Maintaining Student Motivation When Using Authentic Reading Materials

Joe Garner
English for Liberal Arts
International Christian University

Abstract

Authentic reading materials have become a standard part of many second language (L2) classes as they provide rich linguistic input and expose students to a broad range of information. Many advocates of their use claim that such materials motivate learners. However, there are concerns that without effective selection and scaffolding of these texts, they may have a negative impact on learner motivation. In this paper, I outline research into the motivational effect of the use of authentic reading materials on L2 learners. I also provide a number of suggestions as to how teachers can scaffold the materials so as to increase students' comprehension and therefore maintain and enhance their motivation.

From menus to magazine articles, teachers of foreign languages frequently employ authentic materials in their classrooms. They are used for a variety of reasons, but generally, teachers view them as providing students with realistic and motivating language input. As Zyzik and Polio (2017) note at the very start of their book, "Most language teachers would probably agree that using authentic materials is desirable" (p. 1). The use of authentic materials in L2 instruction is not a recent development. In fact, writing thirty years ago, Widdowson (1990) noted the shift towards the use of such resources in L2 instruction: "It has been traditionally supposed that the language presented to learners should be simplified in some way for easy access and acquisition. Nowadays, there are recommendations that the language presented should be authentic" (p. 60). However, while the use of such materials in L2 instruction is well-established, there remain a number of concerns regarding the appropriateness of their use in the classroom and how their use may impact on learner motivation. In this paper, I outline research into the motivational effect of the use of authentic reading materials on L2 learners. I provide an overview of research into the benefits and drawbacks of the use of authentic reading materials, with a particular focus on the materials' impact on the motivation of L2 learners. Subsequently, I outline a number of ways in which such materials can be scaffolded so as to sustain and enhance students' motivation.

What are Authentic Materials?

Although the term "authentic" is frequently used when describing materials used in the classroom, it is important to define what is meant by this. A number of definitions have been provided by researchers. For example Peacock (1997) defines authentic materials as those that "have been produced to fulfill some social purposes in the language community" (p. 146). However, this definition's use of "social purposes" lacks clarity. A clearer definition is seemingly provided by Morrow: "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" (as cited in Gilmore, 2007, p. 98). However, this also lacks clarity as it relies on a shared understanding of the term "real", which is problematic as it is an abstract concept. Perhaps a clearer definition is provided by Zyzik and Polio (2017) who state, "Authentic materials are those created for some real-world purpose *other than language learning* [emphasis added], and often, but not always, provided by native speakers for native speakers" (p. 1). What is clear from this definition is that for a text to be classed as authentic, the purpose of its production was to convey information; it was not originally intended to be used for language instruction. As such, materials including restaurant menus, blog posts, newspaper articles, novels and academic research papers all meet this criterion.

Advantages of Using Authentic Materials in L2 Instruction

It has been argued that the use of authentic materials in L2 instruction has a number of benefits. From a linguistic input perspective, researchers contend that authentic materials provide students with an accurate model of the language which they are studying rather than "the artificial language of course textbooks" (Berardo, 2006, p. 64). While material which has been produced specifically for teaching purposes may provide learners with a sense of "security and comfort" (Nunan, 1999, p. 212), this sense of security comes from the fact that the material provides a more limited range of vocabulary items and grammatical forms. In contrast, authentic materials are much more likely to provide the learners with richer linguistic input (Gilmore, 2007). Moreover, although materials specifically designed for L2 language instruction may provide learners with relatively clear examples of language use, these models are unlikely to resemble input which the learner will have to comprehend outside of the classroom. As such, there is the possibility that learners will struggle when faced with the language beyond the learning environment. In contrast, exposing learners to authentic materials increases students' ability to comprehend the language they will be exposed to outside of the classroom (Al Azri & Al-Rashdi, 2014). In sum, the authenticity of the language is a key reason for using such materials in L2 instruction.

In addition to the benefits they provide in terms of the linguistic input, authentic materials are said to have a positive effect on learners' motivation towards L2 study. As Gilmore (2007) emphasizes in his extensive review of the relevant literature, "Claims that authentic materials are a motivating force for learners are widespread" (p. 106). These claims have been supported more recently by a number of studies (e.g., Belet Boyaci & Güner, 2018; Marzban & Davaji, 2015). One reason given for the increased levels of motivation is that as the language in the materials is "real", the learners have a greater sense that they are engaging with the L2 as it is used in real-life situations. It is argued that this allows the learners to feel a closer connection to language which they are studying (Al Azri & Al-Rashdi, 2014; Berardo, 2006; Nuttall, 1996).

