

ASSESSING AUTHENTIC MATERIALS FOR LOW-LEVEL JAPANESE STUDENTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the greatest difficulty EFL students have is finding chances to use their L2. But for the motivated language learner here in Japan, the situation is improving year by year. Efforts at “internationalization” have led to an increased number of Assistant English Teachers in the public schools, and the demand for teachers by private language schools also draws thousands of native speakers to Japan. The number of long-term foreign residents in Japan is likewise increasing, so that friendships, and exposure to the L2, is maintained. Typically, such students (I use this word broadly, to include anyone studying a L2 regardless of situation) use social occasions with foreign friends, language lessons they pay for, and the mass media to increase their exposure to the foreign language. Many learners go to great lengths to take advantage of these sources of L2 language and culture. And likewise, many native speakers take pleasure in teaching these motivated learners. It is a rather ideal situation: motivated learner and a conscientious (and hopefully good) teacher.

But what about the “less-motivated” learner? Many of them could not care less about foreign languages. Their lives are no worse off for their lack of foreign language ability. Other learners do care about a foreign language and culture, and would like to improve their ability. But, if they are school-

aged, their study of English is largely for passing a college entrance examination rather than for altruistic goals of self-enrichment, or practical purpose of being able to communicate in a foreign language.

And what about the teachers? Junior and senior high school teachers are obligated to prepare their students for university entrance exams. University teachers then inherit students who, by tradition, rarely study (especially in their non-major, first- and second-year courses) and expect to pass anyway. The minority of students who would like to improve their L2 are mired in classes with 40 or more other students with varying degrees of ability and motivation. So, there are motivated students who cannot get enough target language and culture, and then there are the less motivated students who believe that the target language and culture is largely irrelevant to their lives and study only because they have to. The teachers of the first group are highly fulfilled, the teachers of the latter group search for ways to make the target language and culture interesting, if not relevant. And it is often to materials and tasks that teachers turn to for help.

Much has been written on the advantages of using authentic materials (AMs) -- language text by native speakers to native speakers. The arguments in favor of using AMs generally fall into two categories. One argument is that there is a "cultural content" in AMs not found in non-AM texts. A second argument is that AMs motivate students. These arguments are not mutually exclusive, and there are many additional arguments subsumed. But for a university teacher in Japan, motivating large classes of low-level, low-motivated students remains a constant challenge. It is the purpose of this paper to review these two arguments, and to document how various AMs worked in classes with low-level, low-motivated EFL students in Japan.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the biggest advantages AMs offer over non-AMs is their ability to bring a purer cultural component to the learner. Where non-AMs are sometimes stilted or superficial, AMs present the L2 in its natural environment, in its natural form, including hesitations, deviations, and interruptions. Both written (Lucantonio, 1994, and Lund, 1992) and broadcast (Porter and Roberts, 1981, and Pemagbi, 1995) media are valuable, but video, film and television, because of their visual element, enable learners to both see and hear language in use. Visscher (1990, p. 8) says "video lends itself extremely well to creating awareness of proxemics, kinetics and all the other non-verbal aspects used with the target language." Visscher, in fact, contends that the cultural component is primary, and that "video is not suitable for input of new language or for listening comprehension for its own sake." Voller and Widdows (1993, p. 343) say that films are "richer than most other text types" and "full of unspoken contextual clues." Berman (1990, p. 11) refers to EFL classrooms as "cultural deserts" and says that the "increased native input...video brings is a welcome refreshment."

Others, however, argue for tasks based in learners' culture. Alptekin (1993, p. 141) cites various studies in which comprehension is aided by the "degree of familiarity with its content schemmas." Edge (in Alptekin, 1993) warns that "activities which characterize communicative approaches and materials are not value-free modes of behavior...learners from those cultures cannot learn English properly by behaving in ways which are both alien to their educational culture and proscribed in their daily life." These competing ideas should cause a teacher to think carefully about AMs.

The second major argument for the use of AMs is that they motivate students better than non-AMs. Visscher (1990, p. 8) says the power of video “lies in its visual stimulus, which can generate meaningful and relevant language.” Berman (1990, p. 11) says video is “the most powerful and motivating resource I have found.” Kitao (1986, p. 18), says that video “motivates students” and “it brings ‘real life’ into the classroom.”

