

The Use of Instructional Materials in English Language Classroom

Dr.SamahBenzerroug

Départementd'anglais

ENS Bouzaréah

Abstract

The paper aims at presenting and explaining the use of the most essential instructional materials in EFL classroomand its impact on students' autonomy. It aims also at highlighting the importance of using authentic materials and the basic criteria for selecting the appropriate ones for the teaching and learning process according to the learners' different characteristics as thinking about the aid and its preparation may be more valuable than the aid itself. Therefore, the present study evolves around the following question:How can EFL teachers use instructional materials in the classroom effectively and make them relevant and meaningful to the students?

Introduction

The success of the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language is determined by a number of factors such as the teacher, the learner, the methods and the teaching aids used in that process .Many EFL teachers complain about their students' lackof motivation, participation and critical thinking in class , however ; these teachers can adopt various strategies that can be useful and helpful in language teaching among which the use of instructional materials. Teaching materials are important tools for teachers and a key component in most language programs . They serve as the basis for

much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom.

Therefore ,using various kinds of instructional materials in the classroom has always been a challenge, and a large part of this challenge in becoming better at teaching is getting to know the range of tools available ,what they are called ,how they work and most importantly when and how to use them accurately and effectively. Moreover,in the light of technological development in education and with the growing needs of learners to use English as ‘*an international language*’,educational systemsaim to promote changes in the national curriculum and to motivate ,encourageand effectively inform teachers to develop,design and exchange teaching materials which have now an important impact on students’ autonomy .

Indeed, the role of the teacher today has changed a lot .Traditionally , the teacher’s task has been ‘*to fill*’ the minds of students with ‘*true*’ knowledge . The teacher was the only authority that gave information and students were supposed to receive information and give their knowledge back to the teacher through diagnostic evaluation which ‘*provides information on the learners’ achievement*’(Brindley 2001:137) . However, in today’s world, the teacher must go beyond knowledge transmission. The change of the role of the teacher is conditioned by the development and implementation of instructional materials in the classroom. So, the classroom becomes a ‘*multidimensional environment*’ which is difficult to manage by the teacher. This type of environment is learner-centered as learners ‘*see themselves as being in control of their own learning rather than as passive recipients of content provided by the teacher or the textbook*’ (Nunan 2004:67) . The teacher should develop a sense of responsibility in his learners and

learners, in their turn, should know where responsibility ends and where autonomy starts because the efficiency of teaching depends on learners' motivation to be autonomous (Scharle and Szabó 2000: 4).

Learners' autonomy is defined as the ability to take charge of one's own learning. According to Edge and Warton (1998 : 298) *'the teaching materials that are controlled by the institution may limit the amount of investment and involvement that students can have in the learning process'*. To overcome this problem, teachers should encourage students to find and bring to class texts, their favorite English songs or stories , or any piece of information on topics that are of interest to them. By choosing the materials themselves, students are starting on the road to autonomous learning.

The teacher plays an indispensable role by acting as a facilitator and modifying material for the students when necessary ,he should not spend too much time and energy preparing or conducting activities that students can accomplish themselves . By inviting students to seek materials from different sources, the teacher constructs an environment where students complete tasks by themselves (ibid.299).

1-The Importance of Using Instructional Materials in EFL Teaching and Learning

The EFL teacher should own sufficient audio-visual teaching aids . This sufficient ownership of the teaching aids should result in the students' sufficient practice of English language because *' audio visual aids have the following advantages :(a) they can brighten up the classroom and bring variety and interest into the lessons (b) they can help to provide the situations which may be used to illustrate linguistic items (c) aural aids can give the*

students the opportunity of listening and imitating native speakers (d) they can stimulate both children and adults to speak the language not only to read it and write it ' (Venkateswaran 1995:173) .Both students and EFL teachers are aware of using visual aids in EFL teaching/learning process .They strongly agree that instructional equipments have a great importance .Using instructional materials will help the teacher achieve his explicit and implicit objectives .Moreover , visuals will help students who have difficulties with listening and attending, understanding and responding ,following instruction and routines, anxiety and resistance to change , social isolation and shyness. Visual aids are essential for all successful presentations .They add impact and interest to the lesson and increase the audience's understanding and retention level .For example, with pictures ,the concepts or ideas presented by the teacher are no longer simply words ,but words plus images. The importance of using instructional materials in EFL teaching and learning process can be summarized in the following points:

a- Using materials guides and supports teacher with practical suggestions for more fruitful activities.

b-They can be used as rich renewable resources(tools)to refresh textbook materials.

c- They help students to learn new information faster and retain it longer.

