

The authentic materials approach in the teaching of functional writing in the classroom

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# **The authentic materials approach in the teaching of functional writing in the classroom**

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## **Abstract**

Students joining middle-level colleges, universities and the workplace have limited functional competency in English language. The teaching approaches and syllabi at institutions of learning do not give adequate attention to functional writing. The aim of this paper is to explore the authentic materials approach and demonstrate how it may be used in the teaching of functional writing in the classroom. The paper defines and classifies authentic materials, and explains how they apply to classroom functional writing. Second, it describes classroom authentic material analysis and evaluation activities that can be useful learning and teaching tools where the learners, as a result of reading and discussing, can go on to be effective functional text writers. Finally, the paper proposes an authentic text-based teaching and learning methodology that can be used in the acquisition of functional writing skills in the classroom.

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## **Introduction**

There are two main purposes for writing namely, writing for academic purposes, and writing for functional or operational purposes. Whereas the former deals with writing as a partial requirement for the award of a school, college, or university certificate, the latter provides specific directions or information related to workplace tasks. Some writing tasks associated with the first purpose include expository, argumentative, and descriptive essays. Functional writing on the other hand includes letters, memoranda, directories,

signs, manuals, forms, recipes, and minutes. In order for learners to succeed in producing effective functional texts, they must have a clear sense of *purpose* and *audience*. Since functional writing offers many options in terms of both purpose and format, learners' awareness of audience and purpose will facilitate the selection of appropriate language, style and format which will further support the piece of writing.

Recently, there has been a spate of research into the language of the workplace, making it an area of interest in applied linguistics. Swales (2000, p.65) points out that there has been a growth in research activity in workplace English over the last 15 years. Hewings (2002, p. 209) notes that this growth can be demonstrated by the increasing number of business English articles published in the English for Specific Purposes Journal. This state of affairs stems from and underscores the need for teaching and learning materials based on authentic texts produced out there in workplace settings. Functional writing is said to be part of 'workplace English' or 'professional discourse' (Gunnerson et al 1997), 'business discourse' (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1997a); and 'workplace English' (Berry, 1996; (Willing, 1997).

Davies et al. (1999) indicate that written discourse is central in the workplace. In an interview with managers in UK companies, Davies and Foray (1996) found that many managers considered that functional writing is 'crucial' for success and it is more influential than spoken interaction within the organisation. But concerns are raised on the preparedness of people joining the workplace in regard to the writing that forms part of their professional operation. Whereas syllabi in the secondary schools and tertiary

institutions include functional writing as part of composition studies, the teaching approaches adopted by teachers hardly give the learners a true picture of the relationship between the functional writing in the classroom and the real-life workplace writing.

Carter (1990) acknowledges that certain disparities exist between functional writing at college and at work. He believes that teaching is too heavily dependent on the teacher's interpretation of the workplace texts, and adds that 'if only the teacher's definition counts then it is little wonder that pupils are not adequately prepared for the writing requirements of non-academic settings' (Carter 1990, p. 179). He uses reports by a student and a manager from Proctor and Gamble (a UK company) to illustrate some of the specific linguistic choices made. For instance, he noted that the student preferred nominalisation while the manager preferred to use congruent verbs to characterise 'a relatively subjective orientation to solutions' (Carter 1990, p. 184).

According to Barry (1989, p. 60):

Discourse analysts have been slow to focus on the question of what makes a text successful or not, and even slower to investigate this question in the context of the specialised language varieties of the workplace.

Similar sentiments are made by Martin (1989, p. 60) who points out that education ignores almost completely the kinds of writing that would enable children to enter the workforce. Martin points out that the possible cause of this neglect is that teachers are unable to teach what makes workplace texts effective as they have limited access to authentic workplace texts. Berry states that:

Teachers do not know what has to be learnt in order to produce effective written products in the context of the workplace, particularly workplaces such as those of business and industry.

St John (1996) also points out that pedagogic materials developed for teaching functional writing should be often based on the understandings of authentic data. Flinders (1998b) also notes that functional writing materials, more than anything else, represent what the writers of the materials believe business English to be via their intuition. This paper therefore argues that authentic materials will give an enhanced understanding of workplace discourse. The paper addresses three issues:

- (a) What are authentic materials?
- (b) Which authentic materials can be used for functional writing and how can they be categorised?
- (c) How can the authentic material approach be employed in the teaching and learning of functional writing?

### **What are authentic materials?**

According to Jacobson et al (2003, p.1), authentic materials are print or learner-contextualised materials and activities used in the classroom in ways that they would be used in the lives of learners outside their classes. Authentic materials in the classroom therefore are stretches of real language, produced by real speakers or writers for real audiences and designed to convey real messages of some sort. In this sense, such texts are ‘actual, attested, and have real authentic instances of use’ (Stubbs, 1996).

