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Book reviews

Designing Authenticity into Language Learning Materials, Freda Mishan. Intellect, Bristol, 2005. ISBN: 1-84150-080-1. 330 Pages. Price: £19.95.

Introduction

Freda Mishan's welcome new book provides teachers, teacher trainers and trainees with a critical overview of the literature on the "authenticity-centred approach" as well as a discussion of ways in which cultural products can be used to provide learners with authentic experience of language in use. It also acts as a stimulus for materials adaptation and development by teachers.

Interestingly, Mishan attributes the current centrality of authentic texts both to the communicative ethos which has "become engrained in language teaching (in the West at least)" (ix) and to the revolution in information and communications technology (ICT). In her Introduction she makes the valid claim that ICT has opened up "unlimited access to authentic texts from the target language culture, thereby impelling the issue of authenticity of texts and interactions to the fore in language pedagogy" (ix). She also makes the more disputable claim that the "broadly accepted" pedagogical model in the authenticity-centred approach is the task. While few methodologists would deny the value of a task-based approach, many would argue that tasks are not necessarily authentic and that a multi-dimensional, text-driven approach is another potentially effective way of exploiting experience of authentic texts (e.g. Masuhara, 2004; Tomlinson, 2003a, 2003b). I would also take issue with a point made later in the book that the task-based model "caters to the kinaesthetic learner who prefers movement, activity and creativity" (p.32). Some task-based materials do this but many others do not.

Contents of the Book

The first part of the book "provides a theoretical grounding to the authenticity-centred approach" and reviews the literature on:

- Authenticity in language learning

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- The SLA rationale for using authentic texts for language learning
- The pedagogical rationale for using authentic texts for language learning
- Authentic texts and authentic tasks

The second part focuses on practical applications of the principles established in Part 1 and recommends applications in relation to the use of the following cultural products as teaching resources:

- Literature
- The broadcast media
- Newspapers
- Advertising
- Song and music
- Film
- ICT

Part 1– Authenticity in language learning

The theoretical grounding in Part 1 is very well-researched and is written in a way which would be accessible and meaningful to teachers without much theoretical background. It provides access to the main core of relevant literature but highlights (quite legitimately in my view) those views and findings which Mishan has been most influenced by. In general it achieves clarity, coherence and persuasive power by presenting concise summaries of what experts have said about aspects of authenticity and by commenting on them critically with the acknowledged benefit of hindsight. It starts by reviewing attempts to define authenticity of texts and authenticity of language use and wisely avoids favouring or attempting specific definitions. Instead Mishan draws out the commonly agreed criteria for authenticity and comments interestingly on how the development of ICT has modified and extended our concept of authenticity, especially in its ability to connect 'real life' and 'the classroom'.

The ability of authentic texts and authentic tasks to bring 'real life' to the classroom is also focused on in the presentation of the second language acquisition (SLA) rationale for using authentic texts for language learning. This section focuses in particular on the ability of authentic texts to provide the comprehensible input, the affective engagement and the opportunities for language processing which most SLA theorists would agree are vital facilitators of language acquisition. Among the many interesting points made by Mishan about input are that:

- the sort of reductive simplification of authentic texts typically manifest in low level coursebooks and graded readers has been shown not only not to facilitate comprehension but to sometimes inhibit acquisition;
- elaborative changes involving "adding features to the text which resemble conversational adjustments" (p.23) have been found to facilitate both comprehension and acquisition;
- what learners benefit from most are "authentic texts which provide rich, varied and stimulating linguistic input" (p.24).

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In the section on affect Mishan reports literature which stresses the value of authentic texts in enhancing acquisition:

- by stimulating both intrinsic and instrumental motivation (providing the selection of texts coincides with learner interests);
- by helping the learners to lower their affective filters (Krashen, 1981: 22) as a result of achieving engagement and empathy;
- by achieving positive attitudes towards the target culture.

Mishan wisely points out that these benefits are not inevitable and that using authentic texts can have the negative effect of increasing anxiety if they engender feelings of linguistic inadequacy.

In presenting the SLA rationale for using authentic texts Mishan also draws attention to the value of authentic materials in:

- catering for many different learning styles (providing the course makes use of the full range of sources of authentic material);
- offering "the greatest range of potentially acquirable language" (p.34) in comparison with other means of providing input, such as grammar instruction;
- exploiting the learners' capacity to acquire language autonomously;
- providing opportunities for learners to be guided towards discoveries about how the language is used;
- establishing an appropriate balance between bottom up processing and top down processing;
- stimulating the use of the full resources of the brain.

It could be argued that other SLA related benefits of using authentic materials which Mishan does not draw attention to include facilitating intake from input, achieving deep processing, relating language use to intended outcomes, exploiting the brain's capacity for pattern detecting (Masuhara, 2003) and encouraging the use of sensory imaging and the inner voice (Tomlinson, in press).