2-The Use of Authentic Materials

The term “*authentic*” has been used as a reaction against the prefabricated artificial language of materials used in EFL teaching and learning. According to Widdowson (1976: 166) ‘*authenticity is a function of interaction between the reader /learner and the text which incorporates the intentions of the writer/*

speaker. Authenticity has to do with appropriate response'. However, Little and Singleton (1988: 21) point out that *'an authentic text is a text that was created to fulfill some social purpose in the language community in which it was produced'*. Indeed, with the increased necessity to develop not only communicative, but also cultural competence in language teaching, the need has grown to reassess the notion of authentic text and communicative authenticity (Kramsch 2001: 178).

Although English teaching materials come from many places, the dominant sources are countries where English is a native language. The use of authentic materials in an EFL classroom is what many teachers involved in foreign language teaching have discussed in recent years. Many Educators insist that the English presented in the classroom should be authentic, not produced for instructional purposes. Generally, these are materials which involve language naturally occurring as communication in native-speaker contexts of use, or rather those selected contexts where standard English is the norm ; for example, real newspaper reports, real magazine articles, real advertisements, poems, songs, films, cooking recipes, etc.

Most of the teachers throughout the world agree that authentic texts or materials are beneficial to the language learning process as it is stressed by Croft (1972:95) *' Authentic materials are those which involve details of customs, behaviors and attitudes typical of the foreign culture These types of materials help to practice and manipulate language in a communicative way as they offer communicative contexts similar to those of real life '*. Authentic materials refer to examples of language that were not originally produced for language learning/teaching purposes, but which are now being used in a real communicative situation. In other words, these materials refer to normal,

natural language used by native or competent speakers of the language but not specially prepared for pedagogical purposes as ‘ *Students learn language more if they are thinking about a non-linguistic problem than if they are focusing on specific form* ’ ((Hamer 2001:86).

Some have argued that authentic materials are preferred over national produced ones, because they contain authentic language and reflect ‘*real-world*’ uses of language compared with the contrived content of much national produced materials. This is, indeed, what the students encounter (or will encounter) in the real life if they come into contact with target-language speakers ‘ *through the use of CD-ROMS or tape records , the learners are exposed to a varied range of authentic speech with different registers , accents intonations, rhythms and stresses . Besides , the language is used in the context of real learning* ’ (Ernestova 1989:5). So, by using authentic materials, students will learn not only English but also other skills beyond the language. They can be used by students at fairly low levels, however, if the tasks that go with it are well designed and help students understand it better, rather than showing them how little they know.

In fact, there are two main reasons why authentic materials are important:

a/ Language:

They represent actual goal of language learning, including the difficulties that learning materials avoid. Therefore, all learners must have practice in meeting these real challenges. Even at the early stages, students should learn how to respond to language which they don’t fully understand.

b/ Motivation

They bring the means of learning and the purpose of learning close together, and this establishes once again a direct link with the world outside the classroom .

To sum up, authentic materials enable learners to interact with the real language and content rather than the form .They have a positive effect on learners' motivation and they provide authentic cultural information about the target culture. In addition, authentic materials provide exposure to real language contrary to the artificial texts found in local materials that have been specially written to illustrate particular grammatical rules or discourse types. Moreover, students should be exposed to English varieties used by native speakers so that that the pressure to speak like a native will be reduced and students will speak more in English, and with more confidence.

3-The Process of Localizing Materials

Authentic materials which have been carelessly chosen can be extremely demotivating for students since they will not understand them. One solution to overcome this problem is to *localize materials*, which entails revising them so they relate more specifically to the culture and experience of the EFL students, who should otherwise not respond to materials that have no connection to their lives. In many cases, it will be obvious where to localize the material to include relevant and recognizable scenarios. The role of teachers as skillful material developers is therefore crucial because they can make the best judgment about which foreign cultural elements to localize and which to explain. Besides, teachers provide instructions for learners on how to modify the material according to their own cultural context. Replacing unfamiliar contexts with familiar ones allows students easier access to the information and gives them something to talk and write about.

Indeed, materials do not need to be totally representative of the local culture and a balance should be maintained between foreign and local cultural concepts and images. This provides a rich opportunity for teachers to explain non-native cultural items, in addition to using localized content. In many language programs, teachers thus use a mixture of authentic materials and national produced ones. In other words, a good balance between foreign and local elements in teaching materials is likely to make learners more adept at avoiding such cultural missteps. In brief, local content is motivating and increases participation, while foreign cultural content increases understanding and awareness of another culture's social conventions.

4-The Selection of the Appropriate Instructional Materials

Nowadays ,instructional materials are abundant .They come from different sources ,but teachers should know how to benefit from them .So, it is easy to get materials but it is difficult to choose and more difficult to bring and use them in the classroom in the sense that the way the teacher uses materials will influence the way students learn. In addition ,the teacher must set his objectives , by doing so , the teacher can prepare materials that support each objective .

Indeed, teaching English using materials is motivating and fun ; however, teachers are often unknown of how to use these materials effectively in the classroom .Thus , knowing his materials is the starting point. Teachers have to respect the following techniques to make the use of instructional materials more fruitful and enjoyable :

- If the material is new , or the equipment is unfamiliar , the teacher has to experiment it in private and try it out beforehand to make sure that it is working and that anyone can hear and see .
- Select with care and consent .
- Select the materials based on how the teacher wants students to use it (individual , in pairs or in groups) .
- Determine the best medium for the lesson components and remember that a good aid should not call attention to itself , it should just let in the light .
- When preparing visual aids ,the teacher has to make sure they are brief and not crowded in details .
- Check that line detail , letters , and symbols are bold enough to be seen from the back of the room by the learners.
- Use contrasting colors but do not over-use colors .
- Make it simple and clear because the simpler the teacher makes the material , the more effective he is in getting what he is trying to do approved.
- Introduce the visual as close as possible to the time when the teacher will refer to it . Do not let it become a distraction .
- Be prepared to compensate for the distraction a visual may cause .
- Inform students who arrive late of what they missed .
- Use updated teaching aids so that students would not find their E.L learning boring .

- Finally , be sure that all materials used have been cleared of any potential copyrights issues .

In fact , it is very important and useful to apply these tips . Hence, if instructional materials are well organized ,well constructed and presented properly , a successful teaching – learning can be achieved .

5-The Selection of Instructional Materials According to the Students' characteristics

We should not think of teaching as something the teacher does in isolation. It is a three-way relationship between the teacher , the materials he is using , and the students .Most teachers are not creators of teaching materials but providers of good materials . Dudley-Evans and St .John (1998: 173) suggest that a good provider of materials will be able to select appropriately from what is available and to modify activities to suit the learners' characteristics such as age , proficiency level, needs and interests , educational background and cultural background.

Each of the following considerations is essential and decisive in the selection of the appropriate instructional materials :

5-1-Students' Age and Proficiency Level:

When teachers have the freedom to choose the course materials , a critical eye is needed . He must consider this wide range of characteristics that affect decision-making , and make the best choices for his students and their situations .In other words , an effective classroom teacher needs to be able to evaluate , adapt and produce materials so as to ensure a match between

learners and the materials they use because *“every teacher is a materials developer”*.

The age of the students is a major factor in teacher's decisions about what instructional materials to use . Learners of different ages have different competences and cognitive skills .Moreover ,students' proficiency level plays a important role in the selection of the materials .Students are generally described in 3 levels beginners , intermediate and advanced .Teachers of beginners will necessary use activities whose organization and content are less complex than those for more advanced learners . Since students at this level have little or no prior knowledge of the target language, the teacher and the materials used become central determiners in whether students accomplish their objectives .The teacher should keep in mind that students capacity for taking in and relating new words , structures , and concepts is limited .The presentation of materials should be in simple segments that do not overwhelm students because they are just barely beginning .As students move up they develop fluency along with a greater degree of accuracy and the ability to handle virtually any situation in which target language use is demanded ,they become *“advanced students”*.

5-2-Students' Needs and Interests

Different types of students have different language needs and interests and what they are taught should be restricted to what they need .Instructional materials ,in particular ,should correspond to the users (the learners) and should be designed to connect with their needs and interests .Teachers should use a variety of materials to make sure that all students' needs and interests are being met .These needs are fairly specific but they can be identified. Moreover, Teachers should determine and look carefully at the content of the

materials used (are they relevant to the students ?) (Heather and Abigail 2003:22).However, it is very necessary to engage students' interests and challenge their intellect to motivate them to become more independent in their learning and in their use of English .This can be done by including interesting and stimulating topics and by encouraging learners to bring themselves materials .By analyzing the students' needs and interests ,the teacher can understand the nature of his audiences and how they best learn (their learning styles) .Students are generally divided into :

- **Visual learners** :(they look and see). Visual learners tend to prefer reading and studying charts , drawing and graphic information .
- **Auditory learners** :(they hear and listen) .These learners are characterized by a preference for listening to audiotapes and lectures .
- **Kinesthetic learners** :(they feel externally , internally or through movement). These learners are right-brain dominant ,they are acquiring the structures through actions .

5-3-Students' Educational Background

Students' prior educational knowledge has a substantial linear relationships with engagement in the materials used in classroom. So, materials drawn upon students' educational background are desirable. Both comprehension and motivation are often enhanced when students can activate relevant background knowledge as they learn , connecting their personal experiences with various experiences .But , if students are not interested in the material, or if they are unfamiliar with the material genre they are asked to work with ,they may be reluctant to engage fully with the activity. Their lack of engagement or schematic knowledge may be a major hindrance to successful performance.

To solve such problems , teachers need to think about how to plan the topics of his materials to be familiar and connected with students' prior knowledge by building on what students already known .In addition , if possible , the teacher should learn about each student's background .

5-4-Students' Cultural Background

Teachers must understand and recognize learners' culture and their expectations about the target language .They must take an introspective look at students ' cultural background , understanding the effects of biases students may have when interacting with new culture in instructional materials .In other words , the teacher should ask himself and consider how the students' cultural background is different from that of the materials used .Most publishers of materials are anxious to risk giving offence and provide learners with lists of taboo topics which usually include violence ,sex , drugs , alcohol, religion , politics since embarrassed learners are unlikely to learn much language (Carter and Nunan 2002: 68) .This means that contexts used by teachers when teaching English ,which may be a completely new and foreign language , should be contexts that are familiar and appropriate to learners . When presenting new culture in materials , teachers has to expand students' capacity to appreciate, treat and deal with differences with respect .

Conclusion

As a conclusion , clearly one goal of foreign language instruction is to expose students to a new language and a new culture in order to prepare them to become global citizens in the future .As it has been stressed throughout this research ,using instructional materials in teaching English offers both teachers and students the opportunity to make learning English more purposeful and

productive .Moreover ,teaching materials enhance teachers and learners' activities and consequently the attainment of the lesson objectives .Effective language teachers are required to employ instructional materials in their teaching in order to make sure that teaching is more permanent in the minds of the learners and to explain language meaning and construction .In addition, instructional materials provide creative and productive ideas on how to plan and teach lessons as well as formats that teachers can use in order to be able to meet the various needs and interests of their students. So, it is very necessary that teachers ,especially English language teachers ,use instructional materials so that students can have the opportunity of seeing ,hearing and manipulating which contributes to effective learning and the development of reading, writing, listening and speaking skills.

Furthermore ,as it has been argued repeatedly in this research, the use of instructional materials is an effective way of developing teachers' awareness of methodological options and of improving students' acquisition of English. However ,it requires efforts on the part of the teacher who must scrutinize how texts and activities can be selected and adapted to create a classroom environment of interaction , participation , critical thinking and independent learners.

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