

Adapting Authentic Material for Language Learning

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Abstract

This article discusses the issue of simplification (or adaptation) of authentic English language materials for learners of lower English proficiency. Such authentic materials are defined as those taken directly from real life situations, such as railway schedules or content-specific Internet websites, rather than materials designed specifically for language study. Two main forms of simplification are noted: linguistic simplification and learning task simplification, and the pros and cons of each form are outlined. To illustrate such kinds of simplification, several sample lessons using simplified or adapted authentic English learning materials for an undergraduate ESP course in sport and communication are outlined.

Keywords:

linguistic simplification, task simplification, ESP, curriculum development, authentic material

Rationalizing “Simplification”

One of the fundamental principles of curriculum design for language learning is that study materials and activities should reflect real language use as closely as possible. Anyone who wishes to learn a language in order to use it in real life situations can see the value in practicing with materials and activities taken directly from such situations. For instance, if you want to be able to understand train schedules, it is undoubtedly helpful to practice with existing train schedules used by real railroad companies such as Amtrak or Japan Rail. Similarly, if you want to be able to ask for help in a foreign country at an information desk, what better way to practice than to go to a real information counter (such as at an airport)?

There are educators who question the use of authentic materials – claiming that they are, more often than not, too linguistically complex for the average language learner, since they are seldom created with such individuals in mind. However, even if we accept this viewpoint, we can still accommodate the previous argument by the use of *simplified* authentic materials or activities. That is to say, if we alter the materials in minor ways – for example by deleting complex lexis from an original text or dialogue – or we simplify the

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language task (e.g., by reducing the activity to one or two steps instead of carrying out a full set of requirements), we can make most authentic materials suitable for all but the students at the lowest level of language proficiency.

Nevertheless, there are disagreements in the literature over the use of authentic material simplification.

Tomlinson (2003: 5) summarizes the argument thus:

Materials aimed at explicit learning usually contrive examples of the language which focus on the feature being taught. Usually these examples are presented in short, easy, specially written or simplified texts or dialogues, and it is argued that they help the learners by focusing their attention on the target feature. The counter-argument is that such texts overprotect learners, deprive them of the opportunities for acquisition provided by rich texts and do not prepare them for the reality of language use, whereas authentic texts (i.e., texts not written especially for language teaching) can provide exposure to language as it is typically used.

Those who favor simplification of language learning materials often claim that lower level proficiency students in particular cannot handle the linguistic challenges of truly authentic materials. Lynch (2010: 1) summarizes this position:

If asked why they rely heavily on course books for English language teaching, among a variety of other reasons, one that emerges is the seeming unsuitability of available authentic materials. Principal reasons cited for this “unsuitability” can include:

- Unsuitable material level
- Too difficult
- Too long or short
- Use of grammar or language
- Irrelevancy of themes
- Not adapted for specific use
- Not adapted to student learning styles

However, Shepherd (2004: 1) argues:

Using authentic materials is one of the mainstays of an imaginative and motivating higher level course, but rarely features at levels lower than intermediate. There are several reasons for this, primarily a kind of fear that students will panic when faced with language that is largely unfamiliar, and a feeling that to prevent this the language should be edited to the students’ level. This is an unnecessary fear, as using authentic materials can be rewarding and stimulating for both teacher and students.

Shepherd claims the key to using authentic materials, “regardless of the text used, is not to edit and grade the text, but to grade the task according to your students’ abilities.” He offers three reasons for doing this: to

reflect real-life use, to save the teacher time and energy, and to motivate students by building their confidence at handling authentic material.

