

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Authenticity and adaptation in EFL materials

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### ABSTRACT

*Historically, two attitudes have been adopted towards how to plan and develop materials for especially foreign language classes. Some educators have favored the use of authentic materials which are thought to contain more natural and realistic examples of language use. Some others have approved of the culturally-specific content in which all norms, values and standards as well as beliefs of learners should be taught in relation to the content. Those advocating the former view say that classroom materials should as far as possible mirror the real world and use real-world or authentic sources as the basis for classroom learning, which can generate communicative processes, develop learners' cultural awareness of L2 and engage learners in real-life or authentic communication. From the perspectives of the latter group, materials should be culturally- or locally-relevant because learners will be able to relate them to their own everyday-life situations and experiences so that they are meaningful to them. Apart from the occasional merits coming from the authentic materials, lots of current research studies have questioned the total reliance on such a notion and advocated the development of materials adapted to the contexts of the language learners. Although this adaptation process has offered some great advantages, but the researchers and educators failed to identify its limitations and drawbacks and left behind the consequences it may bring about, only focusing on theoretical framework, principles, techniques, and overlooking the idea of how such adapted materials will practically influence the effectiveness of language learning in a wide variety of learning contexts. The present paper aimed to investigate this issue of adaptation in authentic materials intended for the EFL settings from different perspectives.*

**Key words:** authentic materials, adaptation, censorship, simplification

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### INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, materials are an interlocking part of an educational system, especially instruction. The most popular view is that they play a facilitating role in the second or foreign language teaching and learning. But the issue of choosing a type of materials to meet certain criteria on the state and district levels has been controversial in the field of materials/curriculum development as new models, programs, and teaching methodologies and approaches have been developed. What makes the issue more striking is the fact that "not all materials are fully developed" [1]. Historically, two views prevailed over the subject matter. Materials should be either authentic or adapted. Some have argued that classroom materials should be as far as possible mirror the real world and use real-world or authentic sources as the basis for classroom learning [2]. Some others approved of the materials being culturally appropriate in the local learning environments. *Adaptation* is, therefore, defined as a process in which published teaching and non-teaching materials are changed, modified and suited to particular groups of learners in particular EFL learning situations.

### BACKGROUND

With the emergence of the Whole Language Approach to L2 learning and teaching under the influence of both the humanistic and constructivist perspectives, followed by the Communicative Language Teaching, the philosophy of teaching changed from skills-based paradigms focusing on direct teaching to the instruction of materials aiming to reflect realistic and naturalistic or real-life use of language. This approach holds that second or foreign language learners are supposed to use the materials such as magazines, newspapers, news reports, radio or TV programs, etc., that were not originally provided for

the pedagogical purposes [3,4]. So its heavy emphasis is placed on authenticity [5]. Its main tenet is that using such materials results in the learners' literacy in reading and writing in out-of-class contexts. It also promotes fluency at the expense of accuracy.

There are a number of underlying reasons why authentic material have appealed to many people in EFL settings. They can generate communication processes while engaging learners in real-life or authentic communication [6]. Authentic materials can encourage reading for pleasure because they are likely to contain topics of interest to learners [7]. They can also develop the learners' self-esteem and enhance motivation on them [8]. One of the chief reasons their proponents state is that these materials can develop the learners' cultural awareness of L2 because they reflect cultural features of the language. Authentic materials can keep students informed about what is happening in the world, so they have an intrinsic educational value [9, 7]. They can give a sense of achievement as well [10]. Using *real life texts for real life purposes* provides students with an education that is meaningful and responds better to their individual needs [11]. Because students are claimed to receive the natural and genuine language in the classrooms, these authentic materials can, as Tomlinson [8] and many other researchers and educators in the field state, provide exposure to language as it is used.

Apart from the worldwide approval of using authentic materials in second and foreign language classrooms, many contemporary research studies have been carried out in the field that have questioned the total reliance on such a notion and advocated the development of materials adapted to the especially EFL contexts of the language learners. The proponents of this approach to materials development argue that materials should be culturally- or locally-relevant because learners will be able to relate them to their own everyday-life situations and experiences so that they are meaningful to them. Thus, all norms, values and standards as well as beliefs of learners should be taught in relation to the culturally-specific content. As a token of great dissatisfaction with the use of such materials in EFL classrooms, Dat [12] claims that in many cases, activities are not effective simply because their subject matter is not culturally appropriate in the local learning situations. Once local learners are not interested in the activity and switch off from its content or certain components, there is no ground to convince them to believe in the method.

