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Appropriate selection of authentic texts for adult second language instruction

John C. Mauceri
San Jose State University

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**Appropriate selection of authentic texts for adult second
language instruction**

Mauceri, John Conrad, M.A.

San Jose State University, 1991

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APPROPRIATE SELECTION OF AUTHENTIC TEXTS
FOR ADULT SECOND LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

A Project Report
Presented to
The Division of Graduate Studies
San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
John C. Mauceri
August, 1991

APPROVED FOR THE DIVISION OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Denise B. Murray
Dr. Denise Murray

Alice Scofield
Dr. Alice Scofield

Patricia C. Nichols
Dr. Patricia Nichols

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

M. Lou Lewandowski

ABSTRACT

APPROPRIATE SELECTION OF AUTHENTIC TEXTS FOR ADULT SECOND LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

by John C. Mauceri

This report addresses issues in appropriate selection of reading material for adult second language instruction. In reference to the form of such material, it traces the theoretical issues underlying the current interest in using authentic texts to promote communicative competence. In reference to content selection, it examines the issues of student topic preference and cultural accessibility. The implementation of resulting criteria are explored.

Instructor interviews, a reading interest survey, and an investigation of related research indicate a need for authentic texts that are relevant to students' interests and purposes in language learning. An analysis of responses from 175 ESL students surveyed at five local community colleges shows a clear preference for reading content related to educational and employment concerns. In contrast, little interest is evoked by culturally specific topics for which students lack background knowledge (schemata). The effects of several learner variables are considered.

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Chapter 1: The need for criteria in selecting readings

This paper arose out of the need for criteria to assist in the selection of appropriate reading materials for adult second and foreign language (L2) instruction.

Depending on the goals of any given course of language instruction, reading in the L2 is becoming more frequently accepted and respected as a vehicle for language learning (Meyer & Tetrault, 1988; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983). In particular, studies cite the positive effects of reading on vocabulary development (Krashen, 1989), cultural awareness (Pugh, 1989), and writing (Johns, 1990; Spack, 1988). A stroll through the exhibit hall of any convention in the field will impress teachers with the incredible variety of commercial products available, each competing for attention. Textbook subtitles reflect the pedagogical buzzwords of the moment. Two years ago every other book claimed to be "communicative." Last year these found themselves upstaged by a swarm of "interactive" texts. This year has witnessed the debut of "strategies" of one kind or another. But, in truth, these labels often seem more marketing ploy than accurate description. The form and content of the reading passages contained in these textbooks vary considerably: It seems as though an instructor could find something to suit any curriculum. Some passages are written expressly to

illustrate a grammar point to the non-native speaker. Others are syntactically and lexically simplified versions of texts originally written to convey a message to a native speaker of the L2. Still others are left unedited, in the same form a native speaker might find them. Some passages are brief, and some are long. Some are heavily glossed in the anticipated learner's native language; others are lightly glossed in the target language (Davis, 1989). Some texts present the same genre throughout, e.g., short stories or dialogues, while others contain a range of genres, from advertisements for mineral water to letters-to-the-editor. Topics run the gamut from serious to spurious: technology, evolution, the environment, American folk heroes, sports, stress, opera, bionic children.

Instructors, departments, and materials developers, on their own or in combination, select items and prepare appropriate learning tasks. If the material chosen is marketed through commercial channels, decisions must perforce be made and books ordered long before the interested parties--the students--appear on the scene. Therefore choices are often based on an anticipation of what the learners will be like, a belief that what "worked" with a previous, or a colleague's, class will give a repeat performance, and on assumptions about the value of reading and its place in the syllabus. The same holds if

instructors create their own reading materials by clipping articles, copying short stories, poems or advertisements. In addition, instructors who collect their own resources will be faced with a seemingly infinite number of items to choose from, and will therefore be even more acutely aware of the need for valid criteria.

Issues in text selection identified by ESL teachers

At the outset of this project, several ESL instructors at local Community Colleges were interviewed to find out what they looked for in an ESL reader. While their responses varied, these clustered around four issues: packaging, tasks, form and content.

Packaging included preferences for a simple layout with photographs associated with each piece. "Cute" illustrations were decidedly frowned upon as patronizing. One instructor was particularly concerned about the expense and size of a text, and assumed that students felt more of a sense of accomplishment when completing a short text than when reading only part of a long one.

Tasks referred to the kinds of support activities contained in the text. The instructors I spoke with generally favored activities that required processing of text beyond the word and sentence level. Several mentioned that students unfamiliar with written discourse preferred

word recognition and "fill-in-the-blank" style tasks. Instructors, on the other hand, thought it better to design tasks that incorporated students' affective reactions to selected readings and encouraged restructuring of the text's propositional content.

As for *form*, all instructors indicated a preference for authentic texts, meaning that the shape of the language used reflects communication for purposes other than language learning. One of the reasons given for this preference was that students who are only exposed to simplified material that avoids low-frequency vocabulary find themselves at a loss to communicate in everyday situations outside the classroom. None of the instructors expressed an interest in readability formulae, which judge text appropriateness by looking at ratio of syllables to words and words to sentences.

Finally, *content* was clearly the issue that instructors were most keen on discussing. One instructor spoke of the need to find material that "hooked" students, and favored the reader *True Stories in the News*. This textbook consists of syntactically simplified tabloid articles. Other instructors, however, warned that student interest in the sensational diminishes quickly. Several indicated that they had more success with photocopies of articles that provided students with background to current events. For example,

one instructor discovered, when she polled her reading class at midterm, that the most popular item was an article she had used explaining the story behind the yellow ribbons Americans exhibited during the U.N. Coalition-Iraq confrontation that semester. Another instructor pointed out, however, the difficulty of developing a commercial text based on current events which are local and time-bound. Two instructors reported on success with stories which their students were already familiar with in their native language. All agreed that reading content needed to engage student interests and be related to their lives.

This paper will not be concerned with task development as excellent treatments already exist in the field (e.g., Grellet 1981, Nuttall 1982). However, it should be noted that appropriate tasks can make difficult or unfamiliar material accessible to learners, either as individuals (Zvetina, 1987) or by creating a literacy community (Freeman & Freeman, 1989) of groups of students within a classroom culture (Breen, 1985). Therefore, when deciding among text selections for class use, instructors need to look at how well texts lend themselves to task development and exploitation.

On the other hand, there seems to be no clear and comprehensive treatment of criteria for text selection that might respond to the concerns of the instructors

interviewed. Frequently, the way the subject is dealt with in the research literature is reminiscent of the three blind men who each felt a different part of an elephant and proceeded to make different public statements regarding the nature of the beast. In attempting to present a broader view, this paper will first examine issues of form and then turn to issues of content involving reading material for adult second language instruction. Regarding form, this paper will trace the historical and theoretical bases for the current interest in authentic texts and attempt to define what makes a text authentic. Regarding content, it will examine two things: student topic preference and the problem of cultural accessibility of authentic texts. In considering student topic preference, a report will be included on the results of a survey conducted using a sample student population at five local community colleges. With respect to that specific learner population, it will answer the question "What do students say they want to read?" The paper will then proceed to show why the criterion of student interest must be complemented by another content criterion, that of cultural accessibility, before they can be implemented.

Definition of terms: text form and content

The following are brief definitions of some terms that will be used in this paper.

Text, as used here, includes any graphic communicative display of language. It is, therefore, used in its technical sense, and not as an abbreviation of *textbook*, which refers to a commercial product. *Authentic text*, which will be more completely defined in Chapter 2, is usually used to describe a text that was originally written for a reason other than teaching language.

Form, the observable manifestation of language in a text, is generally used to indicate the structural qualities of a language sample. These structural qualities include syntax and lexis, sentential and discourse markers, and surface cohesion and underlying coherence of the constituent propositions. Language form alone is the criteria conventionally used by readability formulas that measure word and sentence length to gauge comprehensibility. Form will also reflect the purpose and intended audience of a text. For example, a note from a friend will contain fewer cohesive devices, yet be more intelligible to most readers, than a brief from a lawyer. Likewise, text intended to illustrate a grammar point for ESL students will usually differ from text meant to communicate a message to native speakers. *Formal* or *organizational schemata* concern

expectations about text form. For example, readers apply a different set of expectations to train schedules and mystery novels. Readers from different cultures will sometimes have different expectations about how information will be presented or a story developed.

Content refers to the subject matter of a text. Current theory in reading suggests that during comprehension a reader reconstructs propositional meaning based on a combination of *top-down* and *bottom-up* processing. *Top-down* processing refers to a reader's preexisting knowledge about the content stored in long-term memory as *content schemata*. It informs a reader's predictions about what will be read and facilitates the integration of new information in memory. *Bottom-up* processing, on the other hand, refers to the decoding of graphic features based on syntactic and semantic cues. Content issues include cultural accessibility, assumed reader background, and relationship to reader interests.