Looking at student motivation, there is plenty of research supporting the notion that having motivation for learning is the most basic foundation for successful learning. Just as one example, Parsons and Iwasaki (2008: 22) point out, “There exists in Japan an often noted paradox, in which the demand for EFL education is very high, yet the enthusiasm to actually learn English is low.” In their student questionnaire-based study, they find that the majority of their students want to learn English through the study of movies and music (which can be seen as examples of authentic learning materials). Without the selection of learning materials that intrinsically motivate students, language courses are less likely to maintain student interest in the long run:

...both educators and learners will find it beneficial to continue to search for new ideas, resources and authentic materials, such as those available on the internet, to expand their curriculum and create interest and a more positive attitude towards EFL learning... As most learners have been subjected to 6 years of the *yakudoku* method, it may be beneficial for them to experience new forms of learning, to give them new perspectives on the language, how they can learn it and perhaps why they should study it.” (Parsons & Iwasaki 2004: 28)

Tomlinson (2003: 22) lists several functions for language learning materials. He states that materials should:

- ... help the learner to develop cultural awareness and sensitivity.
- ... reflect the reality of language use.
- ... help learners to learn in ways similar to the circumstances in which they will have to use the language.
- ... help to create readiness to learn (e.g., by helping learners to draw their attention to the gap between their use of a feature of communication and the use of that feature by proficient users of the language, or by involving the learners in a task in which they need to learn something new in order to be successful.
- ... achieve affective engagement.

Richards (2001: 164) gives more practical applications for the above functions:

... qualities each unit in the materials should reflect:

- Gives learners something they can take away from the lesson.
- Teaches something learners feel they can use.
- Gives learners a sense of achievement.
- Practices learning items in an interesting and novel way.
- Provides a pleasurable learning experience.
- Provides opportunities for individual practice.
- Provides opportunities for personalization.

- Provides opportunities for self-assessment of learning.

Perhaps not all authentic materials are capable of fulfilling such criteria; nevertheless, by their mere nature as “authentic,” they represent texts or activities that provide most of the above. And in terms of Richard’s final three applications, it is only a matter of lesson design (i.e., how the authentic materials are used in the classroom) to achieve these.

On the other hand, it is somewhat imprecise – or limiting at least – to refer to “simplification” of materials when in fact it is the task as often as the text that is simplified. So, from this point on, I shall make a distinction between the “adaptation” of authentic learning materials and learning tasks for which the materials have been selected.

Islam & Mares (in Tomlinson 2003: 89~91) point out that adapting materials (whether authentic or not) for a particular lesson may involve a variety of actions: adding (extending and expanding), deleting, simplifying, reordering, and replacing material. Depending on the lesson purpose, such adaptations can result in greater appropriacy from materials:

... you can adapt to:

- Personalize
- Individualize
- Localize
- Modernize
- ... Add real choice
- Cater for all sensory learner styles
- Provide for more learner autonomy
- Encourage higher-level cognitive skills
- Make the language input more accessible
- Make the language input more engaging

In the design of ESP (English for Specific Purposes), it is important to consider how English is used in a particular field. The English needs and uses of nurses or care workers may be quite different even from those of medical doctors, let alone people in business or sports. However, the number of learners in such ESP classes may be fewer in number than in general English classes. Therefore, it becomes both imperative to individualize the learning materials for ESP classes and, by comparison, more practical to do so.

In other words, the course designer must take into account what specific language forms and uses a practitioner of a particular field of endeavor will encounter within their working life. Through use of authentic materials, the learner can focus directly on knowledge, skills and tasks that are necessary within that field.

In the past, it was common for relatively unskilled laborers to become migrant workers in foreign countries, often in the agricultural or mining sectors. Within such working milieus, the language needs were often small, and as a result pidgins and other simplified trade languages evolved in order to communicate with locals (e.g., on sugar cane plantations in the Caribbean). More recently, skilled workers have been finding overseas employment and, since their jobs are more complex, they require higher levels of language proficiency. For example, Filipino and Indonesian nurses and care workers have found employment all over the world, including in Japan. Such workers – despite their technical skills – may be quite lacking in language proficiency for the area in which they find themselves working. Hence, there is an increasing need to teach lower proficiency learners the language they need for their work.

The British Council (2008) notes that ESP is of growing importance and, in addition to students starting to learn academic or vocation English at a lower level of proficiency, they may also start at an earlier age:

ESP has become increasingly important as:

- There has been an increase in vocational training and learning throughout the world. With the spread of globalisation has come the increasing use of English as the language of international communication.
- More and more people are using English in a growing number of occupational contexts.
- Students are starting to learn and therefore master general English at a younger age, and so move on to ESP at an earlier age.

