

LEV VYGOTSKY'S SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH AND AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: There are barriers in teaching and learning foreign language but there are always ways in overcoming the problems. One of the most challenging tasks faced by (English as a Foreign Language) EFL teachers is how to elicit the students' interest so that they will be more motivated to learn and successfully develop their English proficiency. Educational psychology theories developed by Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky have been recognized as having great contribution to language education and teacher training. Education experts also insisted that in order to motivate the students, English which is presented in EFL classrooms should be authentic in order to immerse students into the real usage of English communication. This article discusses Vygotsky's sociocultural approach and the authentic materials used in the classroom to develop students' English proficiency.

Keywords: *sociocultural, authentic materials, EFL classrooms*

Today, EFL teachers have a lot of choices in terms of teaching approach, methods and materials. One of the most challenging tasks that are faced by EFL teachers is how to elicit the interest so that they will be more motivated to learn and successfully develop their English proficiency.

EFL teachers are free to choose method and materials but they should pay attention to students' need and improvement. Not only vocabulary building but also grammar structures should be prepared for them. Moreover, students need to be accustomed with the real English usage where real forms of communication and cultural knowledge are crucially exposed. There are many alternative approaches and methods to facilitate this purpose. One of the most influential strategies used in ESL and EFL teaching today is the use of authentic materials in EFL classroom. They are sometimes underestimated since teachers attempt to explore only handbooks most of the time. I believe if authentic materials were used more, English teaching would be not only more effective, but also more interesting for the learners.

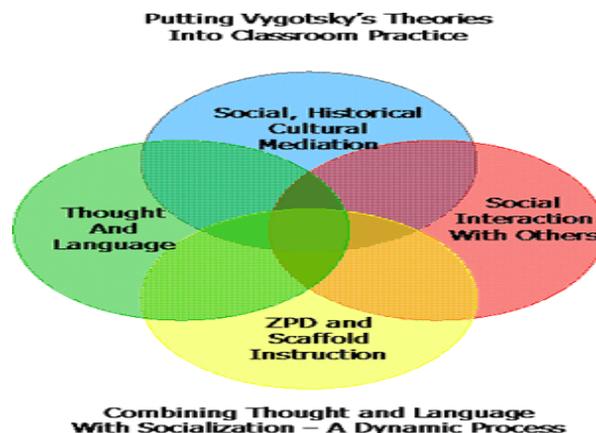
In Indonesian context, it is common to see that students are more prepared for National Exam so that exam exercises are given frequently rather than emphasizing on their proficiency. If learners are asked to study grammar rules or study the textbooks for the tests, they can't understand nor experience the feel of the language as a real language used. On the other hand, authentic materials are perceived by the learners as useful, lifelike, and interesting. Lev

Vygotsky proposed that language learners are empowered as readers and writers when they use reading and writing in authentic situations where the learners are engaged in purposeful and meaningful use of language. In addition, Khaniya (2006) believes that in the course of the decade, the use of authentic materials has become increasingly popular in learning situations ranging from traditional intensive ESL to language training for professionals.

LEV VYGOTSKY'S SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH

Language cannot be separated from its social context since language will have different meaning in a different context. Learners will develop the language proficiency easier if they are introduced to its social context in which the language is used as Vygotsky (1968) emphasized that “development cannot be separated from its social context”. In addition, he also stated the concept that words are understood and created by the environmental interactions. Thus, learners should be familiarized with the use of language in an authentic interaction to make them understand the language use in real communication. To be able to create the more authentic interaction, teacher should be able to create a close-to-real-life situation with the exploration of authentic materials. Furthermore, expert said that “language and culture are the frameworks through which humans experience, communicate and understand reality” (Vygotsky, 1968).

Vygotsky introduced the sociocultural nature of human cognition where human learns best with the help of other more knowledgeable peers. It is what so called Zone Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD is based on the idea that development is defined both by what a learner can do independently and by what the learner can do when assisted by an adult or more competent peer. Peers don't have to be the teachers but peers can also be the same aged-friends but who have the better knowledge. Therefore, learners learn better when they work collaboratively or cooperatively in social interaction with others. Language, thought and culture are interrelated to each other in the world of knowledge. In order to be successful in learning language, learners need to learn language, thought and culture from socialization with others by communicating to get access to the intellectual life of those more knowledgeable people around us (see the picture below).



Picture 1. Putting Vygotsky's theories into classroom Practice
(<http://cadres.pepperdine.edu/omcadre6/BookProject/vygotsky.htm>)

According to Vygotsky (1968), learners learn best through socialization since he believed that socio-cultural influences were essential and language was the bridge to our own thoughts, and the thoughts of those in our zone proximal development. The roles of the teachers in a Vygotsky Classroom are to scaffold and assist the growth of learners' competencies. Communication is crucial of the socio-cultural experience when students are learning and problem solving from the authentic interaction. Through language and culture, teachers and students construct meaning. The teachers should design authentic and meaningful social activities to generate the meaningful learning for the learners. Thus, social interaction is vital to the learning experience as the experiential learning which influences how learners learn, but also what they learn. In the purpose of giving students the meaningful learning, teachers should give students adequate input of meaningful materials. What more meaningful than the original or the authentic material itself?

AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

Authentic materials are resources which are not intentionally used as teaching materials in teaching learning process in the classroom. They are therefore written for native speakers and contain "real" language (Wallace, 1992). Nunan (1988) also stated that authentic materials in general, are "those [materials] which have been produced for purposes other than to teach language". Furthermore, Jordan (1997) refers to authentic texts as texts that are not written for language teaching purposes.

In other words, we can get authentic materials from sources other than materials specifically used for teaching. Authentic materials are obtained from the real communication activities by native speakers of the language. Authentic materials are language produced by real native writers to real readers and from native speakers to real listeners in order to exchange real messages (Morrow, 1977) as cited in (Gilmore, 2007). Experts insist that language is acquired. That's why learners must be immersed in the language use. Learners need the exposure of real language use to increase their motivation in learning language as proposed by Guariento & Morley (2001). All in all, authentic materials are the materials which are used in real activities by native speakers in order to communicate each other in real communicative setting, not intentionally made for teaching learning processes.

Gebhard (1996) gives many examples of authentic materials which can be used in EFL and ESL classrooms. Some examples that teachers of EFL can use are: 1) authentic listening viewing materials such as films, TV, cartoons, movies, drama and ads, audio taped short stories and novels, pop, and children's songs, home video, etc; 2) authentic visual materials also have many benefits in improving students' interest in learning language, for instance: slides, photographs, paintings, drawings, wordless street signs, calendar pictures, pictures from travel, news, magazines, postcard pictures, wordless picture books, stamps, etc; 3) authentic printed materials, such as: cartoons, advertisements,

short stories, novels, books of photographs, lyrics, restaurant menus, street signs, tourist information brochures and tourist guidebooks, comic books, greeting cards, etc.

Teachers can collect these authentic materials easily: at home, book stores, markets, banks, or while they are on journey, holiday or on business trips. So, teachers do not need too much effort in collecting authentic materials from everyday life. Realia (real world objects/miniatures) can be effectively used in EFL and ESL classrooms to grab learners' attentions. Realias are also used to pre-teach some new vocabulary, especially for young learners so that they can visually expose to a new objects. The examples are dolls, puppets, currency, key rings, scissors, folded paper, Realia are often used to illustrate points very visually or for role-play situations.

BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS IN USING AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN EFL CLASSROOMS

EFL teachers are free to choose authentic materials from unlimited sources from everyday activities and internet. However, teachers should consider the negative and positive sides. The paragraphs below are examples of the weaknesses and the strengths of using authentic materials in EFL classrooms.

One of weaknesses mentioned by Gebhard (1996) is that collecting, selecting, and matching the authentic materials with specific lessons can take more time. Therefore, EFL teachers need to allocate more time in preparing the materials to match with the certain lessons. This is the challenge for EFL teachers who really want to enhance their students' language proficiency by providing them the appropriate authentic materials for the lessons.

The other limitation is that authentic materials sometimes consist of difficult vocabulary or dictions which are difficult for students to comprehend. Often, students with low level of competence will have difficulties in understanding the materials. Richards states that along with these disadvantages, authentic materials often contain difficult language, unneeded vocabulary items and complex language structures, which causes a burden for the teacher in lower-level classes. To prevent this to happen, teachers should carefully choose the most suitable authentic materials for the students in accordance with the students' level of proficiency. Teachers also need to pay much attention on the complexity of vocabulary and structure of authentic materials to avoid the long gap between the materials and learners' competence. Lower level students should be supported by appropriate tasks in using authentic materials because difficult materials may cause low level students to get discouraged and confused since they lack of vocabulary and structures used in the target language.

The disadvantage is that some students think differently about the authentic materials used in classroom. Some of them may think that some authentic materials are considered as entertainment, such as: movies, TV drama, videos, comedy, cartoons, or songs. They don't accept authentic materials as being valuable learning sources. Some of them still think that learning materials should be more serious.

Another disadvantage is authentic materials contain cultural setting which sometimes misunderstood by the learners. Martinez (2002) emphasized that this cultural influence in authentic materials can be hard for lower level learners to understand. Too many structures which are mixed with cultural bias make some students confused. Teachers need to give elaboration about cross cultural understanding and discourse to make them understand the language being learned. According to Vygotsky (1968), people learn best when they participate in activities that are perceived to be useful in real life and are culturally relevant.

Despite the disadvantages, there are very strong reasons for EFL teachers to use authentic materials in the classroom. Authentic materials can be used as the media to connect the classroom activities with outside world. By using authentic materials, students will be enriched with the language beyond textbooks so that they can expand their knowledge of language from classroom into the real use of language outside classrooms.

While Nunan (1999) realizes that it is not realistic for teachers to use only authentic materials in the classroom, he makes a point that learners should be enriched with authentic materials as many as possible because ultimately, if they only encounter textbook dialogues and listening texts, their learning task would be made more difficult. He also insists that it is important that learners listen to and read authentic materials of as many different kinds as possible. This will help motivate the students by bringing the content and the subject matter more concrete for them, and enable them to make the important connections between the classroom world and the real world beyond it.

Another good reason for using authentic materials is proposed by Gebhard (1996). He stated that authentic materials offer a way to contextualize language learning. Authentic materials are valuable sources for language input. By giving authentic materials, they will tend to focus more on content and meaning rather than to the language only. By doing these, students are provided with so much input to help them broaden their active learning contextually. They will be exposed to the real use of the language rather than the knowledge of the language. Nunan highlights that authentic materials provide variety and interesting sources for learners in the classroom. These materials help learners to understand language easier and able to use language in more meaningful learning since they are connected with the real life (Gebhard, 1996).

AUTHENTIC MATERIALS WITHIN CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

EFL teachers should carefully choose the suitable approach to match the authentic materials used in classrooms. Sometimes, teachers tend to give hand out materials to each student and ask them to work individually. On the other hand, the research has shown that using pair work or group work can be more interesting for students.

Vygotsky (1968) insisted that cooperative learning activities can be planned with groups of learners at different levels who can help each other in the process of learning. They can work together and spend more time participating in the classroom enthusiastically. Pair work or group work enables low level students to ask the pair or the member of the group when they have difficulties.

The higher level students will have experience in giving suggestions or answers and increase their self esteem. Different from having to do the task alone, lower level students will be more encouraged because they are supported by the other friend in the group. It needs teachers considerations in choosing best approach suited with authentic materials used.

Considering the task design is also crucial in implementing authentic materials in the classroom. According to Lee (1995), the following points should be considered: In real-life communicative situations it is very common to use more than one language skill to achieve different communicative purposes, and for this reason an integrated skills approach is recommended. Contexts have to be provided tasks, so that learners can practice the skills in a natural, meaningful, and relevant way. The task content should be related to the authentic materials selected so that students can use them as after the tasks. Whether the task is used as pre-activity, practice activity, or post-activity depends on the course objectives, the skill(s) to be practiced, and learners' preferences.

Teachers should pay attention to the level of difficulties of the tasks which are applied in using authentic materials used in the classroom. Tasks should be appropriate according to the level of the students. Teacher should understand the level of potential development of their students. Vygotsky (1978:86) defines Zone Proximal Development (ZPD) level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. The authentic materials can be simple or complex but the tasks can be suited with the level of the students. The tasks given to students should be simple and vocabulary should be introduced in advance. For the lower level, for instance, the task can be: find the main idea, find meanings of new words, find verbs, nouns, etc, and make sentences from them.

Furthermore, teachers can also choose the authentic materials for lower level by considering the simple vocabulary, simple structure and grammatical structure such as time tables, simple restaurant menus, short videos, short news, or simplified stories. Teacher then can suit the more difficult vocabulary and structures of authentic materials for higher level students. More difficult authentic materials for intermediate or advance levels can be longer articles, longer videos, more complex structure and vocabulary in news or reports.

EFL teaching and learning process has to vary each meeting to prevent students' boredom. Teachers need to create a healthy, supportive environment for students to be more active and productive. The activities chosen by teachers for students to do should also be interesting and possible for students to actively learn and improve themselves.

In conclusion, the variety of authentic materials can always be suited to the students' level and the objectives of the lesson. It needs teachers' creativity and innovations.

CONCLUSION

Authentic materials are the materials which are not specifically written for teaching purposes. Many researchers have conducted studies about the

authentic materials. Although they have different views, but they have common idea that using authentic materials in EFL classrooms can be the exposure to real language used in real life communication. In other words, there are a lot of benefits that students can get from being exposed to the language in authentic materials although there are a few disadvantages. The authentic materials should be used in accordance with the students' level of knowledge (zone of proximal development) and the students should be helped by their teachers and peers to overcome the problems they get during teaching learning process.

Some consideration for the implementation of authentic materials must also be given to know when and how the materials will be introduced and used in the specific lesson and specific level. If they are used effectively, authentic materials and socio-cultural approach can help teachers to bring the real world into the EFL classrooms and significantly bring the EFL classrooms into the lively environment. Authentic materials can serve as excellent resources for teachers in introducing language in its real form to make learners more motivated to learn and successfully develop their English proficiency.

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