I’ve recently been trying out a well-known language learning app and found myself translating such gems as The ducks eat a strawberry. Personally, I’ve never seen a duck eat a strawberry and it’s not something I can imagine ever needing to communicate!

That’s a bit of an extreme example, but I think it illustrates the point that for most language learners, authenticity is important. We want to learn the sort of language we’re likely to come across or need to use in the real world. Awkward examples and made-up texts are both demotivating and potentially counterproductive as they provide unrealistic models. This is probably true for all learners, but especially so for students who already need to deal with authentic texts (or will soon need to) for work or for study. Otherwise, they can find themselves unprepared to deal with the texts they come across and feel cheated by the mismatch between classroom materials and the real thing.

This presents a challenge for materials writers; do we use absolutely authentic texts which students might struggle with or do we simplify them in some way but risk losing the element of authenticity?

**For and against authentic texts**

There are strong arguments in favour of using authentic texts, especially in contexts where students need to learn to cope with reading complex texts in English such as in Business English, ESP (English for Specific Purposes) or EAP (English for Academic Purposes). As Alexander et al (2008) point out: ‘Teachers may be concerned that the content and vocabulary of [authentic] texts will present too many difficulties and should be left to a later stage, but the reality is that, for EAP students, there is no later stage.’ If students are already encountering authentic texts outside the language classroom, it makes no sense to present them with simplified versions in class. Even for students with less specialist or immediate needs, plenty of authentic language input will help them develop a better understanding of how English is actually used and give them the confidence to read more widely outside of class.

However, using authentic texts in teaching materials can have drawbacks too. Giving students a long, complex text to read can leave them feeling overwhelmed; by the volume of unknown vocabulary, by the complexity of the grammar, by cultural or other references. They soon lose the thread and get bogged down in details, so they lose confidence and motivation. The teacher can end up working through the text with students line by line, decoding or translating as they go, explaining each point. It’s a slow and ultimately unhelpful process that may eventually lead to some understanding of the text at hand, but provides students with little confidence that they’ll be able to tackle the next text they come across, and what’s more, sidelines any other aims there might have been for the lesson.

**Size matters**

Short texts can be much less daunting and are ideal for working on micro-skills. A very short text or a short section of a longer text can often do the job of illustrating a language point or bringing up a point for discussion just as well as a longer one. Sometimes, a single paragraph might be enough. Summaries work particularly well as mini-texts in their own right; examples might be the abstract of an academic article or the executive summary of a report. If you want to use an extract from a longer text, then you could consider abridging it. Is there a complicated example or reference that could be cut without losing the flow of the text, for example?

**Lower the cognitive load**

One of the challenges for a student trying to read a complex text in a second language is that they’re having to deal with the ideas in the text at the same time as the language. One way to get around this is to use simpler or more familiar ideas while keeping the language level high. That doesn’t mean dumbing down necessarily, but could...
involve choosing a text on a subject that students are likely to be familiar with, perhaps because it’s already been discussed in a previous lesson. In an EAP context, you could drop down an academic level, so if you’re writing for postgraduate students, choose introductory undergraduate texts and if you’re aiming at undergraduates, use end of high school texts (such as textbooks written for students doing the International Baccalaureate). In that way, you maintain the style and authenticity of the language, but lessen the cognitive load on the reader.

There are also plenty of techniques which can help students grasp the key ideas in a text more easily so as to free up mental space to deal with the language. Pictures, diagrams or infographics can all be added to aid comprehension. If a text contains a lot of detailed statistics, for example, a graph or an infographic can help to establish what’s going on. Then readers will already know more-or-less what to expect in terms of content and can focus on getting to grips with the details and the way they’re expressed.

**Adapt the task**

As a general rule of thumb, the simpler the input, the more challenging the accompanying task can be and, conversely, the more challenging the input, the simpler the task. If you’re presenting the student with an authentic text which you know will be challenging for them, then it’s vital to design tasks that will guide them towards coping with the text. The aim of the initial tasks should not be to test the students’ comprehension, but to help them in decoding the text. That means careful **staging** and **scaffolding**.

**Staging** is where you break the overall task down into intermediate stages. So you wouldn’t jump straight in and ask students to write a summary of something they’d just read, for instance. Instead, you’d walk them through the process of getting to grips with the vocabulary maybe, picking out the key points and then paraphrasing them to eventually produce a summary. The number of stages you choose will depend on the complexity of the text relative to the students’ language level and their experience of coping with the task type; is it the start of a new course or have you already gone through a number of similar activities together in class?

**Scaffolding** is the way in which materials are designed to support the learner. Images and graphics, as mentioned above, can be a form of scaffolding, as can glossaries where you provide simple definitions of key words in the text, usually in a box alongside, to save learners having to look them up. Scaffolding can also be in the form of tasks which guide rather than test the learner. Take, for example, these three sets of questions about the paragraph on staging above.

1. **What is ‘staging’?**
2. **Staging is:**
   a. the way a task is broken down into intermediate stages
   b. the way in which materials are designed to support the learner
3. **Which of the following is an example of ‘staging’?**
   a. Students work through a number of short, simple activities which together help them complete a final task, such as writing a summary or giving a presentation.
   b. A diagram next to a text describing a process helps students to visualise the steps being described.

Question 1 is tough; it provides no support but simply tests understanding. If you know the text will be challenging, this is just setting students up to fail. Question 2 is apparently easier, but it doesn’t really help the student to better understand the text. Because it repeats the language of the original, it simply becomes a mechanical matching exercise and moves students no further on in terms of grasping the meaning. Question 3, however, further exemplifies a key idea from the text and gives the student a bit more information to help them understand the concept. By reformulating, simplifying or exemplifying key points, you’re doing part of the work of decoding the text for the student. Other tasks which help students get to grips with an authentic text might involve matching a key point to the correct picture or diagram, matching ‘student’ paraphrases to key points in the text, or reordering sentences to provide a simple summary. The aim of the task in each case though is not to test, or worse still, trick, the learner, but instead to provide them with information within the task that will aid their understanding.

**Gradually withdrawing support**

Of course, too much hand-holding can be just as unhelpful as oversimplified, made-up texts. Bruner (1983: 60) describes scaffolding as ‘a process of setting up the situation to make the learner’s entry easy and successful and then gradually pulling back and handing the role to the learner as he becomes skilled enough to manage it’. Whatever form of help you give students to get them started with authentic texts – using short texts, on familiar topics, with helpful pictures or diagrams, or staged and scaffolded tasks – over time, that support needs to be withdrawn. As students become more confident and learn the skills needed to deal with texts on their own, the materials they use can provide less and less guidance until eventually the learner is ready to ‘fly solo’.

**References**


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