According to the British Council, ESP courses need to fulfill the following basic criteria:

- ESP is designed to meet the specific needs of the learners.
- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the specialism it serves.
- It is centred not only on the language (grammar, lexis, register), but also the skills, discourses and genres appropriate to those activities.

There is an abundance of commercial ESP learning materials for intermediate or advanced English learners in many fields. However, there is a shortage of such study materials for lower level students. One reason for this is a mistaken belief that since lower level students haven't mastered general English they are not yet ready to do ESP studies. As we have seen in the above comments, overseas workers may be thrown linguistically into the deep end with little language learning support. So it is imperative that ESP teachers find study materials that are both appropriate and 'doable' for lower level learners.

It is with this point in mind that this paper advocates the adaptation of authentic materials for language learning. If we can accept the previous arguments about the value of adaptation, what precisely then can teachers do to adapt such materials? Lynch (2010) gives several practical suggestions:

- converting them into workshop activities

- adjusting the length of the materials
- simplifying or explaining key language elements
- converting authentic materials into a variety of exercise types

He also recommends using lots of authentic listening materials (such as videos, CDs, newscasts and radio programs), in order to give students “insights into current events and cultural aspects of English-speaking countries” as well as exposure to authentic spoken language:

Learners benefit from listening materials spoken at “normal” conversational speed vs. English language learner directed listening materials which have been “altered” or “slowed” to enable “improved comprehension”. All well and good, but if the learners ever need to apply that learning and listening practice in a real-life situation – they’re lost. Why? Because – no – body – talks – like – this – in – real –life – in – any - language. (gasp!)

Shepherd (2004) suggests at lower levels several kinds of suitable authentic materials:

include leaflets, timetables, menus, short headline type reports, audio and video advertising, or short news broadcasts. The task should be simple and relatively undemanding, and it is important to pre-teach key vocabulary so as to prevent panic.

He also points out that students need to be made aware that they do not have to understand everything in order to carry out most tasks. So, for instance, one technique for dealing with unknown language may be to simply ignore it, if the task doesn’t require its knowledge.

Sample ESP Activities: Sport & Communication

Faced with the task of teaching an elective undergraduate course called “Sport & Communication,” in which the students are expected to learn English for careers in the sport industry (mainly as non-athletes), to students at beginner to low-intermediate proficiency levels, it quickly became clear that there were few available teaching materials for such students.

In order to give students listening and vocabulary practice related to their sport major, a course book called *Sports: Listening Variables* (Manning 2008) was selected. Each unit, focuses on a single popular sport, comprises a Japanese glossary of sport terminology and five simulated listening passages: a live event broadcast (at authentic speaking speed), a spectator dialogue about a game in progress, a quiz based on a sports wrap-up, a sport history lecture, and a quiz on the history lecture.

Other than this course book, all learning materials are produced by the teacher or students. Many of the materials have been adapted from information posted on the Internet, supplemented by materials related to the

teacher's own experiences of sport (as a child playing informal games, a fan, an athlete, and a coach). In addition, students prepare short research-based reports or presentations (individually or in pairs).

Since the teacher believes strongly in the concept of "learning by doing," as much as possible lessons include physical activities that support the language learning. For instance, students do stretching and exercises, play sport games, and injury treatment simulations while using English to communicate. Usually students carry out such tasks after a demonstration by the teacher and vocabulary/grammar study to prepare for the activity.

One of the goals of this course is to stimulate creative thinking, since this supports the "affective engagement" concept (Richards, 2001; Tomlinson 2003). So occasionally students will be challenged to think of the origin of a particular sport.

Sample Activity 1:

One example of such a challenge has been guessing the origin of the Frisbee. The lesson starts with a seemingly odd task: to choose the best skipping stone (from a group of 3 stones of differing shapes shown to them). A skipping stone is a stone that is thrown across a body of water and bounces as many times as possible on the surface before sinking.

After all of the students have made their choices, they pair up and explain in English the reasons for their choice. Inevitably, this discussion results in practice using comparative and superlatives forms, e.g.,

Stone A is flatter than stone B or C.