The relationship between reading and language learning

While English graphic and oral language systems are related, they seem to develop somewhat independently in learners. For example, in California it is frequently remarked that Asian ESL students show relatively higher writing skills while Mexican students exhibit superior

fluency in oral discourse (Benidettino & Mauceri, 1990). Even among native speakers in college level basic writing, a typical problem is the interference of students' oral speech register with their ability to control Standard Written English (Traugott & Pratt, 1980, p. 12). Therefore, depending on the primary aim of instruction, some have suggested it may be helpful to distinguish between a language lesson and a reading lesson (Alderson, 1984). Nuttall (1982) contends that the goal of a reading lesson is to enable students to develop the skills necessary to become independent readers. To do so they must learn "how language is used for conveying content" and how "to extract the content from the language that expresses it" (p. 31).

One of the practical reasons for the distinction between language learning and reading instruction is the common remark among language teachers that second language readers, when compared with effective L1 readers, seem overly concerned with word-level comprehension (Kern, 1989). In other words, it appears on the surface that reading skills do not transfer between languages. Clarke (1980) confirmed this impression in a study which first proposed the *short circuit hypothesis*, which states that "limited control over the language 'short circuits' the good reader's system, causing him/her to revert to poor reader strategies when confronted with a difficult or confusing task in the

second language" (p. 206). While Clarke's results lend support to the idea of reading process as universal, they also indicate that a *language competence ceiling* might interfere with the transfer of reading strategies from one language to another.

A follow-up study by Hudson (1982) suggests that non-transference of reading skills, i.e., the short circuit, is partly due to false schema production, which disrupts the processing of an L2 written text. He found that the "linguistic ceiling" could be overcome by the external induction of schemata, e.g., pictures or discussion of vocabulary in pre-reading activities.

In another seminal study, McLeod & McLaughlin (1986) analyzed the kinds of errors generated by L1 readers and different levels of L2 readers. The study found that, when given a distracting task to induce errors, native speakers' mistakes retained the meaning of the original. The researchers interpreted this as a sign that native subjects were doing more than decoding: They appeared instead to be actively interacting with the texts. On the other hand, the kinds of errors made by L2 readers usually did not retain meaning, and the proportion of meaningful to non-meaningful errors remained the same whether subjects were beginning or advanced level. McLeod and McLaughlin propose that in learning complex cognitive skills, like reading, there is

more going on than an accretion of *automaticity*, the ability to adopt new skills as older ones become automatic. They offer that *nucleation* or *restructuring* needs to take place for reading to become efficient. Restructuring entails the imposition of a new organization on old information that allows the reader to deal efficiently with semantic and syntactic cues. While automaticity is gradual, restructuring is emergent and discontinuous. The concept of restructuring incidentally explains those "clicks of comprehension" reported by second language learners when they suddenly "understand" material they had previously been struggling with.

The conclusions of these three studies suggest an interaction between language proficiency and reading skills. On this basis, it may not be useful to think of a strict dichotomy between oral and graphic language, between a language lesson and a reading lesson. Integrating skills may strengthen the relationship between learners' underlying competence and their ability to implement that competence in a range of modes. A reading lesson *is* a language lesson.

The relationship between motivation and language learning

While not an issue for first language learning, motivation has been shown to have a strong relationship to the outcome of adult second language learning. It is a

commonplace that after childhood learners are unlikely to learn languages spoken by people they dislike or languages for which they have no real reason to learn. Since the question of motivation is so pervasive in second language education, a brief introduction to the topic is offered here. It should be noted that in the United States much attention is paid to student motivation among foreign language faculty. Their concern with student dropout rates and enrollment levels may incidentally be associated with budget cutbacks.

The literature describes motivation, understood as the fulfillment of needs, in several ways. Psychologists often write of a hierarchy of human needs that range from requirements for physical survival to the need for self esteem (Maslow, 1970). From studies in the psychology of education (Ausubel, 1968) emerges a view of human needs that may be more useful for teaching because it addresses the kinds of motivation that teachers help generate by manipulation of the learning environment. For example, Brown (1987) reports human needs that are the basis for motivation: the need for exploration, manipulation, activity, stimulation, knowledge, and ego-enhancement.

One of the most cited distinctions between different types of motivation was elaborated by Gardner and Lambert (1972) in their twelve year study of how attitude and

motivation affect language learning. They identified two forms of motivation: instrumental (e.g., to further a career, to fulfill a language requirement) and integrative (e.g., to identify with and blend into the society that speaks the language). Additional studies pointed out that instrumental motivation should not be discounted, and that one or the other were better depending on the learning context.

Other writers have made a distinction between *intrinsic* (to integrate with the culture or to achieve goals important to the learner) and *extrinsic* motivation (to achieve goals established by someone else). At a recent conference Brown (1991) described the intrinsic-extrinsic distinction as a continuum. He referred to intrinsic motivation as occurring when the reward was inherent in the process, and extrinsic as associated with a reward as final product. Brown cited several studies, including one in which two groups of teenagers were asked to individually tutor a young child. One group was told they would be given a pair of movie tickets at the end of the task, the other was not promised any extrinsic reward. This last group worked longer and became more involved in the task than did the group promised the movie tickets. In his presentation, Brown pointed out that the intrinsic rewards in doing a task well satisfied a human need for autonomy, self-determination and competence,

which caused better performance than the carrot-and-stick approach.

Ellis (1985) points out the difficulty of knowing from correlational studies, such as Gardiner & Lambert's, whether it is "motivation that produces successful learning, or successful learning that enhances motivation" (p. 119). He does, however, cite two studies (Burstall, 1975; MacNamara, 1973) that indicate that "it was the motivation that was engendered by the learning process itself that seemed to matter most" (p. 119). This implies that by manipulating the learning environment teachers can have an influence on learner motivation and consequently on the outcome of instruction.

One final set of distinctions relates motivation to the scope of the learning situation. Brown (1981) identifies three types of motivation: *global*, *situational*, and *task*. *Global* motivation is the general motivation for learning the L2; *Situational* motivation depends on the environmental context in which the L2 is being learned; and *task* motivation has to do with the specific learning activity at-hand. Figure 1 presents a three-dimensional model illustrating the relationship of the different types of motivation to one another.

Figure 1. Different types of motivation and their interrelationship.

Chapter 2: Text form and authenticity

In this chapter the theoretical and historical issues underlying the current interest in using authentic text formats will be outlined. The difficulty of determining objective criteria on which to base a definition of authentic text will be explored.

Why should texts be authentic?

Several arguments have been put forth justifying the use of authentic texts in language instruction (Grellet, 1981; Bacon, 1987; Gajdusek, 1988, Meyer & Tetrault, 1988). Many of these arguments refer to both graphic and oral discourse. Nunan (1988, p. 99) contends that learners need opportunities to engage with authentic texts in classroom settings so as to develop the skills necessary to deal with them in the world. His rationale reflects that expressed in the previously reported instructor interviews. Another argument in favor of authentic texts is that by simplifying language (i.e., making it "unauthentic") one may remove clues to meaning that occur in natural discourse (Honeyfield, 1977). Cathcart (1989) points out the difficulty of simulating natural discourse, given linguists' current level of knowledge on the subject. She adds the possibility that specially prepared texts lack validity.

Furthermore, many writers concur that communication should be meaningful, that adults like to see the immediate relevance of what they are learning by applying it to the real world, and that texts written for native speakers can help learners acquire an understanding of, and tolerance for, cultural differences.

A literature search of *The Modern Language Journal*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *The Journal of Reading*, and *Foreign Language Annals* revealed only one long-term classroom-based study that looked at the impact of using authentic texts on the overall performance of beginning language students. The study was reported by Vigil in 1987 at the University of Texas (cited in Swaffar, 1988). At the end of an eleven week Spanish course the study compared test results of an experimental group, whose instruction had been based on authentic texts, and a control group who had used prepared materials. Vigil found that students using authentic texts made more errors in spelling and concordance, but obtained significantly higher reading comprehension scores. The benefits were not limited to reading, however, as the experimental group also demonstrated better overall composition and oral performance than the control group. Vigil therefore concludes that "learners exposed to language structures in the context of authentic text develop the

skill to produce language coherently rather than as isolated components of the language" (Swaffar, 1988, p. 103).

This study lends some empirical evidence, then, to support the belief that learners "must see and hear the second language being used as the primary medium of communication among native speakers--as a language with a purpose" (Rogers & Medley, 1988, p. 467). It suggests that contextualizing supports learning, and that "only by helping learners deal with authentic texts can we re-establish the connection of language to its natural setting and purpose" (Byrnes, 1987, p. 183).

Historical and theoretical background of the authentic text movement

The use of authentic texts in second language education is not a new phenomenon. Traditional methods, which now tend to be subsumed under the label "grammar-translation," stressed study of written texts and "classics." In the U.S. the goal of instruction was largely to enable students to participate in the literacy of older and more prestigious cultures. This changed during World War II with the sudden need for efficient large scale language training in both oral and graphic skills to meet military and intelligence needs. The "audio-lingual" method was the direct result of the U.S. Defense Department's investment in specific

university programs (e.g., University of Michigan) and widespread acceptance of behaviorism as an appropriate model for learning. According to this method, the language variations found in authentic texts did not provide the simple, efficient template that was needed to guide in the formation of correct language habits. Authentic texts were, therefore, to be avoided. The recent revival of authentic texts as a vehicle for language learning (Beatie, Martin & Oberst, 1984, p. 203) is due in large part to the so-called "communicative revolution" in language teaching. To understand the sense in which authentic language is being re-proposed, it is necessary to understand some of the theoretical constructs informing this movement.

