

Marcin Kleban

Jagiellonian University, Kraków

From authenticity to participation

Abstract

Due to the changing role of English influenced, among other things, by the development of computer technology, our understanding of authenticity is evolving. This exploratory article argues that authenticity can be viewed as being embedded in the notion of participation. Participation in the practices of various English language communities, on both receptive and productive levels, is greatly facilitated through the affordances offered by computer technology. In this context, the study described in this article attempts to investigate how advanced users of English, previously exposed to a variety of texts aimed at native speakers, perceive the authenticity of their own texts published on the university's learning platform.

1. Introduction

The notion of authenticity has been one of the key ideas in second/foreign language teaching since, at least, the communicative approach era. Some (e.g. Gilmore 2007) argue that the term has been used in this context as early as in the 1890s. Authenticity has been perceived as facilitating language learning by virtue of bringing the learner closer to milieus in which it is used by native speakers. However, in the face of the widespread use of English as a tool of international communication (Jenkins 2009) enhanced by computer technology, traditional interpretation of the term authenticity can be questioned.

Recent studies concerning authenticity in language learning (e.g. Roberts, Crooke 2009; Badger, MacDonald 2010) demonstrate that the notion may be perceived not only statically, as a feature of a text, but also dynamically, as an act of negotiation of meaning between a text produced by a speaker/writer in one particular context and a reader/hearer operating in a potentially different one.

Also, computer technology contributes significantly to the shift of our understanding of authenticity. On the one hand, ICT provides access to materials produced by others (native or non-native speakers) and on the other, it affords learners

numerous opportunities to author and publish their own texts and text-related artefacts in the target language. In this sense, computer technology equals the linguistic status of both native and non-native speakers.

This exploratory article argues that computer technology enhances language learning through the provision of access to authentic materials and through offering opportunities to productively participate in the target language-related practices. In doing so, it describes a short study which probes into advanced English language students' perceptions of authenticity of their own texts published on the university's learning platform.

2. Defining authenticity

The notion of authentic language can be defined, following Tomlinson (1998: viii), as "not spoken or written for language teaching purposes." An authentic task "involves learners in using language in a way that replicates its use in the real world outside the language classroom" (Tomlinson 1998: viii). Gilmore (2007) concludes that authenticity can be understood in a number of varied ways. He adopts a definition proposed by Morrow (1977: 13), which states that "an *authentic text* is a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort."

Within the various ways of perceiving authenticity two general aspects pertaining to this notion come to the fore. One of them concerns the sources of authenticity. One viewpoint stresses that authenticity can be seen as a property of text. Little, Devitt and Singleton (1989) perceive authentic texts as produced and targeted at the native speaker. This view seems to be shared by Badio (2009), who defines authenticity, in the first place, as a feature of texts (or oral interactions) embedded in a particular context (easily) interpretable by native speakers of the language in which the texts were written.

The other view sees authentic texts (e.g. Morrow 1977; Breen 1985) as not necessarily produced by native speakers but rather as those designed to convey real messages to real audiences for real reasons. This understanding of authenticity includes also classroom language which can be argued to have its own real communicative value targeted at a real audience. Further, it is possible to perceive of authenticity as a dynamic process which takes place between the text and the reader/hearer. According to Badger and MacDonald (2010), authenticity of a foreign language text used in the classroom depends on whether it has been used in a similar way as it would be outside it.

The second aspect concerns the nature of authenticity. Authenticity resides in the language learning tasks which involve real, and therefore not artificial, communication (Guariento, Morley 2001). Related to this is the concept of learner

authenticity (Lee 1995) which posits that only those tasks which are in some way relevant to learners' communicative needs can be labelled as authentic.

For the purposes of this article authenticity is understood within Guariento and Morley's (2001) broad definition, which sees authenticity as inherent in tasks which involve real communication. In consequence, authentic communication occurs between both native and non-native speakers in informal as well as in formal (classroom) contexts.

