, picture books, etc.

Printed: restaurant menus, newspaper articles, bulletin board advertisements, company websites, coupons, sales catalogues, travel brochures, maps, telephone books, signs, blogs, movie posters, food labels, etc.

Didactic treatment of AM

An important aspect of this research is to learn how AM is used by teachers to teach English. According to the British Council (2004), when using authentic material, the point is not to focus on the content degree of difficulty but on the task according to the students' abilities. However, some teachers may think that the use of authentic material itself in the class is the key so that learners develop or improve their foreign language proficiency. Gilmore (2007) suggests that teachers should focus on learning aims, (Hutchinson and Waters in Gilmore, 2007:107) and refer to the latter as "fitness to the learning process" and state that the goal is to guide learners to communicate efficiently in the foreign language regardless of the materials' authenticity or contrivance. It is also the responsibility of the classroom teacher to make language samples useful. Hence, teachers are invited to consider their motivations for using authentic language, Adams (1995). Teachers can always find valid reasons to plan their lessons including authentic materials as the activities input, such as bringing some authenticity into the classroom. This means, the activities learners have to perform must be useful, related to and necessary outside the classroom. Then, for Rogers in Akbari (2015: 106), authentic materials should be qualified in terms of objectives, learners' needs and nature of the meaningful communication. In the light of this explanation, the didactic planning to exploit AM is what should have more weight rather than the material itself according to the aim of this research project.

That is to say, regardless of the material, teachers have to think about what they want their learners to achieve, consider how they learn, what kind of activities they enjoy more and make them more engaged in learning. In order to do so, Scrivener (2005) suggests teachers have to bear in mind a series of issues related to the planning, such as atmosphere, learners, aims, teaching point, tasks and teaching procedures, materials and classroom management.

From this perspective, Woodward (2001) suggests learners' ideas should be taken into account as starting points so the teacher can assume they have these topics available. In this sense, knowing about learners can help teachers propose activities that challenge and extend their ideas as well as their participation to make learning happen and be meaningful to them too. Thus, the teacher's task is to suggest a statement or give some kind of input which guides and invites learners to achieve some output production of the language and communicate through it. Besides, it is crucial to remark that in order to make communication happen, learners must interact with others since communication cannot occur in isolation. On this matter, this collaborative action research project emphasized on the fact that "learning is the result of interaction between learners and the target language users, collaboration to create and negotiate meaning, attending feedback, the incorporation of the language that is overheard to the own communicative competence and by trial and error" (Richards 2006:4). In this regard, Rivers (1987) also explains that interaction is what can make the most out of using authentic material in the language classrooms. However, it is vital not to forget that the goal is to convey and receive authentic messages that contain information of interest for both, the speaker and the listener.

Authenticity

To allude to authenticity, it is necessary to mention what the term authenticity refers to in the language classroom. Breen (1985) refers to four types of authenticity to bear in mind; text authenticity, learner authenticity, task authenticity and authenticity of the classroom. These refer to the qualities of the text, which can help learners to eventually develop an authentic understanding of genuine information as native speakers interpret it in their real context. However, this will only be possible if teachers have the aim to engage learners in real communication with their peers, through sharing content of language learning that will enable them to find means to convey real language. In light of these references, teachers must not neglect the lesson nor the planning of activities when they have authentic materials at hand to support their language lesson. Consequently, it is not enough to have an excellent authentic piece of information if teachers assign an activity that brings as a result, a list of controlled utterances whose results may have already been anticipated. This would not permit learners to react and express themselves based on the authentic piece of information, but would push them to say or produce what the teacher expects. If there is no personal free production, thus it is not authentic. To this respect, Rivers (1987:11) states that in order to take advantage of the potential benefits of AM, there should be a change of perspective and the adoption of some new or different teaching approach.

The previous theoretical principles were the basis for the implementation of a course focused on the use of AM within the English lesson.

Methodology framework

Statement of the problem

At Faculty meetings at Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras at FES Zaragoza, the dissociation between the course book contents from learners' needs and from native speakers' real use of English has been discussed. Considering this, learning the TL from this viewpoint may not help learners in their process to become proficient users of English. Thus, an answer to the problem stated above can be that among the many sources teachers can have at hand for their lessons, authentic materials can be a good aid for teaching real English Then, keeping in mind learners' needs and teachers' concerns a collaborative action research was carried out that can help learners reach their goals related to the learning of this language.

Research question

Related to the problem stated above, the concern of the collaborative action research project was to find out whether the learning activities used by teachers based on authentic input can be advantageous to improve learners' English proficiency or if on the contrary, they represent mora of a burden than an aid for the purpose of learning the TL. This is to say, the objective of this research was to learn what kind of teaching knowledge and teaching abilities are essential for the use of authentic material in the English teaching-learning process. In this regard the objectives to reach the project's aims are presented below.

