

Authentic or not? A Case Study on the Role of Authenticity in English Language Teaching in Iran

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Abstract

The present article arises from a three-year cross sectional investigation into English Language Teaching (ELT) in secondary schools in Iran and the role of Communicative Pedagogy within this. The study has examined the extent of communicative pedagogy within the Iranian national ELT curriculum, the ELT programme and to some extent the English language coursebooks used in secondary schools. What is going to be done therefore is looking at one aspect of the study which is the role of authenticity in the above mentioned system.

In order to investigate the situation, varieties of research instruments were applied in order to collect valid and reliable data. These instruments were mainly composed of a review of literature, a desk based analysis of the curriculum, administering questionnaires as well as conducting interview sessions. The questionnaires were mainly distributed among English language teachers and the interviews were conducted with some authors of the curriculum, textbooks and English language teachers in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

It will be explained while the issue of authenticity has been addressed and considered within the newly designed national curriculum in Iran, this issue appears to play no role in either the textbooks or the English language teaching programme.

Key Words: Authenticity, English, Language, Teaching, Iran.

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Introduction

Many teachers like to use authentic texts, i.e. texts written for use by the foreign language community, not for language learners. Authentic materials refer not only to types of texts found in magazines and books, but also to any item from everyday life that conveys meaning through written language, such as schedules, application forms, billboards, advertisements, labels, and so on. The texts in this later category, according to Aebersold and Field (1997) are generally referred to as realia. Authentic materials are taken directly from first language sources and are not changed in any way before they are used in the classroom. Articles or advertisements from a second language (L2) or a foreign language (FL) newspaper and train schedules are also examples of authentic materials.

The present article arises from a three-year cross sectional investigation into English Language Teaching (ELT) in secondary schools in Iran and the role of Communicative Pedagogy within this. The study has examined the extent of communicative pedagogy within the Iranian national ELT curriculum, the ELT programme and to some extent the English language coursebooks used in secondary schools. What is going to be done therefore is looking at one aspect of the study which is the role of authenticity in the above mentioned system.

In order to investigate the situation, varieties of research instruments were applied in order to collect valid and reliable data. These instruments were mainly composed of a review of literature, a desk based analysis of the curriculum, administering questionnaires as well as conducting interview sessions. The questionnaires were mainly distributed among English language teachers and the interviews were conducted with some authors of the curriculum, textbooks and English language teachers in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

1. Educational System in Iran

Prior to proceeding further, I would like to continue this section by presenting a summary about educational system of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Iranian educational system is divided into five cycles: pre-school, primary, middle (guidance), secondary (high school) and post secondary (university). The Iranian textbooks considered for the purpose of this research include those for students in:

- Secondary school for ages 14-17, Grades 9-12.

The schools in Iran are under the administration of the Ministry of Education. English language textbooks are designed by the Ministry of Education and while there are no alternatives, all schools, both state and private, are compelled to apply them.

At present the dominant trend in Iran is toward more ELT. As a required course from the second grade of middle school, English is taught three to four hours per week. There is an extensive and still growing private sector of education in the country, a distinctive feature of which is introducing English at primary school and even pre-school levels. In almost all private schools English receives striking attention and probably extra hours of practice (Aliakbari, 2004).

Aliakbari (2004) continued by arguing that English is so crucial a factor that the quality of the English programme and the skill of the teacher or teachers working in each school may determine the families' choice to send their children to one school or another. Private language schools or institutes have attracted an increasing number of interested learners from young children to adults. The multiple variations observed in the programmes delivered signify a great tendency to learn English in Iran, on the one hand, and a notable endeavour to fulfil the learners' communicative needs, on the other.

Besides, Iranian people are not allowed to watch or have access to satellite TV, as one of the sources of authentic materials, since the policy makers as well as clergymen in Iran consider their programmes inappropriate and against morality. So, this would be another issue which makes Iran unique in the region or maybe in the world.