But while AMs offer benefits to higher level, higher motivated learners, these materials are often too difficult for lower-level EFL students. Some AM proponents, like Kitao (1986), suggest using short (video) segments with follow-up exercises focusing on plot, character or lexical items. Others counter that students should be encouraged to “hang on and figure out the general idea” and develop a “tolerance of ambiguity” (Berman, 1990, p. 12). Others simplify the materials to better suit low level learners. AM proponents discourage this, however, saying any modification to an authentic piece of L2 text invalidates it as a useful language learning tool. But there is contrary evidence. Larsen-Freeman (1991) cites studies in which children and adults exposed to unadjusted and incomprehensible input acquire little or no lexical items and utterances. But Larsen-Freeman discourages lexical simplification, favoring modifications in the interactional structure (*ibid*). Krashen advances the principle of $i+1$ in his Input Hypothesis. This principle states that what the L2 learners are exposed to should be “a bit beyond his or her current level of competence” (Brown, 1994, p. 280).

Learning styles are another factor that a teacher, whether using AMs or not, must consider. Nunan (1991) and Brown (1994) note that learners who are tolerant of ambiguity are stronger at picking out detail among chaos, while others need to see the big picture in order to understand. When using authentic materials with low-level learners, many of whom who might be intimidated by the challenge AMs pose, both Krashen’s $i+1$ principle and a

student's learning styles should be considered. Teachers should bring these points out to students, and to encourage them to work towards their strengths, rather than feel overwhelmed and rejecting difficult tasks outright.

Finally, any discussion on AMs should be made with the awareness that more direct empirical data is needed to support claims made either for or against AMs. Nunan (1991, p. 211) observed that "there are comparatively few empirical investigations of materials development and use in the classroom." Nunan was, presumably, speaking of all materials, not just AMs. But few published articles I reviewed for preparation of this paper offered case studies. The following classroom research projects were modest attempts at providing case studies of how well various AMs worked in large university classes of low-level, low-motivated students. The aim of the research was to test one of the two primary arguments of AM proponents: that AMs motivate students better than non-AMs.

3. RESEARCH PROJECT

The students were first- and second-year non-English majors at Ehime University, and second-year English majors at Shinonome Junior College. I first asked students, via a written survey, what topics they would be interested in using in English class. Second, I asked what kind of activities they would like to do with these topics. Third, I developed seven tasks with authentic materials and monitored the students doing them. Fourth, the students rated the task according to how "interesting" and how "helpful" it was. The following scale was used: 1=Not at all interesting/helpful. 2=Not very interesting/helpful. 3=Neutral. 4=Somewhat interesting/helpful. 5=Very interesting/helpful. "Helpful" was explained to the

students as: “Did it help your English?” and “Was it a good way for you to study or practice?” I felt that “interesting” was self-explanatory. Due to time limits, no control group was used, and no pre-testing was done.

3.1 The first AM tested was “The Sanka Ad,” shown to Junior College Class No. 1. This was a 30-second television ad for Sanka Instant Coffee, which portrayed a couple returning from their first date, and pausing awkwardly at her apartment door. The ad was rich in dating rituals: He asks to come in, she allows it, she later asks him to leave, he tries to find a way to stay. I showed the ad twice, and then led a discussion of various scenes, situations, behavior and language in the ad.

3.2 With Junior College Class No. 2, I used video tapes from my 1996 wedding to create an information gap exercise called “Wedding Video.” I recorded four five-minute segments of home video. Tape 1 included scenes from the day before the wedding when friends and relatives arrived at the house, on-camera conversation was heard, various house-cleaning and decorating. Tape 2 included the pre-ceremony milling about of people, friends making on-camera remarks, and scenes of the house. Tape 3 was the wedding march, ceremony, exit, and toasts. Tape 4 was of the lively reception, and more on-camera comments. Groups of students watched one segment independently, then spent 15 minutes preparing vocabulary and story-telling strategies. Then new groups were formed. The new groups included students from each tape segment, who told of what they saw in their taped-segment. Students then determined the sequence of the segments.

3.3 The third AM was called “Richard’s Letter.” This was a letter sent to me by a close friend in the U.S. He was responding to a letter of mine, in which I had solicited his thoughts and advice on marriage. It was a thoughtful letter, with his thoughts on commitment, love, support, children, and play. Initially, students did an in-class exercise in which they described their

future marital and family situations. Then, for homework, they read my original letter to Richard, and completed a clozed exercise with Richard's letter. An optional assignment was to write their own letter to an imaginary friend who had solicited advice from them (they had to imagine their own future before giving advice). The following week, I explained various concepts, ideas and vocabulary in Richard's letter.