In 1971 Dell Hymes presented a challenge to the pre-eminence of structural linguistics and its influence on second language education. Arguing that language consisted of more than sounds and referential meaning organized solely by a set of rules linking them (1972, p. 278), he simultaneously questioned the emphasis placed on structure, (or *langue* in de Saussure's terms), in the language pedagogy of the time. He presaged a new conception of language, one which took into account *parole*, or what people actually spoke. He forewarned that the new perspective would supplant structuralism by the end of the century.

Using what was to become the new buzzword in the field, Hymes argued for a conception of language based on a notion of *communicative competence*. This notion included not only the elements syntax and phonology of concern to the structuralists--i.e., *linguistic competence*--but also a consideration of language elements that the structuralist model could not explain. The latter came under the rubric *sociolinguistic competence*, and had to do with one's ability to modify one's language to suit the *field* (purpose or subject matter), *tenor* (relations between participants), and *mode* (means of communication) of a given speech event (Halliday, 1978). According to Hymes, sociolinguistic competence consisted of the tacit knowledge and ability to use *sociocultural rules* as well as *rules of discourse*. Sociocultural rules specified the appropriateness of what to say to whom, when, and how. While sociocultural rules operate on propositions in context, rules of discourse govern how these propositions can be combined and interact (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Hymes' proposal found a sympathetic audience among second language educators who were experiencing dissatisfaction with the teaching methods then in vogue. Research into declining enrollment in U. S. undergraduate foreign language courses suggested that students, too, were often frustrated with the tedious, interminable rote

memorization of abstract grammar rules and constant drilling (Mollica, 1979, p. 158). Dissatisfaction with then current materials in ESL may also have fueled the fires of the communicative revolution. Oller, writing at the same time as Hymes, points out that "foreign students are frequently expected to learn to read college level prose by practicing material appropriate in complexity for fourth or fifth graders and in context suitable only for idiots" (Oller, 1972, p. 313 cited in Schulz, 1981, p. 44). Communication as a pedagogical concern may have received an extra push from changes in the English language learning market. During the seventies a new kind of consumer emerged, one who, rather than learning English as the subject of a required academic course, was motivated by immediate communicative needs associated with practical occupational or academic pursuits (Widdowson, 1979). Furthermore, English was becoming consolidated as the de facto international language at a time of increased mobility and expanded worldwide communication, a fact which may also have influenced learners' attitudes toward second language learning (Dannerbeck, 1987).

A concurrent shift in emphasis occurred in the field of second language education on three levels. At the level of research, contrastive analysis, memory studies, and methodological comparisons popular in the fifties and

sixties were abandoned. In place of research that focused on the language product, a new set of studies examined the language learning setting and learner variables (Swaffar, 1989, p. 303). Articles began to appear in the journals on the question of formal versus informal learning, the relevance of cultural schemata to comprehension, the impact of affective variables such as attitude and motivation on L2 acquisition, and validation of *interlanguage* "errors" as integral to successful learning. Furthermore, quantitative studies were supplemented with ethnographic research, and diachronic methods with synchronic ones. At the level of teacher-training, interdisciplinary courses began to be offered in sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics. A new emphasis was placed on the cultural and psychological factors affecting learner perceptions and language use (Swaffar, 1989, p. 305).

Related to the new developments in research and teacher-training was a shift in what many practitioners consider appropriate materials and methods. Table 1 offers a comparative overview of the different materials and techniques stemming from the older and newer approaches to language learning.

Table 1. Lower division curricular shift: materials and techniques

Preexisting Paradigm	New Paradigm
Culturally neutral dialogues, edited texts, separate skill practice	Personalized language Authentic texts as basis for oral, written work as well as reading
Sentence drill (fill in blanks) Grammar rules linked to formal accuracy in a sentence	Integrative use: grammar rules linked to meaning in paragraphs and discourse as well as sentences
Grammar rules taught in class at least 30% of class hour Cued by translation or grammatical terminology	Grammar rules to be learned by students outside of class: 95% of class time devoted to contextual practice Cued by situational variables
Vocabulary lists to be memorized for active use--largely cued by translation	Distinction between actively used and comprehended words--vocabulary understood and cued in L2 context.

Note. From "Competing paradigms in adult language acquisition" by J. K. Swaffar, 1989, *The Modern Language Journal*, 73(3), p. 304.

The new paradigm in Table 1 reflects a view of language and language learning commensurate with Hymes' concept of communicative competence. The activities listed concentrate on communicative intent and context of speech acts.

Language is thought of as communication; real language use is favored over abstract usage (Widdowson, 1979, 1984); and acquisition is favored over learning (Auerbach & Burgess, 1985, p. 477; Krahne & Christison, 1983). Furthermore, a learner-centered approach is favored over a teacher-centered one (Nunan, 1988), with particular interest in the nature of the learner, the learning process, and the learning setting (Raimes, 1983, p. 543). These are the most prominent features of the new paradigm as reflected in textbooks, teacher guides, "how to" journal articles and conference workshops. It should be stressed that they do not represent any particular method, but rather constitute "a common body of beliefs and assumptions [held by] most of the practitioners in the discipline" (Hairston, 1982, p. 76). In other words, they are what most teachers will believe to be the case and act upon until presented with evidence to the contrary.

Unlike the empirical sciences, where researchers have the luxury of delaying action until the truth of a proposition has been verified by the data and all variables are accounted for, the applied sciences require investigators to fill in the unknowns and to act in the world according to an imperfect theory. The hope of this approach is that eventual inquiries will prove one right, and life will become less uncertain. In materials design,

publishers seem to have become aware that what was lacking from many texts was "linguistically authentic comprehensible input presented in a fashion which allows students to practice decoding message systems rather than individual words" (Swaffar, 1988, p. 17). In consequence, the marketplace today reflects an increased effort to design products "based on the functional use of language, to make materials more authentic and meaningful, and to give students the opportunity to learn to use language spontaneously and appropriately in social context" (Wolfson, 1989, p. 46).

Difficulty of defining authentic texts

While there appears to be much enthusiasm for the use of authentic texts in second language education, there have been few attempts to define exactly what is meant by the term. A search of professional journal articles in *TESOL Quarterly*, *The Modern Language Journal*, *Foreign Language Annals*, and *The Journal of Reading* turned up frequent mention of the term, but only four attempts to develop a careful definition of the concept.

Rogers and Medley (1988) probably provide the simplest definition. They designate as authentic those language samples "that reflect a naturalness of form, and an appropriateness of cultural and situational context that

would be found in the language as used by native speakers" (p. 468). According to this, neither the writer's initial purpose nor the original source of the sample would preclude the designation "authentic." Therefore it could consist of simplified text and specially created prose as long as it "reflects" language as used by native speakers. This is, in some ways the easiest definition to understand: It calls for a simple value judgement on the part of the materials developer as to whether or not a text reflects native speaker use. But this judgement may not always be an easy one to make. Research in sociolinguistics has shown that native speaker judgements concerning their own language use are highly unreliable (Wolfson, 1989). In ignoring the writer's initial purpose, Rogers and Medley's definition begs the question of whether the producer's intended audience also need be a native speaker. Finally, their definition goes against the common notion that "authentic" in the context of language materials means something produced for a purpose other than language learning.

Swaffar (1985) provides a more explicit definition of "authenticity." She specifies three criteria, the most important being that a text's primary intent should be "to communicate meaning" (1985, p. 17). Thus, the writer may be consciously writing for either a native or non-native readership as long as there is "an authentic communicative

objective in mind," e.g., to persuade, inform, thank, etc. The second stipulation Swaffar makes is that readers be "allowed to analyze message systems for themselves" (p. 17). This requirement excludes materials that have been linguistically or culturally sanitized. Alterations should therefore not be made to impress upon the reader a particular interpretation. The one exception she grants is in the form of a brief introduction to provide background information the learner is unlikely to know. She argues, however, that "such an introduction will frame or delimit student expectation but not provide a reader hypothesis or prediction" (p. 17). She advocates that students actively engage in reading skills similar to those they use in their native language, such as inferring meaning from context, predicting, and developing their own interpretation. Finally, an authentic text needs to satisfy one of two conditions: (a) that it be "representative of a target culture message to other members of that culture" (p. 17), or (b) that it be a message directed to students, either to elicit a response or to provide content information (p. 17-18).

Thus, Swaffar introduces the idea that the quality of the interactions between writer and reader, and writer and text, can be used to distinguish authentic language samples from pseudo-language. As an operational definition it seems

highly applicable. With respect to communicative competence, it opens up additional areas of inquiry. For example, how representative does a sample need to be to qualify as authentic? And how do we identify a target culture message with respect to a target speech community? Cathcart (1989) mentions that some suggest that for beginning learners in survival English, appropriate authentic discourse should consist of "real native-speaker/nonnative speaker interactions that show negotiation and strategies for coping with imperfect communication" (1989, p. 122). This proposes a more heterogeneous and flexible idea of target speech community than is usually represented in textbooks. It also offers the opportunity to expand the definition of authentic texts to include not just communicative competence, but strategic competence (Canale & Swain 1980) as well.

