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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	Business Management Skills Required by Automechanics Craftsmen in Lagos State for Establishing Small and Medium Scale Enterprises in A Global Market Economy. <b>J. A. Jimoh &amp; S. A. Adebayo,</b>	1
2.	The Need for Effective Monitoring, Supervision and Evaluation Systems in the Implementation of Environmental Education in School Science Curriculum in Nigeria. <b>Adaeze Chike-Okoli &amp; D. I. Wushishi</b>	13
3.	A Blind Geoelectrical Survey Commissioned to Affirm or Deny the Presence of Aquifer at A Compound at Minna, Central Nigeria. <b>Jonah, S.A., Umoh, S.E., James, G.O., Adeku, D.E., Ahmed, F., Alhassan, A., Hamza, S., Igbideba, O. I., Kwaghhua, F.I., Kyari, M., Macaulay, V. F., Olarewaju, S.I., Onyeodili, G., Popoola, G.B., Sofeso, O.A., Switzer, F. K., &amp; Umoh, U. E.</b>	20
4.	Enhancing Teacher Development in Nigeria through Open and Distance Learning. <b>Amadi Martha Nkechinyere</b>	39
5.	The Development Media Theory Option for the Nigerian Media in the task of National Development. <b>Dalhatu Bala Muhammad</b>	51
6.	The Importance of Social Studies Education to National Development. <b>Sharu Muhammad</b>	56
7.	Emerging Issues in Nigerian University Libraries. <b>Katamba Abubakar Saka Hussaini Musa &amp; Abubakar Nda-Salih Usman</b>	62
8.	Adoption Pattern of web 2.0 Learning Technologies Among the Fresh University Students in Bauchi. <b>Abubakar Sadiq Bappah &amp; Umar Usman Bello</b>	68
9.	Inconsistencies of the Library of Congress Classification Scheme in Terms of Treatment of some Topics in Classes h (Social Sciences) Q (Sciences) T(Technology) and G(Geography): a Critical Analysis. <b>Stella. A. Onwukanjo</b>	73
10.	Woodwork Trades Enrolment Trend in National Business and Technical Examinations Board (NABTEB) May-June 2003-2007 of Technical Colleges in Nigeria. <b>Gomper Sunday &amp; Manyei Badung</b>	79
11.	Pre-Drilling Geoelectrical Survey at a Built-up Compound at Barkin-Sale Ward, Minna, Niger State, Nigeria. <b>Jonah, S.A., James, G.O., Adeku, D.E., Ahmed, F., Alhassan, A., Hamza, S., Igbideba, O. I., waghhua, F.I., Kyari, M., Macaulay, V. F., Olarewaju, S.I., Onyeodili, G., Popoola, G.B., Sofeso, O.A., Switzer, F. K. &amp; Umoh, U. E.</b>	86
12.	Reflections on Persistent Challenges of Tertiary Education in Nigeria: The Way Forward. <b>Joseph Maina Musa &amp; Sabina Joseph</b>	98
13.	The use of Authentic Materials in the Teaching and Learning of English as A Second Language. <b>Amina Gogo Tafida Aniah Anthony, Ahmed Muhammed Sadik Enesi.</b>	104



## The Use of Authentic Materials in the Teaching and Learning of English as A Second Language

By

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*Language teaching in Nigeria, whether in private or public schools, is in most cases bedeviled with teacher and course book-oriented activities. Little attention is given to students-oriented activities. An ideal language-learning classroom should be one that gives room for students' participation by tapping the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The use of authentic materials, such as newspapers, magazines, songs, internet, animations, movies, phone messages, greeting cards, calendars in language teaching is a step towards communicative language teaching. The aim of this paper is to improve the teaching of English language from the traditional method of using textbooks and teacher-only approach to the teaching of English language by incorporating the use of authentic materials. The advantages of authentic materials include making language learning friendly and motivating. One disadvantage of using authentic material is that they may contain complex and irrelevant structures that may make learning difficult for the learners particularly at lower level. The paper recommends that language teacher should choose materials that arouse great interest and have a communicative purpose.*

