The Use of Authentic Texts with Postgraduate Students

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Abstract

Current language teaching pedagogy seems to give a lot of weight to the use of authentic materials. This article describes how a group of bilingual postgraduate students were assisted in improving their writing skills in English by means of a pedagogical approach that utilized a wide variety of texts published online. It discusses the methodology used as part of this approach and the outcomes of the action research study it formed part of. Despite its limitations, to a large extent this small-scale study confirms the idea that the use of authentic texts in ELT can prove beneficial, especially if students are empowered to choose the texts they would like to base their learning on.

Keywords: authentic texts, postgraduate, bilingual, writing, ESL, ELT

1. Introduction

After growing concerns with the rather poor level of English writing proficiency amongst bilingual students enrolling on a wide variety of courses in which English is the main language of instruction and assessment, the Faculty of Arts within the University of Malta developed a course aimed at improving students' writing skills. Wong, Kwok and Choi (1995) describe how the use of authentic materials at tertiary level can help develop students' language skills and guide them to apply these skills to situations outside the classroom. By means of a small-scale action research study, I attempted to explore whether this could actually be achieved with a selection of postgraduate students enrolled on the writing skills course. Moreover, I was also interested in whether students' confidence in their own writing skills would be enhanced as a result of their engagement with authentic texts.

The emphasis on using authentic texts in the language classroom is usually associated with the communicative approach. Larsen-Freeman (2000) affirms that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) advocates the use of authentic materials as a means of tackling 'the typical problem that students cannot transfer what they learn in the classroom to the outside world' (p. 132). According to Harmer (2001) 'it is when students come into contact with 'real' language that they have to work hardest to understand' (p. 205). This is because authentic texts most probably consist of the language that students will encounter outside the confines of the classroom and hence the language that will present them with genuine challenges given that it makes no concessions for non-native speakers.

2. Pros and Cons

The main advantages of using authentic materials with students are that you 'expose learners to real language' and 'encourage learners to process real texts' while not undermining the text's 'natural coherence and cohesion' (Hyland, 2003, p. 94). The use of such texts allows the teacher to 'facilitate creative teaching to exploit texts' (Hyland, 2003, p. 94) and thus provide students with models that are relevant to their target needs. Consequently, besides being more motivating, authentic texts supply 'a richer linguistic diet' and 'are more likely to have acquisition promoting content than invented texts' (Little, Devitt, & Singleton, 1994, p. 46). A wide and varied exposure to authentic texts can stimulate such acquisition and this is why I decided to give my students as many opportunities as possible to use a broad range of articles published by the online editions of magazines and newspapers as a means of improving their English proficiency.

However, despite the fact that using authentic texts during one's lessons has a number of benefits to it, there also exist a number of drawbacks that need to be properly addressed. In my case these were mostly bound to the hurdles posed by language level and content. I did not want my lessons to become a word-by-word

comprehension exercise but a means by which the students could 'pool their understanding of the text and their own prior knowledge' so that a 'discussion develops according to the level pace and interest of the learner group' (Mishan, 2005, p. 162). In Harmer's (2001) opinion when an authentic text is 'carelessly chosen' the result is that it 'can be extremely de-motivating for students…since they will not understand it' (p. 205). Besides the fact that the 'language may be beyond learner competence' (Hyland, 2003, p. 94), there is also the risk that the text's content may be alien to the students' schematic knowledge. Thus I sought to circumvent these two problems by asking the students to contribute as actively as possible to the selection of texts. Moreover, given that 'Difficulty also depends upon the task that is used with the material' (Cook, 2001, p. 147), I paid a lot of attention to how I devised the writing tasks based on the authentic texts we read and discussed in class. I made sure that these tasks were couched in the right level of language and that given my students' needs and expectations they were also geared by an authentic purpose.

3. Background

3.1 The Course

The course was planned to run for 12 weeks and each week students had the opportunity of attending a two-hour session in a small group format. Its main aim was that of developing students' writing proficiency and there were four common core targets guiding tutors in their work, namely:

a. Expose students to a variety of texts.

b. Introduce and hone students' organizational skills.

c. Coach students in reading and writing critically.

d. Instruct students in editing written work.

Tutors were also meant to set tasks that addressed each group's specific needs and to allow students to deliver at least two presentations throughout the duration of the course. The course was on a voluntary basis and students would not receive any official credit in their transcript for choosing to attend.

