Authentic Texts in EFL Classes

(Kurz DVPP s akreditací MŠMT v rámci projektu ESF

Moderní učitel – pedagogické kurzy pro učitele základních a středních škol
Libereckého kraje CZ.1.07/1.3.03/02.0021)

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Definition, rationale and possible disadvantages

**Authentic texts** = texts written by native speakers for native speakers, not for EFL learners.
- More complex, but natural language
- Can be motivating if properly chosen and used
- Reflect current issues (textbooks cannot do this)

Bertrando (2006, p. 65) also lists the following advantages and disadvantages
- *Contain a wide variety of text types, language styles not easily found in conventional teaching materials*
- *Encourage reading for pleasure, likely to contain topics of interest*
- *Often too culturally biased, difficult to understand outside the language community*
- *Vocabulary might not be relevant to the student’s immediate needs*
- *Too many structures are mixed so lower levels have problems decoding the texts*
- *Can become outdated easily, e.g. news stories, articles.*

Resources
- the Internet (news, recipes, stories, jokes, manuals, film reviews ...)
- Newspapers, magazines (can be bought in the Czech Republic)
- Travel guides, leaflets, brochures, maps, tickets and other documents collected when travelling abroad

Methodology
1) Grade the task, not the text
   - The text itself should not be simplified if it is to remain authentic
   - Teachers can adjust the task to suit the students’ level
2) Focus on non-linguistic features of the text
   - Pictures and photos can serve as a stimulus for speaking activities
   - Dates and numbers can be understood even by beginners
Example: Weather forecast (grading the task)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hour</th>
<th>Weather</th>
<th>Temp. (°C)</th>
<th>Wind (mph)</th>
<th>Humidity</th>
<th>Pressure</th>
<th>Visibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>07:00</td>
<td>Sunny</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>1015mb</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00</td>
<td>Sunny</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>1015mb</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13:00</td>
<td>Sunny</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>1015mb</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16:00</td>
<td>Sunny</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>1014mb</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19:00</td>
<td>Sunny</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>1014mb</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

http://news.bbc.co.uk/weather/forecast/2574

Tasks

Before reading

Teachers introduce the topic that is discussed in the text. It can be very beneficial to start discussing the topic with the students. For the weather forecast, for example, the discussion can be related to the weather in the Czech Republic yesterday and today. Similarly, students can be asked about the weather in other countries and whether they watch or read the weather forecast.

Effects of such questions:

- students start speaking English (which is important, especially at the beginning of a class)
- students revise language structures (grammar, vocabulary) related to the topic. These structures may appear in the text
- students start thinking about the topic

Elementary students:

- What’s the weather going to be like in London on Sunday?
- Do you need an umbrella?

Intermediate students:

- What’s the weather going to be like?
- Will it be sunny all day?
- When will the wind be the strongest?
- Why should some drivers be careful at night?

The text remains authentic, but the teacher chooses such tasks that suit the learners’ level.
Optionally, teachers can introduce new words that occur in the text and that are related to the topic. These should be mainly key words that are necessary for understanding. Other words can be taught after understanding the texts, in the Language analysis phase (see below). If too many words are pre-taught, students may be confused or concentrate primarily on these words, not on understanding.

Furthermore, teachers can ask students to predict the situation/the content of the article, and the subsequent activity will check whether their predictions were right or wrong. For instance, students can try to predict what the weather will be like tomorrow.

**Reading phases**

1. **General comprehension**
   - e.g. What is the text about? What happened in the story? What is the weather going to be like tomorrow? Which picture illustrates what the text is about? etc.
   - Students know what they are reading and what it is about
2. **Language analysis**
   - e.g. Who said ....? How much? How many? When? Where? Why?...
   - students understand the text in detail
3. **More detailed understanding**

When using an authentic text, teachers should design tasks in the following order:

1. Start with a **general comprehension task** – e.g. What is the text about? What happened in the story? What is the weather going to be like tomorrow? Which picture illustrates what the text is about? etc.
   - ✔ Students know what they are reading and what it is about
2. After students understand what the text is about, **more detailed questions** can be asked – e.g. Who said ....? How much? How many? When? Where? Why?...
   - ✔ students understand the text in detail
3. Finally, when students understand what the text is about, **language used in the text can be analyzed**, e.g. new vocabulary that may be useful (students find synonyms or words from
the text that match some the definitions given; guess the meaning of selected words from context, compare and contrast grammar structures used in the text, etc.)