Rings (1986) draws upon research in discourse analysis in an attempt to give a more technical definition of authenticity with respect to texts. She surveys several disparate sources for initial recommendations. These make sometimes contradictory claims that textual material be "made to seem 'real'" (p. 204), that the focus be on the content of the communication, that materials may be edited and changed for the language learner, that the writer should be a native speaker with competent knowledge of the content

they are writing about, that interaction be between native speakers who are intent on reaching an extra-linguistic goal where any monitoring of form is "the result of their consciousness of the situation and of other speakers, rather than the purposes of tape recording or teaching language" (p. 205), and that "authenticity should be viewed on a continuous rather than a dichotomous framework" (p.205).

Rings attempts to shape these recommendations into a comprehensive definition by introducing the concept of a text type. Any text is authentic, she points out, as long as it is interpreted as belonging to a certain text type. For example, a spontaneous native-speaker conversation is authentic insofar as it is seen as an instance of the text type "spontaneous native-speaker conversation." Likewise a specially created dialog in a textbook is an authentic sample of the text type "textbook dialogue." Text type is determined by discourse variables: the goals, the situation, and the relationship of the participants. Thus, since one can only determine authenticity on the basis of criteria for a given text type, each sample of text could be located on a continuum between authentic and unauthentic depending on how well it satisfies the criteria. For example, instances of the text type "conversation" may include, from most to least authentic: native speakers' spontaneous conversations produced for their own purposes

without any awareness of being monitored, conversations where one of the participants is aware of being monitored, role-playing by native speakers, excerpts of the foregoing, reenactments or altered versions of the above, and composed conversations intended for textbooks. As Rings points out, "one cannot question *a priori* authenticity of a textbook conversation, since its existence makes it an authentic text of some kind. But one can question whether a textbook conversation is also another text type it may attempt to represent" (p. 206).

Rings' analysis is helpful in that it advances authenticity as a relative concept, but in so doing it seems to change the terms of the debate. In pedagogical applications, the question becomes what text types satisfy the requirements of communicative language teaching and what degree of unauthenticity is tolerable, given the practical constraints of the classroom. Because of the complexity involved in language, it is difficult to construct a text of one text type that reflects the features and constraints of another text type. The learner without a grasp of the complexity of the L2 would need to develop a metacognitive awareness regarding what language is appropriate for what text type and how that language changes depending on a host of variables inherent to the speech situation. Although Ring's logic may seem circular, it at least suggests that

thinking of some texts as intrinsically authentic and others as intrinsically unauthentic may be simplistic and not very useful.

Widdowson (1979) remarks that "authentic" may not be a meaningful way to describe any sample of language. All language is authentic. He therefore uses the term not to describe a quality inherent in the text per se, but rather to describe the relationship of the reader to the writer at the level of response. "Authenticity, then, depends on a congruence of the language producer's intentions and the language receiver's interpretation, this congruence being effected through a shared knowledge of convention" (1978, p. 166). Linguistics students know that Chomsky's statement, "colorless green ideas sleep furiously" (Chomsky 1957, p. 15) wouldn't be uttered by any sane native speaker of English outside of the context of a lecture on linguistics. Likewise the text "Sally picked up sea shells yesterday, she is picking up seashells today and she will pick up sea shells tomorrow" is meant to be interpreted to demonstrate past, present progressive, and future verb forms in English, not to inform students about Sally's schedule. Expectations to the contrary would lead a reader to an unauthentic relationship to the language sample, and this is where Widdowson identifies the problem. "It is a disturbing thought that learners of English might actually believe that

the English-speaking peoples spend their time in cretinous conversations stating the obvious about cups of coffee and the shape of restaurant tables" (1984, p. 169).

Widdowson shifts the terms of debate to focus on the learner and the knowledge of conventions that would allow them to interact appropriately with a text. The goal, Widdowson states, is for the learner to attain an authentic relationship with "genuine discourse." The latter, which is what American researchers usually mean by "authentic text," Widdowson identifies as a language not intended to teach language and "of relevance to [the student's] purposes in learning" (1978, p. 170).

As may be gathered from the four definitions discussed, there is considerable variation in opinion and the concept of authentic text is a very difficult one to define. In summary, Rogers and Medley define as authentic texts that reflect the language of native speakers. Swaffar states that an authentic text must have communicative intent and should not have been tampered with in an effort to impress a single interpretation on the student. Under Rings' and Widdowson's analysis, the basis for questioning a text's authenticity is challenged. All texts are in some sense authentic; what is important is authenticity vis a vis a text type and student purposes. The way out of the dilemma of defining authentic text may be in a closer

inspection in the context in which the texts are intended to be used.

Several writers have commented on the occasional difficulty communicative methodologies have in acknowledging the classroom. A typical criticism is that teachers are going overboard in trying to make of the classroom anything other than a classroom, and going to absurd lengths to make sure that linguistic input has no direct pedagogical intent that could interfere with acquisition. To better appreciate language classroom language, it may help to think of the pedagogic setting as consisting of a series of overlapping discourse worlds or speech situations. In one discourse world, learners are learners who want to learn the language for their own assorted reasons. In another, co-existing discourse world, learners are expected to act as though they were in a non-pedagogical setting using non-pedagogical language.

The difficulty in determining objective criteria for distinguishing authentic texts may be due to the two (or more) embedded speech acts that occur whenever an L2 sample is used in the classroom. One speech situation has the learner as receiver while the content of the communication may be another set of participants engaging in a second speech situation. And each speech situation implies a separate and perhaps, at times, conflicting set of

constraints that would need to be met for a text to genuinely belong to it. Therefore a definition of authentic text would need to take into account the overlapping language varieties that occur in the classroom.

Table 2 imposes a sociolinguistic taxonomy on two co-occurring speech situations that might obtain when students

Table 2. Co-existing speech situations in a language classroom

		Speech Situation I (classroom)	Speech Situation II (embedded)
Tenor	person who receives the communication	learner	learner
	person/s to whom the communication is addressed	learner	unspecified
	person choosing the text	teacher or learner	+/- native speaker
	speaker producing the text	+/- native speaker	+/- native speaker
Field	purpose	lang. learning	unspecified
	content/topic	Speech situation II	unspecified
	genre	"authentic text"	unspecified
	psychological setting	+/- target country	unspecified
Mode	norms	classroom	unspecified
	form	interlanguage	unspecified

read in the classroom. An operational definition of authentic text that used such a taxonomy of language variety might read: *A text is authentic to the degree to which the*

unspecified variables of any overlapping speech situation converge with those that may be found in the target language field. For each learner, the target language field may be defined as "the total range of communities within which a person's knowledge of varieties and speaking rules potentially enables him to move communicatively" (Hymes, 1972b, p. 55). The target field thus includes several language varieties--pedgogic and non-pedagogic. The point of such a definition would be to draw attention away from a useless discussion of whether a language sample naturally occurs or not, and focus attention on whether the varieties that are being presented in texts respond to learner needs and motives.

Chapter 3: Text content and student interests

This chapter describes a reading interest survey (see Appendix A) conducted at five community colleges in the vicinity of San José State University. It attempts to answer the question "What do students say they want to read?" The underlying assumption behind the question is that learning might be enhanced if reading topics appeal to student interests or purposes in language learning.

Introduction

There is often a fundamental difference between the kinds of reading associated with a classroom setting and the kinds of reading learners engage in on their own. Outside of the pedagogic setting, learners have a number of different reasons to decode text. For example, reading may involve a practical goal or specific need for knowledge, such as reading the classified ads to get an idea of the prices and features of different cars. Reading may also be prompted by more social concerns. When many people in the same community have read the same item, the item becomes part of the knowledge base of the community, and necessary for full participation. A third reason a learner may have for reading is aesthetic enjoyment, such as one may gain from the lyrics of a favorite song or the novel from which a

favorite movie was drawn. Multiple reasons for reading stem from students' life experiences and needs. In this sense, topics can be said to be selected according to personal or social criteria that offer natural pre-reading activities.

But inside the traditional ESL reading class things often work quite differently. The teacher selects the stories and articles to be read, and baits students with pre-reading exercises in the hope that each will find their own "hook." Some students bite. Other students stare off into space, chew on their pencils, and try not to get caught glancing at the clock.

Coady (1979) stresses the importance of interest and learner background on the selection of reading texts.

The subject of reading materials should be of high interest and relate well to the background of the reader, since strong semantic input can help compensate when syntactic control is weak. The interest and background knowledge will enable the student to comprehend at a reasonable rate and keep him involved in the material in spite of its syntactic difficulty.
(p. 12)

Nuttall (1982) argues that interest is the most important quality to consider in selecting material for an L2 reading

course. She contends that it even supersedes readability, since a reader with a real reason to read is more likely to engage in the skills that lead to reading competence. This is hardly a new concept for teachers of L2 reading. Only the most encrusted fail to ask themselves, "What would my students be interested in reading?" Unfortunately, however, the textbook industry requires this question to be answered months before the teacher can ask the interested parties--the students themselves. The result is a guessing game played by material developers, publishers, and teachers, each trying to anticipate learners' needs and tastes.

The main purpose of the survey reported in this chapter was to try to find out what content students say they want in an ESL reader. The secondary purpose was to examine how these interests might vary across selected learner variables: sex, age, L1, length of stay and years of schooling. The overriding intent was to gain access to the reading interests of a specific student population so that the findings could be used by the participating instructors as an aid in selecting reading material.

