



AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN THE POLYTECHNIC ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM –TEACHERS PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT



Authentic materials are one of the most important tools a teacher can and must use in class in order to make his/her teaching effective and to develop the English language skills of the students. Research also shows that authentic materials provide students with many benefits such as they Guariento & Morley (2001) arouse interest of the students and motivate them thereby improving the communicative competence. In this context a study was conducted to gain insights to teachers' perceptions and classroom practices of using authentic materials. Questionnaires were administered to Thirty English language teachers of polytechnic colleges in Andhra Pradesh. The findings indicate that teachers have a positive attitude towards the use of authentic materials but they do not employ in their classroom practices to a larger extent. This paper suggests that there is a need to conduct a workshop for the teachers on the use of authentic materials in the classroom and a bridge course for the polytechnic students.

Keywords: *Authentic Materials, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)*

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INTRODUCTION

English as a global language has imposed a profound influence on the teaching of English. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has placed the learner at the centre of the language teaching process and all other parameters of the process that include teachers, methodology, curriculum and teaching materials have to align with the needs of the learners. Keeping in view the need for communicative English, The State Board of Technical Education and Training (SBTET), Andhra Pradesh had implemented new learner centered coursebooks in English for the students of polytechnic colleges in the year 2009-10. Though the coursebooks have changed the expected change in the English language

proficiency of most of the students was not evident. Majority of the students can cope with their professional subjects, with the level of language proficiency they have, because the technical subject teachers do not demand language skills from the polytechnic students. Polytechnic students have sound technical knowledge and creativity but their low proficiency in English hampers their progress. As a result majority of the students do not get placements in the final year because the first requirement for any job is to be well versed in English.

One of the most challenging tasks constantly facing language teachers is how to capture the interest and motivate them to learn. It becomes even



more difficult when there is a mismatch between the student's needs and the demands of the coursebook. However good a coursebook may be it may not match the varying needs of the students who are at different proficiency levels. In the case of a polytechnic classroom majority of the students have studied in regional medium at school and are from rural and semi-urban areas of the State. They have inhibitions and find the learner centered classroom to be difficult and do not take part actively. CLT advocates that learning can be promoted by involving the learners in activities that stimulate real life communication. One way of doing this is by using authentic materials like cartoons, newspapers, magazines, post cards, pictures, restaurant menus etc in the English language classroom. Such materials would bridge the gap between the classroom and the real life use of English. Moreover, these materials would be interesting and motivating as they are relevant and useful to the learner's real life needs. In order to help the students communicate effectively polytechnic students must be exposed to real life communication activities. Therefore the focus of this paper is to gauge the perceptions and classroom practices of polytechnic English language teachers with regard to using authentic materials in the classroom.

This paper attempts to find answers to the following issues:

1. What are the teacher's perceptions of using authentic materials in the English language classroom?
2. What are the teachers' classroom practices?

First informal discussions were conducted with the teachers before drafting the questionnaire in order to have an understanding about the teaching practices in polytechnic colleges. Next questionnaires were administered to thirty English language teachers.

THEORETICAL BACK GROUND

DEFINITIONS

Experts have defined authentic materials in different ways depending on their perspective for instance Tomlinson (2003:2) declares authentic materials as "*anything which can be used to facilitate*

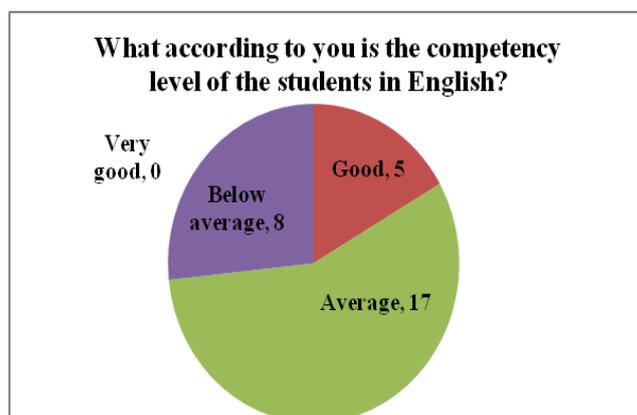
the learning of a language." Further Wallace (1992:145) affirms "...real- life texts, not written for pedagogic purposes" Nunan (1988) is of the opinion that "Any material which has not been specifically produced for the purpose of language teaching" The key point in all these definitions, which are representative of many others available in the literature, is that authentic materials are basically not produced for teaching or learning but give an exposure to language used in real life and when these materials are used in the classroom they motivate the learner to participate in a real conversation and thereby facilitate language learning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, English language teachers reported several reasons for not using authentic materials effectively. The findings reveal teacher's perceptions and classroom practices. They are organized in the following order:

1. Teachers opinion on the competency level of students
2. Teachers opinion on the coursebook
3. Problems encountered by the students while communicating in English
4. Perceptions of teachers on using authentic materials
5. Teachers classroom practices

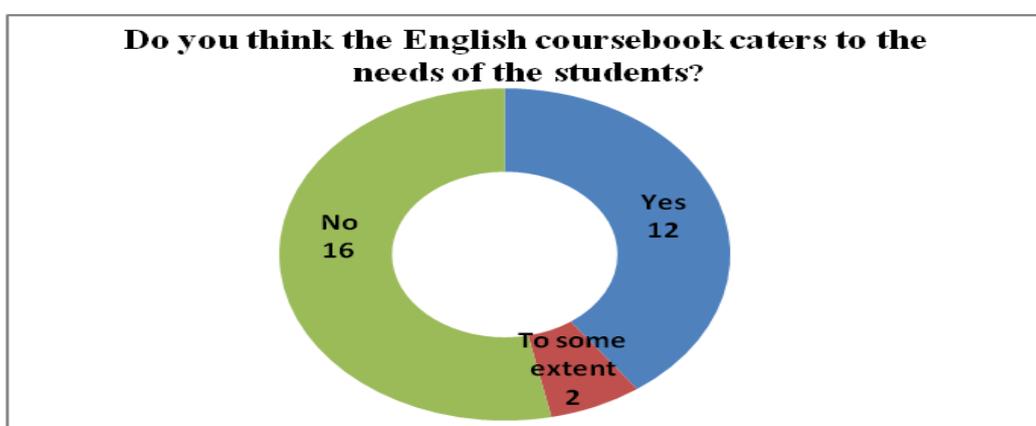
1. Teachers' opinion on the competency level of students



The competency level of students ranges from average to below average because 8 out of 30 teachers stated that students from regional medium background do not know the grammar rules, that is they lack formal knowledge of English, 7 teachers opined that students know the rules, but are unable to use them effectively and 15 teachers felt that students neither know the rules, nor can they express themselves in English.

On the whole teachers opined that the competency level of the students was average to below average because they neither knew the rules nor could express themselves in English. Students with English medium background are more exposed to the language and their proficiency levels are better than the students from regional medium background.

2. Teachers opinion on the coursebook



When asked to give their views on whether the coursebook caters to the needs of the students, 12 teachers felt the book fulfilled the academic and professional needs of the students; 2 teachers felt that the book fulfilled the needs of the students partially, whereas 16 teachers were not satisfied with the book.

3. Problems encountered by the students while communicating in English

Nature of the problem	Always	Sometimes	Very	Never
Trouble in understanding others	6	24	0	0
Difficulty in right pronunciation of words	16	14	0	0
Unable to understand when they speak fast	15	12	3	0
Not able to speak fast	28	2	0	0
Unable to get suitable words while speaking and writing	16	14	0	0

The outlook of all the teachers was that the students encountered problems while communicating in English.



4. Perceptions of teachers on using authentic materials

25 out of 30 teachers felt that authentic materials provide opportunities to the polytechnic students to learn English. All the teachers agreed that students learn from one another as well as from the teacher.

5. Teachers classroom practices

All the teachers asserted that they plan and prepare the lesson before going to the class. Teachers explained their planning as mentioned below:

Elicit information from the students. (T5, T30)

Newspaper cuttings, assignments to students and PPT. (T3) (T12) (T18)

Preparing some exercises related to the lesson. (T12)

Newspaper cuttings.