3.2 Action Research

Given the fact that I was going to be one of the tutors on this writing skills course, I decided to conduct a small-scale study aimed at verifying whether five postgraduate students' writing proficiency could actually be improved by means of an engagement with authentic texts. Moreover, I considered it very important to gauge the students' attitude towards their own writing skills and to determine the level of confidence they had when it came to writing in the L2.

Prior to the commencement of the course, the five postgraduate students whom I would be teaching were assigned a writing task by the course coordinator. The students were asked to write a letter to themselves in which they explained the reasons for which they wanted to attend this particular course. I assessed these writing samples by means of a nine-band analytical scale made up of the following four criteria: task response, coherence and cohesion, vocabulary, and grammar. The descriptors for these four criteria were based on the IELTS writing band descriptors, with which I was highly familiar. Public versions of these descriptors are available online.

I had the opportunity of marking the students' letters before meeting them for the very first time and besides identifying a number of problems concerning accuracy and expression, I also formed the impression that these students' writing fluency required plenty of development. The areas that required immediate attention were coherence and cohesion, and grammatical range and accuracy. Most of the writing tasks that the students subsequently completed during the course were marked by means of the same analytical scale. The use of a research journal allowed me to keep a record of every student's development with respect to each one of the four criteria over the length of the course. Given its limitations this study was not meant to precisely quantify the development made by the students in terms of their writing skills. However, I hoped that by the end of the course I would be able to form an approximate idea of such development.

By means of unstructured interviews I established that for the most part the students lacked the confidence to tackle anything other than the writing of brief paragraphs in English. They felt that they were somewhat out of touch with L2 writing, not having written much in English since their secondary school years. At the end of the course I interviewed the students once more and provided them with feedback sheets in order to ascertain whether they concurred with my own reevaluation of their confidence levels.

3.3 The Students

For the most part the undergraduate and postgraduate students who enrolled on this course were reading for a wide variety of degrees in the humanities and social sciences. I was roped in to teach a group made up of five postgraduate students reading for a Master of Arts in Translation Studies. In the hope of effectively contributing to the achievement of the expected outcomes while adhering to the common core targets, I decided that I would ditch the textbook approach and utilize solely authentic materials easily available online. This decision was spurred on by a number of factors, chief amongst which was a finding yielded by a study that looked into the reading habits of young adults whilst investigating the factors contributing to candidates' performance on a high stakes English examination (Xerri, 2010). From that study it emerged that the reading of online articles commands one of the largest shares of reading time that students in their late teens actually engage in. Hence in order to make my lessons more motivating I sought to explore how such authentic texts could be harnessed for the benefit of my students' language proficiency.

Upon meeting the students I was informed that they shared a largely common background and the same future aspirations, i.e., they all planned to apply for jobs as translators in one of the main hubs of the European Union. Two of them had graduated with an honors degree in Italian, two others with an honors degree in Maltese while another student had read for a degree in French and Maltese. The latter was the only male student in class. They were all in their early twenties and they gave me the impression that they were juggling a variety of other commitments besides trying to keep up with the heavy demands of their studies. Attending this course was a demonstration of how much they wanted to improve their writing skills, but at the same time they were acutely aware of the pressure of having to fulfill the expectations of their lecturers while attending a course for which they were not going to be assigned any credit.

4. Inside the Classroom

The classroom setup I decided to adopt from the very beginning was that of an informal circular arrangement in which the students did not have to feel intimidated by the tutor. Fully aware of the highly formal settings that students in Malta are usually used to, I did anticipate that they would take a bit of time to adapt to what they might have perceived as a break from the norm. However, I felt confident that by treating them as individuals who have many valid ideas to contribute I could actually start supplanting the stereotypes associated with teaching in a higher education environment.

One of the implicit aims of this project was that of boosting students' spoken fluency and thus I felt that discussions characterized by critical engagement with the texts we were going to read and write was essential. This was an authentic task in itself. For example, Mishan (2005) claims that 'Using an article as a stimulus for thought and discussion…is a natural and real-life activity' (p. 162). I wanted the students to appreciate this as early as possible and hence I planned to engage them in a discussion of not just the texts but also the ideas that each student contributed to the lesson. I knew that this was going to be one of my biggest challenges, however, I also realized that it could also prove to be one of the most rewarding experiences of the entire course. That is why the very first lesson was of crucial significance.

5. Modeling Future Practice

The first session was meant to show the students how to actually exploit an authentic text not only for the purposes of honing one's writing skills and perhaps acquiring new strategies but also as an avenue for a collective evaluation of how texts work. Keeping in mind the first common target, I decided to take with me to class two somewhat different articles that we could discuss together and by means of which hopefully explore the techniques employed by professional writers when faced with the demands of different text types.

