IMPROVING ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: AUTHENTIC DIGITISED TEXTS VIA E-MAIL ATTACHMENTS

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Abstract

It is interesting to note that the internet has opened up a never-ending supply of authentic, real world, and up-to-date materials into language teaching and learning classrooms. These internet materials have enhanced language learning and teaching in many ways, and have empowered many students to become critical thinkers in learning as a whole. Internet materials that can be utilized in the language learning and teaching classrooms can be derived not only from various reliable websites but also from communication tools like emails, newsgroups and texts, as well as audio and video conferencing. Digitized texts that are obtained via email attachments have proved to be creative resources for language teachers. This paper considers the following: authentic features of digitized texts transmitted via email attachments; the rationale for using these authentic materials in a language classroom; pedagogical considerations to be addressed before the utilization of these texts; and a language teacher's experience in incorporating digitized authentic texts in her language classroom.

Contributions of the Internet to Language Teaching and Learning

Major development in Internet technology has enhanced language learning and teaching in many positive ways. In many language classrooms across the world, the Internet has made language learning and teaching more meaningful, interesting and challenging. The Internet has opened up channels for alternative "means of communicating, informing, and knowing" and this has offered students "new possibilities for learning and connecting with others" (Norton & Wilburg, 2003:5). The ability of Internet technology to cross boundaries of time and space has enabled learning and teaching to take place anywhere, anytime, transforming the classroom environment by providing "connections, communities and context" (December, 1996:23).

One of the major contributions that Internet technology has brought into language classrooms is the inclusion of a massive amount and variety of resources for students' and teachers to choose from. Materials that can be employed in language classrooms are obtained from easily-accessed websites and through various communication tools like emails, newsgroups, and texts, as well as audio and video conferencing via synchronous and asynchronous means. Teaching using materials from Internet has great potential in improving learners' motivation as they are "visually attractive, easy to use, and easy to understand" (Dudeney, 2007:3).

One type of Internet material that is useful for language classrooms is digitally-formatted tests that are shared via email attachments. Like most materials from the World Wide Web (WWW), information in these digital files are presented primarily in graphic form (.jpeg, gif, .bmp, .tif, and .flv files) text (.txt), readable but unalterable documents (.pdf files), and other types of executable files (Excel (excl), PowerPoint (ppt), Notepad etc.). The main purpose of attaching these digitized texts to emails is for the sharing of information with the recipients of emails.

They often contain various types of information ranging from: ways to detect symptoms of lassa fever, pleas for donations, motivating and inspiring stories of human survival or fight against corruption, war, oppression and abuse; as well as warnings on the latest techniques in crime and scams. These digitized texts also include jokes, and images, as well as weird and bizarre occurrences and phenomena. Some of these digitised texts are compiled Internet materials that are organized thematically. Most of the time, the authors of these materials make the effort to sum up various interesting topics into interesting assorted presentations, by combining text, sound, animation and images to evoke interest and to make an impact on email recipients who may then forward these files to others. These files range in size and are highly accessible and adaptable because usually no special software is needed to run or adapt them.

One of the other main features of these files that make them valuable is their high level of authenticity in terms of language, purpose and content. These digitised texts are produced in technologically authentic environment for the purpose of communication. Language is produced as a means to fulfill social purposes and thus language use and content is authentic.

This paper will explore the following:
1. authentic features of digitised texts obtained through email attachments;
2. rationale for using these authentic materials in language classrooms;
3. pedagogical considerations to be addressed before the utilization of these texts; and
4. a language teacher's experience in incorporating digitised authentic texts in her language classrooms.

According to Morrow (1977:13 in Mishan, 2004) authentic texts are texts that contain "a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort … texts that are written for the purpose of communicating information". Little, Devitt, & Singleton (1988:27) stated that authentic texts are texts that are "created to fulfil some social purpose", and they are not written or spoken for language teaching purposes (Tomlinson, 1998) nor produced to "illustrate specific language points" (Mishan, 2004:12). Most of the digitised texts obtained via email attachments fit this description as most are produced by real people conveying real messages to real audience (recipients of emails) using realistic, contextualized language. These texts are not created for the purpose of teaching or learning, but to fulfill various social communicative purposes; which may include to share and spread information, to warn, motivate and inspire, as well as persuade, educate or entertain.