Stone C is the heaviest stone.

For the final challenge, students are asked to explain the connection between these stones and sport. After small group discussions, some of the students have suggested the stone is thrown like a discus or a Frisbee. In other words, they are able to make educated guesses as to the origin of these pieces of sport equipment.

As a follow-up assignment, students are divided into two groups and given the homework task of researching the origin of either the discus or the Frisbee, reporting their findings in the next lesson.

Sample Activity 1 contains the basic elements for lower level learners: simplicity, limited vocabulary load, linguistic practice, and interest. Arguably, of course, this is not an example of adaptation of authentic materials; yet, in a sense it is adaptation in reverse. That is to say, instead of preparing a reading on the discus or Frisbee taken from the Internet, the lesson prepared the ground by having students carry out a pre-task which appears initially to have no connection.

Authentic visual aids are highly suitable for lessons with lower level students. Often, pictures that illustrate sport actions can be found on the Internet or in books. Frequently, they are accompanied by short explanations.

These pictures can be copied onto a worksheet and their explanations can be simplified for ease of understanding. Alternatively, the pictures can be separated from their descriptions and a matching exercise created (i.e., placing the pictures on one side randomly and the descriptions on the opposite side of a worksheet).

Sample Activity 2:

Another activity that can easily be used with visual aids is to cut up sets of pictures that illustrate a sequence of related actions (e.g., a set of exercise positions). Then students must study the pictures and put them into the correct sequence. These pictures do not have to be supported by printed information. Instead, students can be asked to explain the sequence, action by action. This activity may require students to brainstorm relevant lexis (such as action verbs or body parts). As a follow-up, students can teach each other the action sequence, which will give them practice using imperative verb forms.

One of the most successful activities in this course involves using visual aids as part of a progress test. After lessons introducing students to American football and rugby, several pictures of actions from these two sports are included in the test. Students are required to identify which sport each picture comes from and choose a matching action for the picture. (Actions might include *a try*, *a lineout*, *a touchdown*, *a forward pass*, *a tackle*, *a drop goal*, and so on.) This is a simple item, merely a test of sport terminology (i.e., vocabulary), but it is a more interesting way to assess knowledge than simply using print.

Project work has been an important part of this course. Students have been asked to do reports based on sport-related interviews, using informants such as sport club staff, club managers, coaches, athletes, and so on. To carry this out, they need to prepare a set of English questions (even if their interview will be conducted in Japanese) related to a specific topic and theme that they develop for their interviews. For example, some students have wanted to learn about the duties of a staff member on a typical day of work at a private sports club. (This project is intended partly to give students some career insights and insider knowledge, so as to be informative in addition to the language training.)

As students become more comfortable in doing research in English, they choose more challenging projects. When given a project to report on “New Sports” (i.e., its history, equipment, training, rules, places to play in Japan), the students with the least English ability tend to select familiar sports such as baseball or tennis. Since they already understand the sport, they can more easily report about it in English. On the other hand, the more adventurous or higher proficiency students choose truly unusual sports such as sky surfing, extreme ironing, or *indica*. From these projects, a lot of interest and enthusiasm for learning has resulted.

A rewarding project that appears to appeal to all of the students has formed part of a unit on children’s games. After demonstrating several popular children’s games in English-speaking countries (e.g., tag, hopscotch), the students learn to categorize such games: ball or stick games, rhyming games, and so on. Then,

several children's games that are more local, or possibly no longer played, are introduced by the teacher. Students are then given the task of researching children's games from other countries and teaching them to their classmates.

Sample Activity 3:

Following the study of children's games, students are given a mini-lecture on public playground design. Important features such as adequate space between fixed equipment, rest areas, variety of equipment, and so on are explored, using slides of existing playgrounds and a lecture outline handout. After this introduction, students are given a reading handout adapted from an Internet website on playground use. As a final step, students in pairs then have to do a playground evaluation study of a real playground. The report is in the form of a poster presentation in English, including photos, graphs, and an evaluation of the quality of the playground (its good points and deficiencies).