2. Research Design

As stated earlier, this article is to report one aspect of a three-year cross sectional study investigating ELT in Iranian secondary schools. The main research question that this study was aiming to address is:

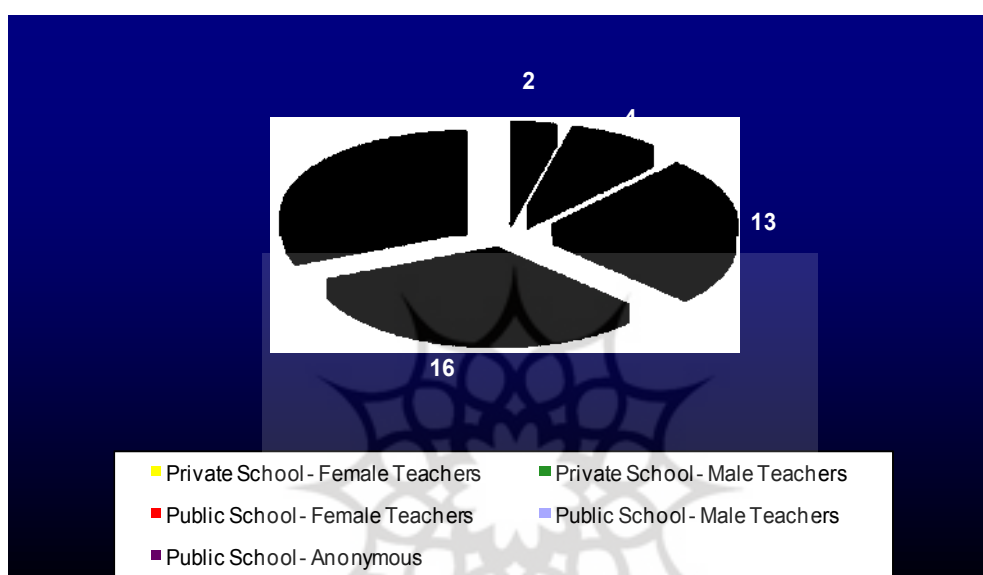
To what extent does the Iranian ELT curriculum include a communicative pedagogy?

Accordingly, this was breaking down into a number of sub questions which the relevant one to this article is:

- What was the role of authentic materials in the curriculum?

The data for this study derived from a variety of sources. The first piece of data used for the purpose of this research was a literature review. In this phase the literature on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was considered and reviewed. As a matter of fact, a huge number of books, articles, research findings were considered (more than 300 titles). The second phase consisted of a desk-based analysis of the ELT curriculum in Iran, using CLT criteria as a guide. The third phase of data collection consisted of distributing questionnaires among Iranian English language teachers in secondary schools - both private and state (51 questionnaires were collected, and their breakdown is given in figure 1 below) as well as interviewing 3 teachersⁱ, interviewing 3 authorsⁱⁱ of the Iranian national curriculum and conducting 1 interviewⁱⁱⁱ with one of the authors of English language textbooks for secondary schools. Data collection involved piloting stage as well as many other strategies that were applied in order

to make sure about the validity and reliability of the whole process of data collection as well as data analysis; however, due to space limit these issues are not going to be discussed within this article.



Moreover, prior to proceeding further, it may be worth clarifying that the textbooks and the ELT programme that was running in Iran during the execution of this research were not written or based on the curriculum document that was considered for the purpose of this research. In fact according to the author participants, the above materials (Textbooks and ELT programme) are not based on any well written and agreed document that could be referred to as the national curriculum or syllabus. Apparently, in 2007, the first Iranian national curriculum for teaching foreign languages was being developed by a team working under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. However, it has been decided to include all of these materials into the investigation in order to present differences, advantages, flaws and in total a flavour of ELT

in Iran to the reader. This would have given a better understanding of differences that existed between what the new programme was willing to deliver and what the old system was about.

3. Constraints and Limitations

Every researcher needs a detailed plan prior to implementing a research project. They may start by considering the method that is going to be applied for the purpose of research and then there would be some predictions about the procedures for data collection and the possible constraints that might merge in this. Afterwards during the research implementation, the researcher might encounter situations or difficulties that he/she may have not been prepared for. This is absolutely normal and was certainly true for the current study. While it was predictable that certain possible problems might emerge during the execution of the research, there were other problems that were unforeseen. In this section some of the limitations and constraints of this research will briefly be discussed.