Another feature of these texts that makes them authentic, other than their language and social communicative purpose is the cultural content. These digitised files often contain actual representations of target and foreign culture which according to Mishan (2004), is another feature of authentic texts. Cultural content in these files is not censored nor altered to produce a safe, simplified representation of a certain culture (as found in most textbooks). In other words, the cultural information transmitted through these files is genuine. These files can also be authentic in terms of the topics that they put forward. These topics are presented as they are – sometimes bizarre, remarkable and even taboo. They are not simplified or 'repackaged' to suit classroom use and are presented as they are. This feature makes these digitised files authentic.

Authentic Features of Digitised Texts

Rationale for Using Digitised Authentic Texts

One of the reasons for utilizing these digitised texts in language classrooms is because of the presence of authentic language, so they are unlike the doctored or simplified form found in the textbooks. According to Tomlinson (1998:23), materials at all levels should "provide frequent exposure to authentic input which contains characteristics of authentic discourse in the target language". The use of such texts can sensitise students to the "use of English in the real world" (Wong, Kwok, & Choi, 1995:318). Using authentic texts such as the ones found in digitised format can assist in developing the ability of language learners "to use the target language accurately, fluently, appropriately and effectively" (Tomlinson, 2006:77). Furthermore, exposing students to real world language as found in most digitised texts can help students acquire "an effective receptive competence in the target language" (Guariento & Morley, 2001:347). This is because these materials are produced by real people who are often not expert users of the target language, hence they contain genuine language mistakes. These real language mistakes can be used as interesting materials for the teaching of grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure and provide platforms for classroom discussion on communication problems that could result from the improper usage of the target language. In addition, most of the time, there are similarities in the type and nature of these real errors made in these texts with those produced by students, creating relevance for their inclusion in the language classroom.

Another rationale for using digitised authentic texts transmitted via email attachments is because of its unfiltered cultural information. Mishan (2004:44) advocates the use of authentic texts (like the digitised files sent through email attachments) in language classrooms as they represent the three 'C's – *culture,* as they "incorporate and represent the culture/s of speakers of the target language; *currency*, as they often offer current topics and language use that are relevant to students; and *challenge*, as they are more challenging "yet can be used at all proficiency levels". Digitised authentic texts can expose students to different cultures of target language and the cultures of the users of the target language. According to Mishan (2004), authentic materials can expose students to the actual presentation of a foreign and target culture. As these attachments often contain real messages whose writers' intentions are focused on imparting information or communicating with others, the kind of cultural information that is transmitted thereby is most of the time genuine. Exposing students to such materials may help expand students' perspective of the world and it can be exploited to develop students' inter-cultural competence (Tseng, 2002). In other words, when using these materials, as the cultural content is not filtered and controlled, students are exposed to a diverse collection of cultural representations which may improve their understanding of different cultures, particularly the culture, which marks the starting point for "deeper explorations" (Mishan, 2004:46).

Digitised materials obtainable via email attachments are interesting as they are unlike textbook materials that can be "physically restricted" in terms of topics and amount of materials presented (McGarry, 1995). They may provide exposure to real topics and real perspectives that people have on certain topics or issues. Even though some of these topics and perspectives can be considered taboo and controversial, they have generated great interest during discussions as students often want to share their ideas and thoughts on topics that are typical and rarely discussed. As stated by Mishan (2004:55), "traditionally taboo subjects … are potentially the most engaging and stimulating to learners". This will require students to cross boundaries, be creative and think outside-the-box when analysing the content

of these materials. Integrating them into a language classroom can help increase students' innovation level as authentic materials are often "more interesting and stimulating than artificial and non-authentic texts" (Peacock, 1997:144) and can bring about a positive impact on effective factors like empathy and emotional involvement which according to Mishan (2004), are essential for language learning.