3.4 "The Zipper Joke" was the fourth AM tested. In groups of four, each student read a portion of the joke to another student. Each student then re-told the segment they just heard. Segments consisted of three to five sentences. When everyone had both heard and told the other three stories, the group discussed the joke, vocabulary, and the humor.

3.5 The fifth AM was "Wedding Draw." I photocopied four photos from my wedding onto one paper and made the students do a "describe and draw" exercise in pairs.

3.6 The sixth AM was called "Sports Page." I photocopied recent pages of sports news from the English-language "Daily Yomiuri" newspaper in Japan. Each sports page included Japanese and American baseball news, soccer news from Japan and around the world, and the usual news, photos, standings and statistics found in sports pages. Groups of four students were given sports pages from different days, with the instructions: "Don't read the whole paper. You don't need to understand everything. Look for what is interesting to you and try to understand the meaning. Next, ask the other group members about the news they found. Also, answer the questions that they ask you." Halfway through this exercise, I handed out "discussion guidelines," which told students to find out how their favorite players and teams did, and to use that as basis for further group discussion.

3.7 The seventh AM was called "Men and Women." This was a reading exercise taken from "The Reader's Digest" magazine. It was an article

TABLE 1

RATINGS OF TASKS WITH AUTHENTIC MATERIALS -
INTERESTING and HELPFUL

	1	2	3	4	5	Total
<u>SANKA AD</u>						
Interesting	0	0	9	27	64	100%
Helpful	0	0	9	18	73	100%
<u>WEDDING VIDEO</u>						
Interesting	0	0	53	33	17	100%
Helpful	0	0	25	67	8	100%
<u>WEDDING DRAW</u>						
Interesting	2	5	10	38	44	100%
Helpful	5	14	22	36	24	100%
<u>ZIPPER JOKE</u>						
Interesting 1	0	11	46	35	9	100%
Helpful 1	0	9	43	37	11	100%
Interesting 2	2	2	22	52	20	100%
Helpful 2	2	8	22	48	14	100%
<u>RICHARD'S LETTER</u>						
Interesting 1	10	22	33	27	8	100%
Helpful 1	4	10	39	31	15	100%
Interesting 2	10	13	31	28	13	100%
Helpful 2	8	13	42	26	11	100%
<u>MEN-WOMEN</u>						
Interesting	4	4	18	61	14	100%
Helpful	2	4	40	46	8	100%
<u>SPORTS PAGE</u>						
Interesting	0	9	20	43	28	100%
Helpful	2	13	23	47	15	100%
<u>ZOO GAME (Non-AM)</u>						
Interesting 1, 2	2	10	25	29	34	100%
Helpful 1, 2	0	11	20	31	38	100%
<u>GREEN LAKE (Non-AM)</u>						
Interesting 1, 2	0	12	18	33	37	100%
Helpful 1, 2	2	6	25	35	32	100%
<u>BIG DEAL (Non-AM)</u>						
Interesting 1, 2	0	3	23	41	33	100%
Helpful 1, 2	0	9	36	41	13	100%

* 1 and 2 refer to different classes in which the AM was used.

Notes: Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100. Non-AMs are from previous semesters, and are shown for comparison purposes.

titled “What Men Don’t Understand About Women,” written by Dr. Joyce Brothers. She listed nine things about women’s attitudes, needs and wants which men seemingly fail to comprehend with their wives or girlfriends. Under each heading were three to six paragraphs enumerating on the heading. I cut out one paragraph under each heading, mixed the order, and had the students determine which single paragraph belonged under which heading. I then assigned group discussion.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research findings will be discussed in two ways: First, the post-task ratings done by students will be presented. References to interesting and helpful, when not enclosed in quotation marks, refer to the rating “somewhat” and “very” combined. Where relevant, I will compare ratings to past survey results. Second, my personal observations of students doing the tasks will be discussed.

4.1 Sanka Ad. Sixty-four percent said it was “very” interesting, 27 percent said “somewhat” interesting. There were similar results for the “helpful” rating. Seventy-three percent said “very” helpful, 18 percent said “somewhat” helpful. The students were clearly engaged in the activity. They paid attention. It was very teacher-centered. Class discussion worked relatively well because the students’ levels were adequate, and the class was small.