Lots of reasons have been set out to support the idea. First, it is argued that these published materials are necessarily constrained by the syllabus, unit template and other space concerns [13]. Second, many of such published materials are too strange to the learners because of their too culturally biased features. Another reason they state for materials adaptation is that such materials can become outdated easily [7]. Since newspapers, magazines and periodicals are among the common resources of extracting materials for the classrooms, the news and reports may become old and no longer useful later, and this can give rise to the learners' confusion, misunderstanding, boredom and eventually their indifference to the process of learning.

The diversity of authenticities is also believed to emerge in materials within one national society. Kramsch [14] argues that this notion depends on such contextual variables as age, social status, gender, ethnicity, and race; therefore, what is authentic in one context might be inauthentic in another. Moreover, such materials are not suited to the learners' levels and also to their interests most often. They may be either higher or lower than the level on which a particular group of students are studying. It is worth noting that one topic appealing to one student may be boring to another. Richards [15] notes that authentic materials often contain difficult language, unneeded vocabulary items and complex language structures, which can often create problems for the teacher, too.

Also, too much focus on authentic materials might result in cultural imperialism of English language in which certain cultural stereotypes and values are presented as universal and superior while others (either by omission or by direct presentation) is viewed as inferior. Too many structures are mixed so lower levels have problems decoding the texts [7]. Moreover, authentic materials, published or unpublished for teaching, may contain specific varieties of language, dialects, socialisms, pidgins, registers, creoles, which are difficult for especially less experienced English teachers to identify, on the one hand, and for EFL students to grasp the meaning of the words or phrases or even the structures of these language varieties, on the other.

### **OBJECTIVES OF MATERIALS ADAPTATION**

Materials are adapted in order to achieve the objectives that the people have identified, defined and set for EFL learning contexts. We adapt the authentic materials in order to facilitate the learning process through identifying the learning problems so that learners are able to internalize the learning content in a natural way. Adaptation, thus, places more focus on learning than teaching. We also adapt the materials to

“achieve congruence among such related variables as teaching materials, methodology, students, [administrators, publishers] and course objectives” [13]. If the materials are adapted to increase learners’ awareness, we are able to prepare them for taking their own decisions, help them have control over their own learning while following their own preferred learning styles. This will also result in their autonomous learning.

### CRITERIA FOR MATERIALS ADAPTATION

Adaptation is also a process which involves certain criteria to become effective in learning. Researchers have identified a number of them in this regard. But in this paper, it has been tried to list six criteria that are regarded as working enough to follow in adapting authentic materials.

**1. Adaptation should facilitate instruction.** Teachers sometimes find their authentic materials difficult and unsuitable to teach due mostly to lack of harmony in subjects, incongruity of subjects and given teaching methodology, etc. Materials should, thus, be instructionally easy to implement. The pedagogic presentation of materials, as one of the key factors that can underscore the effectiveness of materials in foreign language settings, can enable teachers to adapt the suitable teaching methodologies, models and techniques to them in a variety of learning situations. Teachers can employ them to facilitate the learning process by consciously choosing what is theoretically and practically true and apt to teach. It is in this criterion that teachers reword instructions as to materials in order to make them more accessible or acquirable, manageable, understandable, analyzable, digestible and communicable to learners.

**2. Adaptation should encourage learning.** Sometimes learners complain that they cannot learn what they have studied during the term. Authentic materials seem to be richly-structured, replete with lots of passive and unfamiliar words and complicated discourse. Thus, they should be developed according to the level of students. They should be designed unambiguously so as to boost learners’ comprehensibility as well as their self-confidence. They should enhance the learners’ learning awareness. They should also inform learners of how well they have performed and how they have progressed.

**3. Adaptation should focus on learners.** Because authentic materials are not designed according to learners’ needs most often, learners give no special care towards what the materials convey, or it is difficult for learners to communicate with the content. Since the notion underlying the currently-favored teaching models and methodologies have stressed the learners’ role in the learning process, students’ needs, interests and views should be included in designing the materials. Pedagogically, there are two types of materials development. The first is the *Negotiated syllabus* which is internally generated or the product of the negotiation between teacher and students, and the second is *externally imposed syllabus*, which is the syllabus imposed by an external body such as the teacher, an institution or any other administrative authority [15]. In authentic materials, everything is infused into the learners. They are imposed by authorities in charge which carry their thoughts, demands and decisions, degrading the active role of the learners. According to the current studies, the development of a language course curriculum should be adapted to the learning preferences and expectations. So the focus is supposed to be on the materials designed as result of a negotiation or a mutual understanding between both parties, i.e., the learners and the teacher. In this case, the materials and but learners at the center of the learning process and make them the main input providers [1].