✓ students learn new structures from the text
✓ as they understand the text very well, learning new structures will be easier – they are learning new structures in a context they understand

After reading

Teachers can choose some of the following:

• speaking / discussion: students can discuss what they think about the text, whether they liked the story, or, for example, if the text is an interview with a pop-star, they can roleplay the interview
• writing: students can write something similar (here the original text should be analyzed and understood in detail), they can write an email to somebody telling them about the news they have read in the newspaper, or they can write a text message (up to 160 characters) to a friend telling them to take proper clothes, according to the weather forecast
• grammar/vocabulary practice: the grammar or vocabulary structures can be further practised, students can do some extra exercises
• further research: for example, if students are interested in the topic, they can learn more about it using the Internet at home.

Grading tasks

Tasks should be adjusted to learners’ level. The following factors influence the overall difficulty of a task:

• Previous experience
• Task complexity
• Language (input – the text, language output – how students react/respond)
• Degree of support
### Task difficulty (After Van den Branden 2006, pp.52-3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Simple</th>
<th>Complex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of abstraction</strong></td>
<td>Concrete description (here-and-now)</td>
<td>In other time and space (there-and-then)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree of visual support</strong></td>
<td>Much visual support</td>
<td>Limited visual support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Linguistic context</strong></td>
<td>High level of redundancy, low info. density</td>
<td>Limited level of redundancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of processing</strong></td>
<td>Descriptive (understand info as presented)</td>
<td>Restructuring (reorganizing info)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(What do Ss do with the info?)</td>
<td>Non-verbal reaction (purely receptive)</td>
<td>Limited verbal reaction (writing/talking at copying level)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Modality</strong></td>
<td>Highly frequent words</td>
<td>Less frequent words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(How do Ss answer? What is the outcome?)</td>
<td>Short</td>
<td>Reasonably long</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- A text about children at schools in central Europe will be easier for pupils to understand than a text about a text presenting a general insight into the process of teaching and learning in Britain (level of abstraction).
- Texts supported accompanied by pictures and graphs are easier to understand than texts without any visual support (Degree of visual support).
- Texts in which the same information is repeated many times can be understood more easily than texts that present many different facts (Linguistic context).
- It is easier for learners to interpret what the text is about than to reconstruct a text (e.g. a story), and it is much more difficult for them to compare two or three different information sources, as each of them may present the information in a different way (Level of processing).
- If students are supposed to put pictures representing the plot of a story in order, it is much easier for them than retell the story (Modality).
- If the text comprises words that are frequently used, it is likely to be understood better than a text with low-frequency words (Vocabulary).
- Short texts (a few paragraphs) can be understood more easily than longer texts (three-page stories) – (Text length).
Choice of texts

Berardo (2006, 63) lists the following areas and asks the following questions when choosing an authentic text for reading:

Suitability of Content
Does the text interest the student?
Is it relevant to the student’s needs?
Does it represent the type of material that the student will use outside of the classroom?

Exploitability
Can the text be exploited for teaching purposes?
For what purpose should the text be exploited?
What skills/strategies can be developed by exploiting the text?

Readability
Is the text too easy/difficult for the student?
Is it structurally too demanding/complex?
How much new vocabulary does it contain? Is it relevant?

Presentation
Does it “look” authentic?
Is it “attractive”?
Does it grab the student’s attention?
Does it make him want to read more?

Other factors can be, for example:

- Relevant to student needs and interests
  - Questionnaire / discussion / interview to find out what students are interested in
- Link to what has been discussed in classes
- Content
- Culturally acceptable
- Length
  - If the text is too long, perhaps only a part of it could be used if it remains coherent
- Quality, availability
  - Can the text be reproduced so that all students can read it?
  - Quality of pictures (after copying)
• If students are asked to read it on their computers, will it be available? (some texts may be deleted from the web)
• Copyright issues

Concrete examples

All the below-mentioned techniques illustrate the variety of different tasks that can be designed for different authentic texts. Teachers should always adapt the tasks to suit their learners’ needs and abilities.