### Introduction

English language teaching in secondary and primary schools in Nigeria are characterized essentially by the use of course books. In every language class, textbooks are prescribed and teachers use them to teach English, sometimes page-by-page; or topic-by-topic. This makes the language teachers, in most cases, slaves to the course books with little or no innovation in the teaching-learning process. With this situation, language teaching becomes highly formalized and rigid with little motivation on the part of the learners. This situation is captured in Cheung (2001) as follows:  
today English teachers have a lot of choices in terms of textbooks, and it is surprising that many of them rely on uninteresting textbooks that focus students' attention on grammatical structures, and on practice in isolation. In addition, the activities chosen are based on teacher-talk student listen routines.

The scenario above constitutes the main problem this study tends to solve.

Language, whether first or second is supposed to be used for communicative purposes and therefore, the



aim of language teaching should among others be to expose learners to real language use (not only grammar and vocabulary, etc.) so as to instil in the learners the ability to use language naturally in real situations. Berardo (2006) observes that the artificial nature of the language and structures used make them very unlike anything that the learner will encounter in the real world and often they do not reflect how the language is really used. According to him, there is a kind of fear when faced with language that is largely unfamiliar. It is therefore necessary to make language learning stimulating and rewarding to both the teachers and students. This study tends to find ways of enhancing the teaching of English language through the eclectic approach, with particular emphasis on the use of authentic materials like films, news items, articles, magazines and other communicative materials.

Cook (1981) also states that all language syllabuses are defective representations of the target language. English has changed since the course was written or the grammatical description was inadequate. In addition, we do not know enough about learning to be able to say that students would learn it perfectly even if the syllabus itself was meticulously accurate. In other words, there may be gaps in the best of teaching programmes because there is still much we do not know about English or about language learning. The only way we can make sure that we give the students all they need to know is by teaching them making use of authentic materials. Using authentic materials means using examples of language produced and designed solely for the classroom. Authentic materials in language teaching are a convenient way of improving not only students' general skills but also their confidence in real situations.

### What are Authentic Materials?

According to Kilickaya (2004), authentic materials are resources and activities that instructors use in class. They are contextualized language learning and are a valuable source of language input. Bacon and Finneman (1990) define authentic materials as texts produced by native speakers for a non-pedagogical purpose. Nunan (1989) and Laniro (2007) see them as any material which has not been specifically produced for the purpose of language teaching but are excellent learning tools for students because they are authentic. They are language data produced for real life communication purposes. They can be classified as spoken materials which include films, news items, weather forecast, airport and station announcements, interviews, debates, while the written materials include recipes, articles, flyers, train timetables, tickets, advertisements, brochures, bulletin boards, newspapers, posters, drawings, maps, magazines, photographs, calendars, greeting cards, coupons, street signs, websites, ATM receipts, charts and instructions for use of equipment. Indeed anything written in the target language and used unedited in the classroom. Authentic materials also include multimedia such as audio tapes, CDs, animations, movies, documentaries, television and radio programmes, phone messages, podcasts, E-books etc. According to Berardo (2006), the sources of authentic materials that can be used in the classroom are infinite, but the most common are newspapers, magazines, television programmes, movies, songs, literature and the internet. The internet according to him is the most important because whereas the newspapers and any other printed material date very quickly, the internet is continuously updated, more visually stimulating as well as interactive. It is the modern day reality and most teachers and students use it for easier access to different types of material. Berardo (2006) adds that authentic materials should be the kind of material that students will need and want to read, when travelling, studying abroad, or using the language in other contexts outside the classroom. Authentic materials enable learners to interact with the real language and content rather than form. Learners feel that they are learning a target language as it is used outside the classroom. Cook (1981) opines that in authentic materials, the content of the material may not matter very much; but interest in the foreign language is kept alive.