**4. Adaptation should ensure relevance.** Materials should be relevant because they should be worth teaching. They should be aligned and suited with the planned course objectives or with what is expected of. What is being taught, as Krashen [20] claimed, should be perceived by learners as relevant and useful. Moreover, they should have the same effect with different groups of target learners.

**5. Adaptation should prompt flexibility.** Authentic materials are not as flexible as expected as the learner styles, needs and learning environments are sure to change. Materials should be flexible so that teachers will be able to easily adapt what they teach to agree with a particular setting and a particular group of learners. In other words, teachers should provide learners with “the possibility of choosing different activities, tasks, projects and approaches, and therefore of adapting the materials to their own preferred learning needs” [1].

**6. Adaptation in terms of motivational.** The issue of whether the materials are motivating is not easy to decide on by itself. The materials can motivate learners when all of the aforementioned criteria are taken into account. The lack of any one of the above will result in learners’ demotivation, not necessarily in the lack of motivation but in a state in which learners gradually feel that they are losing their motivation because any one of the given criteria fills in *part* of the learners’ needs.

### DRAWBACKS OF MATERIALS ADAPTATION

Many findings have stressed the ineffectiveness of authentic materials in especially foreign language contexts and identified a number of shortcomings they have and this trend prompted the researchers to take into account the issue of *adapting* the published materials to the learners' local context. This process has offered some great advantages, but the researchers and educators haven't identified its limitations and drawbacks and left behind the consequences it may bring about. In this paper, the researcher introduced certain limitations of materials adaptation.

1. *Adaptation is a time-consuming process.* It calls for in-advance and afterward case studies, action research, surveys, etc. It is not claimed to be a day's task. Such contextual variables as age, social status, gender, ethnicity, race, as well as students' background knowledge, learning needs, learning styles, course objectives, and students' levels are to be put into careful and adequate consideration and study in relation to a specific learning context.

2. *Adaptation needs professionalism.* Evaluation in order to adapt the materials to the students' learning context is not an undertaking to be carried out by anyone with any expertise. The people must be skilled in developing materials and have a diagnostic and analytic view of the local learning contexts. Even the teachers must be experienced, knowledgeable and qualified.

3. *Adaptation cannot be universally and equally appealing.* Adaptation is a process which needs to be of local interest. Because of such factors as cultural differences, ethnicity, educational systems, peculiar environments of learning, etc., materials appealing to one learning context may not be similarly attractive to another.

4. *Adaptation may be affected by the saturation of flexibility.* Sometimes the people in charge of adapting materials go to extremes due mostly to lack of enough knowledge of the given materials, unfamiliarity with learning contexts, psychological concerns, fatigue, lack of enough time, personal/political/religious bias, gender favoritism, etc.

5. *Adaptation fails to take into account all learners' needs equally.* There is no denying that learners differ in needs. Therefore, these needs must be analyzed in making pedagogical decisions especially materials development. Although needs analysis is an indispensable part of curriculum/materials development [8], can we adapt the materials by considering all the individual needs of EFL learners in all the learning contexts? Can adaptation take into account all the given learners' psychological, social, affective and learning variables in different learning contexts equally? Of course, not.

6. *Adaptation cannot establish congruence between learners, teachers, methodologies, administrators, publishers' expectations, as well as those of course objectives at the same time.* Adaptation seems to have different meanings. For learners, it means facilitation of language learning. For teachers, it is the facilitation of teaching process. Based on the teaching methodologies, it should correspond to pedagogical principles. For administrators, it often means "ease of standardization" [8]. For publishers, it is a matter of making profits. And the course objectives require that adaptation fulfill what has been planned for the given course. Therefore, it seems to be almost impossible to match all these attitudes in order to make an effective process of materials adaptation.

7. *Adaptation fails to be carried out on all types of materials.* Only reading texts containing no political, religious, legal and ethical restrictions are apt to be adapted to EFL learners' context. We cannot modify the listening materials which carry the native accents and oral discourse. If we make some cuts on such materials, learners may feel gaps easily in the events of the listening tracks or contents. Although there are, in some cases, misunderstandings in such authentic materials, this problem can be solved by skilled teachers through listening comprehension techniques.

8. *Adaptation may be impinged on by the materials adaptor's tastes.* Sometimes people tend to select for adaptation those materials they regard as suitable only because the topics are their favorites, overlooking the role of students' needs and interests and course objectives. This occurs when learners feel that the materials selected and adapted are of no interest to them. McDonough [17] argues in general that materials are therefore learning resources and embody the course writers' views on how languages are learnt, what exercise type and tasks work, and what both the learner and teacher should do in the classroom and in their own preparation.