Printed newspapers:
• how much the newspaper cost, the date, how many news items there are on the front page
• sections of the newspaper – names of sections, which of them is interesting...
• advertisements – how many ads there are, which products are advertised...

Articles:
• Students choose an article (ideally with a picture), try to read it and then they say what it is about in Czech (they are asked to choose something they already know something about)
• In the article they have chosen, students find numbers and figures and try to find out what these numbers mean. They read the numbers in English, and if they can, they say what the numbers means in English, too.
• For articles with a series of pictures, students can match the pictures and individual paragraphs, or put pictures in order (the pictures are cut beforehand).
• Students match the subheadings and individual sections of the article.
• Students answer general and more detailed comprehension questions.
• With some articles describing a process, individual steps of the process can be printed on separate stripes of paper and students are asked to reconstruct the process.

Some other tips (taken from Cintron 2011)

Supermarket Ads--There are a lot of possible activities using supermarket ads. Here’s a good follow-up for food vocabulary, recipes, etc: Bring in multiple copies of supermarket circulars. Put students in groups of three. Tell each group they are friends planning a dinner party. Each group has $75 to spend. After planning their party, each group elects one student to present to the rest of the class. Once all the groups have presented, ask the class to vote on which dinner party they would most like to attend.

Delivery Menus--You can pick up delivery menus from many Chinese and Indian and restaurants. Others might work too. After reviewing menu/food vocabulary, put students in groups of three or four. The task is for groups to decide collectively on what they will have for
dinner. (You may need to tell your students that in the United States, it is common to order food for everyone to share; the bill is usually divided equally.) Give each student a role card. Possible roles could be: "You're a vegetarian, but you don't like mushrooms or spinach." "You only have ten dollars to contribute to the meal. You really like spicy food." "You love shrimp. You will be very unhappy if your group doesn't order at least one shrimp dish." "You have a sensitive stomach and cannot eat spicy food." After each group decides they should elect one member of the group to participate in a telephone role-play in front of the whole class.

Labels--You can use either food or clothing labels. For clothing labels, simply bring in around seven different garments and hang these in places around the room. Review clothing/laundry vocabulary with the class. Then, give each pair a short worksheet which describes each clothing item (e.g. the plaid Gap shirt, or the wool sweater) and asks the same set of questions for each item. Some possible questions could be: "Are you going to put it in the washing machine, wash it by hand or take it to the dry-cleaners?" "Hot, warm or cold water?" "Are you going to put it in the dryer, hang it up or dry it flat?" or "Does it need to be ironed?"

Simple Comic Strips--White-out the text bubbles. Make multiple copies of the same strip. Distribute one per pair. Students work together to fill in the bubbles while you circulate and assist. Once the students are finished, post their comic strips to allow their classmates to compare with the other versions. You may then want to give them the original for class discussion.

(Free) Bar Postcards--If you live in an urban area in an English-speaking country, you probably know that you can pick up lots of free postcards at your local bar. These postcards advertise merchandise and services. You could bring in multiple copies of 5-10 different postcards and have pairs each select a few of them. Pairs can then answer a series of questions. For example: Describe the picture. What's being advertised? Where is the place located? Would you buy this product or service? Why or why not? (If the postcards are similar enough, you could even have students write up individual descriptions. Then post these descriptions and have the rest of the class decide which postcard is being described.)

You could also try using bills, flyers, classifieds, pictures of signs, recipes, CD inserts or club ads with low-level classes. Just make sure that you provide enough structure by giving specific tasks. Otherwise, you'll run the risk of frustrated students staring blankly at an overwhelming array of information.

Computer-mediated communication, text messages

"My smmr hols wr CWOT. B4, we used 2go2 NY 2C my bro, his GF & thr 3 :- kids FTF. ILNY, it's a gr8 plc."