Subjects

The sample population consisted of 175 ESL students enrolled in eight classes at five Community Colleges within thirty-five miles of San José State University: Gavilan,

Cabrillo, Evergreen, San Jose City, and Foothill colleges. The classes ranged from beginning to advanced and included ESL reading, basic writing, grammar, conversation and note-taking. 55% of the sample was female, 45% male. Of the sample, 41% were native Spanish speakers, 30% were native Vietnamese, and 23% were native speakers of other Asian languages. The median age was 28, the mean was 30 with a standard deviation of 10 years. The average number of years of school was 13, with a standard deviation of 3.6 years.

Table 3. Ratio of men to women, percentages by language groups.

	all	Spanish	Vietnamese	other Asian
men	45	40	60	33
women	55	60	40	68

Figure 2. Histogram of sample population age.

Table 4. Years of school attended.

	all	Spanish	Vietnamese	other Asian
mean	13.0	12.3	13.0	14.1
std. dev.	3.6	4.0	3.2	3.3
median	13.0	12.0	12.6	13

Methods

Since the cooperation of several faculty was necessary to obtain a sample large enough to study the effect of learner variables, the survey was designed to take up a

minimum of class time. It was simple to administer and easy to comprehend. Instructors introduced the activity to their students as a favor they were doing for a colleague who was writing an ESL reader. The instructions reinforced the fact that any information given was voluntary and offered in the spirit of furthering research. The combination of simplicity and low-anxiety context was successful: Of the 176 forms collected, only one had to be discarded as being incomplete.

The survey consisted of three parts: a personal data section, a forced choice task simulation, and a pair of open-ended questions.

The personal data section asked native language, sex, age, amount of time in the U.S., and years of school attended before and after arrival in the U.S. This information was later used to examine how learner variables affected responses to the forced-choice items.

The forced-choice section presented students with a simulated task. They were asked to look at the topic headings of two hypothetical books and check the four topics they wanted to read about first in each. They were then asked to indicate which of the two books they wanted to read first. The strength of a forced choice is that it is a realistic task: given a limited amount of time, it is natural to choose among options. An operational assumption

was made that what students will choose to read first is what they consider most relevant to themselves. Since responses were anonymous, it was also assumed that students were not aiming at pleasing the instructor.

Although a simple and fast instrument, this forced-choice survey had obvious drawbacks. First, there is no record of relative response to individual items: Someone could like them all equally. This was in accordance with the intention of the survey, which was to ask students to discriminate, and was thus not considered a defect. The second weakness of a forced-choice format is that it precludes unforeseen answers. In order to address this, an open-ended question section was added. This consisted of two items. In the first students were asked what other things, aside from the topic headings, they wanted included in the ESL book; in the second they were asked to finish the sentence "I like to read things that..." The intent here was to allow students to express options outside the limits of a forced choice, but it incidentally compensated for the survey's third weakness. Students often used the open questions to reinforce and elaborate on their responses to the pre-established topics. This gave a better idea of how students interpreted the meaning of each item, some of which were purposefully vague.

The forced-choice topics were developed and refined in consultation with several community college ESL instructors and my advisors at San José State University. Many topics originated from actual chapters in current ESL readers. Other topics were suggested by instructors, and some by students in two trial surveys that helped shape the final format. In the first trial, which presented subjects with a single menu from which to choose, there was a strong interest in a core of practical topics that had to do with material well-being, but a low interest in items at the periphery of that core. In subsequent versions, then, subjects were presented with two menu clusters, one of which consisted of the popular items and one of which contained items drawing the next highest response. Items drawing little or no interest were discarded. Discarded items included *the homeless, the army, U.S. writers, movies, famous Americans, other students in your class, how banks work, and good places to shop*. These are worth noting, since they include cultural items that might be of interest to ESL teachers and materials developers but hold limited appeal for this group of students. The practical, survival-English items are apparently not relevant to these students, either.

Results

Figures 3 and 4 give the overall percentage of students who indicated a topic as being among the four they wanted to read about first from each cluster. The most popular topic was *getting an education*, which was checked by 70% of the respondents, followed by *jobs*, which was checked by 57%. After these, the most popular topics were *U.S. Laws* (45%), *starting a business* (43%), *computers* (39%), and *healthy foods* (36%). Least popular in the first cluster were *how the U.S. government works* (26%), *how to buy a house* (19%), *women's rights* (19%), *medical insurance* (15%), *marriage* (14%), and *taxes* (13%).

Figure 3 gives the overall percentage of subjects marking items as being among the first four they wanted to read from the second topic cluster. Here, the most frequently checked topic was *child education* (56%). This was followed by a group of topics including *American history* (46%), *strange things Americans do* (42%), *how the brain works* (42%), and *other cultures* (39%). Behind these in popularity were *fun places near your school* (30%), *medicine* (30%), and *sports* (27%). Least popular were *American music* (23%), *famous people from your country* (22%), *earthquakes* (21%), and *movie stars* (13%).

Figure 3. Topics in first cluster ranked by popularity; $n=175$.

Figure 4. Topics in second cluster ranked by popularity; $n=175$.

In response to the question asking which "book" subjects wanted to read first--one based on the first or the second cluster--71% indicated the first book and 25% indicated the second one.

Figure 5 shows how men's and women's responses differed on the first topic cluster, and ranks the topics in order of decreasing difference. For most topics in this cluster, roughly equal percentages of men and women checked each item. The largest discrepancy was found for *women's rights* which was checked by 31% of the women, but only 4% of the men. Tabulations revealed 10-15 percentage point differences for *jobs, how the U.S. government works, computers, and medical insurance.*

Discrepancies between men's and women's responses were more apparent in the second topic cluster, illustrated by Figure 6. The largest difference occurred for the topic *sports*, which attracted substantially more men. The items *childhood education, fun places to visit near your school, and strange things Americans do* were more of a priority for women. Some items that collected fewer overall votes were nonetheless of more consistent interest to men, including *earthquakes, American music, famous people from your country.* Roughly the same percentages of men and women marked *American history, medicine, how the brain works, movie stars, and other cultures.*

Figure 5. Comparison of men's and women's response to first topic cluster ranked in decreasing order of discrepancy; men $n = 79$, women $n = 96$.

Figure 6 Comparison of men's and women's response to second topic cluster ranked in decreasing order of discrepancy; men $n = 79$, women $n = 96$.

Subjects' responses were also broken down into three major language groupings. The two largest groups enrolled in the area's community colleges are native Spanish and native Vietnamese speakers. Of the sample population, 41% were Spanish speakers and 30% Vietnamese speakers. A third, somewhat artificial group was established consisting of native speakers of Asian languages other than Vietnamese, which consisted mostly of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese speakers. This group was created to check the possibility of an East-West split over topic choices, but the results in Figures 7 and 8 do not support this hypothesis.

Figure 7 shows that native Vietnamese speakers showed relatively less interest in *women's rights* in the first topic cluster. On the other hand, Spanish speakers were less interested in reading about *jobs*. Otherwise, responses across language groups were roughly the same to the first topic cluster. Much more variation appeared in response to the second cluster of items, illustrated in Figure 8. The artificial group of "other Asians" showed markedly more interest in *movie stars*, *fun places near your school*, and *American music*. Vietnamese subjects treated *other cultures* as less of a priority, than *American history*, which was checked frequently. Spanish speakers seemed to be less interested in *strange things Americans do*.

Figure 7. Comparison of response to first topic cluster by native language;
 native Spanish $n = 72$, native Vietnamese $n = 52$, native Asian other than Vietnamese $n = 40$.

Figure 8. Comparison of response to second topic cluster by native language; native Spanish $n = 72$, native Vietnamese $n = 52$, native Asian other than Vietnamese $n = 40$.

Next, the sample population was divided by age into two bands of 80 subjects each. The younger group included subjects 18 to 27 years old; the older group included subjects between 28 and 42 years old. Figures 9 and 10 compare responses from the two groups to each topic cluster. In the first cluster, subjects in the older band showed more interest in *how U S. government works* and *U.S. laws*. Younger subjects showed relatively more interest in *computers*, *healthy foods*, and *marriage*. In the second cluster, the older subjects were more likely to check *child education* and *fun places near your school*, while for younger subjects *movie stars* and *American music* were relatively higher priorities. Response to other topics did not seem to differ by age group.

Subjects were also divided into groups according to length of stay in the U.S. Figure 11 shows the resulting variations in responses to the first cluster. New arrivals, in the U.S. less than two years, were not interested in *how to buy a house*, but did want to be informed about *marriage*. Subjects in the country for more than 4.5 years checked *women's rights* more than twice as often as the other groups. In the second cluster (Figure 12), however, these same "old-timers" were far more interested in *child education* and *medicine* than in *movie stars* and *American music*.

Figure 9. Comparison of response to first topic cluster by age band;
age 18-27 n = 80, age 28-42 n = 80.

Figure 10. Comparison of response to second topic cluster by age band;
age 18-27 $n = 80$, age 28-42 $n = 80$.

Figure 11. Comparison of response to first topic cluster by length of stay;
 < 2 years $n = 55$, 2 - 4.5 years $n = 56$, >4.5 years $n = 62$.