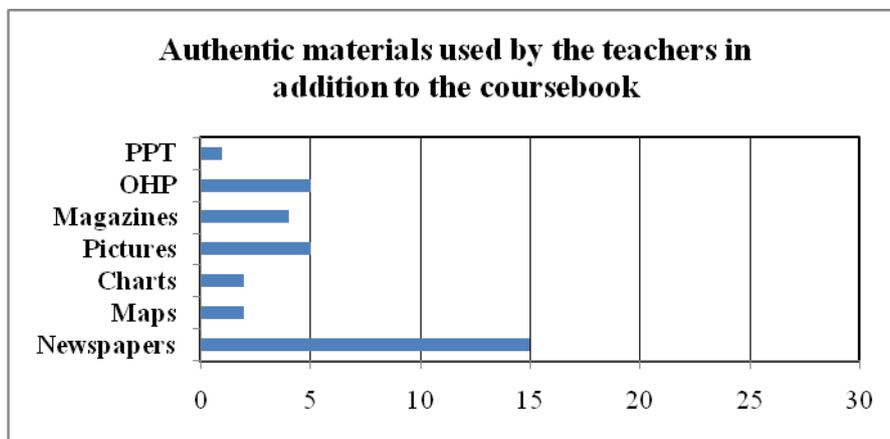
(T2)(T3)(T10)(T12)(T13)(T14)(T15)(T17)(T18)(T120)(T21)(T23) (T25)(T29)(T30)

Supplement the activities in the lesson to give adequate exposure and practice for the students. (T25)

More than 20 teachers said that they encourage the students to participate in the classroom activities. Conducting group work in the classroom was difficult because of the constraints of heterogeneity of the learners, low proficiency levels of the learners, insufficient time, large classes, overburdened workload and few teachers lacked the awareness on how to make use of authentic materials.

The common practice followed by the majority of the teachers is to engage the students in individual work. Group and pair works are rarely done in the class because majority of the students lack confidence to express themselves in English. Students from the English medium background are more motivated in the English classroom and participate actively whereas regional medium students are passive. The majority of the students are from the regional medium background students and hence the teachers are not interested to use authentic materials.

Authentic materials used by the teachers in addition to the coursebook



CONCLUSIONS

SOME OF THE MAJOR CONCLUSIONS ARE AS FOLLOWS

The findings indicate that teachers have a positive attitude towards the use of authentic materials. They felt that authentic materials can generate interest and provide opportunities to develop the student's communicative skills. But teacher's perceptions are not reflected to a larger extent in their practice. During the activities, teachers

make the students work individually most of the time and neglect pair and group work. They concentrate only on a few motivated students.

A majority of the teachers expressed that they are unable to use the authentic materials because of the low proficiency levels of most of the students, insufficient time, large classes, overburdened workload, lack of awareness of how to make use of authentic materials etc. Students from the English medium background who had some



language proficiency benefitted and find the activities to be challenging whereas, the students from the regional medium background had difficulties and were passive most of the time.

SUGGESTIONS

PROVIDE A BRIDGE COURSE FOR LOW PROFICIENCY STUDENTS

The polytechnic students are at varying levels of abilities, skills and proficiency. Students with English medium background have an advantage over their fellow learners as they had added exposure to the language. Moreover, they read the textbooks of all the subjects and write their answers in English, so their proficiency levels are much better than their counterparts. Students with regional medium background find it difficult to cope with the demands made on them by the sudden change in the medium of instruction. When these students are made to do the tasks they lack self confidence and develop anxiety about their performance. This problem of low proficiency becomes a constraint in students' participation in the classroom activities. Hence, a bridge course should be offered to such students.

Need to encourage the teachers to update their knowledge of ELT

The activities in a learner centred classroom are challenging and teachers are required to manage different situations. For this, teachers should be innovative and creative in the classroom. They could be encouraged to do a certificate course in English and attend in-service programmes so that they could update their knowledge and gain practice in using different techniques in teaching LSRW skills.

Need to organise a workshop for the teachers

Most of the teachers have limited knowledge of using authentic materials in English language classroom. There is a need to organise a workshop on the use of authentic materials in the classroom.

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