Given the complexity of the issues and the cultural politics of the setting, the researcher was not convinced that a survey questionnaire would be the most appropriate instrument for investigating the topic. It felt that using a more subtle and context sensitive method for addressing such issues; e.g. participant observation, ethnographic interviews would be more relevant.

One of the main problems surrounds the relatively small amount of data which the research had, in the end, to work with. Plans were originally made to collect a greater range of data, including classroom observations of teachers in action, and a large number of interviews with teachers. However, permission to collect such data was not given by the Iranian authorities. The reasons for this lack of permission were never explicitly stated, but the likely

explanation stems from a worry that this data would be published in Great Britain or anywhere else outside of Iran, thereby risking possible criticism of the Iranian system.

On the other hand, one of the main advantages of this research would be the interviews that were conducted with authors of textbooks and the curriculum document since they provided great insight into the ELT system in Iran and confirmed many of the issues that were raised and discussed by teachers. Another advantage of this research might be its uniqueness and pioneering nature. Apparently, according to the participants as well as some authorities within the Iranian Ministry of Education, no one has ever before done such research on such a scale in Iran. Bearing in mind the shortage of relevant literature and research about ELT in Iran, the current study might be considered fairly precious.

4. Findings and Implications

As discussed earlier, a variety of methods i.e. desk-based analysis of the curriculum, questionnaires, interviews were applied in order to collect the data for the purpose of this study. This section is aimed to bring together the collected data and to discuss the meaning and implications of the findings. The findings will be compared with what might have been expected from the literature.

The definition of authenticity in the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics begins: “the degree to which language teaching materials have the qualities of natural speech or writing” (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992, p.27). One aspect of ELT that concerns many teachers and methodologists is the difference between authentic and non-authentic texts. The former are said to be those which are designed for native speakers; they are ‘real’ texts designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language in question. Thus English

language newspapers are composed of what we would call authentic English, and so are radio programmes for English speakers.

The concept of authenticity is central to CLT, with the pupil being exposed to the same language as a native speaker for the purpose of preparing for real life. According to Harmer (1991), what we need, therefore, are texts which students can understand the general meaning of, whether they are truly authentic or not. But texts whether authentic or not must be realistic models of written or spoken English. If teachers can find genuinely authentic materials which their students can cope with that will be advantageous; if not they should be using material which simulates authentic English. In simple terms the texts should be roughly-tuned rather than finely-tuned.

There has been a trend in recent years to introduce authentic materials into L2/FL reading classes at every proficiency level. According to Aebersold and Field (1997, p.49), “this lets students know what is available to be read and demonstrates to them that even though they cannot yet read the material in its entirety, they can comprehend the text on some level by using their reading skills”.

One of the main reasons for this could be named as motivation. According to them, mastering even a small degree of comprehension of authentic materials would give students confidence in dealing with reading for real purposes. Nuttal (1996, p.172) similarly argued that “authentic texts can be motivating because there are proof that the language is used for real-life purposes by real people”. Similarly, Berardo (2006) expressed the view that one of the main advantages of using authentic materials is that they are highly motivating. For instance, when it comes to reading Berardo (2006) explained that these materials would give a sense of achievement when understood and encourage further reading.

Having suggested the motivational aspect of authentic materials, there is another reason for preferring them. According to Nuttal (1996, p.177), to pursue the crucial text attack skills, we need texts which exhibit the characteristics of “true discourse: having something to say, being coherent and clearly organised”. Nuttal justified this by stating,

“Composed (ie specifically written) or simplified texts do not always have these qualities. The striving for simplicity may lead to vacuous texts (merely vehicles for language presentation, conveying little or no real message) or unnatural ones, lacking many of the features we expect to find in normal discourse.” (Nuttal, 1996, p.177)

Whether the text looks authentic or not, is also very important when presenting it to the pupil. Berardo (2006) expressed the view that the ‘authentic’ presentation, through the use of pictures, diagrams, photographs, helps put the text into a context. According to him (2006, p.62), “this helps the reader not only understand the meaning of the text better but also how it would be used”.