Research objectives

To analyze the characteristics of the institutional context that aid or hinder the appropriate use of authentic material in the English teaching-learning process.

To identify the teaching competencies that promote the insertion of authentic material in didactic planning.

The practical use of the collaborative action research project refers to the teaching of a course that was aimed for teachers to:

Raise awareness about the importance of the insertion of authentic material in their teaching practice.

Have the opportunity to share their experience with peers, knowledge and new proposals about including this kind of material in their lesson planning.

Promote the issue through collaborative work and peer coaching.

In order to back up the project, some particularities about action research and collaborative action research are now described. Action Research is the practice of research related to the experimental approach of social science coined by Kurt Lewin in 1946. Through action research, we try to simultaneously deal with knowledge and social changes in order to solve a particular social problem. Then, theory and practice occur at the same time. According to Ramage

(2009), Lewin believed that the key to resolving social conflict was to facilitate learning and so enable individuals to understand and restructure their perceptions of the world around them.

In Ramage (2009), Lewin proposes a three-stage model of social change: thawing, movement and refreezing. According to him, these may take place based on the following phases:

1. Dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs.

2. Identification of a problem area.

3. Identification of a specific problem to be solved through the action.

4. Execution of the action to verify the hypothesis.

5. Evaluation of the effects of the action.

6. Generalizations.

Through this model, participants can take part in an action research project so they contribute with their knowledge and become themselves part of the solution to the problem.

Collaborative Action Research

Collaborative action research is a powerful qualitative research instrument of staff development, in the words of Ross cited by Burns (1999: 15-16). Through collaboration, teachers examine their own educational practice methodically through classroom inquiry and self-reflection. Then, through the use of techniques for doing research, they can make up teams of teachers who have the same interests, and people who want to solve problems they have identified during their daily teaching practice. This way, they can work with colleagues to collaborate in evaluating their practice together in order to improve a teaching-learning issue from a positive critical perspective Burns (1999:11). In the light of this explanation, the collaborative action research project was carried out by the implementation of a course that contributed to enabling teachers to improve their use of authentic material in the teaching-learning process, whose content is stated hereunder.

The course features

The course was a series of workshops that made up a total of 25 hours of theory and 15 hours for practicing the use of AM along the language lesson. The sample of this research was made up of in-service teachers of English and a teacher of French at Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras, who were willing and interested in working with other colleagues to reflect on their current teaching practice related not only to the exploitation of AM, but also to prepare learners for real situations in which the use of real English is demanded.

The course was divided into four didactic units, which were taught along eight classroom sessions. The first 25 hours were devoted to theory revision which had the objective to go through:

1 The concept of collaborative work.

2 The concept of action research.

3 The concept of authentic material: characteristics, kinds of AM, principles to choose AM.

4 The insertion of authentic material in didactic planning: the use of AM in different English proficiency levels, the regularity of using AM, the role of AM in the language class.

5 Skills development through the use of authentic material: receptive and productive skills through the use of AM, activities to exploit AM.

6 Authenticity in the language classroom: The impact of AM on the English learner, learners' output out of authentic input and benefits of using AM for the teaching-learning process.

The other 15 hours were dedicated to the class observations aimed to learn about how or if teachers led learners to produce real language out of real input as part of the interests of this research. Then these observations took place from the fourth didactic unit onwards. For the observations, the participant teachers shared their lesson plan on line with peers their lesson plan on line before the lesson teaching. This gave their colleagues the opportunity to make some suggestions to improve the plan beforehand in order to help the lesson development. It is important to mention that the teachers of the sample had a lesson on Saturday. Then the sample lessons were filmed by the researcher, who sent and shared the videos with the other teachers on Google Drive. This way, they had enough time to observe the didactic treatment of AM, in order to fill out an observation format and to discuss this information with the peer teachers straightforwardly.

Results and discussion

The results of the research show that during the development of the intervention, there were ten participants, nine teachers of English and one teacher of French who decided to take part in the project because of his good command of English too. All the sessions were in English and all of them had discussions in this language, but for the observations, there were nine lessons in English and one in French, about which some teachers could detect the effectiveness of AM didactic treatment since they understand French and because of the learners' attitude and performance.

In order to have clear raw data for this research, along the classroom sessions, notes were taken about the participants' new ideas, doubts, reflections, as well as the suggestions to solve some difficulties that are always part of the teaching-learning process. Moreover, for the gathering of the information related to the lesson planning, observation formats were used. These formats were aimed to gather raw data through observations on teachers' performance when they exposed learners to authentic input. The first section of the format corresponded to the general information about a specific lesson such as the observer's name, the observed teacher, time and date of the observed lesson. The second part of the observation format dealt with the observed teacher's objective for the lesson as well as specific activities the observer should concentrate on. Finally, the third section concentrated on

how the observed teacher reached the aimed goals through aspects such as teaching strategies, assignments, classroom management and class environment to use AM effectively.