Comments: This was successful. But discussion was too teacher-dependent. I spent much time explaining the rules, expectations, and decisions that govern the behavior of a couple, on their first date, saying good night at the girl’s door. For example, men are expected to escort their date to their door. Then, the man must decide whether or not to kiss. It is the

girl who decides whether or not to invite him in. Once he is inside, other decisions need to be made. The students were very interested in hearing this.

4.2 Wedding Video. The significant finding here was the weakness of their group discussion. Most students spoke only about one minute of English during the discussion. Only one student asked a question. When I instructed them to speak for one more minute, they groaned. Half of the students said this lesson was “neutral” and half rated it interesting. It was more helpful (75%) than interesting (50%).

Comments: The lack of L2 discussion in this task suggests that AMs ability to motivate and stimulate discussion is not necessarily true. These students said, on a questionnaire, that they want to “discuss things like (Japanese and foreign) lifestyles” and “foreign culture.” Yet given the chance to discuss something highly authentic, and highly cultural, which also happens to relate to the teacher, the students clearly could not, or would not, discuss it.

4.3 Richard’s Letter. Nearly as many rated this AM not interesting (32%) as interesting (35%). However, 46% rated it helpful. It was slightly more successful in the other class (41% interesting).

Comments: This task contained many of the points AM proponents deem necessary for successful tasks. It related to young peoples’ lives (relationships and marriage), it contained a cultural component (the thought-process of a foreigner), and it contained authentic language. The task itself (clozed exercise) was not difficult. These findings suggest that either the material and task should be done differently, or that the students do not think reading other peoples’ correspondence is interesting.

4.4 The Zipper Joke. This was rated more helpful than interesting. Seventy percent in both classes rated this neutral or “somewhat” interesting. Eighty percent rated it “neutral” or “somewhat” helpful. Re-telling the

story was difficult, and attempts at negotiating meaning were mostly poor. Students were very attentive during my brief explanation of American humor, and “dumb blonde” jokes. But they were unable or unwilling to guess at the source of the humor, or to speculate on the behavior of the characters in the joke.

Comments: The explanation of colloquial language required much teacher talk. I gave examples of authentic colloquial items, but students had no chance to practice these themselves.

4.5 Wedding Draw. This was highly successful. *Forty-four percent* rated it “very” interesting, 38% rated it “somewhat” interesting. Sixty percent rated it helpful. This task produced among the highest amount of L2 of any task in this project.

Comments: Though this task produced a high amount of L2, the question is: does it matter whether the picture is authentic or not? The findings suggest that it doesn't. Normally I use a non-AM picture for describe-and-draw exercises, and consistently get very good results. (See table 1, Green Lake.) This is a case of a non-AM being as stimulating as an AM.

4.6 Sports Page. These exercises were highly interesting (79%) and helpful (81%). However, the amount of English used was low.

Comment: This is a good example of content-rich, interesting authentic material not motivating lower-level, low-motivated EFL students. Despite very high scores on both the initial survey and post-task ratings, students produced little L2. When I handed out a discussion guide to focus students' ideas, they simply read word-for-word from the paper, not creating follow-up questions. Similarly, they answered questions with a simple “yes” or “no” with no elaboration. When I prompted them to elaborate, most simply added one or two short sentences. But without my monitoring and prompting, they would not have made extra effort.

4.7 Men-Women. This was “somewhat” interesting (61%). About equal numbers said it was “neutral” (40%) or “somewhat” helpful (46%).

Comment: Many students used dictionaries to look up words. Most students were engaged in the activity, though group talk was mostly in Japanese. When I presented discussion questions, I noticed the same behavior as the students who were using the Sports Page: Word-for-word reproduction of my “suggested” discussion topics, and as-short-as-possible answers. There were few extended discussions.

5. DISCUSSION

While the arguments of AM proponents are attractive, the findings above suggest that a reality check is in order. The low-level, low-motivated learners that fill most first- and second-year required English classes at Japanese universities might sincerely be interested in a foreign culture. However, most are not interested in things like developing “a tolerance of ambiguity.” For those who are able or willing to use English, most are satisfied using what they already know. They sometimes get excited at using new forms that are easily learned, but items that are too difficult are quickly given up on. And the “motivating” factor of video cited by AM proponents is usually little more than the students sensing an opportunity to be entertained while not having to do any real work in the class. I have interrupted the viewing of a video to do discussion or exercises. However, students’ motivation has been no better during these tasks than during non-AM tasks. They clearly would have preferred to continue watching the video. The AM did not stimulate any more L2 production (maybe less, due to their disappointment at me having interrupted their entertainment) than the non-AM tasks I used at different times during that course.