When bringing authentic materials into the classroom, it should always be done with a purpose, as highlighted by Senior (2005, p.71) “...we need to have a clear pedagogic goal in mind: what precisely we want our students to learn from these materials”.

Advocates of CLT argue that it is important to use authentic texts whenever possible and there are several reasons and advantages for this. As articulated by Berardo (2006), using authentic materials is useful in:

- a. “Having a positive effect on student motivation;
- b. Giving authentic cultural information;
- c. Exposing students to real language;
- d. Relating more closely to students’ needs;

e. Supporting a more creative approach to teaching.” Berardo (2006, p.64)

So, it could be argued that using authentic resources would give an opportunity to the students to experience the real world; therefore, according to Nunan (1995), the language students would be ready for such an environment based on the extent to which they are provided with such materials. He later argued that “much has been made of the fact that authenticity is a relative matter, and that as soon as one extracts a piece of language from the communicative context in which it occurred and takes it into the classroom, one is de-authenticating it to a degree” (Nunan, 1998, p.27). But still Nunan (1998) believed that such materials should be used and that they still have their own advantages. He (1998) further explained that authentic materials helped his own pupils to make sense of the real texts and to develop effective learning strategies for reading and listening, speaking and writing.

Furthermore, according to Hidalgo et al. (1995) materials production demands creativity in presenting structural materials in a communicative interactive situation that has to be as natural as possible without giving the students the impression of being in an artificial setting. The pupils have to be motivated and placed in a setting where sharing information is real and where students talk about topics of relevance and genuine interest to them. It also needs to be kept in mind that language is a natural process and by simplifying language for teaching purposes there is always a risk of making the process of learning and teaching more difficult. As a result the meaning and its clues might be removed. Moreover, the simplified materials do not always have the characteristics of real discourse.

With respect to empirical evidence, according to the findings of a survey carried out by Chavez (1998), pupils

do enjoy dealing with authentic materials since such materials enable them to interact with the real language and its use. Also they do not consider authentic situations or materials innately difficult. However, in her study students stated that they would need pedagogical support especially in listening situations and when reading literary texts such as the provision of a full range of cues (auditory and visual including written language).

Furthermore, results of a research conducted by Kelly et al. (2002) in Aichi Institute of Technology (Toyota, Japan) suggested that,

“When used effectively, authentic materials help bring the real world into the classroom and significantly enliven the ESL class. Exposing the students to cultural features generates a deeper understanding of and interest in the topic. On one hand, the students develop their ability to zero in on relevant information, and on the other, they learn how to disregard what is not relevant. As students pool their individual strengths they gain confidence in being able to function in an English-speaking society.”

As discussed earlier, this article is to report only one aspect of a greater investigation into ELT in Iran. Below is the relevant research question that the investigation was to find out about:

What was the role of authentic materials in the curriculum?

In order to find out about this issue, the participants were enquired about a) the role of authentic materials

within the Iranian English language education and; b) availability of authentic materials to the participants.

Regarding the first issue, according to the teacher participants, the ELT programme do not emphasise using such materials at all. Also, one of the participants further added that teachers are free to use such materials but they are not advised to do so.

Furthermore, according to the author of textbooks, there is no emphasis on using authentic materials in the textbooks and this could support what the teachers said.

On the other hand, two authors of the curriculum believed that authentic materials are very important and another one stated that they could be considered extremely important. Having asked whether such materials were designed or prepared in this regard, I was told that,

“This document was not going to be a productive one and some criteria and factors were only included for those who wanted to learn four learning skills within 550 hours, so they would know to what extent these skills could be improved.”

Thus, this could be argued that authentic materials do not have any role within the current educational programme in Iran. Although, all the teachers and writers believed and commented that these materials are very important in the ELT but not in the Iranian ELT programme.