Another interesting feature of digitised materials is the way they are packaged. As the purpose of producing these digitised tests is for authentic communicative reasons, they are often packaged in an interesting way that would be appealing to the email recipients. According to Tomlinson (1998:23), materials at all levels should "provide frequent exposure to authentic input that varies in style, mode, medium". Tomlinson (1998:7) further suggests that materials to be used in the classroom should have these features: "novelty (unusual topics, illustrations and activities)", "variety", "attractive presentation – use of attractive colour", and "appealing content". This description matches the features of most digitised materials transmitted via email attachments. As these authentic materials are often creatively presented, students are often excited when they are utilised in classrooms. As stated by Jensen (1997, as cited in Tileston, 2004), only little intrinsic motivation is needed when learning takes place in an environment that involves the use of various forms of media. Furthermore, the variety of formats in which these materials are used mostly suits different types of learners, thereby making their learning more effective. According to Tileston (2004), about 87% of the learners in a classroom are either visual or tactile learners. Utilising these digitised files in class can benefit the majority of the students who learn mostly through visual representations of information and through direct involvement in the learning process.

With the proper pedagogical approach, these digitised authentic texts can be valuable resources for language classrooms as they can make language learning a meaningful process, because digitised texts often impact language learners' motivation in a positive way. The writer has utilised these digitised materials obtained via her emails in many ways. She has used them as preludes to reading, speaking and writing activities; as an introduction to a new topic; as a conclusion for her lessons; as a way to break classroom monotony; as a tool when teaching a certain language point and also as a catalyst to provoke students to give opinions on a certain issue or subject. These email attachments can build an atmosphere where learning and critical thinking are encouraged; an environment where students are not merely passive receivers of knowledge but active participants in the learning process. Prior to utilisation, however, several pedagogical considerations need to be addressed to ensure a productive outcome.

Pedagogical Considerations

Many teachers may not be interested in using digitised materials from email attachments due to the challenges that they may bring into the language classrooms. Some materials may be unsuitable as they may contain authentic language that is too difficult to be comprehended by students. In a study by Yano, Long, & Ross (1994:193), students found that "authentic texts, in comparison to simplified and elaborated versions, are the most difficult to understand" and according to Williams (1983:1750) an "authentic text with a high level of language will force the students to focus on linguistic codes and not on meaning". In addition to this, digitised authentic texts, as they may be produced by speakers of low or medium proficiency, often contain language of low quality with serious language errors. It is

common to find unsuitable slang, jargon or taboo words used in these digitised texts.

Due to this, the introduction of digitised authentic texts in the language classroom has to be done cautiously. Utilisation of such materials has to be carefully aligned to match learning outcomes. Some digitised texts that contain serious language problems, for example, can still be utilised if focus is placed on highlighting mis-communication problems that may occur due to problems in language. It is quiet risky to introduce an authentic text that contains taboo words; however, if the main content is interesting, relevant and appropriate, a teacher can still use it, but (s)he needs to prepare her students and draw their attention to the main aspect of the text that (s)he wants to highlight.

The level of language difficulty of these materials, most importantly, must match students' level and needs. This is supported by Day (2003:6), who stresses that "in choosing materials for the language classrooms, focus should be placed on the appropriateness of materials to match the abilities and types of learners". Students who are introduced to authentic texts that contain complex presentations of real language need to have a high level of proficiency and sophistication. This is necessary since the use of internet resources (like most digitised authentic texts) "completely depends on reader judgement, which presupposes solid language proficiency and critical reading skills" (Brandl, 2002:88). In most cases, research has suggested that most students who are proficient in the target language are quite receptive and are not easily discouraged when exposed to authentic texts that are one or two levels higher than their own. These challenging authentic language features may train the students to "rise to a challenge" and this can be an experience that can help improve "their confidence and instill a sense of achievement" (Mishan, 2004:60). According to

Mishan (2004), practice in rising to a challenge can encourage students to become risk takers, which according to Oxford (1999), is vital to learning. For students with a low level of proficiency, the use of authentic texts with minimal language errors may lead to satisfactory outcome; however, there are undoubtedly limited choices for these students but it is very important to provide them with accurate examples of the target language (Mishan, 2004).