5.1 Text 1

The first article I chose ('How firms should fight rumours', 2011) had appeared in *The Economist* a few days before and I happened to read it while trawling the Internet for resources I could use. I must admit that I do not usually read *The Economist*, however, I assumed that as future translators my students would be working with materials concerning finance, industry, politics and the like. In fact, it later transpired that during their MA Translation Studies course, translating articles taken from *The Economist* was a staple part of their workload.

I started by asking the students to tell me what a rumor was and to mention any examples they could think of, especially ones that formed part of their own experiences. Such a pre-reading activity was meant to tap the students' schematic knowledge and gradually introduce them to the topic of the text in question. I then asked them to look at the layout of the printed text on the page and they immediately pointed out that the paragraphs are to a large extent quite concise. I asked them to think of why the writer/editor had decided to organize the text

in this manner and they said that most probably it was meant to facilitate the reading process. We then discussed the source of this particular text and its genre as well as the requirements and constraints facing the writer of an article that was going to appear in such a publication. I hoped that this would make them aware of two significant components of the writing process: medium and audience. I then asked them to number the paragraphs from one to seven so that we could easily understand one another whilst discussing the article. On the board I wrote down the following guidelines: Why has the writer used this? What effect was the writer aiming for? I asked them to read the article and to highlight anything that they would like to discuss or that they would like to add to their linguistic repertoire. I performed the same activity and once we had all finished reading the article and highlighting what we considered to be particularly interesting we took turns discussing each one of the seven paragraphs in terms of what we had flagged as worthy of further discussion. After asking them to analyze the language employed in every single paragraph I also elicited their views about the function of that particular paragraph vis-à-vis the rest of the article and how the writer had chosen to organize his or her ideas. Thus we spent a substantial amount of time examining cohesive devices and text organization.

5.2 Text 2

After having spent about 30 minutes discussing the first text I decided that it was time to move on to the next article, Thomas Jones's (2010) review of a book by Ilana Gershon on how Facebook and other new media affect college students' relationships. This time round it was taken from a publication I read on a regular basis, *The London Review of Books*. The article had appeared in a regular section entitled 'Short cuts' a few months before and even though it is relatively concise when compared to other articles in the *LRB*, it still amounts to more than two A4 pages of single-lined text.

I once again asked the students to examine the article's layout and they immediately pointed out that the paragraphs in Jones's article are much longer that those in the previous article we had discussed. I informed them that 'Short cuts' was not the article's title but that of the section in which it had been published. Therefore I asked them to skim through it and jot down their ideas about its gist. After they had done this I asked them to read the first few sentences of each paragraph and make a note of what they thought the paragraph was focusing on. We shared ideas and then we read the article and highlighted what we wanted to discuss together in further detail. Once we started discussing the language and style employed by Jones I immediately realized that they were actively contrasting this piece of writing with the previous one we had read. They judged Jones to be the better writer and thus we decided to explore what made this article a superior model for our own writing. We discussed genre requirements and deviations and they admitted that this article was something they were not so familiar with. We examined the way Jones organizes his discussion of Facebook and what strategies he employs in order to make his writing worth reading. I asked them to think of any book reviews they had read on print or digital media and to think about what makes Jones's review different from such publications. I wanted them to think about how Jones uses the personal anecdote as a means of framing his review and about how he critically engages with the book he is reviewing. We examined in particular those sentences in which Jones grapples with Gershon's book in a critical fashion and my intention was that of encouraging them to start adopting such a style as a model for the kind of writing I expected them to do in the coming weeks.

5.3 Peer Feedback

With only about 50 minutes to spare before the end of the lesson I assigned them a writing task that merged the concerns of the two texts we had read earlier, that is, a short magazine article discussing whether Facebook helps to spread rumors. The students were not set a word limit but they had only 30 minutes in which to finish the task. After they had done so I asked them to hand their piece of writing to the person sitting on their left (excluding myself) and to think of feedback to present to the author of that particular piece. I explained that the feedback had to consist of an indication of what they considered to be the strengths and weaknesses of that particular piece of writing and that before giving their feedback they had to describe to me (who had not at that point read the writing in question) and to the others what their fellow student had sought to do in terms of content and structure. Even though they initially felt somewhat uncomfortable with this, I immediately explained that this was going to be a staple part of our future lessons and thus they tentatively set about doing what was expected of them.

