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Authenticity in the Teaching of ESP: An Evaluation Proposal

Abstract

Although authentic materials are a very rich source for the selection of teaching materials in the field of ESP (*English for Specific Purposes*) in general and of Business English in particular, the ultimate purpose should be authentic communication between the text (oral or written) and its recipient as a result of the interpretation brought to the text by the latter. To speak of authenticity implies therefore a dual focus: that of “authentic material” and that of “authenticity”. The literature in the field is vast and deserves an in-depth analysis, as in many cases the previous terms are treated as synonyms. Thus, an original proposal for the evaluation of authenticity is called for, an aspect rarely considered in the evaluation of teaching materials. This proposal will build upon a review of the literature on authenticity, as well as on the most important proposals for the evaluation of teaching materials. The proposal set forth in this paper is completed with a checklist which integrates the consideration of the inherent characteristics in the material being evaluated, together with the teacher’s view on this score.

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Introduction

While there is a vast gamut of proposals for the evaluation of teaching materials, these proposals are much less common in the field of ESP (*English for Specific Purposes*). Equally worthy of mention is that, if the evaluation of teaching materials is an important part of a teacher’s work, then the checklist is a useful tool which facilitates materials selection, given the extensive array of ESP teaching materials available at present, especially in the field of Business English. This usefulness is in no way minimised by the implicit limitations of the material being evaluated (Sheldon, 1987: 2-6), on top of those directly related to materials evaluation itself and which result from the lack of consensus on the criteria which are fundamental in such an evaluation.

Even though it is common sense that most of these criteria are agreed upon in the field of English for general and specific purposes, it is also true that the teaching of ESP has some distinctive features which merit special attention, as is the case with authenticity. This variable is scarcely contemplated in such proposals, the focus of interest rarely going beyond the question “is the material authentic?”. Therefore, it would be very useful to have an authenticity evaluation proposal which complements existing

proposals. Almagro (2004) offers a proposal for the evaluation of ESP textbooks at university level which reviews the proposals from the 70s to the present time, but it is nonetheless incomplete as far as authenticity is concerned.

Due to this foreseeable necessity, the main aim of this work is to present a proposal for the evaluation of authenticity based both on a thorough review of the literature on authenticity, and on the most important proposals for the evaluation of teaching materials. Thus, we start by analysing the main positions and controversies related to authenticity, as well as to the evaluation of teaching materials. Next, we go on to justify the methodology that underlies the elaboration of the proposal under scrutiny in this paper, and then we present the proposal itself and its corresponding checklist. From all this can be inferred that authenticity is slighted in the proposals for the evaluation of teaching materials. This proposal is conceived primarily for the teaching of Business English, as this is the widest variety of ESP nowadays, although it would also be useful in any other variety, and it complements the proposals already in existence.

Major theories and controversies related to the role of authenticity and the evaluation of teaching materials

The concept of authenticity engenders two fundamental meanings. The first of these, “authentic material”, involves the material produced by and for native speakers with communicative purposes. Widdowson’s (1983: 30) view will serve to define the second of these meanings: “[...] the communicative activity of the language use, [...] the engagement of interpretative procedures for making sense, even if these procedures are operating on and with textual data which are not authentic in the first sense”.¹

Before entering into the pros and cons of the use of this type of material in the teaching of ESP, the change operated in the teaching of languages with the evolution from the concept of sentence to that of text should be emphasized, given that it is the text which provides an imitation model for the student.² Nevertheless, for this to be possible, following Morrow’s (1977: 13) words, consideration is needed of whether the four factors by which the language is determined –topic, function, channel, and audience (cf. Hymes, 1972)– are appropriate for the context in which the text will be used in the teaching of ESP.³

¹ The terminological profusion associated with authenticity leads Robinson (1980: 35) to propose the use of “realia” instead of “authentic material”. However, Widdowson’s (1983: 30) terminological proposal is decisive: he identifies the first meaning with the product, ascribing the term “genuine” to it, in opposition to the process, to which he associates the term “authenticity”. Our terminological proposal is similar to that of Widdowson from a semantic point of view, the terms employed being “authentic material” and “authenticity”.

