Evolution in Specialty English Education: Authenticity and Information and Communication Technology in the Esl Classroom

Mingguang Liu[1,a*], Shiqian Liu[2,b]

[1]Naval Logistics Academy, Tianjin, China

[2]Hengshui University, Hebei, Hengshui, China

[a]2935267lmg@163.com, [b]384429512@qq.com

*corresponding author

Keywords: Authenticity, Information and communication technology (ict), Esl classroom

Abstract: In general, the concept of authenticity refers to something real, true and genuine. How to apply this concept to the ESL classroom has been a long-term concern related to language teaching and learning. Technology has significantly transformed the way people obtain, receive and process information particularly from the Internet. Technology is also being increasingly used in language teaching and learning. This paper expounds the concept of using authenticity and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to create a new teaching method and learning experience for students.

1. Introduction

In language teaching and learning contexts, authenticity primarily refers to authentic materials that are intended for native language speakers. Nonetheless, authenticity is not only about using authentic materials, but also implementing real-life language usage in the ESL classroom. Applying authenticity can be challenging and rewarding at the same time. Teachers use technology to create brand new teaching styles and learning experiences for students, so that they could learn from a significantly large number of materials and resources because of accessibility and convenience of the Internet. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is applied in education, which means using information and communication technology to achieve optimal transmission and delivery of information in pedagogical settings. There has been a long discussion on benefits and downsides of applying ICT to the ESL classroom. Meanwhile, teachers often attach importance to students' language levels, abilities and discipline problems when considering using ICT in classes.

2. Authenticity Usage in an Esl Class

What are authentic materials? Authentic materials range from literary sources, such as menus, travel brochures, newspapers and magazines, to audio or visual sources, such as TV commercials, documentaries, songs and movies. They are produced within different kinds of social contexts to inform and entertain native language speakers. Nevertheless, they are increasingly used by teachers and language learners for pedagogical purposes.

Selecting authentic materials can be challenging for teachers. It is important that authentic materials match students' levels and objectives of lessons. As Reynolds [1] put it, 'There is no such thing as authentic language data. Authenticity is realized by appropriate response and the language teacher is responsible for designing a methodology which will establish the conditions whereby this authenticity can ultimately be achieved'. Teachers normally choose authentic materials for their classes to create literary, audio or visual experiences for students, as a way to let them immerse in native language

environment. However, authentic materials tend to be much more challenging than textbook materials which are specifically designed for language learners. Teachers often find it difficult to use authentic materials when they teach lower-level classes, since it is impossible for students to comprehend and receive them. Students' learning motivations will undermine if teachers select materials that are too challenging for them, so teachers often apply them to higher-level classes. When using authentic materials for higher-level classes, it is important for teachers to incorporate appropriate techniques and strategies for students to achieve maximum learning results, such as developing students' listening or reading comprehension skills.

Despite challenges of selecting and using authentic materials, there are several benefits using them in the ESL classroom. On one hand, students are exposed to authentic and genuine language usage by native language speakers, even though there might exist mistakes, slangs or jargons in authentic materials. In a broad sense, students are exposed to different cultural representations across various medias. Learning a language is not only about acquiring knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, but also developing cultural perspectives, they are essential because a language is used in different social contexts. On the other hand, there are often many interesting topics derived from authentic materials. It is of paramount significance to create interests in language classes, because it is always important to keep students motivated and engaged. When students are advanced learners, it is important to be exposed to various current events, hot topics or even controversies, to facilitate exciting and meaningful discussions, as a way to not only further improve their listening and speaking skills, but also develop observation, analysis, explanation, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which are important aspects in terms of increasing students' confidence in using the target language, to some extent. Some authentic materials like TV shows, documentaries and films contain both audio and visual elements, which can be stimulating to make students engage all their senses, so that they might perceive and receive information in a more comprehensive manner, to make the learning experience more appealing.

However, authenticity in the ESL classroom does not exclusively refer to applications of authentic materials, it has other implications as well. The most common one is for teachers to create different scenarios inspired by real-life contexts to facilitate usage of real language by native speakers in classes. In this case, the communicative aspect of language learning is of great importance. According to Thomas [2], 'There is no such thing as an abstract quality 'authenticity' which can be defined once and for all, and that authenticity is a function not only of the language but also of the participants, the use to which language is put, the setting, the nature of the interaction, and the interpretation the participants bring to both the setting and the activity.' That is to say, authenticity is realized through interpersonal communications in different situations, since the ultimate purpose of learning a foreign language is to apply it to daily life, like those native speakers. Authentic materials have certain advantages in terms of improving students' reading or listening skills, however, it is always important to apply contents learned from them to oral practices. For instance, if the authentic material is an article on gender equality, apart from reading comprehension, the teacher could be creative designing follow-up activities such as debate on gender equality, mock conference on solving women's problems around the world, and so on. Students could not only develop further understanding on the topic, but also train their speaking skill. In this case, authenticity is achieved through active participation and expression of opinions, as the authentic material is adapted to suit the purpose of real-life usage. For lower-level language learners, teachers could also incorporate the concept of authenticity in classes. For example, the teacher could design a role play activity, in this scenario, suppose one student is a salesperson at a clothing shop, the other student is a customer looking for a dress, and the point here is to approach real-life business environment as closely as possible, even when students practice relatively simple language, it is still very useful.

