

## 4 Motivating language learners through authentic materials

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As language teachers, we have all used some authentic materials (poems, advertisements, menus, or songs) that bring students into contact with language as it is used in the culture to meet actual communication needs. Many of us, at some time, have organized successful “culture days” or taught “culture capsules,” where we have introduced authentic texts and been thrilled by the enthusiasm of our students. These interludes revive flagging spirits and renew interest in the subject matter. We can do more than this, however. Fully exploited, authentic texts give students direct access to the culture and help them use the new language authentically themselves, to communicate meaning in meaningful situations rather than for demonstrating knowledge of a grammar point or a lexical item.

Taking full advantage of the potential benefits of authentic materials may, however, require both a change of perspective and the adoption of some new approaches. Teachers, like the texts they use to teach a language and introduce a culture, tend to tell students about a country and its people instead of letting them find out for themselves. By being too eager to share their knowledge, teachers deny their students the thrill of discovery. Because their experience of the culture is mediated by the teacher, students do not interact directly with authentic materials but rather with someone else’s summary or analysis of them.

What then would be a more effective way of using authentic materials in class? Let us begin by giving students units of authentic material with exercises and activities that we design. Let us then allow the students to decide on which of the texts they wish to concentrate. After students have worked with the material, let us give them time to communicate their findings to others. The conclusions they reach are of secondary importance. What matters is their ability to reach conclusions based on work with authentic sources and the opportunity to communicate these conclusions in the new language. The procedure we propose can best be illustrated by the following model unit called “Discover a City,” which can be used effectively with beginning, intermediate, or advanced students in any language.

### “Discover a City”

Imagine being able to culminate each semester of language instruction by sending students to a city in the target culture for about four days,

telling them that their final examination will consist of going to that city for a long weekend (in French going to Paris, in English going to New York, or in German going to Heidelberg), keeping track of everything they do, and reporting back to the teacher or the class. Although beginners would not be capable of the same kinds of interactions with native speakers as advanced students, they would survive and benefit from the experience.

Regularly providing students at all levels with this kind of opportunity as a supplement to the usual class routine would be an incredible motivator. Students who taste success in the use of a foreign language realize the benefits of knowing the other language and culture and seek to repeat the experience.

### Authentic materials as a substitute for a trip to the culture

Unfortunately the foregoing scenario is just a fantasy for most of us and our students, but what if we could capitalize on the benefits of such a program without actually sending our students on a journey? Although the actual experience of visiting the city cannot be transferred to the classroom, virtually all the sources of information students visiting the city would use can be made available in a classroom setting. What kinds of materials would enable students to simulate such a visit? What would make it possible for them to “discover a city”? Here are some suggestions:

- city street map;
- public transportation guide;
- relief map of the city and surrounding countryside;
- list of hotels;
- guide to the city’s restaurants with descriptions and rankings;
- menus from local restaurants;
- tourist brochures;
- cultural publications announcing opening times of museums, theaters, and galleries in the city;
- catalogues from exhibitions at local museums;
- entertainment sections of local papers;
- student guides to the city with information on educational institutions;
- guide to sports and recreation opportunities;
- movie listings;
- shopping guides and sales advertising;
- business telephone listings (like the Yellow Pages);
- samples of currency in use;

- newspaper or magazine articles describing various aspects of life in the city;
- songs about the city;
- films, television shows, or literature about or set in the city;
- pictures or videotapes of the city's best-known points of interest;
- audio or video interviews with natives and other visitors getting advice on what to see and do;
- radio and television ads for points of interest in the city.

### Using these materials productively in class

What kinds of meaningful activities might students be asked to carry out with these materials? The “Discover a City” model asks students to work with the authentic materials for one week. The movement is always from comprehension to production. Students begin by familiarizing themselves through reading and listening with the kinds of materials at their disposal. They are then asked to choose the specific sources with which they would like to work intensively. After concentrated work with these sources, the week concludes with either a written or an oral presentation of how each student plans to spend a four-day period in the city. Students are asked to justify each decision they make and to explain their sources of information.

Perhaps the most important feature of student work in “Discover a City” is the suspension of usual classroom procedures. Students are told from the beginning that their project will be evaluated on their ability to receive and convey information in the language. Accuracy will affect their performance only if errors interfere with communication. Students are constantly reminded that we are simulating what they would experience in the actual city. Time spent worrying about the things they do not understand is simply time wasted. What counts are those things whose meaning they can discover. Just as students do not need to understand every word of a TV guide to decide which program they would like to watch, students can glean a great deal of information from sources containing vocabulary and structures they have not yet mastered. The first exercises, therefore, help students identify what they have understood in a new text. Subsequent exercises send them back to the text a second or third time to refine their comprehension.

