Teachers' Centre

AEXALEVI *Forum*

Issue I - April 2009

This is a momentous occasion for the Asociación.

Today we're opening a new communication channel in the form of a bulletin for us to share our viewpoints on some key issues we have to face and resolve in our different teaching situations with a view to improving students' performance in the final exams.

With our support, especially Myrian Casamassima's, we hope teachers will develop new resources to devise activities that will help students find out what items they consider particularly problematic to cope with and what sort of practice they find useful.

I should like to express my gratitude to you teachers who helped me clarify my ideas throughout the years and have inspired me to embark on new educational projects aimed at fostering your personal and professional growth.

Prof. Marta Moure

AEXALEVI *Forum*

Directed by Prof. Marta Moure

Written by Prof Myrian Casamassima

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C o n t e n t s

THE CALL FOR

AUTHENTICITY

With the arrival of the Communicative Approach to English Language Teaching, material designers were confronted with the urge to create communicative contexts for the presentation of the linguistic content to unroot the artificiality of materials used in methods with a structuralist base. The claim for authentic materials questioned the use of graded texts. However, as the pendulum of the changes in Methodology swung sideways once again, it was later realized that in EFL contexts (English as a Foreign Language), students needed exposure to input situated slightly above the student's current level of comprehension. Surprinsingly, when Krashen and Terrell (1983) elaborated their approach, they were concerned with ESL contexts (English as a Second Language) but Krashen's input hypothesis proved to be meaningful to understand from which kind of material the EFL student would benefit the most.

Authenticity redefined

Communicative textbooks generally start each unit with a text for presentation. This means that the text provides the contextualization of the language to be taught in the unit. In *Sky 3*, unit 22 we meet Josh and Sophie getting ready for a party. The characters take decisions and make promises in response to their mother's remarks about preparations. The language focus of the unit is precisely this: the use of *will* and *won't* for offers, promises and decisions. In *Stardust 5,* unit 4 we see Robohelp doing the house chores and making mistakes.

The story paves the way for the Simple Past. To be able to call these texts non-authentic, I suggest that we revise the definition of authenticity. We all understand that texts that are authentic have been created for real-life purposes. Therefore, their counterpart, non-authentic texts, have been designed for pedagogical purposes. The trouble with this distinction is that it confronts us with a dichotomy: authentic vs. non-authentic.

To avoid this dichotomy, Brown and Menasche (1993) describe material by situating it along a scale. At one end,

they place material that they consider "genuine", i.e. created for real life, while at the other end, they place material that they call "minimal" or "incidental", i.e. created for pedagogical purposes but not made to look genuine. As we move along the continuum away from genuine material, we find other kinds of materials that Brown and Menasche call "altered", "adapted" and "simulated". "Altered" means that glosses or pictures have been added to a genuine text, which had none of this support. "Adapted" means that a genuine text has been simplified. "Simulated" material has been produced for pedagogical purposes. Yet, it has the features of genuine texts as the author has attempted to make it resemble real life.

If we apply Krashen's "i+1" concept to this description of material, we will see that texts that are adapted, simplified or simulated are more likely to meet the students´ needs of exposure to input that is slightly above their current level of comprehension in an EFL context. At one end of the continuum, minimal or incidental material may turn out to be too poor as a source of input. At the other end, genuine material might prove to be too hard for the students to take in at the lower levels if the time for exposure to the language is restricted as it is generally the case in EFL contexts. However, genuine material can be integrated in the syllabus provided that adequate support is added when necessary, which would paradoxically turn it into altered material.

Authentic procedures

Our concern for authentic materials sometimes makes us lose sight of procedures. "Authenticity" is a term traditionally applied to input but the fact is that the tasks that we carry out in class should be pervaded by a dose of real life as well. This does not mean to say that every single task that we do must be authentic. It does mean to say that we need to make room in our lessons for tasks that can capture the kinds of target language situations which our students could potentially engage in. In these tasks, the students will have the chance to rehearse the language and the skills that they will eventually need in real life. There might be real situations which the students may not have to get involved in and, yet, these can inspire tasks that can help the students activate language and skills which can later be applied to novel contexts.

Authentic assessment

Authentic assessment refers to the procedures that we use to evaluate which do not isolate evaluation from the authentic tasks that our students do in

class. According to O'Malley and Valdez Pierce, "We use the term *authentic assessment* to describe the multiple forms of assessment that reflect student learning, achievement, motivation and attitudes on instructionally-relevant classroom activities" (1996; 4). This can easily be accomplished by simply asking the students to carry out one of the many tasks that we always have in our lessons, but this time we evaluate.

In a few words

For authenticity to step into our lessons and stay on, we might need to reconsider what can be called authentic. It is not just the input. It also embraces procedures and evaluation. It is not just authentic vs. non-authentic. It is a wide range of materials that are at our hand. We must decide what we wish to make out of them.