As important as the description of the observation formats is, the process of collaborative action research is, according to Kemmis and McTaggar (1988:4-5), not so linear or straightforward for identifying, planning, acting, and observing. It is a process that never ends, but there is always an outcome out of any learning activity. Hence, collaborative learning is learning that occurs as a result of action, interaction between peers engaged in the completion of a common task (Noble 2000:4), which is precisely what the course intended to do in order to reach the goal of this research.

In the light of the previous explanation, the relevance of this research project was that teachers worked together to review thoroughly the concepts of collaborative work, action research and authentic material, about which teachers' views demonstrated having the knowledge, but raised awareness about the benefits and hard work that requires collaboration for a common goal. In this sense, they had to share their experiences on this kind of work, the benefits of having others' support, assessment, feedback, as well as self-feedback to promote this working together, which at the same time requires disposition, commitment, tolerance, openness and co-responsibility, among other aspects of team work.

With respect to the definition of authentic material and its kinds, the research indicated that for some teachers AM may be a source of fun, motivation and attractiveness for the lesson, even a door to reality, and not necessarily a grammar resource. For some others, AM can be more related to students' needs and more meaningful to their own reality. For most teachers their basis of the subject matter is solid, but the literature review was necessary to update their knowledge and prepare them better for the didactic treatment of such material.

The research results also gave evidence that in connection with collaborative work, teachers recognized the complexity of giving AM the appropriate didactic treatment to make the most of it during the TL lesson, the difficulty of goal setting as well as purposes of using AM as input. It is necessary to mention that the first lessons of the course enlightened teachers about their real teaching process. However, some proposals still demonstrated that the goal setting is still focused on grammar competence, which is not wrong, but if this is the teacher's goal, then any other non-authentic material can be used instead.

Related to the teachers' lesson plans proposals, they agreed on the fact that the success or failure of an activity based on authentic input could depend on the goal setting, which should be in accordance with the learners' authenticity development. "The notion of authenticity came along the communicative approach. Thus, speaking and writing can be authentic productions as long as they reflect the relevant criteria and also mirror the real world, only if the teacher proposes situations in which and for which language is really used (Hedge in Al Azri and Al-Rashdi 2014: 250). In this sense, teachers showed the path they followed to take learners from authentic input to produce authentic output, based on what they actually do in the classroom to bring out authentic language out of learners minds.

In order to achieve the latter, teachers had to revise the specific literature related to roughly-tuned and finely-tuned activities. Thus, they had to concentrate on their lesson planning activities. Scrivener (2005) proposes that based on the input learners are exposed to, they can carry out authentic use activities or restricted use activities. Finely tuned activities, such cases in which the language available for the learners to use, listen or read has been restricted, for example when a teacher asks learners to write a text using specific grammar categories, for example. Or, on the opposite, roughly tuned activities so that learners deal with language that has not been restricted or limited in any way. For instance, it may refer to learners being required to produce their own ideas or views according to their criteria towards a specific topic.

Regarding this, Richards and Bohlke (2011) suggest teachers use AM materials for activities that reflect the students' language use in the real world. So, with all this support, the teachers worked in pairs to produce a lesson plan, which included the kind of activities mentioned above, the less restriction they showed, the closer to authentic output production learners could be.

As it is common ground in language learning, learners are expected to produce real output for communication. Hence, a process in which they use real language, as a vehicle of communication has to be carried out, taking advantage of all the language learners can rely on in order to understand, interpret and express their own thoughts. If this is the case, the research found that the use of roughly-tuned activities are more appropriate for the lesson planning based on the use of authentic input, activities that in a way challenge learners to use the TL at a higher level from the one they have. This means, teachers have to thrive to guide learners to solve a problem or react in a real situation that requires them to communicate in English.

It is crucial to mention that during the course, the teachers were respectful and critical of their own and their peers' planning as well as of their practice in the class. They all had the goal to expose learners to real input or provide them with genuine target language through activities that took them to produce real output, which in the end is the goal of using AM. This can be reinforced by Adams (1995) who states that what goes on in the language classroom is almost artificial and what teachers have to do is to make an effort to make this as real life as possible. Hence, this last goal was the one teachers wanted to achieve during the lesson they had prepared and were filmed. However, as teachers were working through collaboration, they agreed that the didactic treatment of authentic material of a teacher did not follow the path to authenticity. This was due to the fact that the learners were asked to prepare their activity beforehand and what they did was just a rehearsed role-play, an activity to use their memory, even when their material was authentic. Hence, learners did not have the opportunity to express their own ideas, but were limited to what they had worked on as their script. This outcome shows that it was a challenge to have some teachers re-structure their previous assumptions based on the theory they were revising.