Another way of defining authentic materials is that they are any materials which have not been specifically produced for the purposes of language teaching. Thus, authentic texts are real texts designed not for language students, but for real-life use for both interactional and transactional purposes. Such texts have conventionalised formats and are produced to serve a number of communicative purposes.

Authentic materials are not invented pieces for instructional purposes but rather texts produced for communication purposes in real-life situations. Biber (1995) points out that authentic materials have the following characteristics. First is that they are objective as opposed to intuitive. Second, when adopted as a teaching resource, authentic texts allow for verification of classroom facts. Third, authentic materials are pedagogic in that, as teaching materials, they bring variety of learning methodology to the classroom, thereby enhancing learner motivation. They enable teachers to contextualise their instruction within the students' lives and provide literacy instruction using the very materials the students will engage with as they live those lives.

### **Types of authentic materials**

Once teachers and students begin to look at the outside world for possible texts to use in class, there is really no limit to what types of text might be incorporated. It is also worth noting that it is easier to identify the texts that might be used for instruction than it is to get them. When selecting authentic materials, Halliday's functions of language can be used as a framework for the task (Jacobson et al 2003, p.56). Teachers therefore need to reflect on the following questions before selection of the materials:

- (a) Does this text help my students to get what they want? (Instrumental)
- (b) Does this text inform my students on the rules that they might follow?  
(Regulatory)
- (c) Does this text help my student to establish or maintain a personal relationship with someone? (Interactional)
- (d) Does this text help my students to express their personal thoughts? (Personal)
- (e) Does this text help my students to explore the world? (Heuristic)
- (f) Does this text help my students to express or create for someone an imaginative world? (Imaginative)
- (g) Does this text provide the information my students want or need?  
(Informative)

Authentic materials can be broadly classified in audio, visual, and printed materials. Audio materials involve those that learners can listen to. These can be grouped into three. First is television programming including commercials, quiz shows, interactive talk shows, cartoons, news, and weather forecast reports. The second group is radio programming including interviews, interactive talk shows, and radio advertisements. The third group involves taped conversations, including one-sided telephone conversations, meetings, short stories, poems and novels. Functional writing texts that may benefit from these authentic materials include advertisements, dialogues, news articles, weather forecast reports, interview schedules, agenda for meetings, minutes, short stories, plays, poems, and novels.

Visual materials on the other hand are those that the learners can see. These include photographs, paintings and drawings, children's artwork, wordless road signs, pictures from magazines, and wordless picture books. Functional texts that can be illustrated by these materials include road signs, notices, directions, instructions, warnings, descriptions, expository texts, time tables, and X-ray reports.

The third type of authentic materials comprises the printed materials. These include newspapers (articles, movie reviews, advertisements, astrology columns, sports reports, obituary columns, TV guides, recipes, directions, notices etc.), restaurant menus, directories, minutes of a meeting, memoranda, diaries, tourist information brochures and travel guides, greeting cards, letters, billboards, posters, bus schedules, and forms (medical history forms, application forms, tax forms, etc.). Production of such functional texts as newspaper articles, menus, directories, obituaries, bus schedules, and travel guides can be facilitated by the printed materials listed here.

### **Why use authentic materials in the classroom?**

The use of authentic texts has been supported by Firth (1957, p. 175) where he argues that language should be studied in actual, attested, authentic instances of use, not as intuitive, invented, isolated sentences. He further argues that 'the placing of a text as a constituent in a context of situation contributes to the statement of meaning since situations are set up to recognise meaning (p. 176). Similar views are echoed by Stubbs (1996, p. 29) where he argues that human intuition about language is highly specific, and



not at all a good guide to what actually happens when the same people actually use language.

There are several factors that form the character of workplace written texts that necessitate the use of authentic texts in the instruction of functional writing. These factors include the formulaic phrases found in specific texts, technical and sub-technical words, the relationship between the writer and the reader(s), the culture of the readership, the corporate culture, power and dominance, politeness, and levels of communication. Thus, for learners to get a clear picture of all these issues in functional writing, the use of authentic material drawn from workplace settings will be inevitable. Such materials will have the following advantages:

First is that the materials will expose learners to a wide range of natural business language that is employed in the composition of the functional texts in the workplace. Hence, learners will get to know that functional writing has a register that varies from general English. Authentic materials will also bring reality to the classroom and make interaction meaningful. Learning functional writing without real-life texts will widen rather than plug the gap between classroom writing and workplace functional writing. Authentic materials therefore succeed in connecting the classroom to the outside world and bringing the outside world to the artificiality of the classroom.

Third, authentic materials will make the teaching and assessment to focus on skills rather than the facts of language. The learners will be exposed to how the authentic texts are

structured and how they work in the business environments where they are created. As a result, the teaching and learning of language moves away from delivering a set of facts to be memorised for examination purposes and lets the learners to see for themselves what the functional texts are. Fourth, instead of constructing idealistic texts for instructional purposes, most of the authentic materials will be readily available, inexpensive teaching resources. Such texts as notices, advertisements, obituaries, forms, and memos are easy to access. However, other materials such as minutes of meetings, and reports may be considered confidential by institutions.

