Enhancing Student Engagement through Authentic Materials in a Chinese Classroom

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Abstract

Authentic materials are defined as samples that reflect a naturalness of form and an appropriateness of cultural and situational context used by native speakers. Authentic texts give students direct access to the culture and allow them to communicate meanings in purposeful ways rather than demonstrate knowledge of grammar points and lexical items. Authentic materials encourage and motivate language students to conquer a real text and help them to expose to languages used in the real-life situation. The trick to implement authentic materials in the language class is not to edit and grade the "text", but to edit the "task" according to the students' abilities. In this article, the author gives four examples of how to implement authentic materials into a beginner level Chinese class. Through the examples, not only do students learn the target language efficiently, but they will also be able to demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture comparison of the culture studied and their own. The use of authentic materials increases students' motivation and results in a more positive attitude towards the target culture.

Keywords: implementing authentic materials, culture comparison, real-life situation,

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Today I spent another 3 hours browsing the Internet. I found some photos, a website and several videos on YouTube. Yes, it is so time-consuming! Why can't I just ask the kids to count from one to ten and tell me their age? Is the video about a Taiwanese family celebrating the birthday of a little girl important? What do Chinese number gestures have anything to do with kids who live a million miles away in the States?

Introduction

In the context of teaching foreign languages and cultures, authentic materials have been defined as samples that reflect a naturalness of form and an appropriateness of cultural and situational context that would be found in the language as used by native speaker. There has been an increasing trend towards their incorporation into foreign language and cultural classrooms for the past twenty years (Erbaggio, Gopalakrishnan, Hobbs & Liu, 2012). According to Melvin and Stout (1987), fully exploited, authentic texts give students direct access to the culture and allows the students to use the new language authentically, to communicate meaning in purposeful situations rather than for demonstrating knowledge of a grammar point or a lexical item.

After playing the YouTube video, Most Lucky and Unlucky Numbers for Chinese People (Off the Great Wall, 2013), one of the 4th graders yelled loudly "No, I was born on April 14th" (the most unlucky number in Chinese culture is number 4). I had to comfort him and tell him

that "it's OK. Relax! You are not Chinese." Not until that moment had I realized that the video could have such a huge impact on the students.

Using Authentic Materials in the Foreign Language Classroom

There are some arguments suggesting authentic materials may be too culturally biased. There are many headlines, adverts, signs, and so on that might require good knowledge of the cultural background (Tamo, 2009). Too many structures are mixed causing lower levels language students to have a hard time decoding the texts. Besides, the vocabulary of authentic materials might not be relevant to the students' immediate needs. Polio (2014) pointed out that one of the most difficult aspects of using authentic materials with beginners is finding interesting and accessible materials. Moreover, the materials can become quickly outdated. Some teachers have said that using authentic materials takes up too much time. Erbaggio et al. (2012) suggested that students may experience anxiety when faced with authentic materials. Students may also experience frustration when they are unable to understand authentic language input, which may negatively impact their receptiveness to authentic materials.

Authentic materials should be used according to students' ability and suitable tasks can be given to learners in which total understanding is not important (Tamo, 2009). Authentic materials reflect real-life situation students may face in a foreign language-speaking environment. They are also encouraging and motivating when students realize they can conquer a real text. Although it will take some work to find and incorporate authentic

materials in addition to taking class time to help students through the materials, students will benefit from exposure to language as how it is really used.

Language and culture are inseparable. Through online authentic materials, I can create effective learning environments by making learning more social, enjoyable and meaningful. When students learn the games I used to play when I was their ages, I know that it is not a dull or mechanical lesson. I know they can share the same experience with children in Taiwan/China.

Implementing Authentic Materials

Authentic materials make a significant contribution to bridging the distance between language learners and the target culture by linking students to other language speakers and to target language texts (Sanchez-Lopez, 2006). They prepare learners for real life, meet learners' needs and affect learners' motivation positively. The use of authentic materials is associated with the development of the communicative approach in language teaching. Matsuta (1998) emphasized the importance of implementing videotaped materials in a second language classroom. Videotaped materials offer more clues for comprehension to the students than other materials because of the visual contexts and nonverbal clues, such as gestures and facial expressions. He further explained that using authentic materials not only is effective in teaching the target language but also in teaching the target culture. Video programs from the target country provide a rich source of information about the target culture, including a

country's verbal and nonverbal ways of communicating.

Authentic materials might be difficult for language learners, especially beginners. The trick is not to edit and grade the "text", but to edit the "task" according to students' abilities. Melvin and Stout (1987) suggested that the best way to reduce the initial anxiety is to design exercises that draw the students' attention to things in the text they will understand. Teachers can help students realize that they can interact productively with a text that appears at first to be too difficult. As Gilmore (2011) commented, authentic materials offer a much richer source of input in the classroom and have the potential to raise learners' awareness of a wide range of discourse features and more likely to encourage the development of a broader range of communicative competencies in learners. Below are examples showing how to implement authentic materials into a beginner level Chinese class.