References

Brown, S. & Menasche, L. (1993). Authenticity in materials design. Paper presented at the 1993 International TESOL convention, Atlanta, Georgia. In D. Nunan (ed.) *Practical English Language Teaching*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Krashen, S. y Terrell, T. (1983). *The Natural Approach*. California: The Alemany Press.

O'Malley, J. & Valdez Pierce, L. (1996). *Authentic Assessment for English Language Learners.* U.S.A.: Addison-Wesley.

If you are interested in exploring the topic of authenticity,
join us in the discussions in our forum,
which will soon be available in our website.

BUILDING UP SENTENCES WITH YOUNGER LEARNERS

S entences are the core of a written text. When we ask our students to write a paragraph about a topic or sentences about a picture, we take it for granted that they know how to go about sentence building. The evidence that we have collected from exam results shows us that generally students find it extremely hard to write a simple sentence. Why is this so? How can we help them to write sentences that are grammatically correct and suitable for the contexts to which they apply?

What is a sentence?

The first issue that we need to consider is the recognition of what a sentence is. The students should be able to tell a sentence from smaller units, a phrase for example, and from larger units, for instance two sentences in coordination. It should be clear for the students that a sentence has an identity:

- It begins with a capital letter.
- If it is a telling sentence or a statement, it ends with a period.
- It tells a complete idea.
- It has two parts: a naming part first and a telling part later.

Several kinds of tasks can help the students build up this notion of identity:

- We can provide the students with a number of sentences and phrases, and they have to identify which are sentences and which are not.
- In a given sentence, the students circle the capital letter that signals its beginning and the period that signals its end.
- In a given sentence, the students underline the naming part (the subject) and the telling part (the predicate).
- We can also provide subjects and predicates in two columns for the students to match the ones that make a sentence.
- In an incomplete sentence, the students have to say which part of a sentence is missing, the naming part or the telling part. Then we can give them a number of options and they have to choose the one that best completes the sentence.

As meaning is embedded in form, we could do all the tasks above with reference to a picture, which would frame the activities in a context. Working along these lines, it would also be useful to ask the students to recognize out of a number of sentences which ones refer to a picture in particular. Of course, we could exploit variations here: matching sentences with a character in a picture, matching the same subject with several predicates to show that you can say different things about the same referent and any other variations that you consider useful for your students.

Word order

Undoubtedly, word order deserves a second thought. Can the students order the elements of a sentence? Yes, they can, provided that they are given the tools to do so. The more visual the procedure, the more tangible, the better.The students may find it difficult to order the elements in their minds. This is only reasonable as the capacity of our working memory, the place where information must be processed on-line while we build up the sentence, may be somewhat restricted for certain

learners at certain ages. We could then resort to flashcards with the words written on them and shuffle the flashcards as we teach the students how to build up a sentence. It would be desirable to have this kind of activities quite often and to have the end products available in posters and on panels in the classroom. Frequent revision consolidates learning as it is a good aid for memory and visuals in the learning environment reinforce what we call "periphery", which includes all the information that is perceived by the students in the classroom although it may not be the focus of the lesson that day.

What's next?

You must have noticed that all the suggestions above turn around the recognition of sentences. The next step would be then to ask the students to start producing sentences themselves. However, this is not meant as a linear process. Logically, the students recognize and later they produce. But in the art of writing, we will surely need to spiral back and take up recognition once again as the students rehearse their first sentences.

WRITING AWARDS

Would you like to have your students participate
in a writing contest?

We would like to invite your students
to take part in a writing contest .

- **Who can participate?**

Students currently doing Sixth Year and Seventh Year.

- **What do they have to do?**

They have to write a story, not longer than a page, suitable for the level they are in, like the kinds of stories they write in their final exams.

- **How many students per institute can submit their compositions?**

Only one student per level. Each institute should first carry out a selection of compositions and submit the winning story by e-mail not later than August 18th, 2009.

- **What award will the winners be given?**

There will be one winner per level and each will receive a prize and a diploma from Asociación Ex alumnos del Profesorado en Lenguas Vivas "J.R.Fernández".

- **Why participate in a writing contest?**

For some students, the writing contest will mean a challenge and they will feel motivated to learn how to write. For the teacher, the contest will imply making room in the class for the teaching of writing.

Write to us if you have a question about the writing contest.
We will be glad to assit you in anything that you may need.

GUEST WRITER

Prof. Viviana Rossi

Viviana is the Head of Cardiff Institute. In this article, she helps us to reframe the tasks that we do in the classroom.

After graduating at the I.N.S.P. Lenguas Vivas "J.R.Fernández", I started working as an English teacher at the Asociación. At that time, I was able to share nice experiences with other colleagues, which helped me a lot at the beginning of my career. A long time has passed since those days and, having my own institute, I am still in contact with the Asociación. There I can find support and answers to my doubts. It is the place where I can get a word of advice that the teachers working there are always willing to give.

Now, after many years of working with the language, I would like to share with you some tips to improve the performance of your students and their attitude in the English class.