### Exercises for “Discover a City”

The first type of interaction, regardless of level, is between students and the authentic materials. The kinds of exercises assigned to students de-

pend in large part on their language level; they are, however, always ordered so that they lead the student from comprehension to production. Beginning students are given simpler, more directed activities. Students may be asked to

- locate on a map the sights of interest in the introductory slide show;
- make an inventory of available sources – what types of information can be found where;
- make a list of loan words encountered in the sources;
- identify businesses or activities with counterparts in their home town, for instance, the zoo or a fast-food center;
- find places or activities that are mentioned in more than one source;
- produce, based on a prescribed budget, a detailed itinerary for a four-day visit to the city.

For this last activity, students are asked to

1. pick a time of year for the visit based on seasonal activities available in the area;
2. select lodging for four days and figure out how much it will cost;
3. select from advertisements, restaurant guides, and menus places to eat for four days' worth of meals and estimate the cost of each meal;
4. select at least two places of interest to be visited each day;
5. locate all the places to be visited on the map and figure out how to get from one place to the next, estimating transportation costs.

These activities are all designed to help students work productively with the materials without having to account for each grammatical structure and lexical item. They are intended to maximize the chances that students will encounter items in a variety of different contexts. The emphasis is on successfully processing information from as many sources as possible. Beginners tend to work most productively with sources requiring little linguistic sophistication, such as charts, tables, and lists. More complex sources would of necessity be dealt with superficially at this level, although they would be of considerable interest to more advanced students.

Production exercises grow naturally out of these comprehension activities and might ask students to

- present their itineraries to the teacher or the other members of the class;
- justify each of the selections they have made and describe which sources of information they used in reaching their decision;
- find other students in the class who will be staying where they will be staying or visiting places they will visit;
- figure out how to visit other students in the class while they are both visiting the city;

- compare itineraries to determine whose plan is most expensive, whose the cheapest, and share ideas for making the visit more enjoyable;
- carry out role plays with the teacher and other students in which they order food from the menu of a restaurant they have selected;
- fill out a registration form for the hotel they have chosen;
- act out scenes where they ask for extra blankets at the hotel or change travelers' checks at the bank.

In the production stage students move from interaction with the materials to interaction with each other and with the teacher. The more often students refer back to their sources during the production phase the better, since this is where their familiarity with the sources really pays off. The students with the more interesting itineraries will be those who have taken the trouble to look closely at the available sources. The more they are familiar with their sources, the more they will have learned, and the more easily they will be able to communicate what they have learned to others.

Although more advanced students can begin with the activities designed for beginners, they will be called on to do much more:

- find places listed in more than one source and analyze the differences in information provided: for example, a restaurant that advertises authentic atmosphere but is described in a review as a tourist trap;
- find out as much as possible about each item on the itinerary;
- work intensively with tapes of natives and other visitors, analyzing their recommendations and comparing them with other sources of information;
- divide available options into categories, then plan at least one activity in each category on the itinerary, such as culture, nightlife, sports, shopping.

Advanced production activities are correspondingly more sophisticated. Students might

- act as tour guides or experts and explain to the class what they have learned about the various points of interest;
- write diary entries or a letter home describing their experiences;
- interview other students, compare itineraries, and find out why the others made the choices they did;
- evaluate the different sources and explain which were most helpful, most subjective, too vague, and so on.

At this level students concentrate less on survival skills and focus instead on getting to know the city in greater detail. They will also be required to back up their contentions about the city with reference to sources, but they will be asked to look critically at those sources and discover how and why they differ.

The final production exercise at any level consists simply of producing a detailed schedule for each of the four days. Students provide entries in the following categories: time, place, type of activity, information sources used, and why they chose this place or activity. Asking students to justify their choices provides them with the opportunity to show just how much they have learned.

## **Practical considerations**

We turn now to the practical questions involved in the use of authentic materials.

1. Where do I find authentic materials?
2. How do I choose topics and select materials for a unit?
3. How do I assemble the units?
4. What kinds of exercises and activities can I design?
5. How do I get help in working on units?

### *Where to find authentic materials*

Creating a unit as extensive as “Discover a City” takes time and effort. It is most easily accomplished by visiting the city in question and devoting several days or longer to collecting the material. The best way to start is by reading tourist guides to the city. Most cities have tourist information centers with booklets and brochures providing excellent material on where to stay and things to see and do. They may also provide information about local transportation, day trips from the city, major industries, addresses of clubs and organizations, and a brief history of the city. The next step is to visit all the places of interest, taking pictures and gathering relevant printed material. To this can be added magazines; newspapers; postcards; records; videotapes; information brochures from banks, post offices, railway stations, and airports; interviews with native speakers taped on your own cassette recorder; and anything else that seems even remotely usable.