It is also argued that the use of authentic materials, such as newspaper and magazine articles, enhances learners' motivation to engage with the materials as it allows them to interact with the content of the materials as well as the linguistic forms; consequently learners are given more access to information about what is occurring in the world around them (Berardo, 2006) which brings them closer to the culture of the language they are studying (Little, Devitt, & Singleton, 1989). A further and highly significant claim that is made about the motivating effect of the use of authentic materials in the L2 classroom is that students can gain a sense of achievement from being able to extract information from these texts (Berardo,

2006; Cross, 1984). In other words, although authentic materials are richer in terms of their linguistic content, and therefore likely to be more challenging to understand than non-authentic texts which have been designed for L2 learners, it is argued that learners are more motivated to engage with them as the rewards from understanding them are greater.

Potential Drawbacks of Using Authentic Materials

While it is clear that there are a range of benefits to using authentic materials in L2 instruction, it is vital to recognise that there are also potential drawbacks. As noted above, it is claimed that learners will be more motivated to engage with authentic materials than with those which are non-authentic. While some teachers, having seen their students actively engaged when reading a newspaper or magazine article, may recognise the situation being described, others may find this argument runs counter to their experiences. These teachers may have witnessed their students struggling with authentic reading passages as a result of the demands they place on the learners. One possible cause of this may be that the content of the texts, which advocates of the use of authentic materials claim to motivate learners as it provides opportunities for them to learn about the world outside the classroom, may require background knowledge that the learners do not possess. This lack background knowledge of the content will act as an obstacle to comprehension resulting in decreased motivation (Gilmore, 2007).

A further, and arguably more significant, obstacle is the texts' linguistic complexity. The "real" language which authentic texts contain may indeed allow the students to be exposed to richer linguistic input, but as a consequence of this it is also likely to present the students with low-frequency vocabulary, idiomatic phrases, and complex grammatical structures, all of which the students may struggle to comprehend. If, as outlined in the previous section, proponents of the use of authentic materials claim that students are motivated by the authenticity of the texts because extracting information from them provides a sense of achievement, it would also seem logical to claim that the use of authentic texts can be demotivating as the students do not feel they are able to comprehend them. As Zyzik and Polio (2017) argue, "Authentic texts that are too challenging for the students will likely result in frustration rather than enhanced motivation" (p. 7). Therefore, rather than motivating students to read the materials, there is a danger the texts' authenticity has the opposite effect. In other words, the very aspects which advocates of the use of authentic materials claim build motivation may in fact be demotivating.

L2 Learner Motivation

Motivation, like authentitity, is a term which is widely used. However, to clearly understand the relationship between the use of authentic materials in L2 instruction and learner motivation, it is important to examine what is meant by the term. Dörnyei (2001) provides a useful starting point for our understanding of motivation when he writes that "motivation explains why people decide to do something, how hard they are going to pursue it, and how long they are willing to sustain the activity" (p. 7). Pioneering work on L2 learner motivation was conducted by Gardner and Lambert (1959). They developed the concept of integrative motivation in which L2 learner motivation comes from desire to integrate with speakers of the L2. However, more recently Gardner and Lambert's conceptualization of

motivation has been questioned, especially with reference to learners of English as an L2, as due to the growth of English as a global language, it is not always clear who the target group of speakers is (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009).

Dörnyei's (2001) Process-Oriented Model provides a significant reconceptualization of L2 learner motivation. In this model, fluctuations in learner motivation over time are accounted for. The model consists of three stages: the Preactional Stage in which motivation has to be generated, the Actional Stage in which motivation has to be "actively maintained and protected" (p. 21), and the Postactional Stage in which learners reflect on their performance. Dörnyei's (2009b) L2 Motivational Self System further developed the conceptualization of L2 learner motivation. The L2 Motivational Self System again consists of three elements: the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience. The Ideal L2 Self represents the person a L2 learner would like to become; Dörnyei (2009a) argues that "if someone has a powerful ideal self … this self image can act as a potent self-guide, with considerable motivational power" (p. 17). The Ought-to L2 Self "concerns the attributes that one believes one ought to possess to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes" (p. 18). The final element, L2 Learning Experience, is perhaps of most relevance to this paper, as it concerns the learning environment, namely "the impact of the teacher, the curriculum, the peer group, *the experience of success* [emphasis added]" (Dörnyei, 2009b, p. 29).