In providing the pedagogical rationale for using authentic texts, Mishan initially focuses on their value in offering opportunities for developing cultural awareness about the target language culture. This seems more of an objective than a pedagogical justification and it implies that the only materials which are authentic are those whose content is located in the target culture. Surely authentic materials can be usefully located in the learners' own culture and in cultures other than those assumed to be targeted. I would also take issue in this section with the prominence given to schema theory, a theory now considered to have been useful in its insistence on the importance of previous experience and knowledge in achieving comprehension but to be deficient in its explanation of how the brain achieves comprehension (Masuhara, 2003). The lengthy sub-sections on English as an international language, on culture and the ELT coursebook and on currency of topic and language are very interesting and include many very important and valid criticisms of current course materials but they do not really provide convincing justifications for the use of authentic materials. Many of the objectives established in these sub-sections could be achieved in other ways. I do, however, agree

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with Mishan that using a text-driven syllabus is justified both by SLA theory and pedagogic practice and that authentic materials play a crucial part in such a syllabus. I also agree completely that authentic materials, providing they are appropriate in content and language complexity for the learners, can present the achievable challenge which is vital to durable language acquisition.

In the final theoretical section, Mishan provides a concise but thorough review of the development of task-based approaches and addresses in particular the issue of task authenticity. In doing so she stresses the need to elicit appropriate task responses from learners and she develops the following criteria for measuring task authenticity:

- communicative appropriacy of response
- appropriacy in relation to the text
- learner engagement
- opportunities for real life rehearsal
- activation of prior knowledge of the target language and culture
- opportunities for purposeful communication between learners

I agree with most of her criteria but surely the required purposeful communication could be between a learner and a text or a learner and her teacher, and for many learners of English there is no specific target culture to aim at.

The focus in Part 2 on a range of cultural products as providers of authenticity is particularly useful in drawing attention to a wide range of potential sources, but it does neglect such live sources of authenticity as students, teachers, classroom visitors and interactants in the world outside the classroom. It starts by focusing on literature as a source of authentic texts, first by reviewing contemporary definitions and then by considering such potential benefits as affective appeal, engagement, personal response, creative response and enjoyment. It then presents examples of task types designed to exploit the potential benefits of using literature and gives ideas for very useful activities involving visualising texts, analysing texts, making discoveries about the use of language in texts, making inferences from texts, transferring information from texts, translating texts, extending texts, modifying texts and responding to texts. Altogether there are 32 suggested task types and for each one Mishan suggests appropriate texts. Very useful though this is, I would have preferred actual examples of lesson plans or units of materials showing in detail how a specified text could be exploited.

This procedure of critically reviewing relevant literature and then suggesting task types is repeated for other sources of authentic texts and a wealth of creative ideas and task types are provided for use with broadcast media, newspapers, advertisements, songs and music, and film. Of particular interest to readers of this journal, though, is the chapter on ICT, which attempts to "ground the use of" ICT "technologies in pedagogical theory" to prevent the technology from 'leading' the theory" (p.241). It focuses on authenticity-centred applications of ICT and, in particular, on the web, e-mail and corpora. This chapter differs from the others in that it deals with each of the three products by introducing the pedagogical practices associated with it and then by illustrating how the advantages of using authentic tasks are especially salient in the particular ICT context. It distinguishes between the web as a medium (i.e. provider of language learning materials) and as a resource (i.e. provider of authentic texts) and

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focuses on the latter. In particular Mishan stresses the value of the web in determining learner autonomy, in releasing the teacher to become a facilitator, in providing range and richness of choice and in providing current exposure to the language in use. She also provides some useful web references and gives a few suggestions for activities. But I was disappointed to find there were no specific examples of task types like there were in the chapters devoted to the other products. This is true of the section on e-mail too: a very useful overview of the value of using e-mail as a resource in language learning and a few suggestions for activities. However, the section on corpora and concordancing not only has a useful overview, it also has a very useful list of task types, as well as 28 actual tasks. Again, though, I found some of these tasks rather difficult to follow and would have preferred them to be presented as actual lesson plans for the teacher or as units of materials for learners.

This is an extremely useful book which provides reliable information, informed advocacy of pedagogical positions, stimulating views and very useful practical applications of principles. It is both objective in its overviews and subjective in its proposals, and I found this approach to be engaging, provocative and stimulating. It is a successful attempt to bridge theory and practice and, while it does suffer from some gaps (e.g. very little reference to the value of authentic materials as a stimulus for cognitive engagement) and from some unsupported prejudices (e.g. the need to gain knowledge of the target culture), I would strongly recommend language teachers to read it and teacher training courses to make use of it.

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