

### What are texts in the classroom for?

The idea that language students should read in class is so deep-rooted that we all too rarely stop and actually think about just why it is that texts are so important for us. What function do texts in the classroom serve?

One problem for teachers is the fact that the role of texts has changed a lot over the years. Under a **Grammar Translation** approach, for example, texts - and particularly literary ones - provided the bulk of the raw material that was to be translated into students' L1. As the translation was being done, grammatical points of interest were explored and lists of new words encountered in the texts could subsequently be memorised. Later on, texts started being used as the main way of presenting grammar, and were often severely tweaked to ensure that they contained as many examples of one particular structure as possible.

More recently, due to the influence of **Communicative Language Teaching**, there has been a swing back to authentic texts. This time, however, the focus has been less on using these texts to teach specific linguistic items and more on using them to help students practise skills. The logic behind this is that in the real world, students will encounter ungraded texts and thus must learn strategies and survival techniques for dealing with them. Such skills include things like reading for gist or the general idea, reading for specific information, guessing unknown words using contextual clues, following cohesive devices such as linkers, pronouns and so on. Texts, as they are featured in the majority of coursebooks, therefore, are predominantly a vehicle for exercising and developing 'skills', though they clearly also serve to introduce new language and perhaps to bring some humour or 'culture' into the classroom.

We think, however, that there are a number of problems with the status quo. Firstly, there is the fact that students themselves tend not to see things in quite this way. Students will almost always read with a pen in hand and tend to see texts in the classroom as being another means by which they can acquire new language. A second problem is the fact that there is little evidence to actually suggest that reading in one's first language can be divided up into the kind of sub-skills outlined above. Added to this is the fact that second language research suggests that students are quite capable of transferring the skills they have in their first language over into L2. This would explain why, for instance, I am quite capable of finding the film review section in a Polish newspaper, say, or a source in an index of a Turkish academic book. The problem, of course, is in actually understanding the words I then find there! The real impediment to second language reading is a lack of language rather than a lack of skills!

It follows on from this that one of the main reasons for using texts in the second language classroom should be to expose students to, and help them learn, lexis which will be useful to them should they read or talk about a topic connected to the theme of the text again. However, this is where the idea that 'authentic' texts are always the best kind of text becomes problematic. As early as the late 1970s, Henry Widdowson was calling into question just what was meant by 'authentic' in the context of English Language Teaching, given that many such texts clearly had no authentic reason for being in a language classroom.

## Teaching with *Innovations* – Module 1: Teaching Reading

'Authentic' texts are written with a very particular group of readers in mind. Those readers tend not only to be fluent users of the language, but they also come to the text with cultural assumptions, background knowledge and so on. This is why such texts can gloss over matters that in a classroom often need detailed explanation. It is taken for granted that 'authentic' readers will come equipped with a frame of reference relating to the time, history, source, writer and so on of texts that second language learners can never hope to possess. Such texts are clearly NOT authentically written for classroom use.

The notion that ploughing through authentic texts helps students actually deal with texts outside the classroom is also a spurious one. In all other walks of life, we take it for granted that the best preparation for the real thing is NOT the real thing itself, but practice exercises, dry runs or mock rehearsals, etc. A boxer training for a big fight would become severely disheartened were they thrown into the ring from day one. Instead, boxers work on a whole range of different techniques and skills, all of which feed into their ability to fight when the need arises. Authentic texts often overwhelm students with their sheer density of new language and cultural baggage. This is not good preparation for the real world. One of the main reasons for using texts in the classroom should, therefore, be to make sure students meet *useful* language within them, and to make sure that language is, if at all possible, recycled over time.

Another reason for using texts in class is to stimulate debate. If you were to ask teachers which texts they've enjoyed using the most in class and why, the status of a text's 'authenticity' would be very unlikely to come into play. Teachers like texts that act as a springboard to discussion, that get their students going, that are memorable. Ironically, if we want to stimulate these kinds of 'authentic' responses to things we read (for, after all, this is how we read in the real world; we read and are outraged or amused or entertained or reminded of anecdotes, and so on), then 'inauthentic texts' work far better. By this I mean texts written specially for the classroom and NOT taken directly from native-speaker sources such as magazines or newspapers. Good classroom texts include a broad range of opinions or they touch on a whole host of different issues which can then be discussed in more detail by students.

The best kinds of texts to use in the language classroom are those that are appropriately graded at - or just above - the students' level. They don't contain too much new language, especially obscure new language. On top of that, they should avoid references to things, people or events which are too time-bound, place-bound or culture-bound. Instead, these texts should focus on stories which are of universal human interest, stories which contain characters that are easy to relate to, and stories which provide some entertainment from time to time. As we shall see elsewhere, the discussion that arises from reading texts in class can also be a source of useful new linguistic input in its own right.

Hugh Dellar – September 2006