## ADAPTATION AND CENSORSHIP

Adaptation sometimes takes the form of censorship. In adaptation approach to materials development; the aim is to conduct modifications eventually for the purpose of facilitating the learning process, but censorship aims to remove the morally offensive, unpleasant and harmful as well as politically or religiously dangerous parts of the materials. There seems to be two major problems in this regard. One problem is that censorships viewed differently by professional people in the world. For example, a

concept may be morally offensive in one country or area of a country and deleted but means no offence at all in another country or area. Also, one word is politically, religiously or legally limited to use in one society, but it is freely used in another society. The second problem is that sometimes people in charge of adaptation exceed the limit and remove those parts they *personally* find offensive and inappropriate, claiming that they are adapting the materials. In whatever cases, the principles underlying adaptation process are infringed.

### ADAPTATION AND SIMPLIFICATION

In the adaptation process, many applied linguists argue that authentic materials should be *simplified* while being adapted to the EFL learners' learning context. Day and Bamford (1998), for example, attacked the 'cult of authenticity' and advocated the simplified reading texts [8]. Simplification is carried out when the materials are too lengthy to cover; when some or most parts of materials or textbooks are irrelevant; when there is much call for it in an intensive course. In adaptation, there is a conceptual and hypothetical framework underlying adaptation process, but simplification heavily relies on the principles and theories constructed in adaptation. Concerns in adapting a piece of materials are more than those in simplification of materials because adaptation owes its effectiveness to such variables as selection, addition, deletion, reordering, replacement, restructuring, *and* simplification.

Moreover, simplification has its own drawbacks that differentiate it in function from adaptation. One of those drawbacks is that there is a distinct danger of distorting language when attempting to simplify a text and thus making the text [totally] inauthentic [13]. Sometimes it is taken to extremes through manipulating the syntactic and discourse structures as well as lexical items, resulting in learners' difficulty understanding. Simplifying a text by changing the language often removes natural redundancy and makes the organization somewhat difficult for students to predict, which actually makes a text more difficult to read than if the original were used [19].

### CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that authentic materials and adapted materials both have effect on learning in EFL settings. But the problem is that they have been overstated by their own proponents, little caring for their limitations and drawbacks in the very contexts. I believe that the principles behind the two notions are to a great extent radical. As the theory of authenticity in materials development suggests, EFL students are provided with materials which are not primarily intended for pedagogical use. The rationale is for them to mirror the real-world picture. The underlying critic that undermines this notion is that not all such materials work in any learning time and situation, and for all individual learners having different learning styles, interests, needs and beliefs as well as different social factors. Besides, there are certain logistical, methodical, implicational, and cultural problems with authentic materials. Therefore, there needs to be a change in the approach. The immediate solution that has been found to the problems is to adapt those materials to the learners' EFL context. The adaptation theory posits that materials should be culturally or locally modified and relevant to the norms, values and beliefs of the language learners [18]. This is not as an easy undertaking as we think. Adaptation process brings about problems when there is not a clear-cut reason for adapting the given materials. Many materials developers have identified scores of criteria for the adaptation process but they are not specifically defined so that someone can adopt them in doing the job. Materials adaptors are provided a list of eleven criteria working enough for the process. One of the great concerns in adaptation is that there has been no specific framework regarding the learners' course level, type of materials, etc. It is suggested to carry out the adaptation on low levels of language proficiency, reading materials, and extensive classes in order for them to become effective. As mentioned before, materials adaptation takes effect to some degree but it has certain major drawbacks that the applied linguists in the field have not either identified or proposed them. Such factors as time limitations, lack of professional people, lack of nationwide or worldwide appeal, failure in learners' needs analysis, incapability of establishing wished-for congruence, influence of materials adaptor's tastes, saturation of flexibility, and limitations in materials type selection all threaten the effectiveness of materials adaptation process. Sometimes the very process and simplification are used interchangeably. This is a big mistake in that they do two different functions. Adaptation is broader and an umbrella term for simplification and related terms. Besides, whatever we simplify does not necessarily mean adaptation. For some people, adaptation, by mistake or on purpose, takes the form of censorship. Since censorship aims to take away the morally offensive, unpleasant and harmful as well as politically or religiously dangerous parts of the materials, it is strongly advisable to avoid it because it inflicts a disastrous blow to the structural and discursal framework of the authentic materials to be adapted.

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