3. Applying Ict to the Esl Class

There are certain advantages of applying ICT to the ESL classroom. To begin with, ICT could to some extent increase students' interest in learning. ICT represents multimedia with the incorporation of visual and audio elements such as photos, images, motions and sounds, which help students engage their visual and auditory senses, so they could better receive and restore information. Although traditional textbooks contain pictures, they lack stimulating effects which are normally found in multimedia technology. With the dynamic presentation of ICT, students could become more motivated and engaged in learning. Next, ICT might have the potential to develop students' communication competence. 'With teachers' instructions learning students' thought patterns and motivating students' emotions, the multimedia technology seeks integration of teaching and learning and provides the students greater incentives. The PPT courseware activate students' thinking, the visual and vivid courseware rand help them to transform English learning into capacity cultivation [3]. That is to say, ICT could inspire students to be more active learners. They would develop the consciousness to actively participate in discussions or debates to improve their communication skills. Then, ICT has the power to broaden students' horizons. The multimedia provides abundant resources with regard to language and culture. They are much more affluent than textbooks which are very limited in presenting cultural information. It is a good idea that students are immersed in learning culture through technology, although there might be too much information. In the long term, it is always beneficial to integrate cultural elements of a certain language into pedagogy. Last but not the least, ICT to a certain degree contributes to create an authentic language environment. Teachers tend to find online resources which are often regarded as authentic materials intended for native language speakers. They could be used to enhance students' interests in learning the target language and make students immersed in diverse real-life contexts.

However, there are disadvantages in this method. Firstly, the use of ICT in the ESL classroom might reduce interactions between teachers and students. Students might rely exclusively on technology to learn the target language, they might even develop the mindset that ICT could completely help them develop their language skills without aids from teachers. At the same time, there is a discipline problem associated with students' excessive reliance on technology. Teachers could upload materials, resources and lecture notes onto the course website in case that students miss lectures. Unfortunately, some students are frequently absent from classes due to this. Reduction in teacher-student interactions is one of the largest downsides related to the application of ICT in language classes. The guidance of teachers is still necessary, particularly when students are at the early stage of acquiring a language. Secondly, ICT might totally replace traditional language teaching and learning methods. Students might concentrate on their laptops or electronic devices all the time without listening to teachers, even though they are present in every class. This is another discipline problem that some students might not be respectful when using technology in classroom settings. They may spend time on social media websites without paying attention to teachers' instructions nor course contents. This is another setback of ICT in the ESL classroom that has to be taken into consideration. Moreover, even though students pay attention to what they have learn, authentic resources from the Internet might contain grammatical and lexical mistakes. It is better that students at lower levels listen to teachers' instructions to develop solid foundation in grammar and vocabulary before accessing and approaching online resources for native language users. Thirdly, certain information presented on the Internet could be biased and misleading. Take culture as an example. 'Stereotyping can lead to negative and distorted perceptions of a culture and this may affect learners' level of confidence and integrity.'[4]This is the reason why teachers have to learn certain knowledge with regard to topics of selected online resources. ICT has the potential to create stereotypes in certain cultural perceptions. It is important for teachers to be objective and fair, so that students from different cultural backgrounds could enjoy learning a foreign language.

Teachers have to take students' language levels into account when they apply ICT to the ESL

classroom. For a beginner class, teachers could incorporate visual elements from multimedia technology into course contents. It is impossible for students at the beginner level to read literary resources and listen to fast speaking video clips of the target language. Therefore, effective use of online visual resources could be beneficial when learning vocabulary. It is also possible that teachers use a simple song to teach a certain grammar topic, it could be interesting. For an intermediate class, teachers could begin to incorporate both visual and audio resources from multimedia technology. They could also choose relatively simple readings as authentic materials for students. However, it is important not to overwhelm students with too difficult learning contents. For an advanced class, there would be much wider selection of resources from multimedia technology. Students could attempt to read more challenging authentic materials and listen to fast speaking video clips. It is still necessary to create both visual and audio experiences for students to keep them engaged. Nonetheless, it is essential for teachers to inform students about mistakes and possible biased presentations in online resources, so that students could achieve optimal learning through multimedia technology.

4. Conclusion

1) Authenticity in the ESL classroom deserves recognition and applicability. It not only refers to authentic materials, but also usage of real-life language in classes. It is important for teachers to select appropriate authentic materials and design corresponding effective activities to suit needs and interests of their students. One learns a foreign language in order to use it in realistic contexts, that is why incorporating the notion of authenticity in language learning environment is becoming increasingly important. Thus, language education should always emphasize the communicative aspect of teaching and learning.

2) ICT plays an increasingly important role in ESL teaching and learning. It has transformed the way one learns a language through multimedia. However, ICT could not completely replace teachers' instructions, since they are always important in language education. ICT could be used as supplements to enhance students' language learning enjoyment.

References

[1] Alexandra Reynolds. "Authenticity in Intercultural Virtual Exchange", Conference: Virtual Exchange and 21st Century Education, At Léon, pp.10-14, September 2019.

[2] What Makes Materials Authentic, [online] Available: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED391389.pdf

[3] Shyamlee, S. "Use of Technology in English Language Teaching and Learning: An Analysis", International Conference on Language, Medias and Culture IPEDR, vol.33, pp.150-156, 2012.

[4] Deni A, Zainal Z. "Authentic Materials for the Language Classroom: Digitised Texts via Email Attachments", The English Teacher, vol. 38, pp. 111-121, 2009.