Translation: "My summer holidays were a complete waste of time. Before, we used to go to New York to see my brother, his girlfriend and their three screaming kids face to face. I love New York. It's a great place."

(Taken from BBC News: Is txt mightier than the word?, 2003)
Such language is normally used on the Internet (chat, forums) and in short text messages. The language usually comprises abbreviations, individual letters and numbers.

Examples:

- 2mrw = tomorrow
- 4U = for you
- CU = see you
- L8 = late
- R = are
- Thx = thanks
- 4ever = forever
- 2nite = tonight
- Gr8 = great
- pls = please
- UR = your
- Wknd = weekend
Activities
First, students can “decipher” the following messages that they may receive from their English-speaking friends:

sry i 4gt 2 fon u.i c u 2mrw  Sorry, I forgot to phone you. I’ll see you tomorrow.
ru goin 2 pub 2nite  Are you going to pub tonight?
hi m8 u k?-sry i 4gt 2 cal u lst nite-y dnt we go 2 c film 2mrw
=Hi mate, are you OK? Sorry I forgot to call you last night. Why don’t we go to see a film tomorrow?

Then, for example, students can respond to the following message:

Hi m8, what r u doin? Can we meet 2nite?

More activities and online resources (updated 31st March 2012)

http://www.funtrivia.com/newflash/trivia.cfm?qid=62800
http://surfsafety.net/acronyms.html
http://www.acronymfinder.com/
http://www.webopedia.com/quick_ref/textmessageabbreviations.asp
References


Useful resources: (updated 31st March 2012)

http://www.world-newspapers.com/ (Links to various online newspapers and magazines)

http://www.bbc.com/


http://www.guardian.co.uk

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal:Pop_music (Links to pop singers and groups)

http://www.imdb.com (International Movie Database – links to the websites of various films, short summaries, information about actors and directors...)

Computer Mediated Communication


Examples of authentic materials (the activities for these materials were discussed in the seminar)

Possible uses:

- **Fossils**
  - Students describe the pictures (→ parts of the animal body, comparative forms)
  - Students read the text (→ reading comprehension, new vocabulary, past tense)
  - Follow-up: Students draw and describe a picture of another dinosaur (→ writing)

- **Family & Attractions**
  - Students describe the pictures (→ there is, present continuous) and talk about what people can do in those places (→ can for possibility)
  - Students read the text (→ reading comprehension, new vocabulary, contact information)
  - Students in groups choose a place for their family holiday / they have to agree on one of the destinations for their group (→ speaking)

- **Shopping**
  - Students discuss what they can see in the pictures (→ vocabulary - food)
  - Students tell the prices of the products (→ money expressions)
  - Students convert the prices into CZK, bring a similar Czech leaflet and compare the prices in the Czech Republic and in the USA (comparatives, writing/speaking)
Hard Hit  Every batter and tennis pro knows the best thwack comes when the ball hits the equipment’s sweet spot. Turns out glyptodonts, giant armored mammals that lived from about 30 million to 10,000 years ago, were using that center of percussion, as the spot is known, to strike hard blows with their battle-ready tails.

Fossil evidence tells us that some of the largest of these armadillo kin wielded spiked clubs weighing up to 140 pounds, joined to the body by a series of bony rings. Now biomechanical studies by Uruguayan scientist R. Ernesto Blanco and colleagues suggest that glyptodont fights didn’t involve random swinging of arms. While smaller species had mobile tails for quick swipes at predators like carnivorous birds, the largest ones had stiffer tails with a sweet spot at or near their prime spike. This morphology allowed the beasts to nail foes while minimizing harmful vibrations to the body joint from the force of impact. The big guys could afford this adaptation, which limited the tail’s speed and range of motion but, Blanco theorizes, offered a particular advantage during slow, ritualized courtship battles over favored females. How sweet is that? —Jennifer S. Holland

At up to two tons, the largest glyptodonts weighed more than a Volkswagen Beetle.

The tail’s sweet spot minimized joint injuries from the impact of blows.
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(Source: The Official Florida Vacation Guide, 2007, p. 64)
(Source: VONS. Ingredients for life. September 2011.)