The participants were further asked about the availability of authentic materials. As discussed above, there is no emphasis on using authentic materials in the Iranian ELT programme. Having realised that, the researcher then tried to figure out if such materials are available to teachers and whether they are applying them in their teaching.

Two teachers explained that authentic materials are available to them but another one claimed that nothing is

available to them. Moreover, those who claimed that such materials are available to them further commented that they use a lot of these materials. Apparently, they use the Internet and some supplementary books from different publishers. But it is necessary to indicate that these teachers have bought the materials themselves and nothing is provided for them either by school or the Ministry of Education.

According to the authors of the curriculum, authenticity is considered quite important within the curriculum document. This comment could also be backed up by the findings from the curriculum analysis. Apparently, a great attention has been paid towards the notion of authenticity as well as applying authentic materials within the programme, for example as one of the main principles of the programme, it is explicitly stated that “the programme would keep it in mind to use real and authentic contexts and texts” (INCTFL, p.16).

On the other hand, concerning the ELT programme as well as the textbooks, the situation is quite different. According to the participants (teachers and the author of textbooks), no attention is given towards such a concept within either the programme or the course books. Dahmardeh (2009) also argued that the concept of authenticity is not being referred to within the textbooks which could be used in order to support what the teachers and author claimed in the current research. Moreover, Aliakbari (2004) in his study explained that reading passages with omitted identity are recognised as another flaws of the textbooks. He (2004) found that 28 per cent of 'Reading' passages lacked identifiable sources of reference. Whether the identity had been taken away prior to or through the adaptation and modification processes is unknown. Such a process, which has apparently been done with the intent of providing neutral passages, has resulted in senseless, artificial and untraceable texts. Thus, instead

of genuine texts, pupils often meet imaginary artificial passages.

According to principles of CLT, authentic materials play a vital role within the ELT and as discussed earlier and according to Berardo (2006, p.63), “the concept of authenticity is central to CLT”. However, it needs to be kept in mind that applying authentic materials within a class does not necessarily mean ignoring the course books as the tangible element that gives language course face validity to many pupils and teachers. Although, attention must be given to “materials are not simply tools that the teacher uses to teach students; they are more importantly resources that the students use in order to learn” (Hidalgo, Hall and Jacobs, 1995, p.29). Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that the ideal textbook for every situation will never be published, but the assiduous teacher can use and breathe life into any textbook.

From the comments made by the participants, both the author of course books and teacher participants as well as Dahmardeh’s findings (2009), the ELT programmes as well as textbooks in Iran have failed to include authentic. Consequently, authenticity has been left as a vague notion to both teachers and students. Accordingly, the Ministry of Education in Iran invests in neither these kinds of materials nor any guidelines or instructional materials that might accompany the course books.

On the contrary, concerning the role of authentic materials in the curriculum document the situation is quite different. The findings from the curriculum document suggest that the authors of the document considered these materials quite important and the quotations below might be presented as a support to this claim.

“Establishing a purposeful and meaningful learning environment in which variety of teaching materials (authentic materials) relevant to the textbook would be applied.” (INCTFL, p.39)

“Paving the way for processing the language data via different senses by using supplementary and authentic materials like: blackboard, overhead projector, picture, poster, computer software as well as audio visual tapes.” (INCTFL, p.39)

Moreover, one of the authors of the curriculum document argued that the document is not meant to be “a productive one” and the above statements are only presented for those teachers who might be interested. Unlike whatever the authors’ intention was, based on the evidence collected from the curriculum through its careful analysis and based on comments made by scholars, which some of them presented earlier, it could be argued that the curriculum document has got authentic materials included in which such materials play a very important role. On the other hand, based on the evidence brought into this article from the ELT programme as well as textbooks, it could be suggested that the authentic materials do not have any role in them.

