

## Introduction

Most language teachers would probably agree that using authentic materials is desirable. *Authenticity* is unequivocally a positive attribute: We value authenticity in cuisine, artwork, and merchandise. By the same token, authentic materials in language classrooms are prized as accurate and reliable representations of the target language. Nevertheless, there is considerable disagreement with respect to what kinds of authentic materials should be used, how they should be used, when they should be used, and how much of the curriculum should revolve around them. Even defining what constitutes something authentic is a matter of debate. In a book about using authentic materials, defining *authentic* must no doubt be the first task at hand, so this is where we begin.

### Definition of Authentic Materials

Gilmore (2007), in his review of authentic materials, provided several definitions that were used over the years but eventually settled on one from Morrow (1977, cited in Gilmore, 2007), which defines authentic materials as “a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort” (p. 98). Noting that this definition includes a wide variety of language (including teacher-talk in the classroom), we opt for this modified definition:

Authentic materials are those created for some real-world purpose other than language learning, and often, but not always, provided by native speakers for native speakers.

We use this definition to ensure that the language found in such materials is not modified for second language (L2) learners and has the primary intent of communicating information.

This definition, too, is not without problems for two reasons. First, words like *authentic*, *real*, and *native speaker* tend to be evaluative. The point of this book is not to argue that non-authentic materials (i.e., those created for language learning purposes) are without merit, but rather that authentic materials are essential and can be used much more broadly than most teachers might envision. Materials created by proficient non-native speakers are quite common in some contexts where English is a lingua franca (i.e., where it is used as a common language among speakers who have other first languages) and are therefore included in our definition of authentic materials. Second, even with this definition, gray areas exist, and it is important to discuss the possible benefits of such materials for language teaching. On a final note, we will use the terms *text* and *materials* interchangeably throughout the remainder of this book. However, *text* generally refers to any spoken or written language that is part of a set of materials. *Materials* is a slightly broader term that includes texts but also, for example, may simply be a set of pictures without any language.

## **Types of Authentic Texts**

Authentic texts comprise both spoken and written language samples. For example, newspaper articles, short stories, advice columns, magazine ads, and graphic novels are commonly used authentic written texts. Spoken texts include, but are not limited to, television commercials, movies, radio broadcasts, lectures, songs, podcasts, and conversations or service encounters among native speakers. This last category would fall under what Wagner (2014) has called *unscripted texts*. He argued that unscripted oral texts contain additional features not found in scripted texts such as television shows. These types of texts would certainly fall under our definition of authentic, but they are much more difficult to collect.

The internet is a plentiful source of authentic texts that are not limited to one modality. We do not address multimodal texts (e.g., websites with audio and video) specifically, but most of the principles in this book apply to such texts. Even less text-laden materials—such as

train schedules, menus, and nutrition labels—are unambiguously authentic. There remain some texts that may be useful but deserve additional discussion. These include teacher-made materials, children's books and graded readers, translations, and materials written for *lingua franca* contexts. We address each of these in turn.

Consider the following example of a teacher-made text. There is a unit in the textbook on food in the target culture, so the teacher interviews several native speakers about common foods found in their country. The interviews would be an excellent supplement, but would not fall under what we consider authentic texts because the speakers—in this case the people being interviewed—might naturally modify their speech when talking to non-native speakers, the students. In addition, there is no real-world activity associated with such an interview. If the teacher did not tell the interviewees what the recording was for, the language used might have been different, but there is still no real-world purpose that would guide the speakers. These types of materials are examples of useful texts, but ones that we do not consider in this book.

Children's books and graded readers are sometimes considered authentic. Many teachers use children's books because, intuitively, the language seems simpler. Nevertheless, children's books should be used with caution because they sometimes include slang, language play, and inaccessible cultural information. If teachers find appropriate children's books and note that their students enjoy such materials, the texts can be used as supplements. Graded readers for children, by definition, control the grammar and vocabulary used. One of the authors (Charlene) enjoyed using graded Chinese readers while studying Chinese in Taiwan because Chinese characters were added gradually, and because the books were replete with cultural information. Interested readers can also see Cho and Krashen (1994) in which adults became enthusiastic readers of a children's book series. The authors argue for the value of using such materials with adults. We will not, however, be considering the use of children's books or graded readers here.