Another issue that needs to be addressed before the teacher can utilise digitised authentic texts in the language classroom is the trustworthiness of the content of the texts. According to Brandl (2002:88), there is "no control over the quality and accuracy of the information" from the Internet. Ciolek (1996:45) supports this when he states that WWW documents are mostly "unattributed, undated, and unannotated", with the information about the author and publisher often being "unavailable or incomplete". It cannot be denied that trustworthiness of digitised authentic texts is very much in question, most particularly due to the absence of information about the authors who created these texts. Most of these digitised texts are created by anonymous authors whose background is unknown to the receivers. It is not difficult to find many digitised texts containing prejudiced, biased and untrustworthy information on the topics that they highlight. Credibility of the authors and trustworthiness of content of texts are negligible, however, if the reason for using the texts in the language classroom is to focus on improving specific reading, speaking or writing skills, introducing grammar points or new target language vocabulary is necessary. Text trustworthiness may only become significant if the focus in the language classroom is on academic writing, tone and style which would entail the need for trustworthy texts and credible authors. Even then, these digitised texts can still be introduced

as examples of texts that are not suitable for academic writing.

Before utilising digitised authentic texts in the language classrooms, the issue of distorted cultural information needs also be considered. Use of authentic texts, for example, can lead to cultural stereotyping (Guest, 2002). Stereotyping can lead to negative and distorted perceptions of a culture and this may affect learners' level of confidence and integrity. It is therefore vital that teachers highlight the fact that the digitised authentic texts they are using only represent the author's own cultural interpretation. It is thus very important that the teacher has adequate cultural knowledge of the people that the text is representing. If this is not so, she may give the wrong perception of a culture or may confuse the students with the wrong information about a certain culture.

Incorporating Digitised Authentic Texts into the Language Classroom

Incorporating digitised authentic materials can create a positive learning environment if proper pedagogical considerations are addressed prior to utilisation. The next part of this paper will provide four examples to illustrate how digitised email attachments were incorporated into the writers' language classrooms.

Example I: The Story of a Young National Youth Service Corp (NYSC) Member

One of the emails the writer received with the above title was an attachment to her email from a newsgroup called "naijacomm". The learning outcome was grammar relating to adjectives or adverbs that express more in amount, degree or quality (comparatives), and adjectives or adverbs that express the highest degree of something (superlatives). A young girl on NYSC Programme was posted to serve at a school in Edo state and she was assigned to teach the Junior Secondary School Students (JSS) II

students English language. She was directed to start teaching the Comparatives and Superlatives of words. So after a brief explanation on the topic with some examples, she started to call the words and asked the students to complete the rest. E.g, She said "TALL", the students shouted "TALLER, TALLEST". The school principal went to check on the young teacher and met that scene. The teacher continued by saying "FAT" and the students as usual echoed "FATTER, FATTEST". She then said "BIG". They all echoed "BIGGER, BIGGEST". The principal nodded his head in acknowledgement for their excellent performance and said GOOD. The students shouted "GOODER, GOODEST". The principal was surprised and ordered "STOP" and the students echoed "STOPPER, STOPPEST". He became fed up and shouted in anger "QUITE", the students again echoed "QUITER, QUITEST". The students were able to identify the errors, the writer pointed out to the students the differences between comparatives (more in amounts) and superlatives (highest form of something).

Example 2. My Boss and I

Another ditigised material transmitted through email that brought a lot of excitement to the class was the one entitled 'My boss and I'. The writer utilised this as a prelude to a discussion on 'Do not take your boss for granted'. It provoked the students (Office Technology and Management Department) to relate their own experiences and share their own opinions on the matter discussed.

> When I take a long time, I am slow, when my boss takes a long time, he is thorough.
> When I don't do it, I am lazy, when my boss does not do it, he is busy,
> When I do something without being told, I am trying to be smart, when my

boss does the same, he takes the initiative,
When I make a mistake, you're an idiot. When my boss makes a mistake, he's only human.
When I take a stand, I am being bull-headed. When my boss does it, he's being firm.
When I overlooked a rule of etiquette, I am being rude. When my boss skips a few rules, he's being original.
When I am out of the office, I am wandering around. When my boss is out of the office, he's on business.
When I am on a day off sick, I am always sick. When my boss is a day off sick, he must be very ill.
When I apply for leave, I must be going for an interview. When my boss applies for leave, it's because he's overworked
When I do well, my boss never remembers, when I do wrong, he never forgets.

The topic discussed above was quite a serious one but introduction of the document in the classroom injected elements of humor, making the discussion a light but an effective one.