(See the Appendix for a sample of the lecture content and an adapted reading passage from the Internet.)

Despite their lower English ability, the students have been able to produce concrete conclusions. Here are typical examples of student comments about a playground (accompanying some photos):

Student 1:

There is stroll road around the park. There are many rocks and normal jungle gym in the park.

This park is big area, but few playground equipment. There is not a danger thing around the park. Namely, this park is safety.

Student 2:

I call clover park. Because many clover grew in the park. But now, clover disappeared. So I don't know this park is called now. There are many cherry trees in the park. In spring, many people come to see cherry blossoms. Very beautiful scene. After school, many people play in this park. Of course I played with friend here! I feel it with nostalgia.

The contrasting styles of these two student comments can be used to illustrate differing viewpoints on playground function and evaluation. Clearly, Student 1 has given a more evaluative analysis (i.e., closer to the task requirement). On the other hand, Student 2 has provided a more thoughtful, impressionistic response to the task. In both cases, there are simple language errors that can be addressed either individually or with the whole class (e.g., noun/adjective forms, sentence-combining).

Conclusion

From the foregoing examples of learning activities appropriate for learners at lower level English language proficiency, it should be clear that authentic language materials – as well as concrete objects (realia) can provide viable and motivating tools for language study.

Ultimately, learning materials should be: useable (or adaptable for use), useful (to the learner), and interesting. If such is the case, most students will find their language studies worthwhile and hence satisfying. On the other hand, a poor choice of learning materials forces the teacher herself to be the prime motivator for learning.

Naturally, the adaptation of authentic materials will in most cases take up more planning time for the instructor than simply using commercially-prepared learning materials. And inevitably there will be some mismatches in appropriacy of task or language level, since the instructor will usually be developing such materials with limited time and support. Nevertheless, the rewards in increased student motivation, self-confidence to deal with the “real” world, and general enjoyment of learning are worth the effort necessitated. Moreover, there may be few ESP learning materials available commercially for lower level language learners: adaptation of authentic materials is a pedagogical necessity in many cases.

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APPENDIX: Lecture Outline and Reading on “Playground Design and Use”

Handout #1: **Playground Design** (*lecture outline*)

ZONES

1. Quiet Zones

- Transitional Zone (entrance areas)
- Water Play Zone
- Sand Play Zone
- Dramatic Play Zone (role play areas)
- Comfort / Social Zone (sitting areas, water fountains, etc.)
- Service Zone (trash bins, equipment storage, etc.)

2. Intermediate (Noise Level Zones)

- Swing Zone (separated from other areas for safety reasons)
- Hard Surface Zone (chalk games, skipping, etc.)

3. Noisy Zones

- Natural Zone (open playing fields; greenery)
- Big Loose Parts Play Zone (supervised play area for building things)
- Gross Motor Play Zone (large equipment for sliding, climbing, etc.)

SPACE NEEDS

Gross Motor Play Zones should have at least 2 meters space in every direction from the equipment.

Each area should have a maximum number of users, with 8~23sq.m. of space per child.

MATERIALS

Playground equipment should be located above a shock-absorbing (or safety) surface – often rubber. Each surfacing material has a Critical Height factor for falls, which depends on the surface material and its thickness. Equipment should not be higher than the surface can protect from injury.

Handout #2: **Adults are from Earth; Children are from the Moon**

(adapted online article by Randy White, 2004)

One of the challenges we constantly face when designing for children is to create an environment (including equipment and furniture) that produces the desired behavior and results – and discourages undesirable behavior. This challenge is true whether we’re designing a children’s environment for entertainment, play or enrichment (early childhood education). And, although all adults have had personal experience with childhood, there are often big misunderstandings between most adult designers of children’s environments and the children they are designing for.

Kids will do the strangest and most unexpected things when it comes to interacting with the environment. If you have any doubts about this, consider a recent news story:

A 7-year-old boy crawled inside an arcade-type machine in a supermarket in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and then couldn't get out. When firefighters arrived, the child was sitting inside the machine among the stuffed animals. He had crawled into the 8-inch by 10-inch [20 cm X 25 cm] vending slot while his father talked on a pay phone three feet [1 metre] away. The child remained calm during the hour it took to free him, then made a quick rush to the restroom, said fire department officials.