Translated texts are an interesting matter. These materials are intended for native speakers for a certain purpose, such as the enjoy-

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ment of a movie, but the cultural references are often not related to the target culture. For example, should a Spanish instructor in the U.S. use the Spanish version of a popular U.S. television show such as *Friends*? Should a French teacher ask students to read *Harry Potter* in French? We think that such translations should definitely be considered authentic in that they serve as a vehicle for real language that native speakers would be engaged with. In addition, students often have the background knowledge to understand the materials. When Charlene was living in China, she could not understand Chinese television shows or movies very well. One day, a U.S. made-for-TV movie with an easy-to-follow plot was on, and she found she could understand much more. Similarly, she found that it was easy for her Chinese students to understand stories about China written in the English newspaper *The China Daily*. Thus, we recommend using these types of materials, but only with the caveat that they do not include information about the target culture.

Finally, we address the very complex issue of materials created for contexts in which the target language is the lingua franca—namely, a situation in which native speakers of two different languages use English to communicate because it is their common language. For example, speakers of two Asian languages such as Thai and Japanese often speak English in multinational companies. It is also likely that workplace materials such as emails are written in English. In a context such as Hong Kong or Singapore, the situation is more complex in that the creator of the materials might speak a local dialect of English but the listener is a second language learner. These dialect issues surface as well in Spanish materials produced in the U.S., such as a McDonald's menu, where the Spanish used may be different from the Spanish found in Spain or Mexico. We don't address these issues in this book, but we want to mention that they will be a factor in choosing which materials to use. Such materials are clearly authentic and have real-life purposes, but should also be considered carefully for each instructional context.

## Authentic Texts in an Historical Context

Authentic texts have been used in language classrooms since the early days of the grammar-translation method, which was aimed at teaching students to read (and translate) literary texts. However, as language teaching methods evolved, the status of authentic materials also shifted. In other words, the perceived usefulness of authentic materials is closely linked to the dominant pedagogical approach of the time. For example, in the audiolingual method, authentic texts were dismissed in favor of a bottom-up approach beginning with sounds, words, phrases, and moving up to sentences, dialogues, and paragraphs. When Krashen's natural approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) achieved popularity, the focus was on comprehensible input or input that was just a bit above the students' level ( $i+1$ ). Thus, using authentic texts with beginners was not advocated unless the teacher could find just the right materials. In other words, authentic texts were not excluded *per se*, but they could not be too difficult. The communicative approach, which advocated a focus on communicative competence, certainly took a favorable view toward authentic texts, particularly because these materials could help learners achieve sociolinguistic and discourse competence.

Most recently, and especially in foreign language contexts, there has been a general trend toward integrating language and content at all levels of instruction, as advocated by the Modern Language Association (MLA). The impact of the MLA report (2007) has been an increased use of literary texts in lower-level language courses with the goal of increasing students' cultural knowledge and analytical skills.

Authentic texts can also be discussed in relation to content-based and task-based teaching. In 1989, in a seminal book on content-based instruction, Brinton, Snow, and Wesche presented different models of content-based teaching that might use authentic texts to varying degrees, although the emphasis in Brinton et al. is clearly on authentic texts in every model. (This book was reissued in 2003.) They said specifically that language teaching materials can be used in conjunction with authentic texts but that "these materials must be selected carefully for their relevance to the course objectives" (p. 92). However, they defined

content-based instruction more narrowly than others might; they used the term to refer to *sustained content* (e.g., a history class taught in Spanish) in contrast to textbook units or classes that address different topics throughout the course. Because of the varying definitions of content-based instruction, our focus in this book is on exploiting authentic texts in a variety of contexts, but we want to emphasize that using authentic texts is a way to integrate language and content.

Authentic texts can also play a central role in task-based instruction. In Willis' (2004) comprehensive review of task-based instruction, she noted that among the various definitions of tasks, the commonality is that they have an outcome or that there is a goal to achieve (see also Van den Branden, 2006, who came to the same conclusion). In addition, Skehan (1998) has suggested that tasks have some real-world relationship, meaning that the kind of discourse that arises during the task resembles naturally occurring discourse (Ellis, 2003, calls this *interactional authenticity*). Most importantly, tasks can incorporate authentic texts at various points in a lesson. Norris (2009) describes a task-input phase in which the target task is introduced "as it is realized in actual communication" (p. 583) without manipulation. For example, if the target task is buying a train ticket at a Madrid train station, a student could start by listening to authentic announcements, reading a train schedule, or better yet, listening to an authentic service encounter in the train station. (This last example, however, highlights the difficulty of getting access to native speakers completing real-world tasks.) Norris goes on to discuss pedagogic tasks using authentic texts. Pedagogic tasks are activities that are different from real-world tasks and can include something like a cloze activity or a jigsaw reading. We provide examples of pedagogic tasks as well as more traditional exercises throughout this book to show what teachers can do with authentic texts to make them comprehensible and usable to language learners.