Example 3: Nigerians Never Give Up
This digitized email attachment on "Nigerians Never Give Up" was used in a reading class to inspire students on the need to always try to find a way in any situation they may find themselves in the outside world. Bill Gates organised an enormous session to recruit a new chairman for Microsoft Europe. Five thousand candidates assembled in a large room. One candidate is Ayodele, a Nigerian guy. Bill Gates thanked all the candidates for coming and asked those who do not know Java program (Computer Programme) to leave. Two thousands candidates left the room. Ayodele says to himself, "I do not know Java but I have nothing to lose if I stay. I'll give it a try. Bill Gates asked the candidates who never had experience of managing more than 100 people to leave. Two thousand left the room. Ayo says to himself "I never managed anybody but myself but I have nothing to lose if I stay. What can happen to me? So he stays, then Bill Gates asked the candidates who do not have management diploma to leave. Five hundred people left the room. Ayodele says to himself, "I left school at 15 but what have I to lose? So he stays in the room. Lastly, Bill asked the candidates who do not speak Serb-Croatian to leave, 498 candidates left the room. Ayodele says to himself, "I do not speak Serb-Croatian but what do I have to lose? So he stays and finds himself with one other candidate. Everyone else has gone. Bill Gates joined them and said, "Apparently you are the only two candidates who speak Serb-Croatian, so I'd like to hear you have a conversation together in that language.

Calmly, Ayodele turns to the other candidate and says "Wahala dey o!".
The other candidate answers "Oga na wa o!"
Bill Gates "You are both hired".

Don't you just love Nigerians? Any day, anytime, anywhere, they never give up. So don't give up, u will lose nothing by trying more. The teacher and the students identified the grammar errors and corrected them. However, the students and the teacher appreciated the authenticity of the text.

Example 4: How to Survive a Heart Attack When Alone
This attachment was used by the teacher to help her students (Science Laboratory Technology Class) to finish their assignment on the topic "Scientific Report Analysis". The teacher decided to use this text to teach the

students the need to be systematic when writing a report as Laboratory Technicians.

Let's say its 6.15pm and you're going home (alone of course), after an unusually hard day on the job. You're really tired, upset and frustrated. Suddenly you start experiencing severe pain in your chest that starts to drag out into your arm and up into your jaw. You are only about five miles from the hospital nearest your home. Unfortunately you don't know if you'll be able to make it that far. You have been trained in CPR, but the guy that taught you the course did not tell you how to perform it on yourself. ***How to Survive a Heart Attack When Alone*** since many people are alone when they suffer a heart attack, without help, the person whose heart is beating improperly and who begins to feel faint, has only about 10 seconds left before losing consciousness. However, these victims can help themselves by coughing repeatedly and very vigorously. A deep breath should be taken before each cough, and the cough must be deep and prolonged, as when producing sputum from deep inside the chest. A breath and a cough must be repeated about every two seconds without let-up until help arrives, or until the heart is felt to be beating normally again. Deep breaths get oxygen into the lungs and coughing movements squeeze the heart and keep the blood circulating. The squeezing pressure on the heart also helps it regain normal rhythm. In this way, heart attack victims can get to the hospital. Tell as many other people as possible about this. It could save lives!! A cardiologist says if everyone who gets this broadcast sends it to 10 people; you can bet that we'll save at least one life.

This injected elements of reality into the writer's classroom and helped the writer to authenticate the writing task in her Technical English class.

Conclusion

Digitised materials received through emails can indeed be valuable materials in a language classroom as they are authentic, easily adaptable, and full of engaging content. The authentic features of the digitised materials received via emails bring challenge and surprise into a language classroom, making learning meaningful, fun and motivating. Using these materials in class will provide the students with the opportunity to be exposed to real incidents, opinions and issues. Unaltered content of teaching materials may help these students confront realities in life and make them creative and realistic thinkers. Even though these attachments may also bring unwelcome elements into the language classrooms the writer believes that with the proper application of pedagogical principles and suitable exploitation in class, these materials will create a positive atmosphere in the language classrooms. To ascertain the effectiveness and the usefulness of digitalised authentic texts in the language classroom, it is vital that future research be conducted to obtain concrete evidence on students' perceptions of using such materials in the language classrooms and most importantly, to disclose how digitised authentic materials affect students' language learning.

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