This final element of Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System appears to closely relate to the Actional Stage in his earlier Process-Oriented Model as the learning environment would seem to be the most appropriate place to "maintain and protect" motivation. If the learning environment does not fulfill this role, perhaps as a result of the choice of materials which may lead to students experiencing failure, it is likely to lead to demotivation (Kikuchi, 2015). Therefore, it is clear that, in order for L2 learner motivation to be sustained, or hopefully enhanced, it is essential that teachers and course designers ensure that L2 classes are conducted in ways which increase the chances of succeeding in the tasks that students are given. Consequently, if students are to fully benefit from the rich content and linguistic input which authentic materials provide, these materials must be presented in a way which increases the possibility of the students achieving "success" when reading them.

Pedagogical Implications

If we accept that student motivation can fluctuate over time, it is incumbent upon teachers to consider what actions can be taken in order to either sustain or enhance their students' motivation. Selection of the authentic materials so that they are of interest and the appropriate level for students is of course of great importance, but simply choosing appropriate materials is not sufficient; the support which teachers can provide to learners is also vital (Dörnyei, 2001). Such instructional support is commonly referred to as scaffolding. Scaffolding, as the metaphor suggests, is temporary support which "helps learners to accomplish tasks or comprehend concepts which they cannot typically achieve on their own" (Taguchi, Gorsuch, Lems & Rosszell 2016, pp. 106-107). While the provision of this support may require additional class time, it is essential that the materials are scaffolded so as to increase the likelihood of students having a sense of achievement when reading them. This will not only build their confidence, but will also, as Busse (2013) found, make the reading tasks more enjoyable. Increasing students' sense of success and enjoyment when reading is key to maintaining learner motivation as positive learning experiences are one of the "primary

sources of motivation to learn a foreign/second language" (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2011, p. 86). In other words, as Gilmore (2007) notes, motivation can be "the result, rather than the cause of achievement" (p. 107). By increasing students' positive learning experiences when reading authentic texts, teachers can enable students to benefit from a positive learning cycle. As the students have the confidence that they can indeed successfully and enjoyably read authentic materials, they are therefore motivated to read subsequent texts. This in turn will lead to the students being further exposed to the rich vocabulary and grammatical forms which are common in authentic texts. This exposure will result in greater acquisition of the L2, which will lessen the linguistic barriers which the L2 learners will encounter as they continue to read.

There are a wide range of ways in which texts can be scaffolded. Within the limits of this paper, it is not possible to outline all of them; however, it is useful to briefly note a number of common approaches which teachers can employ to aid their students' comprehension of authentic texts:

- *Schema Activation and Building.* As stated earlier, one obstacle students may have when reading authentic texts is a lack of relevant background knowledge of the topic. Such prior knowledge, or schema, aids reading comprehension. Therefore, it is important that teachers take time to ensure that their students are familiar with the topic of the reading before asking them to read it. This can be done through having students discuss what they already know about the topic (schema activation). However, teachers should be aware that simply activating existing schema may not be enough to enable comprehension of a passage, and that teaching the students new relevant information that will appear in the passage (schema building) may also be necessary (Zyzik & Polio, 2017). This also suggests that providing explanatory footnotes of unfamiliar concepts may also aid comprehension.

- *Vocabulary Support.* In addition to increasing students' knowledge of a topic before or while reading, it is also important that linguistic obstacles are lessened. Therefore, it can be useful to pre-teach key low-frequency vocabulary from the passage. Alternatively, providing glosses of these words can also be useful (Ko, 2005).

- *Summary Writing.* Another method is to require students to write brief summaries of sections of the text they have read before continuing with the reading. Research into reading strategies used by successful L1 readers shows that they tend to mentally summarise what they are reading, and this aids their comprehension (Guthrie, Taboada, & Coddington, 2007). While research into the effectiveness of this strategy among L2 readers is lacking, it would seem logical to encourage students to use this strategy. Therefore, summarising activities could be inserted into the reading tasks. A similar approach is to insert questions which check comprehension into the text.

- *Concept-mapping.* A related technique is concept-mapping. As with summary writing, research has shown that this is an approach which successful L1 readers use (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014); moreover, Dias's (2010) study indicated that this was also effective in enhancing L2 learners' comprehension of texts. Therefore, teachers should include concept-mapping activities when using authentic materials.

In sum, to aid student comprehension of authentic texts, teachers need to take time to ensure that students are provided with the assistance which is necessary. Applying all or some of the above techniques should lead to enhanced comprehension, which will provide learners with a developed sense of enjoyment and achievement, resulting in more motivated learners.

