

Utilizing Authentic Texts in the Conversation Classroom

Randall Cotten

Abstract

The use of appropriate authentic materials can be highly motivational for students in carrying out meaningful tasks in the foreign language classroom. In addition, such materials provide valuable exposure to real-world language models which, while potentially challenging, nevertheless give language learners useful models that can prepare them to communicate outside of the classroom. The practical classroom activities outlined below give several examples of how, over multiple lessons, students interacted with various types of authentic texts to create extended output in the target language. Suggestions for further uses of authentic materials are also provided.

Keywords : EFL, authentic materials, critical thinking, online learning

Utilizing Authentic Materials

When it comes to selecting materials for use in the classroom, teachers of English as a foreign language have many resources available to them. Traditionally, textbooks published by established publishing companies are chosen largely because of the structured syllabus and graded practice activities they provide to both the instructor and the learner. These features make textbooks a convenient choice for teachers, but no single textbook can provide everything learners need. Textbooks are continually revised to keep up to date, but cannot always provide the most recent or relevant language content for classroom use. Thus, it is natural for instructors to supplement textbook content with additional reading texts or practice activities based upon the needs of their students and the teaching aims.

Depending on the textbook, language models are not always those which occur in the “real world.” While there is some debate about how much naturally occurring language models should be incorporated into the syllabus, there is a large consensus among language teachers that authentic materials are an important component in the foreign language learning classroom. Those who uphold the use of authentic materials claim that language models created specifically for learners may not prepare them well enough to deal with the language they encounter in everyday life outside the classroom. The argument is that, in order to prepare learners for real-world

contexts, they need exposure to authentic materials (Nunan 54). Purgason (419) goes as far as to say that authentic materials should be used as often as possible. In the reading classroom, research has shown that authentic materials give learners ideal models of language (Haverson 187). In addition, authentic reading materials have been shown to increase learner motivation (Lynch and Hudson 218). Due to the potential difficulties in comprehending naturally occurring language, exposing students to “real language” is educationally viable as long as it is used in context (O’Keefe, et al 26). Based on these findings, carefully selected authentic materials would be of great benefit in preparing students for real-world communication.

Lesson Background

In a second year English Conversation course at a women’s junior college in Japan, students practice talking about various conversational topics with the aim of improving their fluency and knowledge of the language. The topics they practice talking about typically include ones such as jobs, family, food, travel, etc. The textbook for the course includes example conversations which serve as models for the types of conversations the students are expected to produce on their own. The text also includes grammar focus points along with practice exercises to reinforce the target grammar, as well as vocabulary building exercises. However, what is often lacking in the

textbook activities is practice in up-to-date topics through authentic texts which may be of interest and practical use to the students.

In the activities described in this article, students had already covered the initial parts of a unit on travel. They had practiced model dialogs, completed vocabulary building activities, and studied fundamental grammar structures which would help them to talk about a future imaginary trip somewhere. It was at this point that it was decided to introduce the topic of Airbnbs to the students. This topic was chosen because, while it might be quite unfamiliar to many of the students, it was potentially a topic that would be of great interest to them. Additionally, it would lend itself to using authentic materials for language models.

When traveling, especially overseas, most Japanese students would most likely imagine staying in a hotel which is close to their destination, with a focus on visiting popular sightseeing venues and going shopping for things which they might not be able to buy in their home country. As an alternative, staying in an accommodation using Airbnb offers an opportunity to enhance the adventure of traveling overseas. Yet, most students are unfamiliar with this service, and, consequently, know very little about its advantages or potential areas to be careful of when using it. In addition, since Airbnb is an online service accessible through a website and an app, finding and selecting a desirable place to stay lent itself to exposure to real-world English online.

Airbnb in Japan

Knowledge among the students about Airbnb was found to be relatively small despite its early success in Japan. Airbnb, which began in 2007 as a small independent operation in San Francisco, now connects over 1.5 billion travelers and accommodation owners across the globe (“Airbnb in Japan: More Places”). After its initial introduction in Japan, Airbnb quickly grew to be quite popular. The community of Airbnb owners in Japan saw a 200 percent growth and was predicted to bring stiff competition to the hotel industry and possibly even become more popular than traditional inns (“Traveling to Japan”). However, in 2017, due to changes in Japan’s regulation of “private lodgings” (*minpaku*), many listings on Airbnb Japan had to be withdrawn (“Airbnb in Japan:

Ultimate Guide”). Before the new regulations took affect, there were 62,000 Airbnb listings in Japan, but this number dropped to 2,210 by 2018 (Sugiura). These days, Airbnb is making a comeback in Japan with more listings, but the forced decrease in their number at one point most likely affected the general public’s knowledge of Airbnb in this country.