² Cf. Johns & Davies (1983: 3) as regards the two purposes involved in the use of texts, the linguistic one –TALO method (*Text a Linguistic Object*)– and the communicative one –TAVI method (*Text as a Vehicle of Information*).

³ This is one among many of the aspects that Widdowson (1979: 165) analyses in an exhaustive, conclusive, and magisterial way through the binary opposition *usage* (artificial material or material with linguistic purposes)/*use* (real language or authentic material).

As far as the advantages of authentic materials are concerned, Wajnryb's (1988: 107) view should be highlighted. She lays emphasis on three circumstances on this score: a form of language which is not used by its native speakers is no longer taught, the distance between the real world and the classroom is shorter than it used to be, and, finally, authentic material has influenced the teacher's vision of language. Even though these are undeniable advantages, we should be careful not to fall into the trap of considering authentic material as a guarantee that the use of materials related to the student's target situation implies the acquisition of the competence that this context demands (Widdowson, 1979: 164; Widdowson, 1983: 30; Hutchinson & Waters, 1984: 109-111). In a similar vein, Widdowson (1979: 163) lays emphasis on the fact that an excessive dependence on the use of authentic material in the teaching of ESP as synonym for real communication brings with it the risk of leaving aside methodological principles and the natural interaction of discourse. In addition, the limitations of the ESP teacher in the content area of his/her students are other important drawback to be evaluated (Hutchinson & Waters, 1982: 56-57), as well as the decontextualization of materials as a result of the use of isolated texts.

The positions upheld in the literature are unanimous: authenticity and interpretation are aspects which operate even if the material being used is not authentic in itself and, therefore, authentic material does not always generate an authentic response. Authenticity and relevance is also a decisive correlative, in that, on the one hand, the authenticity of the material itself does not guarantee its relevance and, on the other, the use of non-authentic material does not mean that this is not interesting and relevant (Robinson, 1980: 36). As for the aforementioned limitations, we agree with Widdowson (1979) on the relevance of the methodological principles and we believe that it is for the teacher to decide whether to use authentic or non-authentic material, with communicative or linguistic purposes, of general or specific content, as the characteristics of each course are different and condition the decisions the teacher adopts. As Hutchinson & Waters (1984: 111) put it: "[...] although analysis of the target situation may guide us when we decide what to teach, how we teach it and what materials we use to do so must be decided by reference to the constraints and potential of the teaching-learning situation". With reference to the limitations of the teacher of ESP, our contention is that the collaboration with the content teacher is paramount (cf. Almagro & Vallejo, 2002). Schleppegrell (1991: 20) offers useful solutions in order to overcome the decontextualization of the material –choosing content-based themes, using a thematic organization, as well as contextual references based on activities done before–, a similar position to that adopted by Hutchinson & Waters (1984) on the idea of selection, and a view which is also shared by Widdowson (1979). The culture and technology of the country of origin of the students also play a decisive role as contextual support. Moreover, Clarke (1989: 136-140) insists that the student's collaboration in the adaptation or elaboration of the material is important in bringing about his/her interaction with the material, even when the teaching material has linguistic objectives.

The reference to these limitations is, on the one hand, obligatory but, on the other, the main objective in mentioning them is to discover how to use authentic material correctly in class, as authenticity is the link between the class and the outside reality, as Arnold (1991: 237) corroborates: "[...] the more authentically the classroom mirrors the real world, the more real the rehearsal will be and the better the learning and transfer will be". Nevertheless, Morrow (1977: 14) highlights that the language that authentic texts offer is "particular" and "individual" and that the text is authentic "only if it contains elements which are general as opposed to idiosyncratic". Language varies according

to the situation in which it is used and, as a result, authenticity disappears in the teaching-learning situation because it was not the context for which the language was conceived. Thus, Morrow (1977: 251) stresses that three factors prevail in the communicative use of texts: *authenticity*, *involvement*, and *choice*, and affirms that the most important is what he terms *authenticity of response*.

Compared to Morrow's (1977) position, Arnold (1991: 237) takes the view that the imbalance between the teaching-learning situation and the exterior reality will not occur if the following types of authenticity come together: "Authentic materials and learner's purposes, authentic materials and authentic interactions, authentic responses, authentic participants, authentic status, settings and equipment and, authentic inputs and outputs".

Similarly, we discover in Breen (1985) a conception of the class not as the non-authentic context making the authenticity of the materials disappear, but as the context which gives validity to the authenticity, this being understood as the sum of four types of authenticity that the teacher should take into account: authenticity of the text, authenticity of the interpretation of the text on the part of the student, the authenticity of the objectives and, finally, the authenticity of the class. As far as the first two types of authenticity are concerned, this author points out that the text, on this occasion, is directed at the student, who will adapt it according to his/her point of reference, even if the text was initially conceived for a different situation, and observes: "The guiding criterion here is the provision of any means which will enable the learner to eventually interpret texts in ways which are likely to be shared with fluent users of the language". As regards the third type of authenticity, the authenticity of objectives, Breen draws a distinction between *authentic communication task* and *authentic learning task*, these being the main objective of the activities offered to the students. This idea links directly with the fourth type of authenticity, which is based both on communication and learning. All in all, Breen (1985: 68) concludes that the most authentic activity in the teaching-learning situation is that of metacommunication. This conception of the class as the unique social context is what leads us to affirm that authenticity is validated within the teaching-learning situation and, as Breen observes, to bring other real, authentic worlds to the class is not the essence of authenticity.

As for the evaluation of teaching materials, it should be highlighted that the lack of agreement in this field is obvious: the terminology used to define the different criteria varies greatly, these criteria are not constant, the elements making up each criterion do not always coincide, and the thoroughness in defining the content of each of these criteria varies from one proposal to another. All these factors make the field of evaluation of teaching materials one which lacks a firmly consolidated base, a situation which is aggravated in the field of English for Specific Purposes, because in addition to the circumstances described, there is also a lack of evaluation proposals.

Methodology

The proposal for the evaluation of authenticity set forth in this paper is based, on the one hand, on an exhaustive literature review on authenticity and, on the other, on Almagro's (2004) proposal for the evaluation of ESP textbooks at university level. The latter article extensively reviews existing literature in the field, as it takes into account eighteen proposals for textbook evaluation from the decade of the 70s to our present day,⁴ with special relevance being awarded to the 80s and 90s. However, while contemplating the variable of authenticity, it does not explore it in depth, something which the present paper attempts to do by providing a practical proposal for its evaluation in textbooks.

Evaluation proposal

The formal features of this proposal are the following: to begin with, it reflects the criteria which, according to renowned figures in this field, define the adequate use of authentic material and which have been summarized in the second section of this article. In addition, it takes into account all the aspects pertaining to authenticity included in the most outstanding proposals for materials evaluation made from the 70s to our present day. Finally, it conjugates the foregoing with a personal consideration of those variables and subspects which we consider should be present in the evaluation of authenticity in textbooks. In this sense, the selection of the criteria comprised in our evaluation proposal and the ascription of each one to a specific heading are justified in the present section.

Five are the aspects which constitute the evaluation proposal, all of them complementary and overlapping so as to cover the issue of authenticity from all possible angles. They are arranged from more general ones which can be easily identified to more specific variables which require closer analysis. The way in which these aspects are articulated in the subsequent checklist also allows for its application in both a General English and English for Specific Purposes setting, while, at the same time, incorporating criteria specific to ESP teaching; hence the innovative nature of the proposal, now presented in detail.

⁴ Cf. Almagro (2004: 225).

EVALUATING AUTHENTICITY IN ESP TEXTBOOKS

1. CONTEXT AND TARGET SITUATION

This heading is a necessary point of departure for the evaluation of authenticity since the very essence of the latter resides in authenticity of purpose. It is essential to determine whether, as we have seen Morrow (1977) points out, *topic, function, channel, and audience* match the situation for which a text is going to be used in the ESP classroom. Matching is after all, what evaluation is all about, as Hutchinson & Waters (1987: 97) stress: "Evaluation is basically a matching process: matching needs to available solutions". A text can be considered as a model for production only if we are sure that the students will want to produce texts with the same characteristics.

2. THE STUDENT

The extent to which a textbook's authenticity is useful or adequate for the two participants in the teaching-learning process also needs to be taken into account. To begin with, it is of the utmost importance that the learner be considered when evaluating authenticity in textbooks. As we have seen Robinson (1980) signals, authenticity is not synonymous with relevance; authentic material is only useful if it matches the students' level of communicative competence and the needs of their specialization. Materials should indeed be chosen in terms of how well and how far they develop the competence of the learner, rather than on the basis of the extent to which they mirror the performance data of the target situation. They should furthermore be evaluated on how well they prepare the learner for an authentic experience of language; on how far they engage the language user in authentic interpretation, interaction, and communication; and on how they trigger a response from the learner, activating his/her prior knowledge, interest, and curiosity about language and structure (cf. Morrow, 1977; Breen, 1985; Arnold, 1991 in the literature review).

3. THE TEACHER

Given the fact that the ESP teacher is often not an expert in the specific field of his/her students, it is paramount that the degree of authenticity of the textbook match the teacher's preparation. It must be borne in mind that the textbook is a mere instrument or tool which the teacher should be able to adapt to his/her specific context in order to match the needs of the learners.

4. CONTENTS

Finally, increasing the level of specificity of our evaluation a step further, it becomes necessary to carry out a fine-grained analysis of authenticity in relation to all the variables which affect the content of the textbook. Taking into account that one of the defining features of ESP is the fact that language is learned with a communicative goal, it becomes patent that, alongside **linguistic aspects** (such as the range and selection of grammar and lexicon, or the inclusion of real stretches of language), **sociocultural** or **notional-functional elements**, and more specifically their relation to the students' target situation and academic or occupational purposes, should also be contemplated.

Needless to say, the actual **topics** around which the textbook is built must also be scrutinized, as authentic material can only be considered of use if its thematic content is valid from an academic or occupational viewpoint. It must also be determined if the topics and units are adequate for the students' level of specialization, if they match their learning needs and interests, and if they have both a linguistic and communicative purpose.

The **organization** of the topics or units also needs to be reflected upon. In this sense, it is advisable to build lessons around content-based themes in the specific purpose area. As Schleppegrell (1991: 20) recommends:

Use a thematic organization that chooses particular topics and builds on them from one class to another, rather than random texts or unrelated topics. Understand that in "authentic" situations, understanding a new text comes from reference to the context and surroundings. Build such contexts into your units by referring to previous work and drawing on the frame of reference that learners already have.

Finally, the activities employed to put these topics into practice should also be evaluated in terms of authenticity. In this respect, their usefulness both in the educational context and in the target situation should be analyzed.

Evaluation checklist

The checklist for the evaluation of authenticity presents a structure identical to that of the proposal put forward in the previous section, with the exception that its contents are formulated in question format. On the one hand, the fact that it includes five sections, subdivided into a total of 28 items, endows it with a manageable character and enhances the feasibility of its use. And, on the other, the fact that it comprises two answer sections renders it more complete: a) one affects the evaluation of the textbook in terms of the diverse aspects which constitute the checklist and b) the other involves the teacher's personal view of the relevance of each aspect. To this end, two columns are provided: the first of them has four response options – E (Excellent), A (Adequate), L (Limited), and NI (Not Included) – for the textbook to be evaluated in terms of authenticity, while the second includes three options – E (Essential), R (Recommendable), and U (Unnecessary) – for the teacher to express his/her opinion. The final decision to select or discard a given textbook in terms of its treatment of authenticity will depend on the correspondence between those aspects to which the teacher attaches the greatest importance and their inclusion in the textbook. The checklist is presented below:

EVALUATION CHECKLIST	Textbook proposal	Teacher's view
1. CONTEXT AND TARGET SITUATION		
- Can the textbook's contents be usefully employed in the target situation?	E A L NI	E R U
- Does the target situation presented in the textbook coincide with the students' professional context?	E A L NI	E R U
- Are the purposes of the material authentic?	E A L NI	E R U
2. THE STUDENT		
- Can the student clearly appreciate the utility of the textbook's objectives in real-life target situations?	E A L NI	E R U
- Do its exercises and tasks have a clear goal related to the students' target situation?	E A L NI	E R U
- Is the textbook adequate for the students' level of communicative competence?	E A L NI	E R U
- Does it allow the students to make use of their linguistic abilities and to put into practice their communicative competence?	E A L NI	E R U
- Does it prepare the learner for an authentic experience of language?	E A L NI	E R U
- Does the textbook match the needs of the students' specialization?	E A L NI	E R U
- Does it generate authentic interaction, communication, and responses from the learner?	E A L NI	E R U
3. THE TEACHER		
- Does the degree of authenticity of the textbook match the teacher's preparation?	E A L NI	E R U
- Can the textbook be adapted by the teacher to meet the needs of his/her specific context?	E A L NI	E R U

4. CONTENTS		
4.1. Linguistic aspects		
- Is the selection and range of linguistic aspects presented adequate for the students' level of communicative competence?	E A L NI	E R U
- Does it include up-to-date and relevant grammatical structures and lexicon?	E A L NI	E R U
- Do they include stretches of real language produced by real speakers or writers for a real audience and conveying a real message of some sort?	E A L NI	E R U
4.2. Sociocultural aspects		
- Can the sociocultural aspects presented in the textbook be used for academic or occupational purposes rather than only for linguistic ones?	E A L NI	E R U
- Does the textbook provide a cultural contextual support?	E A L NI	E R U
4.3. Notional-functional aspects		
- Are the functions presented in the textbook related to the students' target situation?	E A L NI	E R U
- Is the presentation of functions complemented with linguistic and communicative exercises?	E A L NI	E R U
4.4. Topics		
- Is the area of specialization of the textbook and its selection of topics of interest to the learner?	E A L NI	E R U
- Are the topics included in the textbook valid from an occupational and/or academic point of view?	E A L NI	E R U
- Are the topics adequate for the students' level of specialization?	E A L NI	E R U
- Do the units have a linguistic and communicative purpose?	E A L NI	E R U
- Do they include authentic material which matches students' learning needs?	E A L NI	E R U
- Is the variety of English presented in the textbook in line with the teacher's preparation and the same as that which the student will need in a professional context?	E A L NI	E R U
4.5. Organization		
- Does the textbook have a thematic unity?	E A L NI	E R U
- Are the lessons built around content-based themes in the specific purpose area?	E A L NI	E R U
4.6. Activities		
- Are the activities presented useful in the educational context and in the target situation?	E A L NI	E R U

Conclusion

Authenticity has traditionally been slighted in didactic materials evaluation proposals, something which the present paper aims to overcome by putting forward a proposal and checklist for the evaluation of authenticity to ease the task of selecting and using authentic materials in the field of ESP, in general, and of Business English, in particular. Indeed, since the recent explosion of published books in the area of ESP has particularly affected Business English, teachers of this variety need to be well-equipped with systematic criteria to help them evaluate various aspects of the materials at their disposal and thus make informed decisions. Although authentic materials are a very rich

source for the selection of teaching materials, the selection and use of this type of material asks the teacher for a thorough appraisal. Authenticity in the teaching-learning situation should be based on the correspondence between our students' learning and target needs.

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