Figure 12. Comparison of response to second topic cluster by length of stay;
 < 2 years $n = 55$, 2 - 4.5 years $n = 56$, >4.5 years $n = 62$.

Finally, subjects were divided into three groups by the total number of years they had reported attending school. Figure 13 shows that, with respect to the first cluster of topics, level of education did not seem to make much difference to the pattern of responses. Subjects who had attended less school seemed more interested in *computers*, while those with more were more likely to mark *taxes*. As with the other variables, the second cluster of topics (Figure 14), showed less agreement in subject response. Subjects with less than 11.5 years of schooling were more interested, relative to the other groups, in *earthquakes*, *famous people from your country*, *American history*, and *medicine*. This same group was markedly less interested in reading about *movie stars* and *strange things Americans do*. For the two other groups, responses tended to be similar, except for the *fun places near your school*, which was marked with greater frequency by subjects having over 14 years of schooling.

Figure 13. Comparison of response to first topic cluster by years of school;
 < 11.5 years $n = 48$, 11.5 - 14 years $n = 61$, > 14 years $n = 66$.

Figure 14. Comparison of response to second topic cluster by years of school;
 < 11.5 years $n = 48$, 11.5 - 14 years $n = 61$, > 14 years $n = 66$.

Discussion of results

The data show a clear majority preference for the first cluster of topics over the second one. Subjects checking the first cluster are more likely to have been in the U.S. longer, but less likely to have had extended schooling. Within this cluster the three most popular topics were *getting an education, jobs, and U.S. laws*. The first two may indicate an overriding concern with the kind of information needed to make decisions regarding education and employment. The third suggests a need for more information about what kinds of actions are permissible. It seems as though the interest is not simply economic and includes issues that are wider than the specific practical topics like *how banks work, good places to shop and taxes*.

In the first topic cluster, the response frequencies of various subject subgroupings to individual items varied relatively little. The only item suggesting a major split was *women's rights*. A split along gender lines was expected, but response was also split along the lines of culture and length of stay. Both native Vietnamese speakers and relatively recent arrivals were less likely to assign the topic high priority. Recent arrivals also expressed little interest in *how to buy a house*, and Spanish speakers considered *jobs* a lesser priority than did other language groups.

Compared with the first cluster, responses to the second are more evenly distributed, suggesting less overall agreement among subjects. Less agreement is also evident in the priorities of the various subgroups examined. For example, *child education*, while the most popular topic, is considerably more so among the older students and women. *Sports* is clearly a male interest while *fun places near school* is a female one, perhaps thought of as a place to take children. Within the second cluster there are two subgroups worth looking at. One consists in *American music* and *movie stars*. These two drew little interest overall, but students over twenty-seven and those in the U.S. for longer than 4.5 years were much less likely to check it. Since entertainment often is a major component of any instruction on American popular culture, this suggests that popular culture is not necessarily popular with everyone. The second subgroup, however, points to a different aspect of American culture. This includes the topics *American history*, *strange things Americans do*, and *other cultures*. These three, along with *how the brain works* formed a tier of topics that were checked by about 40% of the sample population. While as a subgroup these were solid items, there was considerable variation across learner variables. A larger proportion of Vietnamese speakers expressed an interest in *American history*, but a noticeably smaller

proportion checked *other cultures*. Spanish speakers and students with less than 11.5 years of school showed markedly less interest in *strange things American do*. That topic was selected to test interest in some of the tabloid literature that is making its way into ESL texts (e.g., *True Stories*), but might have been interpreted as an ironic twist on "American customs." Still, the variations here are difficult to explain, but introduce questions for further, possibly qualitative, investigation.

Responses to the open question section varied. Some students mentioned grammar and study skills, and expressed a desire that reading "teach me something" and be "useful." Several mentioned genre: "love story"; "romantic story"; "true story in the news"; "interesting story"; "are hot in the moment"; "funny stories"; "a drama story a myth, and legend or folk tales."

Other responses reinforced the topics a student had checked, with frequent occurrence of "American history." Others added specific topics, like "economics, accounting"; "science"; "plants"; "cars"; "religion"; "psychology"; "how I can cope with the problems (such as getting car accident or Insurance system, etc...)." Other topic suggestions were more vague: "I like, if you please, you put in an ESL book the real and fresh things that are going on the real society everyday"; "culture."

Many responses helped to give an idea of how students interpreted the forced-choice topics. Some of these responses: "about how to look for a job"; "to find job"; "information about how to find jobs"; "job outlook"; "how to transfer to 4 years college"; "how to start college in the U.S."; "schools in the USA"; "how we can get help to get financial aids"; "tell me how to succes in education"; "how can the people study dentist"; "communication between parents and school"; "laws about injury on the job and rights of workers"; "something about Mexican culture"; "maybe something about interaction between races"; "descrimination"; "good relationship with native speakers"; "the difference between the western and the eastern culture and society"; and "other culture around the word."

Some responses gave a glimpse of students' personal stories: "are interesting and help me to get used with my new life"; "how I can make native friends"; "help me to continue in school without feeling depres"; "I can learn more everything and I feel better for my life in the U.S."; "I could use in the future, or I could share to my children someday"; "how I can feed my baby right and what kind of meals I can make for him"; "how to live satisfactorily in this world."

Taken together, these responses create a strong statement of need. While there is an appeal for

interesting, lively material, there is also a very pragmatic outlook. Whether students will actually enjoy reading about the topics they choose themselves is a question that merits further study.

Implications

Nuttall (1982) warns that instructors may be disappointed to discover what kinds of things their ESL students want to read. The results of the present survey tend to confirm Murray's (1989) statement that topics that are "dear to many teacher's hearts" may seem to students "a luxury they can't afford" (p. 78). Culturally specific entertainment, topics which require cultural schemata and points of reference that take years to develop, hold relatively little relevance for these ESL students. Their concerns are far more pragmatic: how to get the best education they can, how to find a job, how to raise their children.

Rather than a disappointment, this might be seen as an invitation to teachers and material developers to expand the curriculum. One way for teachers to do this is to begin with their own survey. Once they have identified the students' range of reading interests, they can begin to explore appropriate materials. A teacher who hasn't changed careers lately might peruse the careers section of the

bookstore or visit the college job and counseling center. They might be surprised at how much authentic material is available on topics of student interest, some of it genuinely helpful. This suggestion is not meant to advocate a sudden, wholesale change of curriculum. Material development is time consuming, and instructors need to negotiate a balance between content that appeals to students' immediate perceived needs and the skills that are important for eventual academic work. But it does imply expanding the idea of what constitutes appropriate content.

Another possibility for expanding the curriculum is to guide students to select their own English reading material. This concept is termed Self-Selected Reading (Barnett, 1989, p. 146) and is a method used in L1 reading whereby students are free to read whatever interests them individually. While this means the teacher is giving up control over graded vocabulary, it may actually result in more reading at a deeper level (Krashen, 1988) and more vocabulary acquisition. These individual readings can form the basis of class activities. For instance, students can summarize what they have read for the other students, or share a couple of new vocabulary items they have learned. If supplemented with directed readings, for which teachers can then choose high quality texts, this method can provide a rich and exciting ESL reading class.

Comparison of second and foreign language learner interests

A survey similar to this one was conducted at the University of Texas to determine the interests of 286 students enrolled in German language courses (Dechert & Kastmer, 1989). In this study, students were asked to rate their response to 99 cultural items using a five-point Likert scale. Researchers conducted a factor analysis on the results and assessed students' relative interest in 12 topic categories. These are ranked in Table 5.

Table 5. Ranking of 12 cultural factors

1. Ordinary daily life
2. Tourist attractions and travel tips
3. History
4. Landscape and climate
5. Social and political structure
6. Culture (literature, theater, folk music)
7. Technology
8. School system
9. Church and Religion
10. Social Structure in Switzerland
11. Production
12. Demography

Although this survey of German language students used fundamentally different methods from the survey of ESL

students reported in this paper, it is still possible to make a valid comparison. By searching among the ninety-nine items given to the German students, a sufficient number of similar topics can be found. Table 6 ranks these comparable items by the mean Likert score obtained in the German survey. The corresponding items from the ESL survey are included in parenthesis, for comparison.

Table 6. Ranking of comparable items from German and ESL surveys.

4.16	Cooking foods and eating habits (healthy foods)
4.16	Family life and structure (marriage)
4.01	Popular music
3.93	Film in German speaking countries (movies bombed in trials)
3.85	Tourist attractions and travel trips (fun places to visit...)
3.72	German history (American history)
3.66	Equality between sexes in Ger-speaking countries (women's rights)
3.63	Technology & science (earthquakes, brain , medicine, computers)
3.50	School system (child education)
3.44	Housing (how to buy a house)
2.70	Vocational training (getting an education, jobs)

While many items are not strictly comparable and the method of analysis is different, this comparison shows how different student populations have different interests and purposes for learning. In this case, what is top priority for one student population is the lowest priority for another.

This particular contrast illustrates one of the differences between second language (SL) students who learn the target language within a community of native speakers, and foreign language (FL) learners, who learn outside the community. There is some disagreement among researchers as to how similar the two student populations are and whether a singular model of reading applies (Lee & Musumeci, 1988). But beyond these attempts to isolate the effects of instruction and environment on learning, the present data point to a great variety of underlying student motives in wanting to read in another language. Put simply, the ESL students surveyed generally had practical, instrumental motives that encompassed education and employment. The German FL students picked topics that suggested a wider variety of motives, some of these instrumental to their own needs as future travellers, but some that expressed a curiosity about the target language culture.