By way of an introduction to Airbnbs, students were given a reading for homework (c.f., Whitmore). The reading gave a brief explanation of what kind of service Airbnb is, and explained various pros and cons to be aware of when using Airbnb to find a place to stay overseas. Overall, the text provided enough basic information to help students get a general understanding of how to use the service and what to be careful of. However, it was felt that the reading had many slang expressions in it which somewhat detracted from the explanation, so it was slightly edited to make the content more readily understandable.

Consolidating Information and Sharing Ideas

Students were given one week to read the text and, if necessary, find more information on their own (i.e., articles written in Japanese) in order to understand both the concept of the Airbnb service as well as its advantages and disadvantages. Some suggested links were uploaded to the classes’ online learning platform to help them get started on further research if they desired to do so. In order to assess their understanding of the content and to prepare them for discussing the reading in a subsequent class, students were given the assignment of summarizing the content of the article by making a list of four pros and cons of Airbnbs. Then, to activate their critical thinking skills, students were asked to write their opinions about Airbnbs by giving their reasons for why they might choose or not choose to use the Airbnb service to find a place to stay at a future imaginary destination.

In the subsequent class, a PowerPoint presentation was first given in order to review the basic premise behind Airbnbs. This review was used as a starting point in order to ensure that everyone was familiar with the topic they were about to discuss. Students were reminded that Airbnb is a service which helps connect property owners who wish to make their homes available on a short term basis with travelers looking for an

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interesting place to stay while on vacation. Most travelers who chose to use an Airbnb are somewhat more adventurous than the typical hotel-staying traveler who perhaps does not like surprises. One advantage of using an Airbnb is that, when staying in places that are not so tourist-oriented, travelers may be able to find an Airbnb to stay at when there might not be other alternatives. In Japan, *minshuku* are an option in many rural areas and, while not being as popular as more tourist-oriented lodgings, do offer a place to stay, often with a family, that allows travelers to get a feel for the local culture. There is also the opportunity to meet and talk to people in the local area – something that is often missing when one chooses to stay in a hotel. As most students are familiar with the concept of *minshuku* in Japan (even though many students have never stayed at one), using this comparison helped them to get a better grasp on what staying at an Airbnb could be like.

The next step was to have students discuss in small groups the advantages and disadvantages of using an Airbnb when traveling overseas. This step helped students to consolidate their comprehension of the reading text assigned for homework. The assignment asked students to paraphrase the information in the article – not just copy it verbatim – to complete the task. Paraphrasing is useful for students to check their own comprehension of the article because, in order to rephrase information using other words, it is first necessary to have a firm grasp of its meaning. By comparing their summaries of the main points in the reading, students were able to check with other students their own comprehension of the content and revise their answers when necessary. At the end of the summary discussion stage, students were called upon to state the pros and cons of using an Airbnb. These were written in note form on the whiteboard. Students were asked to write down these points and use them as they moved on to the next phase of the activity.

After checking their summaries, groups were asked to have a short opinion sharing session in which members were able to voice their own feelings about using an Airbnb. Each group was asked to compile the opinions in their group. A spokesperson from each group was chosen, and she reported to the class the general consensus in their group. These opinions were also written down on the whiteboard so that students could note

them down and use any new or useful ideas in the next stage of the activity. The opinions were quite varied. Many students stated that they would not wish to use an Airbnb due to the difficulties in reserving one online and potential problems caused by communication with the owners. Conversely, other students were very interested in the potential of meeting and talking to local people at their destinations or were interested in the adventure that such a novel approach to lodgings offered.

Bringing the Text to Life

Following the previous discussion activity, it was decided to make further use of the content that students had studied. Part of the textbook unit that they had already practiced introduced two types of conversational grammar forms: those which are used for talking about definite plans ('going to' + verb), as well as expressions used for talking about necessity ('must,' 'ought to,' 'had better' etc.). In order to give further practice in using those forms, an extension activity was devised.