If a teacher does not have the opportunity to travel to the appropriate city to gather materials personally, there are other means of acquiring the necessary items. Friends who are traveling may be willing to collect materials for you, or you may establish contact with a foreign-language teacher in the city and exchange materials about the place where you live. Such a contact may also be able to provide you with videotaped television programs on the city. Students traveling in the summers can often be prevailed upon to bring back materials. Writing to companies, tourist information centers in the city in question, tourist agencies in

your own city, or consulates frequently brings in a wealth of material. Area businesses with international connections can also be a source of interesting items. If native speakers are available in or passing through your community, they may be asked to look over the materials and record their suggestions for things to do and see.

Collecting vast amounts of authentic material can be enjoyable, but large units such as “Discover a City” are not the only way to bring authenticity to the classroom. Quite small amounts of material can be used creatively. For example, a quick perusal of almost any newspaper will yield sufficient material to construct a small unit on buying or renting a house or apartment. A collage of owner and realtor advertisements, a headline, and an article dealing with housing shortages or the diminishing population in the area will give students sufficient material for a day’s work. More important than the amount of available material is its interest level for the students and the teacher’s or students’ choice of a theme that draws the materials together in some organized fashion.

#### *How to choose topics and select materials for a unit*

The level of the students will influence the selection of materials, but this is not decisive; many good materials can be used with students at different levels. Often the success or failure of a text depends not on its apparent difficulty but on the exercises accompanying it. Some decisions, however, must be made on the basis of length and complexity. A play by Ibsen, a recent study by a Norwegian sociologist on the mother’s role in the family, and a television documentary about battered wives would probably best be used with more advanced students. Beginning students would probably deal more effectively with statistics on working women, an excerpt from an article on children’s attitudes toward working mothers, and a television advertisement warning parents not to leave their children unattended. The wide array of language used is not the only factor in making material difficult for the student. Culturally unexpected behavior or attitudes can increase its inaccessibility.

Although length, linguistic complexity, interest for the student, and overlap all play significant roles in the selection of materials, *the single most important criterion for selection is content*. Many syntactic and lexical problems can be overcome by the intelligent selection and ordering of exercises; nothing can overcome the obstacle of uninteresting topics or boring activities.

Teachers should not allow abstract notions of student interests to limit their selection. When students in a third-semester college German class in the United States were asked if they were interested in studying sex-role stereotypes, they responded with a resounding “Nein!” When they were asked, however, to work with some popular songs, excerpts from

children’s theater, and dating-service questionnaires, they became enthusiastic. Their work with these materials brought the topic to life for them. Teachers need to guard against making hasty decisions about what is or is not of interest to their students. Materials that seem to have little or no interest can be used in provocative and productive ways.

#### *How to assemble a unit*

It is best to include in each unit items in a variety of mediums that examine the topic from different perspectives. When enough interesting raw material relating to a common topic has been found, it is time to begin turning the material into a unit. If individual texts are too long for our purposes, we can maintain their authenticity without simplifying them by working with excerpts that are relevant to the topic and that tie in well with other materials to be used.

One particularly popular technique is to create collages from a variety of sources. Differences in print size and style catch the eye and underscore more significant differences between the kinds of texts being used. This juxtaposition of several small items relating to one topic can be more inviting to students than a page filled with dense prose, especially if the collage is not overly cluttered.

While assembling a unit, remember that students will be making their own selections from the materials made available to them, so do not limit their choices too severely. Statistical tables may be of no interest to you, but they may interest some of your students, especially if the tables show the topic under consideration from a unique perspective. Since we are providing our students with a variety of sources, it is not necessary to eliminate certain materials because they do not present the culture in a favorable light or because we do not agree with them. In fact, discovering conflicting views in different sources is one of the most productive and interesting student exercises.

#### *Using audio and video materials*

Recorded material can go a long way toward bringing a unit to life, but it presents special challenges for both the teacher and the student. It is crucial that recordings be of the highest technical quality. Students have enough trouble understanding native speech in face-to-face situations. A poor-quality recording, regardless of the interest level of its material, is of little use to students. Length of recorded material is particularly important. Students will be more likely to succeed if they work with spoken language in one- to two-minute segments. If a longer program must be used, then one of the first exercises should be to identify short segments to be analyzed in detail.