These are only two of many possible language learning situations with very specific populations. In other situations, still other student interests and needs will obtain. Reading selections, if they are to interest learners, should reflect their needs and purposes.

Chapter 4: Text content and cultural accessibility

Chapter 2 traced some of the background arguments supporting the use of authentic text forms in second language learning. In chapter 3 an instrument for assessing student topic preferences was demonstrated. In the present chapter, one of the critical problems frequently encountered when considering the content of authentic texts will be explored: that of cultural accessibility and the knowledge background of the reader. This problem will be examined first by reviewing the relationship of schema theory to reading comprehension, then by tracing some of the research that illustrates how inappropriate schema can impede comprehension and hamper both language and culture learning. Finally some proposed solutions will be considered.

Why texts need to be culturally accessible

Instructors might be tempted to take the conclusions reached in chapters 2 and 3 as the basis for collecting authentic texts on topics the students said they want to know about. Instructors might even proceed to apply readability formulae or subjective judgement to grade the texts thus selected to make sure that they are linguistically accessible to students. But if instructors were to put the texts to use without further consideration,

they might run into problems. They would quickly become aware how much authentic texts are artifacts of the culture that generated them, and how difficult they are to comprehend--no matter how simple the language--without understanding them within a specific socio-cultural context. For example, if instructors attempted to use the survey results to collect texts on "how to find a job," they would find a great deal of material, most of it based on the American cultural construct of "self-fulfillment." The assumption is so pervasive that texts might be opaque to many ESL students who come from cultures where "fulfillment" is something achieved through family relations. The information students want is there, but buried under several layers of cultural assumptions that native writers and readers share. Unless students know how to dig through these layers, the texts might appear to have very little to do with finding a job, and everything to do with "nonsense." A third criteria for text selection is therefore called for: cultural accessibility.

Effect of reader background on comprehension

Research in schema theory has demonstrated the importance of a reader's background knowledge on the interpretation and comprehension of texts. A central contention of schema theory is that meaning is not contained

in the text itself, as though text were a vessel that a reader merely had to absorb in order to understand. Instead a text is thought of as supplying a limited number of instructions to the reader based on the writer's assumptions about a reader's background. Comprehension, therefore, involves an interaction between the reader's background knowledge and the text.

When a reader constructs meaning, two complementary processes are at work: bottom-up and top-down. The bottom-up or data-driven processing uses more specific cues originating in the text's graphic display to activate progressively higher order schemata. On the other hand, top-down or conceptually-driven processing uses general, higher-order schemata to make predictions about the kind of information that should be incoming. Thus, bottom-up processing provides the information to confirm and fill-out higher-order schemata; top-down helps resolve ambiguity and gives the entire system greater efficiency (Carrell, 1984; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983).

One implication of schema theory is that what a reader understands depends on the schema activated during reading. Even among native speakers, interpretations of any given text will differ to the extent that all individuals can be said to have had different experiences that contribute to their background knowledge and their ability to handle

incoming code. Writers usually take this range of experience into consideration when considering their audience. However, in the case of an authentic text, second language readers may not have been anticipated by a writer. The second language reader who does not activate appropriate schemata will experience "various degrees of non-comprehension" (Carrell, 1984, p. 333). Failure to activate the appropriate schemata may occur when either bottom-up processing fails to function as the writer predicted, or when the reader lacks the appropriate schemata.

Johnson (1981) undertook an investigation of the relative effects of language complexity (which affects bottom-up failure) and cultural background (which affects top-down failure) on reading comprehension. She conducted an experiment where Farsi and American English speakers read stories about American and Iranian folk heroes (a Buffalo Bill story and a Mullah story). By analyzing subjects' comprehension responses to culturally familiar, culturally unfamiliar, simplified and unsimplified, but in all other ways comparable stories, Johnson discovered that "the cultural origin of the story had more effect on the comprehension of the ESL students than the level of syntactic or semantic complexity, adapted vs. unadapted" (p. 169). This seems to justify the notion that there is more to readability than linguistic factors. When reading,

readers fill-in information and attempt to make a text cohere by calling on whatever schemata are available. Content may be more important than form in readability, and may explain why the instructors interviewed at the beginning of this project were so concerned with the content of the readings they selected for their students.

Several other studies have looked at the effect of lack of background schemata on reading comprehension and recall. Of these, two have findings that are especially relevant to the present paper. Steffensen and Joag-Dev (1984) report a study conducted by themselves and Anderson in 1979, in which subjects from India and the United States read and recalled two texts describing an Indian and an American wedding. They found that culturally familiar material was more quickly read and was subject to fewer culturally-biased distortions during recall. They conclude that

If readers possess the schemata assumed by the writer, they understand what is stated and effortlessly make the inferences intended. If they do not, they distort meaning as they attempt to accommodate even explicitly stated propositions to their own existing knowledge structures. (1984, pp. 60-61)

Another study, by Nelson (1987), is of particular interest not only because it examined recall errors, but also because it sought to determine student preference for similar topics set in familiar and unfamiliar cultural contexts. Nelson had her Egyptian students read four linguistically and thematically similar pairs of readings from the native (i.e., Egyptian) and from the foreign (i.e., American) cultures. She found that "students recall significantly better when reading passages from their own culture" (p. 427). Furthermore, her Egyptian students generally expressed a preference for the readings set in their own culture. The one noticeable exception was a matched pair on the changing roles of women. Nelson attributes this discrepancy to the fact that 85% of her subjects were males and that they may have felt more comfortable reading about the topic in the most distant context possible (i.e., the foreign one). This finding corresponds to the study of ESL students presented in Chapter 3, where preference for certain topics (e.g., women's rights, sports, child education) differed significantly along gender lines.

Language-learning vs. Culture-learning

Nelson's findings are especially relevant to the present report because they suggest that in some pedagogical

situations culture learning and language learning may be at odds with one another. Insisting on certain kinds of authentic texts in these circumstances may lead to

- (a) decreased comprehensible input for the learner and
- (b) cultural misunderstanding.

With reference to the first of these problems, if the reading selection is culturally inaccessible to the learners, they will revert to word-level comprehension strategies (Bacon, 1987). These strategies will quickly overload short-term memory, resulting in comprehension difficulties that frustrate the learner. Since comprehensible input has been shown to be a key factor in language acquisition (Krashen, 1985), a culturally inaccessible text would impede the process of language development. This seems to imply, then, an interaction between background schemata and language learning that creates a ceiling for reading skills and comprehension.

There are learning contexts within which general culture learning and language learning needn't go hand-in-hand. Such might be the case of English for Scientific Purposes (Widdowson, 1978; Burnaby & Sun, 1989). But in these specialized situations, learners' purposes in studying language restrict the target language field to a specialized reference system. In the case of scientists, they will probably share a core of background knowledge that is L1

independent. In one sense, they already know all the culture they need for their purposes in comprehending authentic texts: all they need is the language. This is not restricted to ESP. A similar situation exists where the L2 has been naturalized, as is the case with Indian English varieties. Then there is little or no culture gap to consider when selecting readings in that variety, and learning the language will be facilitated. However, in more generalized language learning contexts, or where a gap exists between the L1 and L2 cultural reference systems, there are different pedagogical concerns (Bensoussan, 1986). If one of the goals of instruction is the development in the learner of those competencies necessary to read a range of authentic texts independently, then culture learning and language learning need to proceed together.

As previously mentioned, aside from the frustrations learners experience when they lack the cultural background assumed by a writer, schema theory identifies another troublesome implication. *Comprehension monitoring* (Casanave, 1988) may fail and readers may therefore not realize that they are bringing inappropriate schemata to bear in attempting to comprehend an L2 text. This is really an issue in intercultural communication, one that can be witnessed repeatedly in language learners' approaches to authentic L2 material taken out of context. Classroom

observations suggest that a frequent danger of using authentic materials is that they may either cause a learner to react by not wanting to understand, or create a false understanding. In the first case, an intercultural bridge is never erected; in the second case, the bridge is built on shaky, illusory foundations which are liable to collapse later on, causing disappointment and confusion. For example, when confronted with the frequent images of bare-breasted women that accompany advertisements and articles in the standard Italian news magazines, an anglophone student's reaction might be that Italians "exploit women," or are, at the very least, "weird." The danger is that learners interpret the item using the false context of their own cultural background and values, against which the item is judged and rejected as alien. The "affective filter" (Krashen, 1985) is raised, meaning that the student no longer has any interest in further comprehension. In extreme cases where there is little instrumental motivation to learning the language, learners running into a number of these items may abandon study of the language entirely.

To illustrate the idea of a "false bridge" I would like to cite an example that is not strictly textual, but might intrigue the reader. The recent film *Cinema Paradiso* by Giuseppe Tornatore, was unpopular in Italy and panned by Italian critics who accused it of portraying a stereotypical

provincial life that never existed. Yet the film was a success with audiences outside Italy, won an award at Cannes, and won an Oscar for best foreign film in the U.S. (Fortunato 1990). So here is an authentic piece that is judged using different criteria by individuals outside the culture (in fact, one of the main criticisms of the film was that it was in the "American style"), and considered culturally unauthentic by those inside the culture! In language learning, analogous textual selections might lower the affective filter, but reinforce stereotypes or, at best, give learners' a one-sided impression they might be tempted to draw generalizations from.