Within the framework of the communicative language approach and its offshoots authenticity is highlighted as an essential component of foreign language pedagogy. Hedge (2000) notes that within the communicative approach authenticity in the classroom is desired because it helps learners function in the target language communities. Also, authenticity is argued to increase learners' motivation. For example, Peacock (1997) reports on a study in which the use of authentic materials resulted in more time on-task and a higher degree of concentration on the part of beginner young adult learners of English than it was the case with contrived materials.

3. Authenticity and computer technology

The burgeoning popularity of computer-mediated communication tools contributed to a further shift of the understanding of the notion of authenticity. For example, Kramsch, A'Ness and Lam (2000) argue that with the advent of computer technology the terms "authenticity" and "authorship," understood as learners' right to author their own texts, have evolved and should be replaced by the notions of agency, identity and the presentation of the self. The authors demonstrate how computer technology empowers language learners through enabling them to express their own voices in the language learning process.

A number of language-related behaviours considered inauthentic in the pre-computer era now seem perfectly authentic and common. One example of this change is supplied by Robin (2007), who describes a project in which language students' understanding of listening and video materials was supported with computer-mediated texts or translations in both L1 and L2. While in the pre-computer era listening or watching tasks were usually completed without any recourse to textual support, let alone translations in L1, now, in the age of automatic or online translation tools, such behaviours are more than common, or to put it in different terms, authentic. For such reasons, our understanding of what constitutes authentic materials and tasks in the context of computer-mediated language learning should be expanded to cater for the new affordances offered by ICT.

It may be argued that the Internet makes the distinction between texts written by native speakers and non-native speakers blurred. Often, it is neither clear nor relevant whether a particular material was produced by a native or a non-native

speaker. What matters is personal relevance, or learner/user authenticity. Such is the character of the exchanges made on popular social networks where English is often the main language of communication.

4. The notion of participation in language learning

The current views on the notion of authenticity differ so much from its original formulations that perceiving the provision of authentic materials, understood as those produced by native speakers for native speakers, as one of the goals in foreign language teaching seems limiting. Instead, foreign language teaching should focus on offering learners a maximal number of opportunities for participation in language-related tasks.

Participation constitutes a metaphor which may help to account for the process of learning in general and language learning in particular. It is one of the key notions in Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory, which sees learning as stemming from participation in the practices of communities which share similar goals. In such communities novice learners benefit from collaborating with experts. In a similar vein, Sfard (1998) argues that the process of learning may be perceived as taking part in particular practices occurring in a particular situational context. Sfard (1998: 6) explains that instead of the idea of "having" which characterizes the acquisition metaphor, the participation metaphor focuses on the notion of "doing," or performing actions which are always embedded in a situational context.

In the field of computer-assisted language learning participation may be defined broadly as any involvement in computer-mediated communication in the target language, both within and outside the class/school. The advantages of such involvement include exposure to input (for example, through texts produced by proficient, though not necessarily native, speakers), opportunities for producing meaningful language which leads to the development of a sense of agency and opportunities to express one's own identity (for example, through the use of web 2.0 tools).

5. Computer technology-enhanced participation

ICT can be seen as facilitating participation on two levels: receptive and productive. The receptive level involves participation in the practices of English using communities, which does not require an active use of the target language. For example, Chun and Plass (2000) claim that the value of the Internet lies in the provision of authentic materials to which learners could be exposed.

The receptive use of electronic media, including the Internet, is much more common than the active use. The statistics provided by major Internet services

such as YouTube or Wikipedia clearly show that receptive users far outnumber those who actively contribute to the content of these websites. For example, the webpage Wikipedia (Wikipedia: About 2012) states that while Wikipedia has over four hundred million unique visitors, only eighty-five thousand are active contributors. According to the official YouTube Statistics (n.d.), “over 4 billion videos are viewed a day” and “60 hours of video are uploaded every minute.” In her report on social media Ala-Mutka (2009) notes that, according to different sources, only a small percentage of YouTube users (from .18 to 8 percent) contribute to its content.