On the other hand, there was another group of English language learners who did not deal with true real language because the material the teacher chose for the lesson did not present the features AM should present according to the theory presented in previous sections. It was a video the teacher chose to make learners express their reality limited to specific grammar content. Therefore, considerations for the features and selection of authentic material had to be given to the teacher.

As for the French lesson, the English teachers who are competent in French, reported that learners were able to collaborate and produce real output out of authentic input. It should be pointed out that all this was possible due to the teacher's guidance. This started by making learners aware of the importance of the topic they were going to refer to in that lesson. Then they had to participate in the selection of their material, real sources in order to make it meaningful for them as part of their interests. Afterwards, learners had to share their information with their peers, presenting the content from a personal viewpoint so their peers reacted and had a kind of a short debate. Finally, they had to bring about their final considerations of their own and their peers' and share them with their teachers, who helped them with language difficulties and gave them the support they needed during the roughly-tuned activities, towards which learners showed motivation, willingness and knowledge to carry them out.

The experience mentioned above was possible due to the group's features. They were five students of fifth level, which corresponds to level A2+ according to the CEFR for languages and assessment (2002). Besides, the good rapport between the teacher and the group made the lesson reach the goal of developing authenticity. In contrast to the group of French, the learners of English were all in first and second levels, except one. In the beginning levels, groups were made up of about 30 people who made a great effort trying to produce what they might have had in their minds. They used the language included in the authentic materials, such as the vocabulary of a song, the content of a brochure to study abroad or the map of a city to go around as a tourist. Their teachers asked them to first understand all the vocabulary they were going to be exposed to, then they had to find solutions to problems such as asking for and giving directions, describing the best schools to study abroad, suggesting their peers to visit different places in a city such as New York. The effort students made consisted of using the language they had at that stage of their course and produce their own ideas. In this case, the teachers were sources learners consulted when they had difficulties, but at the same time they were attentive to help even those who seemed not to be in trouble. In these cases, besides watching learners react and express their own ideas, these teachers had to be patient, and have a good command of the language as well as show willingness to guide learners to use and produce real language.

Unlike these groups of beginners, there was a group of 20 learners who were in level ten, B1- based on the CEFR for languages and assessment (2002), who were able to read an authentic piece of literature, but as their level of English allowed, they were able to use the TL included in the text. They could also talk about their emotions, negotiate information with their peers and get to final conclusions in pairs and as a group. In this lesson, the teacher was a source too, but had to be very attentive to the learners' production in order to guide them properly when difficulties were present. Different from this group were the ones exposed to songs, they were also beginners as the ones mentioned previously, they listened, studied the vocabulary, understood the idea, but could not say too much using the language contained in the material for the production of their own ideas. In these groups, the learners were pushed to produce at least TL language in chunks, but which included the content of the material and their own limited language.

Conclusions

A research question that needed to be answered through this research was to learn if AM and the activities based on authentic input could be advantageous or represent a burden more than an aid for learners. Thus, at the end of the research process, the participants agreed that definitely, using authentic material to trigger the learners' cognition was a way to improve the learning process for being exposed to real input. However, the demand to choose the appropriate authentic material and prepare the lesson based on it could not be ignored. Moreover, because of the features of AM mentioned in the theoretical principles, its use also requires teachers to adjust their methodology towards teaching and make changes or adaptations, which may not be so easy or perhaps not appropriate to some teachers' teaching beliefs.

Considering the results of this research, it would be important to reconsider the characteristics of the institutional context, which based on the learners' needs to learn English are part of their reality. Then, the use of authentic material should be part of the English teaching-learning process, as it would aid learners to accomplish their goals. Certainly, all along the research, which was carried out by the course sessions, the participants demonstrated having the knowledge about the conceptualization of AM, its features and kinds. However, its applicable use in the English lesson was not as clear for all the teachers. As a consequence, they were required to identify and consider the teaching competencies they needed to develop and that can promote the incorporation of AM within the didactic planning, which in the end, guided them to make the most of the authentic material they used for their lesson they were observed. On account of this, the research found that the sample became interested and reflected not only on the project's subject matter, but in general, this research made them raise awareness on their learners' process during their receptive and productive skills development in their everyday teaching. This is why, it would be crucial for the sample teachers and perhaps for teachers in general, to make a halt along the way and reflect on their own teaching approach to see if what learners are capable to do with the TL can help them perform appropriately in a real situation.

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