Hwang (2005) observes that authentic materials are realistic, ready to-use, relevant and trigger the process of natural language acquisition of students. They provide a wide variety of text types and teaching materials. Martinez (2002) says they contain topics of interest to students and encourage reading for pleasure, and they are practical and real because they provide valid linguistic data. Karpova (1999) argues that authentic materials have a positive effect on increasing students' motivation and make learning more enjoyable. They provide close contact with language, build up paralinguistic features, introduce life-like scenarios into the classroom and are useful at all levels. Dumitrescu (2000) opines that authentic materials can be applied to multiple tasks both in and outside the classroom. In other words, they are flexible, easily adapted to learning objectives, and are not bound by textbook format limitations.

Breen (1985) identifies four types of authentic materials within language teaching. He indicates that these



types are in continual inter-relationship with one another during language lesson. They are:

- (1) Authenticity of texts that may be used as input data for learners. This refers to the authentic qualities of a given text. They should help the learners to develop an authentic interpretation.
- (2) Authenticity of learners' own interpretation of such texts. This means learners' interpretation of the text should be in line with the original content.
- (3) Authenticity of tasks conducive to language learning: The task given to the learner should be authentic. This authenticity should reflect not only with respect to communication with texts and others in the classroom but also in learning and the purpose of learning.
- (4) Authenticity of the actual social situation of the classroom: The authentic materials should provide conditions in which the participants can publicly share the problems, achievements and overall process of learning a language as a social activity.

### Criteria for choosing authentic materials

In reading tasks, Nuttall (1996) in Berardo (2006) gives three criteria for choosing authentic materials to be used in the classroom. They are suitability of content, exploitability and readability. Suitability of content, one of the most important criterion, means that the reading material should motivate and be of interest to the students and should be relevant to their needs. Exploitability of content refers to how the text can be used to develop students' competence as readers. According to Nuttall, if a text cannot be exploited for teaching purposes, that text has no use in the classroom. Readability is used to describe the combination of structural and lexical difficulty of a text, as well as referring to the amount of new vocabulary and new grammatical forms present.

Berardo (2006) adds that variety and presentation should influence the choice of authentic materials. A reading course can be made more interesting if a variety of texts is used. The authentic presentation with pictures, diagrams, photographs helps to put the text into a context. This helps the reader not only to understand the meaning of the text better, but also how to use it. Cook (1981) also provides the following as criteria for choosing authentic materials for language teaching generally.

- (1) They should be motivating or the activities that can be done with them are motivating e.g. tickets (train, market, station) but may be used for various types of simulation and information processing activities in the classroom. Newspaper headings and the articles beneath them may also be of general interest.
- (2) They should be up-to-date or that which has a timeless quality about them e.g. the internet.
- (3) They should be organized and linked to other aspects of teaching.
- (4) They should be organised and selected in terms of their language and content.
- (5) They should be of interest to the age group
- (6) They should contain examples of the point of the lesson.
- (7) They should be available locally.
- (8) They should be of good quality both in picture and in sound.

### Disadvantages of using authentic materials

Richards (2001) points out that although there are advantages in using authentic materials in language teaching, they often contain difficult language, unneeded vocabulary items and complex language structures which becomes a burden for the teacher in lower-level classes. Martinez (2002) observes that authentic materials may be culturally biased and too many structures are mixed, causing lower levels a hard time decoding the texts. The vocabulary may not fit the students' immediate needs and they may lack the skills required to manage the vast amount of information. Martinez (2002) and Peacock (1997) add that interpreters recorded on the listening materials might have different accents. The materials could become out-dated easily and the designs more complex. The preparation of the materials could be time consuming if speech preparation is required. The investment of time might not be feasible or realistic (Martinez, 2002; Peacock, 1997). Authentic materials should therefore be carefully selected, controlled, and used with well-thought out and fully exploited teaching exercises. The success of authentic materials in language teaching depends, largely, on the pedagogical support of the teacher. In order to achieve this, Martinez (2002) suggests that teachers may use authentic materials for the learners to listen for the gist of the information presented and to encourage students to read for pleasure, especially certain topics of interest. Guariento and Moley (2001) opine that authentic materials should be used in accordance with students'



ability and that suitable tasks can be given to learners in which understanding is not important but helps the building of confidence in real situations. For instance, students may be given newspaper headlines to explain what they mean. The students may not be totally right, but the teacher should accept anything that conveys the grammatical and lexical spirit of the headline and exploit the grammatical and lexical richness of the authentic materials by various comprehension and discussion techniques. According to Bennett, Harper and Hedberg, (2002), in using authentic materials, it is not necessary to involve students in exactly the same tasks and to expect students to perform at the level of an expert.