Productive participation may take place on the global or local levels. Learners may use English while contributing to such global communication services as YouTube, Facebook, popular blog websites or other social networks available on the web. It may also take on a more local character consisting of writing class wikis, blogs, or using restricted access social networks. Relevant literature provides abundant examples of ICT mediated productive participation. Wikis have been reported as effective language learning tools, for example, in the studies carried out by Mak and Coniam (2008) or Lund (2008). Virtual worlds such as Second Life are used for productive language use (e.g. Ranalli 2008; Peterson 2010). Mompean (2010) shows how interactions related to writing a class blog achieve learner authenticity. Simpson (2005) described a successful project which involved a community of native and non-native speakers of English committed to discussing issues of computer technology in a synchronous CMC environment.

There is evidence that receptive participation may become the first step on the way to more productive participation. Ducate and Lomicka (2008) demonstrate how language learners’ experience of reading native speakers’ blogs facilitates the process of writing their own blogs for the purposes of a classroom project. Hsu, Wang and Comac (2008) show how learners participate in the practices of English language communities by listening to authentic texts on CNN or YouTube, which subsequently fructifies in running their own audioblogs.

Participation on both levels offers opportunities for language development. Receptive participation offers input and learning with multimedia, so much appreciated by the generation of digital natives (Chun, Plass 2000; Prensky 2001). In addition, technological tools afford easier and more effective processing of language input. For example, Robin (2007) points out that the reception of video and audio input is often facilitated through captions, subtitles and the technical means to control playback.

The Internet offers a wide selection of tools and resources which may ensure task and learner authenticity. Ala-Mutka (2008) notes that on the web there exist communities for almost any interest. Also, classroom-based social networks or wikis may provide finely tuned input and tasks that could cater for specific needs of any group of learners.

6. The study

The purpose of this study is to investigate how advanced, non-native users of English perceive the authenticity of their own texts which were published on the university's learning platform. The study aims to investigate whether their receptive (reading) and productive (writing for an audience) participation in the practices of the English language writing community impacted the students' perception of their texts' authenticity. Additionally, it investigates how the learners position their own work in relation to the texts written by native speakers.

The study participants were 25 MA course students involved in an academic writing course. These students participated in the practices of the English language writing community in two ways. For one thing, they practised their academic writing skills by reading and analysing the language structure of professional journal articles and those written and published by paper and online editions of English language quality magazines and daily newspapers (e.g. *The New Yorker* or *The Guardian*). Secondly, they wrote a variety of academic style texts (summaries, critical responses and short essays) and published them on the university's Moodle-based learning platform with a view to making their work available to an audience (the tutor and the peers).

For the purposes of this study the students, either individually or in small groups, were to complete a task which consisted of writing about 1,000 word long essays on a topic of their choice. The texts were conceived as emulations of the journal or magazine articles read for previous classes. As it happened with the other student generated texts, they were also published on the university's learning platform and subsequently utilised for practising the learners' reading and writing skills.

In order to assess the authenticity of the texts a questionnaire (see Appendix) was used after the students had completed the task. One of the questions concerned the students' participation in the writing practices of experienced writers. More specifically, it asked about the resources which the students may have referred to in order to write their articles. The expression of the self and the students' identity were the topic of other questions. Yet another question concerned how the students positioned their texts with respect to the journal or magazine articles read for classes.

7. The results

The questionnaire was completed by 18 participants (72%). The study revealed that a great majority declared their texts to be either authentic (77.8%) or partly authentic (22.2%). It is worth noting that none of the participants viewed the text as inauthentic.

As the question did not restrict the term “authenticity” to any particular definition, the students were also asked to elucidate their understanding of this notion. The responses of 10 students who provided further explanations to their answers can be classified into two groups. The first group included 4 respondents (40%) who pointed to the original compilation of the data pool they used to base their articles on as the condition for authenticity. The quotation below summarises this particular viewpoint:

It [the text] concerns an authentic book and writer. The idea was original, the writing of the article was preceded by thorough research.

The second group of 6 students (60%) pointed to authorship as the main reason for declaring the text’s authenticity. One example of such attitude is provided in the following quotation:

Authentic, in the sense that it was our own text, not copied or written by somebody else and contained everything we viewed as relevant as far as the topic was concerned.

The partial authenticity was also explained through the above-mentioned criteria. One student explained partial authenticity of his/her article by pointing out that he/she accepted the responsibility for writing a part of the text only as it was an effect of group work.