## Why Use Authentic Texts?

When teachers are asked about their rationale for using authentic texts, a common response is that students are motivated by them. Students have various reasons for studying a language (including satisfying a requirement), but the majority of students ultimately want to be able to communicate with native speakers, either locally or abroad. Accordingly, authentic texts may bring students closer to this goal by giving them a tangible sense of how the language is used in concrete situations. Although we certainly don't deny that authentic texts can motivate students, the relationship between authenticity and motivation is not as straightforward as we might assume. In fact, authentic texts that are too challenging for the students and not properly presented by the teacher will likely result in frustration rather than enhanced motivation. For example, Busse (2011) documented how university students in the U.K. became less motivated to learn German partially as a result of struggling with difficult German literature. These results are not entirely surprising: we cannot be motivated by texts that we don't understand. Indeed, it may be the sense of accomplishment that comes from understanding authentic texts that results in greater motivation. Viewed in this way, authentic texts are not inherently motivating; it is the process of understanding (and enjoying) authentic texts that helps language learners to feel more confident in their abilities, which results in increased motivation. As Gilmore (2007) explains, "The success of any particular set of authentic materials in motivating a specific group of learners will depend on how appropriate they are for the subjects in question, how they are exploited in class (the tasks) and how effectively the teacher is able to mediate between the materials and the students" (p. 107).

Another powerful reason for using authentic texts is that they provide richer input than textbooks or other instructional materials designed for language learners. Although the quality of textbooks can vary, research on English as a second language (ESL) and foreign language textbooks has consistently shown mismatches between textbooks and natural language use. First, textbooks often present a

distorted view of grammar, overemphasizing certain structures at the expense of others (Goodall, 2010). In aiming to provide simple grammatical rules, textbooks may fall short of presenting fully accurate descriptions of language. Words and phrases, too, can be underrepresented. For example, Simpson-Vlach and Ellis (2010) compiled an academic phrase list from an oral and a written corpus. One of the phrases on their list from oral academic language was *blah, blah, blah*. We feel confident that this is not the type of phrase that would appear in a scripted lecture for an academic listening textbook.

An additional problem is the fact that textbooks generally present little information about pragmatically appropriate language use. Speech acts (e.g., giving advice, expressing agreement, making suggestions), as presented in textbooks, may differ quite dramatically from how they are realized in real-life conversations. One example of this is a study by Eisenclas (2011), who compared advice-giving as presented in intermediate Spanish textbooks to online interactions. She found that textbooks seriously underrepresented the range of linguistic resources that Spanish-speakers use to give advice and gave no information regarding the pragmatic norms that underlie such interactions in the target culture. Consequently, researchers who study second language pragmatics have argued strongly for authentic texts as a way of providing learners with models of language that exemplify social, cultural, and discourse conventions.

Another reason to use authentic texts is that they provide a vehicle for integrating language and content and form and meaning. As mentioned, the MLA report (2007) advocated more integration of language and content, but at the lower levels, instructors may struggle with making content in authentic texts comprehensible to lower-proficiency students. At the higher levels, instructors may focus too much on content and too little on the language found in the texts (e.g., as found in Pica, 2002, and Polio & Zyzik, 2009). Thus, we emphasize throughout this book the importance of bringing more content to beginners and more language-focused instruction to advanced students through the use of authentic texts. Our recommendations stem from the understanding shared by many SLA researchers that learners need opportunities to



focus on language forms (e.g., pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar), but not in isolation from meaningful language use. This is what Spada (1997) called *form-focused instruction*, defined as “pedagogical events which occur within meaning-based approaches to L2 instruction but in which a focus on language is provided in either spontaneous or pre-determined ways” (p. 73). In this sense, authentic texts encourage a focus on meaning (e.g., understanding a message created for a real-world purpose), but teachers can intervene in various ways to provide the much-needed attention to language form.

A final argument that has been used to advocate for authentic texts is that they are associated with some real-world purpose. In task-based language teaching, as previously mentioned, it is vital to expose students to authentic texts that learners will encounter while doing real-world tasks. However, as will be discussed in Myth 7, what one does with an authentic text in a class may not resemble what one does with the text in real life. For example, students may be able to understand only a few words or sentences from a newspaper article, but a teacher might create an activity in which students have to match headlines and stories. Arguably, this is something no one would do in real life, but it is an excellent way of increasing students’ familiarity with authentic texts and developing reading strategies such as skimming and scanning.