In order to overcome the problems created by difficult authentic materials eg texts, there is need to simplify them to the level of the learner. This can be done by removing any difficult word or structure without removing the basic discourse qualities that make the texts authentic. The basic parametres for simplifying a text according to Berardo (2006) are:

- (1) Linguistic simplicity: grammatical structures, lexical items and readability;
- (2) Cognitive simplicity: age, education, interest of the learner;
- (3) Psychological simplicity: does it follow traditional social norms?

### Sample authentic materials and how they can be used in language lessons.

#### (1) Shopping flyers

Shopping flyers can be used for speaking and writing activities at elementary and intermediate levels as follows;

1. Ask students to bring some materials eg empty tins, bottles, boxes etc
2. Prepare a hand-out or paragraph containing fill-in-the blank spaces describing what is contained in the flyers and the hand out to every student
3. Explain the activity in the paragraph.
4. Ask students to supply the blank spaces with the relevant materials brought to the class
5. Ask the students to read the answers aloud, one at a time and offer correction if the need arises.
6. Ask the students to write out the completed paragraph.

Other activities that may be done with shopping flyers include:

1. Encourage students to bring two different flyers and let them work in pairs to find the similarities and differences between them.
2. The students read the similarities and differences aloud and later write them down in sentences in their books.

At higher level, the flyers can be used to get students to talk and write about general concepts, such as the important values in the flyers and the strategies employed by each flyer to attract customers. Students can also role-play scenes such as buyer/seller; teacher/pupil; husband/wife, following the conversation provided by the teacher.

#### (2) Newspapers

Newspapers can be used at intermediate and higher levels to search for words among others. For instance, students may search for parts of speech or certain categories in a given page. This can be done in groups; each group may be given a number of words to search for their meanings and put them in sentences orally and in written. Current newspapers can also be used to search for relevant information, for instance, tomorrow's weather.

#### (3) Internet

The internet is a very good authentic material as it is in constant update. Blake (1997) opines that the internet allows communication without limits of physical distance between students and improves their comprehension and intrinsic motivation to learn. It encompasses speaking, listening and reading skills. The teacher can search for sites that focus on a specific topic, set questions and post them online. The students can now answer them on their own. They can later discuss the questions and answers in the class and write them down. Other activities with authentic materials are:

- a. Asking students to write a list of items to purchase for an imaginary celebration such as



- b. wedding, birthday, marriage, etc., using super-market ticket.
- c. Informing students to plan a trip using a travel brochure or bus, train, etc., ticket.
- d. Mandating students to plan a meal using a menu
- d. Telling students to use an equipment manual to explain orally and in writing the steps involved in operating an equipment or machine.

All these activities expose students to real language use and emphasize on content rather than form. Berardo (2006) observes that the role of the teacher is not to delude the language learner but to prepare him, giving the awareness and necessary skills to understand how the language is actually used. For according to Hwang's (2005) study, language classrooms should have 70% exposure to speaking activities for students to stimulate their language acquisitions and 30% teachers' explanations. This division of student-oriented activities and teacher-oriented demonstrations is a better way of learning. Therefore, students should talk and act more in class, while English as second language teachers should talk less. This is the best environment for teaching and learning English as a second language.

### Conclusion

This paper has looked at authentic materials and how they can be utilized to make language teaching and learning an interesting exercise. These materials expose learners to real language as is being used in real contexts. Authentic materials reflect the changes in language and language use as well as increase learners' motivation for learning. Authentic materials are versatile and can be updated and used in various ways to promote different skills. They take learners out of the artificial language of the classroom environment to the real world and real communication process. English as a second language teacher should therefore choose authentic materials that hold great interest, have a social purpose in community and a communicative purpose. They should incorporate these materials in language teaching in order to motivate and arouse the interest of students in learning.

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