With hindsight I now know that asking my students to engage in such a peer response activity from the very beginning of the course was probably a sound decision. By seeking to immediately create a safe environment in which they could trust one another's feedback I sought not only to overcome their bashfulness but also to bolster my students' confidence in themselves as writers and speakers of English. This immediately became one of my chief challenges and priorities.

6. Other Lesson Activities

For each subsequent lesson the students took it in turns to download an article from an online magazine or newspaper that they wanted to discuss with the rest of the class and use as a springboard for their own writing. Sanderson (1999) considers the act of asking students to find authentic materials to use in class as motivating because of the 'investment on their part' (p. 234).

The student whose turn it was would give a short presentation on the language used in the article and since each one of us would have been emailed a copy of the text before the actual lesson we would then be in a position to ask questions or make comments based on such elements as vocabulary, grammar, style and structure. Following this activity we would agree on a suitable writing task to be completed in a set amount of time and then engage in peer feedback. At the end of each lesson I collected each piece of writing so that I could supply them with detailed feedback next time we met. The writing tasks took on a variety of forms. For example, sometimes students decided to adopt a stand that went counter to that of the author of the article and at other times they decided to write a news report based on the content of two different articles. On other occasions the students decided to extend the arguments presented in the article or else develop an issue that was only referred to tangentially.

Another activity that the students engaged in during this course was that of rewriting and editing each other's work. After having written their personal response to an online article they would share their writing with their peers and then collectively focus on the work of one particular student and make a conscious effort to improve it by pooling their resources and capitalizing on the guidance of their tutor. Thus each student got a number of opportunities of being assisted by the rest of the class in redrafting and polishing a piece of writing.

7. Outcomes

Towards the end of the course I interviewed the students and asked them to complete a feedback form about the course in general and the use of authentic materials in particular. The students confirmed my own views in relation to the growth in confidence which had been spurred over the duration of the course, with one student saying 'I never thought I'd be able have so much faith in my own writing in English'. When asked for their opinion about the effect of authentic texts on the lessons, the students expressed very similar views to that of their classmate Richard (Note 1), who claimed that the authentic texts used in class 'made the lessons more stimulating'. The issue of motivation was further clarified by Maria, who considered it 'a good idea to use authentic materials for the lessons, as those are the sort of things we read'. This is in line with the idea that for students knowing how to read and make sense of such texts 'represents a very real and tangible goal to aim for' (Sanderson, 1999, p. 3). If used to improve writing proficiency then their motivation is augmented even more.

The majority of the students concurred with the idea that the use of such texts had a positive impact on their writing skills and in the words of one student this happened 'because I started using techniques used by very proficient writers'. Another student explained that "The final writing task that we used to do helped us put into practice what we'd learned from the text and I think that was an excellent technique because some people aren't visual but need to write things down in order to memorize them."

This student's use of the word 'memorize' might perhaps lead to a bit of unease given that writing is a repertoire of skills which cannot be acquired by means of mere committal to memory. What it probably implies is that the texts we discussed in class were serving as a model from which she hoped to pick up the strategies that would help her produce writing of a higher calibre.

The students' views confirmed the evaluation I had circumspectly formulated by the end of the course: an improvement in their writing fluency was made possible thanks to the texts we had used and the activities we had engaged in. The weekly tasks I assigned them displayed a gradual sense of progress, especially in terms of the students' ability to adopt a more critical approach to the texts they read and the ease with which they expressed their ideas in writing. The students' writing also demonstrated a marked improvement in terms of coherence and cohesion, and the accurate use of a range of grammatical structures. From an initial band 6 for these two criteria, some of the students were producing work that was a clear band 7 by the end of the course. I feel confident that these improvements were partly a result of a set of methods that were exclusively based on the authentic texts that the students and I carefully browsed for online.

8. Limitations

The number of students who took part in this study was too limited to warrant any generalizations about the effect on writing proficiency of the use of authentic resources. Its findings must be interpreted within the context of the tutor's and students' evaluation of the writing that was being produced during the course. However,

despite these limitations the writing that took place as a result of an engagement with authentic texts progressively improved over the course's duration.

9. Conclusion

My experience during this course has taught me that even though authentic texts are a desirable feature of one's language lessons, teachers should make sure to actively involve their students in the process of choosing texts that the students themselves consider suitable for their language level and background, needs and future aspirations. This will help guarantee that the authentic materials used during the lesson will not just actively contribute to the students' language development by challenging them to tap their existing knowledge and thus extend learning, but also play a part in boosting students' confidence and motivation.

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Note

Note 1. Names have been changed.