Videotapes can add a new dimension to the students' experience of other places, capturing sounds, sights, and the nonverbal behavior of the speakers of the language for repeated viewing and analysis. Popular songs can also be used with a unit if they deal with the appropriate topic. A unit on computer anxiety in West Germany, for example, may center on the Georg Danzer song "Zerschlagt die Computer" ("Smash the Computers"). Given the opportunity to work with lyrics that relate to a topic they have been studying, students usually learn the song on their own. The words make sense not only in the song itself but also in the larger context of the unit and can become a part of their active vocabulary.

With both video and audio recordings, students must be able to work with the material more than once, just as they would with a printed text. Sometimes this can be done in the library or a language-learning laboratory. Even when the only option is to play the tape in the classroom, students must be given the opportunity to hear sections of the tape many times. Full comprehension comes only with much hearing, and students will need to check details as they work.

### *What kinds of exercises and activities to design*

Since students talk best in another language if they have something to say, exercises should be designed in sequence to lead from comprehension of the material to student production. Students will be better prepared to talk or write about a topic after they have worked with texts, acquired some vocabulary, and identified some important issues surrounding the topic. Production activities must grow naturally out of comprehension activities. Comprehension activities should never be ends in themselves, as they so often are in textbooks and tests, but rather means to an end, namely, the basis for production, in speech or writing.

#### COMPREHENSION EXERCISES

What kinds of comprehension exercises are most effective? The most successful exercises are those that help students make sense of new texts they are interested in, yet are flexible enough to encourage them to move on to other interesting texts before they have mastered every word and structure encountered. There will be some students who find it difficult to focus their attention on any given text for longer than a few minutes and others who will find it difficult to tear themselves away from the first text they face. Yet lure them away we must, for we are doing them a tremendous disservice if we encourage word-for-word reading and memorization.

The first step is to help students realize that they can interact pro-

ductively with a text that appears at first to be too difficult. Our exercises must enable students to overcome this initial feeling of being overwhelmed by new material. The best way to reduce this initial anxiety is to design exercises that draw the students' attention to things in the text they will have understood. These activities might include the identification of number and gender of singers of a popular song or of persons referred to in the lyrics, characterization of the type of text (e.g., poem, advertisement, love letter), or the names of central characters. Identifying loan words and cognates is also a useful preliminary exercise, which frequently leads directly to the central theme.

Students often understand more than they realize, and the first exercises need to make explicit what students know intuitively or by analogy. If, for example, they recognize that the text is a fable, they will expect the characters to be animals with human characteristics. Since exercises at the early stage are quite simple, they give students the opportunity to succeed in their first contact with the text. Given an initial success, they are more likely to approach the text a second or third time. If, on the other hand, initial questions are too difficult, student frustration will increase, thus reducing the chances that they will continue to work at all willingly with the text.

Exercises at the next stage ask students to reorder words or phrases they have encountered in the text. This exercise is based on the notion that even if students do not know the precise meaning of a word, they can often tell from context what function the word serves and what type of information the word conveys. Let us say, for example, that students studying housing problems in an American city are working with the real estate section of a newspaper. Although they might not know the precise meaning of each word, they could probably extract words referring to styles of houses – words such as *Georgian*, *Victorian*, or *townhouse*. They could also identify words describing attractive features of a house, like wall-to-wall carpeting or a new kitchen, even if they were not sure what was meant by each. Once students have identified the type of information conveyed by a word or phrase, they can then make informed decisions about whether or not they want to go to the trouble of finding out its specific meaning.

Spoken texts present special problems, since students may have difficulty identifying individual words in the flow of native speech. Here a helpful preliminary exercise is to give students an alphabetized list of key words and ask them to number the words as they hear them on the tape. This exercise is particularly useful in helping students to bridge the gap between oral and written language. At the same time it provides them with a list of words they will need to master if they are to communicate clearly on the topic at hand. Their numbered wordlist is also a shorthand version of the text and may make the original easier to understand.

Of course, sooner or later students will need help in making precise sense of new words and structures. This usually means turning to the dictionary – a less than popular activity with most students. If the dictionary work follows preliminary exercises like the ones outlined previously, then looking up words will have become more than simply a finger exercise. The students will have decided that a particular word is important and will want to know its meaning. Since they have encountered the word in a meaningful context, they are also more likely to remember it.

Once students have a general understanding of the text, they will decide whether they want to continue working with it. If the text relates directly to their final production project, students will want to look at it more closely; if not, they will move on to the next text. The emphasis here is on students making enlightened decisions about work with a particular text and on helping them to work with it as efficiently as possible.