Norstrand (1989) puts the problem succinctly:

...authentic texts from one culture may give a false impression to a student from another, unless they are presented in an authentic context which makes clear precisely what they exemplify. This concern transforms into a specific agenda the older realization that communicative competence has a cultural component, and the realization that reading in a second language involves an interaction between the reader and the foreign words, which 'function as signs within a culture-bound system.' (Norstrand, 1989, p. 49)

Based on the above appraisal, one of the goals of language learning can be stated as the need to impart an understanding of the context evoked in the mind of the native reader, so that authentic texts are perceived of as more than "nonsense." Natives who unconsciously feel the cultural context of their own behavior can use this as the basis for introspection and reflection from which to develop a conceptual understanding. Non-natives are at a disadvantage. They must begin piecemeal with the conceptual insights and use these to guide further observation. If the cultural context of language is thought of as an interconnected web of customs, values, habitual patterns of thought, and assumptions about the individual, society and human nature, then we can see why we cannot really apprehend one aspect of the cultural context without realizing how that aspect is connected with all other aspects. A curious prediction of the different insider and outsider strategies for understanding culture would be that in learning situations where a culture gap exists, teachers who are native speakers of the learners' L1 might be at an advantage in relating the L2 culture to students. Not only would they have an intuitive grasp of their students' culturally-bound learning styles, but also the intuitive base from which to assist students in bridging social distance between L1 and L2 speech communities (Schumann, 1978), and would also be

less likely to be dismissed by students as "weird."
Anecdotal evidence (Dudley, 1983) offers some support for this prediction.

Recommendations

Assuming that learners' goals include reading authentic texts in the target language, and that an appropriate text selection can assist the process, what kind of content should we look for? Bernhardt (1984) recommends giving students supplementary material in their own language about the target culture. For example, a prose book written to explain the history, economy and culture of a country where the language is spoken will provide background information without impedance from language and unfamiliar schema. Of course, this would only work where the target language field can be confined in some way, as within a country. The idea may not work with Spanish or English for International Purposes. While Bernhardt thus suggests handing learners an already integrated scheme, all at once, Norstrand (1989) advises using authentic texts to focus on one item at a time, to "construct the partial context in such a way that it will fit into the larger whole without contradicting it" (p. 51). He recommends selecting texts which illustrate the most "enlightening" of the social and symbolic relations in the target culture and to show these texts "in the light if

the abstract matrix which shows its authentic meaning" (p. 51). To apply this recommendation to the two Italian problems mentioned, teachers might search for an article that debates the issue of nudity in advertising, or another that describes the confusion among Italians when *Cinema Paradiso* won an Oscar.

Support can be found for the use of fictional literature to create cultural awareness. (Collie & Slater, 1987; Gajdusek, 1988) Some practitioners strongly recommend fictional literature as a complement to the linguistic aspects of a language curriculum. In selecting passages for students, they advise content that will encourage learner involvement at the affective level.

Enjoyment; suspense; a fresh insight into issues that are felt to be close to the heart of people's concerns; the delight of encountering one's own thoughts or situations encapsulated vividly in a work of art; the other, equal delight of finding those thoughts or situations illuminated by a totally new, unexpected light or perspective. (Collie & Slater, 1987, pp. 6-7)

Therefore, selections should be relevant to the life experiences and emotions of the learner.

Likewise, McKay (1982, p. 532) recommends choosing themes with which students can identify. In particular, she

advises a consideration of young adult literature in the target language. These often focus on the problems of personal growth and development that transcend culture. They usually have the added benefits of being relatively brief, stylistically simple with a limited number of characters for the reader to keep track of, and of maintaining a clear central focus on one main protagonist.

Widdowsons' (1984) proposal for the use of literature in language teaching offers a refreshing alternative approach to the issue. Rather than argue his case from a schema theoretical point of view, he talks about engaging learners' most human capacity--their creativity--at the discourse level. He argues the central relevance of literary discourse to language learning is that "it calls for an intensive use and a heightened awareness of just those procedures which have to be engaged whenever people are involved in the learning and using of natural language" (p. 171). By "those procedures" he means "the human capacity for making sense, for negotiating meaning, for finding expression for new experience in metaphor, for refashioning reality in the image of new ideas and new ideals" (pp. 169-170).

This ability of language to extend human experience, create new meaning, and expand the learners' world is central to recent proposals in the teaching of ESL writing

(Raimes, 1984; Spack, 1985; Mauceri, 1991). The pursuit of this concept in the future may actually entail a paradigm shift away from the positivism that has informed much language learning theory, including schema theory and the psycholinguistic approach. The main difficulty of applying linguistics is the field's narrow view of creativity (Dulay & Burt, 1973). The average language user would probably find "The book is on the table" less creative than "My cat thinks she's a dog." However, the linguist would try to convince the average language user that they are both worthwhile examples of creativity, since they are both representative of an internalized system of grammar rules that are capable of generating an infinite number of sentences. On the other hand, it is unlikely that language learners are going to exhibit much interest in the infinite number of sentences generated by the set of grammar rules they are supposed to internalize. Language learners are most likely to be interested in sentences in which they have a strategic investment. As Tolstoy discovered when he tried to teach writing from the "bottom-up" (Berthoff, 1978), language doesn't come authentically unless as a vehicle for the complex and living organic whole. He found that children were most stimulated to write when they could use language to create "a bridge from the familiar to the unfamiliar" (p. 250). This suggests that in selecting

authentic works of fiction for language teaching, teachers should be aware of the potential of language to make connections and represent the world in new ways.

Pugh mentions that "good literature operates on three levels: cultural, personal, and universal, blended into a unique experience" (1989, p. 324). By selecting texts that treat experiences that students can engage in and which contain characters who they can feel for, instructors may be able to set the stage for reflection, growth, and increased cultural awareness. Likely genres in which to find appropriate ESL selections are in contact and minority literatures, particularly stories with adolescent or child protagonists. An excellent example is Gary Soto's *Baseball in April* (1990). This book contains a collection of short stories set in Fresno. The language is simple and the stories rich in detail. Each one portrays the needs, joys and fears of a child set against a backdrop of Chicano subculture and its relation to the dominant society, effectively joining the personal, cultural, and the universal. There is a wealth of such material available in Black, Chicano, Native-American and immigrant literatures, and some of it is now being included in commercial ESL readers.

Contact literature can similarly be used as a rich source of interculturally aware material. For English, this

includes writers from India, (e.g., R. K. Narayan, Anita Desai), Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and other postcolonial countries where English has been nativized to express the meanings and beliefs of the indigenous countries. Stories in these literatures may often be more culturally accessible to Eastern students than stories from minority subcultures in the U.S. or England. French is another language with a rich contact literature in North Africa (e.g. Guy Tirolien, Léon Damas, Léopold Sédar Senghor).

When collecting material from languages without contact literature, such as Italian, one can still look for adolescent literature, where frequently the protagonist will have a sense of wonder and curiosity through which the non-native reader can "connect" in some way to the target culture (e.g., Italo Calvino's *Marcovaldo*). Another source for Italian is poetry or stories written by children, who have not yet conformed to a standardized way of looking at the world and can still transform experience in unexpected ways (e.g. a story about a school desk that gets bored in the classroom, tries to run away and is chased by the students and teacher).

In conclusion, selection of materials for second language reading should take into account authentic form, student interests, and cultural accessibility. Selection should include a variety of different genres and topics. A

balance should be maintained between fictional and non-fictional texts, depending on the aims of instruction. Creative literature should be drawn upon as a means to expand learners' cultural awareness and give them a chance to interact with the text creatively in the second language. Appropriate materials, activities and, above all, an open and flexible approach to each new teaching/learning situation will ensure that language learning becomes more than a matter of "input-output."

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Reading Interest Survey

⊗ Please answer these questions. Your answers will help me write a book for ESL.

① What is your native language? _____ ② Check one: ☐ male ☐ female

③ How old are you? _____ ④ How long have you been in the U.S.? _____

⑤ How many years did you go to school before the U.S.? _____ and in the U.S.? _____

⑥ A book has these chapters. Check 4 you want to read first.

Book 1 →

☐ U.S. laws	☐ computers	☐ getting an education
☐ how to buy a house	☐ taxes	☐ medical insurance
☐ women's rights	☐ healthy foods	☐ marriage
☐ starting a business	☐ how U.S. government works	☐ jobs

⑦ Another book has these chapters. Check 4 you want to read first.

Book 2 →

☐ sports	☐ American music	☐ other cultures
☐ movie stars	☐ earthquakes	☐ American history
☐ child education	☐ how the brain works	☐ medicine
☐ fun places to visit near your school	☐ famous people from your country	☐ strange things Americans do

⑧ Which book do you want to read first? ☐ Book 1 ☐ Book 2

⑨ What other things do you want me to put in an ESL book? _____

⑩ Finish this sentence:

I like to read things that _____

⊗ Thanks for your help!