This story from the news is a good illustration of how children will make things in the environment that aren't intended to be interactive, interactive. And the younger the child is, the more likely this will happen. This is because of the large differences in the way children and adults look at their environment.

Adults view the environment in terms of form, shapes, and structures, and also as background. So if something like a sofa is in a public place, adults will interpret it only for its socially acceptable use, for sitting upon. Children, on the other hand, interpret the environment as a whole, unified space and evaluate it for all the ways they can interact with it. They use the environment to aid their development and improve themselves. They look for the environment's *affordances* – the opportunities it *affords* them to do things. Also, children interpret the environment in terms of its possible function rather than its form.

So, in the case of the sofa, because children haven't yet acquired the social norms for its accepted use (and aren't developmentally ready to accept social norms for behavior), they see the sofa as something that affords them opportunities for bouncing on, sprawling out on, climbing on, jumping over and hiding behind. To illustrate this further, a small rock is perceived by a child as something to grasp and throw – it affords grasping and throwing. If the rock is larger, it could afford stepping on, looking under or climbing on.

If we look at buildings we can find another simple example. A child sees a long straight hall in a building as affording her a chance to run, and so she does that. Similarly, a wall 1-metre high is perfect for walking and balancing on. In these cases, the child is not misbehaving. She is doing exactly what her brain is biologically instructing her to do, based on the environment's affordances and her developmental age.

She is, in fact, carrying out one of her *development tasks*, one of which is to explore and interact with the environment. When a child behaves in an environment in a way that adults see as improper, it is not usually the child's fault, but more often adults' fault for not designing the environment appropriately for children.

Environments for children need to be designed with careful consideration of four basic environmental needs children have:

- *Movement*

The environment needs to offer children an invitation to move within safe and tolerable limits, and allow them to move in individual ways. If too restricted, children become frustrated or try to enter prohibited areas of the environment.

- *Comfort*

A feeling of comfort is important to children's use and exploration of the environment. There needs to be moderate and varied levels of stimulation for all the senses, neither too little nor too much, to achieve a *comfort zone* of stimulation. Too much stimulation and noise will increase children's feelings of discomfort and result in undesired behaviors.

- *Competence*

Children need to be successful in using the environment. The world around them constantly gives them difficult and frustrating experiences, so a successful children's environment is designed to make children feel competent users of the space.

- *Control*

Children need the ability to have control over their environment and acquire increased levels of independence. Children must have experiences that allow them to experiment and make decisions.

Activity

Find words in the reading that mean:

(a) surprising _____; (b) perceive _____;

(c) allows _____; (d) skilled at _____.

(Answers: a. unexpected; b. interpret; c. affords; d. competent)

Discuss the following questions:

1. What is the meaning of the article's title? How does it relate to the topic of playground design and use?
2. Why do children often use objects (such as sofas) in ways that the designers did not plan?
3. Do you think children should be restricted or prevented from using an object in ways that are different than the object's main purpose? Why or why not?
4. Have you ever used any everyday objects (e.g., household goods) in ways they were not intended? How did you use them?

言語習得の為の信頼すべき資料の採用

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要点

この論文は英語力の乏しい学習者のための信頼のおける英語資料の平易化（適応化）の問題を考察している。そのような信頼のおける資料は、言語研究のため特別にデザインされた資料よりむしろ鉄道時刻表、内容の特殊なインターネットウェブスターのような実際の生活状況から直接に取った資料として特徴づけられている。平易化の二つの主な形式が示されている。つまり、言葉の平易化と学習課題の平易化そしてそれぞれの形式の賛否両論が略述される。そのような種類の平易化を例証するために、スポーツとコミュニケーションの学部ESPコースで平易化され、適応化された信頼のおける英語学習資料を使ういくつかのサンプルレッスンが略述されている。

キーワード：言語の平易化、ESP、カリキュラムの発展、信頼のおける資料、適応化

原稿受領2011年11月24日
査読掲載決定2012年1月10日