#### PRODUCTION EXERCISES

The design of production activities can decide the success or failure of a unit. Since the emphasis is on communication, questions of accuracy need to be treated with great care. We believe that it is best in working with authentic materials to suspend the normal rules of classroom operation. Students should be told from the start that they will be graded on accuracy only if errors make communication impossible. They should then be put into meaningful situations where they can use what they have learned and demonstrate their communicative skill. Simple role plays set in a restaurant, airport, or hotel work well in beginning classes. More advanced students may be asked to interpret and to look critically at their sources.

Production should not be limited to interaction between student and teacher. We need to put students in a variety of situations where they communicate with one another. Tedium can be avoided in these interactions by varying the individual assignments. In “Discover a City,” for example, assigning students different budgets for their stay will prevent everyone from picking the same hotel and restaurants. They can then talk about the relative merits of their particular choice and enter into vigorous discussion about the benefits of their stay.

#### *How to work cooperatively on unit preparation*

Since much time and energy can go into the creation of an authentic materials unit, sharing units with other teachers is an excellent way to maximize their benefit. Working collectively on their creation significantly reduces preparation time. For years the Goethe Institute has been

sponsoring week-long “Didaktisierungsseminare,” during which high school and college teachers come together to sift through available materials and create units complete with exercises. Other teachers use in-service days to create units. Teachers in the same or neighboring school districts can establish networks for collecting materials, refining exercises, sharing finished units, and developing ideas for new ones. Regional meetings of professional organizations provide ideal opportunities for workshops and discussions of results. It is also possible to establish an open-file system by housing master copies of units at one school. Teachers can then be sent copies of units on request. Under this system, every time a unit is used the teacher fills in a critique sheet that becomes a part of the file on that unit. This gives teachers who ask to use the units helpful information on what other teachers have done with the materials, especially what worked and what did not. The open-file system encourages teachers to add new items to the units they have borrowed. Even a small school district can accumulate an extensive set of authentic materials by such cooperation.

## Conclusion

Studying a foreign language should be a means to a greater end, namely, communicating with another culture and its representatives. Using authentic materials in the ways we have described allows students to experience early in their study the rewards of learning a language. Students who work with authentic materials have an interest in the language that is based on what they know it can do for them. Students who were previously unwilling to master the forms of the language come to realize the benefits of further language acquisition. Benefits also accrue to teachers who find that they have motivated and goal-oriented students and a curriculum that is stimulating to students and teachers alike.

### Let's act on it

1. Discuss experiences you have had using authentic materials in class.
2. Make a list of authentic materials at your disposal. How could you add to your files? What is most readily available to you? What would be the most difficult to obtain?
3. Choose a text from the authentic materials available to you and outline two series of exercises that lead progressively from comprehension to production, one for beginning students and one

for advanced students. In what ways do the two series differ and for what reasons?

4. Describe in detail materials you could gather from your own city for a “Discover a City” unit, and discuss how they might be used productively in a language course.
5. What advantages and disadvantages do you see in the introduction of authentic-material units into the foreign-language classroom? What kinds of materials would interest your students most?

## 5 Interactive oral grammar exercises

Raymond F. Comeau

Baudelaire in *Les paradis artificiels* referred to grammar as “l’aride grammaire.” Many instructors and students would probably agree with Baudelaire, for grammar study, especially in review grammars, is often associated with the dry memorization of rules and the equally dry prospect of applying these rules in fill-in-the-blank, pattern practice, substitution, transformation, and translation exercises. This stereotypical view of grammar study, fortunately, is only partially true. Most modern language textbooks, especially at the elementary level, include at least some grammar exercises designed to allow students to use grammar in interactive situations.

### What is an interactive oral grammar exercise?

The word *interactive* is derived from the Latin verb *agere*, which means *to do*, and the Latin preposition *inter*, meaning *among*. An interactive grammar exercise, therefore, stresses the teaching of grammar through mutual participation, usually in small groups. It is active rather than passive, student-centered rather than language-centered, cognitive rather than behavioristic, indirect rather than direct, and personal rather than manipulative. An interactive grammar exercise puts communication on a par with correctness, turning the study of grammar into a social activity.

The interactive approach frees the instructor as well as the student. The instructor’s role is to act as a coach who organizes, encourages, and guides student interaction. In practical terms, the instructor prepares and hands out group assignments, then circulates from group to group, listening, encouraging, and correcting; when the groups have finished preparing their activities, he or she orchestrates final performances. At times instructors will also participate in a playful give-and-take with students, thus inserting themselves into the interactive process.

### Five qualities of interactive oral grammar exercises

Instructors who use interactive exercises in class, and those who intend to make up their own, should keep in mind these five qualities of good interactive oral grammar exercises: