
Relevance of Authentic Tasks/Situations in Language Learning

Ms. Beena Abraham (beena@muscatcollege.edu.om)

The Language Centre, Muscat College, Sultanate of Oman

Abstract

Learning through authentic life situations with the help of technology contributes a lot in modern education, motivating problem solving, critical thinking skill and reasoning power. Authentic learning emphasizes practical and realistic experience and skills rather than bookish knowledge and theoretical approach. This white paper explores the importance of authentic learning, the media used for it, and the effectiveness and practical approach towards it.

Keywords: Authentic Learning, Graded Materials, Situational Approach, Task- Based Learning

Introduction

Authentic learning is the topic that has been recently discussed a lot among the researchers and educationists. It can imply a lot of changes in the field of education. All modern revolutionists in education need a diversion from the traditional way of teaching and learning. Here is the relevance of authentic learning. Learning becomes meaningful only when it can be applied in the real life situation. Otherwise, learning becomes just the process of gathering knowledge or information. Authentic learning can be termed as the real or genuine education.

As the term itself indicates authentic learning means the process of learning using authentic materials or authentic situations. Authentic materials are not designed for the purpose of formal learning process; the texts those have not been designed for the teaching purpose. It has been published for native speakers and consequently the language is not graded as per the level of the learners. Authentic learning is the real learning. It makes one capable, independent and confident learners. It provides the learners the chances, confidence and abilities to connect themselves with the real world.

Authentic Learning

Authentic learning is entirely different from traditional style of learning. Traditional way of learning does not inspire the intellect of the learner. It does not make use of multi-sensory activities which stimulates creative and critical thinking of the learners. In conventional way of learning the learners act almost like a robot. Here the learner uses very less amount or percentage of his brain's capacity. The learner follows the instructions and does the tasks as the question demands. The learners gather information, mug up and deliver them when it is needed. Authentic learning includes so many features like it is content based/task based rather than topic-based. It is student centered rather than teacher centered. The role of the teacher should be that of guide or a facilitator, not a dictator. It has sense of freedom, inspires critical and analytical thinking. Instructors must be careful not to insert themselves into the center of activity or to micromanage how the task is explored (Tochon, 2000). Finally it is practical rather than theoretical. So it enables the learners to face the world efficiently. It supplies ample opportunities for critical thinking and problem solving scenario.

The common element to these methods is that they activate students' motivation and curiosity by presenting them with real-world problem that seems interesting and important. Authentic learning enhances students' logical reasoning power. Authentic learning facilitates meaning and motivation to the learning power. It develops the skills which enable the learners to apply their knowledge in real life situations. It reduces the stress of work and increases the power or capacity to deal with the real problems of life. Each authentic learning situation can be considered as a real case study scenario which develops the problem solving skill through critical thinking process. However, the hope is that, through authentic learning practices, students' learning is wider and more meaningful because it is connected to realistic life experiences and values (Power, 2010). There is also evidence that students who take part in classes with an authentic learning component (in these instances, case-based instruction or service learning, respectively), make higher academic gains compared to students enrolled in similar classes that do not contain these components (Mayo, 2010; Power, 2010).

The key feature of authentic learning is the teaching materials which are authentic. The materials should be graded as per the level of the students. Another challenge is creating class room environment which supports authentic learning process. For example, authentic learning tasks in

listening need audio system in the class room. Moreover, the role of the teacher is very important, who can act as facilitator or as a guide, not as a dictator. As mentioned earlier, graded authentic tasks are the central part of this learning process. Rather than being merely passing information by the tutors, students are directed in to doing much of their learning in to real life situations. Problem solving skill is also developed along with the leaning strategies involved in authentic learning. When the teachers grade the materials, he has to do some extra tasks related to the materials like select and edit the materials as per the level of the learner and prepare objective based questions related to the materials selected. It really takes extra time from the tutors' side, but it really worth. The learners graduating in any language without attempting the authentic tasks in all the four skills is like trying to do a new job without any previous experience in that field. He has to learn the work even from the beginning. In that case the graduation certificate will be a sign of just theoretical information or bookish knowledge.

Authentic Materials

Even in our current society we can see the ill effects of the bookish knowledge. For example there are graduates who really don't know how to write an application form, send an email, and write an agenda or minutes of a meeting, to follow the conversation or a lecture given by a native speaker. All these occur not because of the inefficiency of the learner, but merely because of the lack of experience in dealing with the authentic materials or authentic situations. The curriculum should be improvised including authentic materials or tasks in the syllabus. So the syllabus should be modified including authentic tasks in all the four skills like Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Authentic materials or tasks differ as per the module or skill which is identified as the real objective of each lesson. Each lesson including authentic material will enhance the communication skill which serves the pivotal objective of learning a language.

Authentic Reading Materials are widely available. Newspaper, magazines, brochures, leaflets; advertisements are some of the sources for authentic reading materials. As it is the world of technology, the passages given in the websites are easily available. Another advantage of these website texts are they can be adapted or modified as per the level of the learners. They really make the learners capable enough to read and understand any type of reading materials that they

come across in their real life. Authentic Listening Tasks are available from different walks of life. Listening to English programs, news, are common authentic listening tasks. Listen to some recorded lectures also make the students efficient to understand the accent and pitch of the native speakers. Watching English movies and listening to English songs are not only means of entertainment, but also good sources of authentic listening. www.esl-lab.com provide ample materials to develop the listening skill.

Role play activities, interviews, debates and discussions about the current topics can be considered as the effective display of authentic learning situations. If the learners are exposed to these types of realistic life situations, they may develop the speaking skill to face any situation in life. Speaking is the next step to listening. So the authentic listening tasks themselves can contribute a lot to develop the speaking skill. Completion of application forms. Request letter, complaint submission, grievance letter, appreciation letter, writing agenda & minutes of meeting, report writing, travelogue, practice in setting advertisement, e-mail writing and writing on current topics etc. can be part of authentic writing tasks which will enable the students to think creatively and write independently in their real life situations.

New generation considers things only in a practical way. They give more importance to practical side of life than theoretical approach.' Students are more motivated to learn when they see how a concept relates to their own lives' (Watters & Ginn, 2000). Here the tutor's role is to lessen the gap between theory and the concept and leads them to a situation where the concept is practically related to their current life or future scenario. So the word practical is more important in the current scenario. Students often show their desire for doing things rather than listening to instructions or long lectures. Learning by doing is the most effective way of education. Task Based Learning has an important role in delivering the learning outcomes. But certain situations are difficult to be created in real classroom. With the help of internet and using modern communication channels, the instructor can visualize, create or re-construct the scenario. Technological support for today's authentic learning environment can be accessed easily through high speed internet connectivity and virtual laboratories. Thus learning becomes more concrete and practical rather than abstract.

Conclusion

The outcome of any education system should have to send students into the world eligible for both their personal and professional lives; academic knowledge and real life situations should not be separated from each other. However, it is not practical to give experience in all fields of life. We can coach our students to be flexible and creative thinkers who are able to apply the skills and knowledge to create new solutions to their problems. By giving students the opportunity to learn through authentic and real life education we are giving them the ability to apply their learning in their real life and become successful. Delivering authentic tasks has to be a priority for every teacher. Authentic learning can help students to become aware of the relevance and meaningfulness of what they are learning. Students can also implement knowledge in genuine ways, ways that practicing professionals implement knowledge and skill (Perkins.1986).

References

- Lombardi, M. M. (2007). *Authentic Learning for the 21st Century: An Overview* (Boulder, CO: EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative)
- Mayo, J. A. (2010). *Constructing undergraduate psychology curricula: Promoting authentic learning and assessment in the teaching of psychology*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association
- Perkins, D. (1986). *Knowledge as Design*. Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, New Jersey.
- Power, A. (2010). Community engagement as authentic learning with reflection. *Issues in Educational Research*
- Tochon, F. V. (2000). When authentic experiences are “enminded” into disciplinary genres: Crossing biographic and situated knowledge.
- Watters, J. J. & Ginns, I. S. (2000). Developing motivation to teach elementary science: Effect of collaborative and authentic learning practices in preservice education. *Journal of Science Teacher Education*, 11(4), 301-321.