Some practical ideas to make changes in classroom work:

- Make your students do an exercise and then ask them to write a similar activity for other students (a matching exercise, situations, etc.). In that way, your students will not feel "consumers" of the language but also "producers" of it.
- If you are dealing with a reading comprehension exercise, ask your students to try and answer the questions BEFORE reading the text. This will imply using their imagination and adding details that they can later on compare with the original text.
- In the same situation, before reading a text your students may write their own "comprehension questions" (those they would like the text to answer).

- If your students are writing something on a given topic, ask them to write some questions about it at the end. Then they can exchange their activities and answer other students' questions. In this way, their work will be highly productive!

- After having covered a few lessons, you can make your students work in groups and do a simple test themselves. Each group has to be responsible for writing a different part of the test. You then collect all the parts and correct them, put them together and give them back to your students as "their test".

You see how you can improve a class task by giving it educational value and making your students develop different skills. I wanted to share with you, teachers, some activities we have put into practice at our institute with great results. Try them and you will make a difference in your class and in your students' attitude towards the language.

Thank you, Viviana!

Please send us your ideas and suggestions.
We will be glad to have you as our guest writer.
Contact us at:
teacherscentre@aexalevi.org.ar

Spelling and Pronunciation

Two birds, one stone

Let us begin by considering the following exam situations. In the composition, students make a lot of spelling mistakes. In the oral interview, they mispronounce words very often. We all recognize these situations as having a negative impact on exam results. How relevant can spelling and pronunciation be for the students' production of the language?

The spelling bee has swept all over the United States and has become the subject of many films and stories. The American obsession for spelling contests is by all means justified when we consider for a moment the intrincate nature of spelling in the English language. As a reader, I can manage to reconstruct the message from a text with several mispellings. This proves that I have the skill to do so but it gives me the feeling that the writer has been careless. What is it that I want to see in a composition? I certainly do not want to see myself tripping over words and struggling to figure out the message. The composition should flow, as it were, and spelling hinders its flow and makes writing look sloppy.

When I am processing on-line in an oral exam, I must rely on what I hear. Unfortunately, when students mispronounce words too often, and however hard I apply the principle of cooperation with my interlocutor, intelligibility is seriously affected to the extent that the message may be completely lost. Generally, mispronunciation goes hand in hand with poor stressing, unreliable chunking and lack of proper rhythm. Frustration overwhelms both students and examiner.

Perhaps one way of finding our way out of the puzzle that spelling and pronunciation pose to us would be to simply go back to where it all starts: vocabulary teaching. When we present a new word, we tend to teach its meaning, generally its referential meaning. However, we can tell a word from another because each one has a graphic identity as well as a phonological identity. I suggest that we work harder on them and that we do so in an interconnected manner.

How can this be done?

- Producing a colour shock, by using different colours for each letter in a word.
- Highlighting the initial letter of each word and all difficult clusters.
- Drawing a line all around the shape of a word to highlight its silhouette.
- Writing words in the air while saying them aloud.
- Writing words on paper with colour pencils, crayons, beans.
- Labelling objects in the classroom.
- Having posters with the new words on panels.
- Making flashcards with the new words written on them and revising them often.
- Holding spelling contests.
- Asking the students to keep a record of words they find difficult to spell and pronounce.
- Clapping and playing music to build up the idea of stress and rhythm.
- Establishing simple relationships between certain letters and sounds.
- Matching words and sounds.
- Creating mazes or stepping stones on paper for the students to find their way out by choosing words with the same sound or stress pattern.

You will find some of these suggestions more suitable for younger learners while others may be more adequate for older students. The point is to start right from the beginning and to do it systematically. I must admit that it is not an easy task in a society where technology has affected the way we spell words and in a learning context in which students know that somehow we will manage to understand what they are trying to say, because we all speak Spanish. Working on spelling and pronunciation may imply having to address the attitudes that students have developed towards them. If we think of engaging activities, it will be more than two birds with one stone.

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Would you like to brush up your sounds and intonation?
We are developing a workshop in Phonetics
which will soon be available at the Asociación.

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Highly recommended

"How to Teach Writing"
by Jeremy Harmer
Pearson Education. 2008.

In "How to Teach Writing", Jeremy Harmer guides us through a journey into the process of writing by linking theory and practice with skillful balance. He begins this journey with a stopover at the nature of writing, from which he derives its implications for teaching and learning. Next he introduces the written text and analyses key concepts such as genre, cohesion, coherence and register, and their interplay in text construction.

Equipped with all this background, we are ready to hear all the suggestions for classroom implementation that Jeremy Harmer will make in the next chapters. The activity range broadens as we read on. From spelling into punctuation. From the sentence, to the paragraph and into the text.

We have finally arrived at the most fascinating site along the way: how to deal with the process from the stage in which we motivate our learners to the stage in which we respond to their writing. You will pack up a bagful of activities that Jeremy Harmer puts forward for each stage of the writing process.

We end our journey with the feeling that "How to Teach Writing" has accomplished its objective: to help us use our understanding of the nature of the writing process and the written text in the activities that we implement in our lessons.