Lastly, authentic materials will necessarily add variety to classroom activities and support a more creative approach to teaching. Thus, the learners will have a chance to practice the skills learnt in the classroom in real life situations. This strategy will certainly have a positive effect on learner motivation.

Of course some authentic materials may contain complex language structures and unusual language structures not immediately useful to the learner while others may be too culturally biased. It is also possible that some materials might exhibit unpredictable structures, making it difficult for learners to decode them effectively. Some authentic materials are hard to access since they contain sensitive information. Such materials include medical bills, laboratory reports, and doctors' prescriptions. Teachers should talk with the students about how they want to handle texts that contain sensitive information. One approach is to hold one-on-one sessions with the learners since involving the entire class may not auger well to the affected learners. Some authentic texts might be beyond

the students' current reading abilities. For instance the informational medical brochures might contain some jargon that is too technical for the students. To deal with this problem, the teacher might adapt a text and use only those sections that the students might need to know. In addition, some sections of newspapers might be a challenge to learners. The teacher might need to select those sections of newspapers that relate to the learners.

### **Proposed approach to the teaching and learning of functional writing**

This paper proposes a four-stage authentic-material-based-strategy that teachers of functional writing might employ in their classrooms. First, the teacher can sensitise the learners on a specific functional text using existing writing textbooks and their own intuitions. Such consciousness-raising activity could be based on a discussion of the format, rhetorical structure, lexico-grammatical features, the writer and the intended audience, and the broad context of the genre in question.

Following up from the sensitisation activity, the teacher can then divide the learners into small groups of 3 or 4 individuals and assign each group several copies of the same type of authentic material from different sources. As Stubbs (1996, p. 32) points out, 'few linguistic features of a text are distributed evenly throughout' with the result that use of only a small 'sample' of a given genre will inevitably miss out a great many features present. The teacher could then ask the groups to identify features from the authentic materials following the framework outlined above and ask them to compile their own features from the authentic texts.

Thirdly, the writing teacher can engage the learners in plenary discussion sessions where each group is given the opportunity to present their findings. The discussion may be guided by the following questions:

- (a) Which generic features are common in the authentic text across the institutions of origin?
- (b) Which features occur in some and not all of the texts of the genre?
- (c) What similarities and differences exist between in-classroom teacher features (those in the textbooks) and those from the authentic materials?

The class discussion could lead to a corpus of features of functional texts as they are composed in workplace settings.

In the final stage, the writing teacher can engage learners in functional writing exercises based on imagined workplace situations employing linguistic features they can draw from their classroom corpus. The learners' texts can form the basis for further classroom discussion where learners will have an opportunity to review and comment on their peers' work. Eventually, the learners can compare and contrast their texts with new authentic texts from the workplace. It is believed that many of these exercises will lead to the acquisition of the correct forms of functional texts that meet their intended purposes. As Firth (1957) and Lewis (1997) have argued, language use is routine. Thus, the language for functional writing is made up of a large number of linguistic features that are repeated over and over again in everyday situations.

### **Assessment strategies**

A number of assessment strategies may be adopted. One of them is portfolio assessment. In general, a portfolio is a folder or box in which students store significant pieces of class work that mark their progress. Students are able to reflect on and track their progress if they kept successive pieces of a task in a folder. For instance, an initial exercise on writing a memo can be followed up by write-ups of the same task after class revisions to help learners improve their performance. All such exercises can be filed in a portfolio. The filed tests are an accessible gauge of student's progress.

Another form of assessment is teacher observations. When introducing a new concept on functional writing or supervising class writing exercises, the teacher needs to informally observe and document those areas where the learners are doing well and where they are going wrong. This documentation is helpful for lesson planning.

Conferencing with individual students is another form of learner-contextualised assessment. Formal conferences may be held after, say, a term to review students' goals to see what steps have been made towards achieving them. Conferences are an ideal setting for mutual input: both teachers and students are expected to share what they think of learner progress. Student portfolios can also be discussed during such conferences.

Criterion-referenced assessment tests may also be used. The tests are designed to measure the progress of students against a pre-specified set of objectives and/or goals for

a specified population of students. For each criterion being assessed, criterion-referenced tests will reveal what the students have learned, the degree to which they have learnt it, and how much more they need to work on this skill before they are said to have 'mastered' it. Criterion-referenced tests will help teachers in the in planning their instruction, revision, and remedial activities.

Another form of standardised assessment that can be used is the norm-referenced tests. These tests are designed to measure the progress of students relative to the performance of a representative group called the norm sample. Members of the norm sample, selected by the test makers, are given the test and from their scores 'norms' of the test are established. Norm-referenced tests can indicate how students are progressing only relative to this norm sample. The norm-referenced tests can be used for comparison purposes: they show how a student performs on a test relative to the 'experts'. Norm-referenced tests are used to classify learners as 'average', 'above average' and 'poor'.

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