5. Concluding Remarks

It is commonly assumed, and not without good reason, that the textbook is the least authentic thing of all. Some argue that once we have a textbook that immediately makes it not authentic. On the other hand, the authenticity must rest in the closeness of the language used to that used for real life purposes. The first principle here is that the material should be intrinsically interesting and therefore motivating. Ideally a good textbook should reflect life, not just language. A course should be interesting in its own right — its content stimulating and informative. Not only that, if textbook writers could somehow convince students that by using the course, they would learn some English, but also in a wider sense improve their overall communication skills, and be entertained at the same time, then the students' wish list would be met.

Currently, in most cases, authentic texts may be included in textbooks, but often the texts included will be subject to a certain level of adaptation. In the textbooks, the texts are often supplied with vocabulary lists, explanatory comments as well as with fixed questions. The original text can be changed formally and linguistically to suit the textbook needs.

The purpose of this article was looking at one aspect of the study which is the role of authenticity in English language teaching in Iran. While the issue of authenticity has been addressed and considered within the newly designed national curriculum in Iran, this issue appears to play no role in either the textbooks or the ELT programme. Having said that, it could be postulated that changes have to be made if we want to prepare the students to communicate in the multicultural world of English and if we want to use the nationally developed textbooks for the optimum benefit.

The participants in this study were enthusiastic and serious language teachers as well as university lecturers who were willing to devote considerable private time to become better teachers as well as helping their society to gain a better understanding towards the role of English language and how vital it is these days. All of the teachers mostly put the blame for their lack of success as well as the current difficulties and flaws that they and students face on the shoulder of textbooks, the educational system and on top of that the governments of Iran.

It should be underlined, that what is advocated here is not a total rejection of the textbooks in the teaching of English in Iranian schools, but rather that authentic materials should be introduced in the classroom as additional material; authentic texts can provide the students with original language. Moreover, it could be argued that authentic material increases students' motivation when reading in English. If the students are exposed to English in

its true form, that is that the language is not simplified, they are able to deduct important cultural and lexical information. The choice of the text is highly important. Authentic texts focus mainly on contents and meaning and not on linguistic forms or other structures. Authentic material can present the reader with cultural messages as well as prepare students for a so called pleasure reading. Generally, authentic materials do not entirely replace the textbooks but they can be used as a substitution for certain texts that might not be well-suited for classroom use. It could be argued that it is commonly accepted that authentic texts have a motivating effect on students. For example, a newspaper article or an interview can be perceived as more vivid or “real” than the texts you might find in textbooks. It’s through these kinds of authentic texts that students and teachers are able to approach the target country’s culture and the people living there; we are able to compare our own culture and lifestyle with that of a particular country. Authentic texts do not have to be full-length books. They could also include material such as factual texts, ads, warning signs, menus etc. The list is long and there are many ways to include these texts in the teaching of English.

Finally, I would like to conclude this article by quoting a statement made by Davies (1984),

“It is not that a text is understood because it is authentic but that it is authentic because it is understood. ... Everything the learner understands is authentic for him.” (Davies 1984, p.192)

Notes

1.Finely-tuned input: Finely tuned input is the input that is matched to learners' current comprehension level and connected to what they already know. It focuses on conscious learning of a specific point such as the pronunciation of a word, the contrast in the uses of two verb tenses, new vocabulary, or useful social formulas. Generally it is controlled by the instructor or textbook author and used in the presentation stage of a lesson. In short it is the input which is combined with conscious learning.

Roughly-tuned input: Roughly tuned input is the input which is more complex than learners' current proficiency and stretches the boundaries of their current knowledge. It focuses on authentic use of language in listening or reading passages. Generally it is used with minimal alteration by the instructor or textbook author and used in the activity stage of the lesson. Roughly tuned input challenges student to use listening and reading strategies to aid comprehension.

2.This was stated by the author but no further comments were made to clarify what he meant.

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ⁱ Each interview lasted about an hour and according to the participants' preference, all of them were conducted in English.

ⁱⁱ Each interview lasted about an hour and according to the participants' preference, 2 of them were conducted in Persian and another one in English language.

ⁱⁱⁱ The interview lasted about an hour and according to the participant's preference, it was conducted in English.