Conclusion

Using authentic materials in L2 instruction clearly has a number of benefits. It provides students with rich linguistic input and exposes them to language as it is used outside of the classroom. As such, the materials can be a highly effective way to develop the students' L2 competency and prepare them for when they need to comprehend L2 texts once they have finished their language classes. Moreover, authentic texts allow students to engage with ideas and knowledge that they may not have such easy access to in their L1. However, teachers must recognise that the use of such materials can create significant challenges to the learner. If these challenges are not addressed by the teacher, there is a danger that rather than motivating the learner, they could have a demotivating effect. Consequently, teachers and course designers must not only pay close attention to students' L2 proficiency when selecting the materials, but they must also provide sufficient scaffolding when using the materials in their classes so that the students can overcome the challenges which the texts contain. By doing so, learners will be more likely to maintain their motivation to read, which will lead to greater effort when reading, which in turn will lead to more effective processing of the material, which will lead to enhanced L2 reading proficiency.

References

Al Azri, R. H., & Al-Rashdi, M. H. (2014). The effect of using authentic materials in teaching. *International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research*, *3*(10), 249-254.

Belet Boyaci, S. D., & Güner, M. (2018). The impact of authentic material use on development of the reading comprehension, writing skills and motivation in language course. *International Journal of Instruction*, *11*(2), 351-368.

Berardo, S. A. (2006). The use of authentic materials in the teaching of reading. *The Reading Matrix*, *6*(2), 60-69.

Busse, V. (2013). Why do first-year students of German lose motivation during their first year at university? *Studies in Higher Education*, *38*(7), 951-971.

Cross, D. (1984). News and activity in the media. In B. Jones (Ed.), *Using authentic resources in teaching French* (pp. 19-28). London: Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research.

Dias, R. (2010). Concept map: A strategy for enhancing reading comprehension in English as L2. *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Concept Mapping*, 29-33.

Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dornyei, Z. (2009a). Motivation and the vision of knowing a second language. In B. Beaven (Ed.), *IATEFL 2008: Exeter Conference Selections* (pp. 16–22). Canterbury: IATEFL

Dörnyei, Z. (2009b). The L2 motivational self system. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 9–42). Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847691293-003

Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. (1959). Motivational variables in second-language acquisition. *Canadian Journal of Psychology*, *13*(4), 266-272.

Gilmore, A. (2007). Authentic materials and authenticity in foreign language learning. *Language Teaching, 40*(2), 97-118. doi:10.1017/S0261444807004144

Guthrie, J. T., & Klauda, S. L. (2014). Effects of classroom practices on reading comprehension, engagement, and motivations for adolescents. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *49*(4), 387–416. https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.81

Guthrie, J. T., Taboada, A., & Coddington, C. S. (2007). Engagement practices for strategy learning in concept-oriented reading instruction. In D. S. McNamara (Ed.), *Reading comprehension strategies: Theories, interventions, and technologies* (pp. 241-266). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Kikuchi, K. (2015). *Demotivation in second language acquisition: Insights from Japan*. Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783093953

Ko, M. H. (2005). Glosses, comprehension, and strategy use. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, *17*(2), 125-143.

Little, D., Devitt, S., & Singleton, D. (1989). *Learning foreign languages from authentic texts: Theory and practice*. Authentik.

Marzban, A., & Davaji, S. (2015). The effect of authentic texts on motivation and reading comprehension of EFL students at intermediate level of proficiency. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, *5*(1), 85-91.

Nunan, D. (1999). *Second language teaching & learning*. Heinle & Heinle.

Nuttall, C. (1996). *Teaching reading skills in a foreign language*. Heinemann.

Peacock, M. (1997). The effect of authentic materials on the motivation of EFL learners. *ELT Journal*, *51*(2), 144-156.

Taguchi, E., Gorsuch, G., Lems, K., & Rosszell, R. (2016). Scaffolding in L2 reading: How repetition and an auditory model help readers. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, *28*(1), 101-117.

Ushioda, E., & Dörnyei, Z. (2009). Motivation, language identities and the L2 self: A theoretical overview. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 1–8). Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847691293-002

Ushioda, E., & Dörnyei, Z. (2011). *Teaching and researching: Motivation*. Pearson Education.

Widdowson, H. G. (1990). *Aspects of language teaching*. Oxford University Press.

Zyzik, E. C., & Polio, C. (2017). *Authentic materials myths: Applying second language research to classroom teaching*. University of Michigan Press.