## Practical Problems

There are a myriad of problems that come with using authentic materials as well, not the least of which is that it is time-consuming to find appropriate authentic texts and to then create good activities to accompany them. Of course, it’s easy to say that teachers can share and reuse texts and activities, but one benefit of authentic texts is that they are often timely and so it’s not clear how long they can be used. One solution is to fully exploit a text and use it with a variety of activities, sometimes even over the course of a semester. In addition, once you decide on some successful activities with your students (e.g., dictogloss, cloze, sentence ordering), you can quickly recreate these activities using new texts.

Choosing topics and texts is no easy task. Topics can be related to the students' interests (e.g., animé in a U.S. Japanese class), textbook topics (e.g., Mexican artists in a U.S. Spanish class), or students' needs (e.g., reading an academic journal article in an English for Academic Purposes class). There is no rule of thumb for choosing a text at the right level of difficulty because it depends on what one does with text. Throughout this book, we provide examples of activities that can be used with texts at a variety of levels in relation to students' proficiency. Thus, a related problem is deciding what to do with a text. For example, suppose you happen to have an attractive menu from the target culture that contains numerous dishes you have been discussing in class. Students will likely be interested in such realia, but what then is an appropriate activity or task? This is an issue we address throughout the book.

Finally, we must mention copyright issues when using authentic materials. First, copyright issues in general should not be seen as a barrier to using authentic texts in the classroom. Many of the ways you would use texts in your classroom will fall under fair use rules (<http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html>). Second, should you wish to publish materials in a course pack or textbook, permission to use authentic texts can usually be obtained, sometimes with no fee. If you need more information about copyright issues, you can begin with the U.S. government website (<http://www.copyright.gov>) or a university web site such as the one at Stanford University (<http://fairuse.stanford.edu>). Many U.S.-based universities have copyright librarians who can assist you in understanding the copyright laws and in applying for copyright permission. In addition, most websites have a terms of use or a terms-of-service link where you can obtain more information about using materials from a website.

## **Organization of the Book and Intended Audience**

In preparing the proposal for this book, we began by generating a list of myths based on our collective experience in working with language teachers who try to integrate authentic materials and who have had

varying degrees of success. Subsequently, based on feedback from the reviewers, we revised our list of myths. For example, we had originally intended to include a chapter on use of the L1, which some teachers believe should be strictly avoided when working with authentic materials. However, upon further reflection, we opted to eliminate this myth since it may not be very widespread. We also planned on writing a chapter to refute the idea that “only authentic texts should be used for language learning,” but again, there may be few practitioners who hold this extreme view. Instead, we decided to include this topic in the Epilogue in order to emphasize that non-authentic materials also have a place in the curriculum, depending on the goals of the course and the needs of the students.

This book is organized in a similar way to the other Myths books in the University of Michigan Press series in that each chapter starts with an actual real scenario (**In the Real World**) and then is followed by a discussion of the research (**What the Research Says**). Note that there is not a large amount of research using authentic materials, so we have often had to extrapolate from research using non-authentic materials when discussing possible instructional techniques. Each chapter also includes specific implications for the classroom (**What We Can Do**). We hope this approach makes this book accessible to students, teachers, and teacher educators. The book includes appendices with sample activities related to each of the seven myths. We felt it was important to include these extended descriptions of activities along with their source texts because often teachers find great “raw material” but do not know how to transform it into a lesson. We recommend that each appendix be consulted after reading the corresponding chapter to better understand how the principles discussed apply to the sample activities. The activities can all be modified to include authentic texts from a wide variety of sources and for a wide variety of proficiency levels.

Throughout this book, we talk about both second and foreign language settings and both English and other languages. The language learning principles and accompanying research, such as how vocabulary is best learned and the importance of explicit instruction, apply

equally to all languages and settings, both foreign language contexts (e.g., German instruction in the U.S., English instruction in Japan) as well as L2 contexts (e.g., English instruction in the U.S., French instruction in Quebec). The only exceptions, as discussed in the Epilogue, are related to learning how to read in character-based languages; some of the activities discussed throughout this book may indeed be more challenging for use in Chinese or Japanese classrooms. Generally, it is not so much the language being taught as it is the students' needs that will drive one's choice of authentic materials. ESL teachers, for example, will want to choose materials related to their students' daily lives or their academic needs. Teachers of foreign languages, including English teachers abroad, may choose materials that might be entertaining or that motivate and interest their students.

The majority of the research that we discuss is related to English, but some studies have also been conducted with learners of Spanish or French. The abundance of research on ESL learners is simply reflective of the field and does not imply that learning or teaching English is different than other languages, which is why we have included examples from French, German, and Spanish, as well as English, in the appendices. We hope that teachers of all languages can see these examples as templates for creating activities in any language.