Children's Newspaper in Chinese

The purpose of using this authentic material, Figure 1, of a children's newspaper in Taiwan, is for students to identify numbers in Chinese characters. Students will also recognize the fact that Chinese was written in vertical columns from top to bottom traditionally. Chinese write the dates in the order of year, month and then day (年/月/日). In Chinese culture, the week normally starts on Monday.



Figure 1. An example of a children's newspaper from Taiwan.

Comparing the Tally Systems

The character "正" consists of five strokes, as demonstrated in Figure 2. Chinese use "正" to mark numbers when voting, scoring or ordering food. According to ACTFL Standards for Foreign language Learning 4.2, students who learn a foreign language should be able to demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparison of the culture studied and their own. When doing class activities, the teacher can ask the students to use Chinese tally marks, as shown in Figure 3. Using the tally system to count numbers also aligns with Standard 3.1, which is to connect other disciplines through the foreign language.



Figure 2. Stroke order of the character "正".

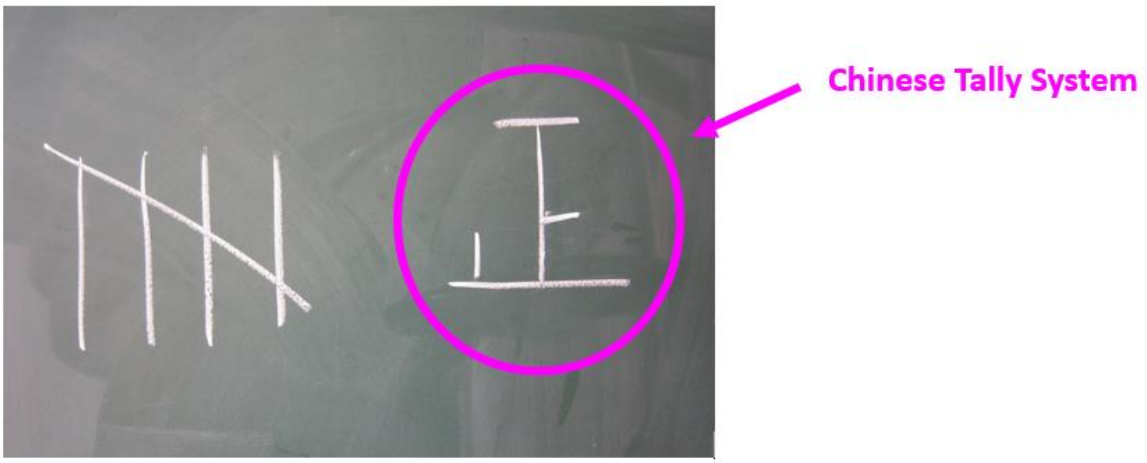


Figure 3. Western tally marks versus Chinese tally marks.

Gestures for Chinese Numbers Chinese tend to use one hand to signify the numbers from one to ten. This method, as demonstrated in Figure 4 (Lu, 2012), may have been developed to bridge the many varieties of Chinese—for example, the numbers 4 and 10 (四, 十) are hard to distinguish even among Chinese. Some suggest business people also use this practice when bargaining if they wish for more privacy in public.



Figure 4. An example of gesturing Chinese numbers.

Invitations

In addition to learning the various ways to greet people during Chinese New Year, to address people in a Chinese letter format and obtain simple information from the letter, there are a few culture elements embedded invitations. This may be wedding, anniversary or birthday party invitation. For example, looking at Figure 5, a Chinese New Year party invitation, student will learn that year 2001 is the year of the rabbit in Chinese zodiac. The color red represents happiness, joy and good fortune. Chinese people are very creative in terms of weaving the meaning and pronunciation of words from different languages ("兔" is pronounced as "tù". Here, the designer borrows the character "兔" to symbolize the year of rabbit and it also sounds like Happy New Year "to" you.)



Figure 5. A Chinese New Year greeting card

When *I see the excitement appearing on the students' faces, I know the magic comes from using authentic materials. I enjoy answering questions about my people, country and*

culture. I feel a satisfaction beyond description, the satisfaction from both the students and myself.

Conclusion

Deeper learning occurs when learning is social, active, contextual, engaging and student-owned. Such learning maximizes students' internalization of the taught knowledge and skills, and results in a meaningful understanding of material and content (Polio, 2014). Authentic materials stimulate students' interest and motivation, expose students to different styles of expression and offer them a window into another culture (Martin, 2012). Bringing authentic materials into the classroom can be motivating for the students, as it adds a real-life element to the student's learning experience. The use of authentic materials is significant since it increases students' motivation for learning, explores the learners being exposed to the real language and reflects the changes in the use of a language (Berardo, 2006). In addition, the use of authentic materials results in a more positive attitude towards the target culture. It allows students to connect with the target culture in a more personal way rather than through someone else's narrative. Once students are outside the safety-controlled language-learning environment, the learners will not encounter the artificial language of the classroom but connect to the real world and already have some insight into how the language is really used.

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