Related to the issue raised above was the question which asked whether the texts reflected their authors’ personal interests. Most students declared that the articles either reflected their personal interests (44.4%) or partly did so (38.9%). However, 16.7% of the respondents said the texts were not related to their interests.

In order to investigate whether the students’ perception of the texts’ authenticity was influenced by their views on the level of the texts’ linguistic proficiency another question was asked. This invited them to compare their texts with those downloaded from English language magazines and newspapers. It transpired that while 50% considered their articles to be of similar linguistic quality, the other half perceived them to be of inferior linguistic quality in comparison with the articles aimed at native speakers.

The survey also inquired about the nexus of reading and writing especially in the context of using online resources which may have helped the students to generate their texts. It turned out that the students used a variety of resources while working on their articles. Most respondents (77.8%) declared to have been inspired by online texts. Other sources of data used by the students included books (66.7%) and journals (27.8%).

8. Discussion

The results seem to indicate that the students viewed authenticity primarily from the perspective of their own efforts invested into writing the work which they defined as data collecting and authoring the texts. In defining authenticity the participants paid less attention to language quality. This is illustrated by the observation that some of the students who viewed their texts as being of lower levels of linguistic proficiency in comparison with the articles written by native speakers perceived their work as authentic.

Arguably, the students' sense of authenticity could be traced to their receptive participation in the online and offline practices of writing in English. Such participation took the form of interacting with different resources. Probably due to their wide availability, the most popular among them were various websites. As the students remarked, the access to data and its transformation for the purposes of writing the texts contributed to the students' sense of authenticity. In this way, this receptive participation created conditions conducive for productive participation. Such an observation is in line with Ducate and Lomicka (2008), who highlighted the fact that receptive use of resources may lead to subsequent productive use.

Following Kramersch, A'Ness and Lam (2000) the perception of the texts' authenticity also relied on their authors' feeling of authorship and expression of the self. The survey confirmed that the students' perception of authenticity was not contingent upon the linguistic quality of the texts; neither was it influenced by the type of audience at which the texts was aimed: the students uniformly declared the texts to be either authentic or partially authentic despite the fact that half of them perceived the articles to be of lower quality than those written by native speaker authors.

Taken together, the students' responses seem to point to the perception of authenticity which is conditioned by the investment of their authors' effort and a sense of agency. The students were empowered by the participation in the exchanges of data and thoughts which was enabled primarily by the Internet. It is in this process of creative transformation of information, concepts and thoughts that a sense of authenticity is forged.

9. Conclusion

The traditional notion of authenticity has been criticised for its native speaker centeredness and the inability to account for the reality in which much communication in English takes place on- and off-line between both native and non-native speakers. Authenticity can be seen as a process of involving interaction between the task, text and learner. Taking these issues into account, it can be concluded that

ESL pedagogy should focus on providing learners with opportunities to participate in language-related tasks.

One such effort was presented in the study described in this article. Its results seem to suggest that, at least for advanced users of English, authenticity is tantamount to authoring and engaging in opportunities to express one's self. This, in turn, is enabled by, first receptive and then productive, participation in the practices characteristic for a particular context.

While this study afforded one insight into the students' perceptions of authenticity of their texts published on a university's learning platform more needs to be learnt about the impact of publishing texts on their authors' sense of belonging to the community of English language writers. In particular, especially interesting would be studies aimed at revealing how disseminating texts to larger and more open audiences than single classes might influence non-native speakers' perceptions of authorship and agency.

Appendix

Please fill in this short survey about the 1,000 word text.

1. What resources did you use to write your 1,000 word text?

- ☐ websites
- ☐ books
- ☐ journals
- ☐ I did not use any resources
- ☐ other (please specify) _____

2. Do you consider your text to be authentic?

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no
- ☐ partly so

Why? Or in what sense authentic/inauthentic?

3. Does the content of your text reflect any of your personal interests?

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no
- ☐ partly so

4. Do you consider the 1,000 word text you wrote to be...

☐ of similar language quality in comparison to the texts we read for classes

☐ of superior language quality in comparison to the other texts we read for classes

☐ of inferior language quality in comparison to the other texts we read for classes

Other (please specify): _____

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