In this activity, the students were put into pairs and a conversation task was assigned to them. The task asked students to create a dialog in which one person was planning to go on a trip overseas, and the other one would give her advice. One condition was that the second student had already been to the country her partner was planning to visit. In addition, she had made use of an Airbnb lodging while she had been there. In essence, the second person would be an "expert" both in regards to places she thought her partner should visit and about staying in an Airbnb. Together, the students needed to collect specific information about the destination one of them would ostensibly visit. This information would be used by the so-called experienced partner who had previously visited the country. Since the whole class had already learned about the pros and cons of staying in an Airbnb, no further research would be necessary for this component of their conversation. As this was a take-home assignment, students would have plenty of time to gather enough useful and interesting information to put in their dialogs about visiting the country.

In the following class, students were given time to practice and revise their dialogs as necessary. No memorization of the dialogs was required; however,

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students were instructed to know their lines well enough so that they would not need to rely too heavily on reading from their prepared dialogs. This assignment was also used as preparation for the students' quarterly speaking assessment and, as such, students were expected to follow instructions, prepare carefully, and spend an adequate amount of time practicing their dialogs. Each pair presented their dialogs in front of the class, with the other students acting as audience members. In addition to the assessment given by the teacher, students who were listening to their classmates' conversations were given a feedback form on which they were asked to choose one conversation that they enjoyed the most. Criteria for choosing their favorite dialogue was only loosely determined by the instructor. Students were simply asked to choose one pair, make a few notes of something they learned from the dialog, and give some additional positive feedback comments. When all students had presented their dialogs, the feedback forms were distributed to those pairs who had been selected by their classmates.

Grading and Selecting the Best Location

As a variation to the conversation activity outlined above, a different project for using the Airbnb topic was designed in which students decided on a destination that they might wish to go to in the future, then use the Airbnb website to select an actual place that they would be comfortable staying at. This project required students to spend a significant amount of time outside of class looking at various details about places to stay. Students were given a set of parameters to work within: they needed to decide the length of their stay, determine a budget for how much they could spend on their lodging, research the location of the Airbnb in relation to shops, restaurants, sightseeing venues and transportation hubs. It was also suggested that students might want to find out whether they would be the only guest at the establishment or whether they might be staying with other guests and/or the family. In addition, to help in the selection process, they were instructed to choose five potential Airbnb listings and read the reviews by people who had stayed there in the past. In their selection of the overall best place to stay, students were asked to include a few comments from the reviews that they had read, especially those

comments that proved to be decisive factors in choosing their final selection.

Students were given a form to fill in all of the information for five different Airbnb lodgings. On the form were two tasks for the students to complete: give a grade or rank to each of the five places on a scale of 1 to 5; and write a description of one place that they would choose to stay at along with reasons for their decision in comparison to the other possibilities. As no one particular place would be the perfect place to stay, students instructed to summarize the advantages and disadvantages of choosing that lodging. Since students would not actually be looking for a place to stay on their next vacation, they were told that this was solely a fact-finding task to see how well they could gather important information that would help them make a decision. If they had difficulty finding all of the information or might need to contact the owners directly to learn more details, they could leave those facts out of the description. While this was a hand-in assignment, it would be possible to have students share their comparisons of different Airbnb listings in a group activity. Points to include in such an activity would be to have students explain their decision making criteria, comparing two or three of their top selections and talk about what led them to make their final decision.

Further Extension

Reviews by experienced customers can be a vast resource for classroom activities. In the second variation of the activity described above, students were instructed to read reviews of people who had actually stayed at various Airbnb locations to help them decide where they might like to stay. In everyday life, it is quite common to read customer reviews of products, places and services to help in making a decision along with one's own personal preferences. Similar activities which make use of customer reviews could be used for classroom activities in which students to make decisions about making purchases, planning vacations, or which eating establishments they might like to go to. The use of authentic materials taken from online sources are a reflection of what we do outside of the classroom and cannot only create in-class motivation for carrying out tasks, but are a fruitful source of natural language

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examples which can be exploited by the instructor in a variety of ways.

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