Proponents also suggest that AMs show “real culture” and how natural English is used. But the cultural component can mislead students, as well. Witness the indiscriminate use of certain English profanity (the “f” word) in Japan. Also, before satellites increased the variety of American programming seen abroad, most of the world seemed convinced that America resembled “Dynasty,” an American soap opera seen internationally which portrayed a decadent, rich American family. There are movies and television shows that can be considered “realistic” portrayals of the target culture. But a teacher must not allow stereotypes to develop while using AMs. The study of any second language should include its cultural element. But the needs of low-level Japanese EFL students are far more basic than what AMs have to offer. In my teaching, I include elements of Western culture (as they relate to communicating and socializing) so students can learn them personally, rather than vicariously through AMs. For example, I emphasize eye contact, body language, projecting one’s voice, clarity, supporting opinions with reasoning, overcoming shyness, fear and passiveness, and taking initiative and responsibility in the class and as a student.

An important point to remember (this also applies to non-AMs) is that when using AMs, the student is an observer of, not participant in, the communication. This is especially true of audio or video materials. The student is not being spoken to, nor is he/she speaking back. Communication begins only when observation of the AM stops, and students participate in L2 exchange with other people. It is at this point that a student’s motivation is tested, and it is at this point where we often see an otherwise successful lesson begin to break down. This is because observing is less difficult and less risky for the students than participating. And for most Japanese EFL students (and perhaps for many foreign language students worldwide), one of their primary motivations is to avoid mistakes and embarrassment. This

means they avoid risk and potential failure. As was found in my research, AMs do not necessarily motivate students any more than non-AMs. Motivation must come from within. If students are motivated, then most well-planned, interesting materials will work. This is where Visscher misses the point, in regards to low-level EFL students, when she says that video “can generate meaningful and relevant language.” Only learners decide whether or not to generate language. And many Japanese students choose not to, even in situations of real need, or (low-stress) opportunity. The following examples are instructive: My students often need to speak with me (usually about homework or attendance) but most do so in Japanese. When I gently prod them to speak in English, some do, many do not. Another example: I often go early to the class to mingle with students on a casual basis. But their responsiveness is dismal; some are remain silent. A few respond very well. What separates the good responders from the poor? Very likely an inner desire towards English that began at a younger age - not an outer stimulus, authentic or otherwise.

While practical considerations regarding our students’ attitudes, strengths and weaknesses will influence our approach, practical considerations of the materials themselves are also in order. For example, when using video, we should focus on short segments. Segments of three to five minutes are preferable. Feature-length films take a long time to get through. Student interest could wane. Television shows are shorter than films, but characters and plots are more difficult to understand, and limited sets and scenes make students more dependent on understanding the dialogue to understand the story. Linguistically, AMs are by nature difficult. But AM proponents discourage simplifying the text on the grounds that any modification compromises the authenticity of the material. But for an EFL teacher trying to achieve results with low level learners, the difference

between “near” and “full” linguistic purity may or may not be important.

6. SUGGESTIONS

1. More case studies are needed on how well AM-based tasks work with low-level, low-motivated EFL students. Both the successes and failures of these materials and tasks should be analyzed.
2. Classroom research is needed comparing similarly-structured tasks using AMs versus non-AMs. For example, information gap activities, structural exercises or listening activities can be done with either AMs or non-AMs. Will an AM task create different results than a non-AM task?
3. Develop a collection of essays by Japanese -- in English, with good English skills -- who have lived abroad (truly “immersed” in the culture), or make video or audio tapes of their own experience. Then develop exercises from them. These should be interesting, “non-fluff” stories that expose the target culture. A Japanese person’s perception of, and experience of, American culture is as valid as mine, though not necessarily as informed as mine. Let them tell their story. Editorial control will be important to avoid triviality, stereotyping and inaccuracies.
4. Create as an authentic communicative environment as possible, using pen-pals, video projects, (willing) foreign-exchange students on campus, host-family connections and the internet.

7. CONCLUSION

Authentic materials offer many benefits, but they are not necessarily appropriate for many situations. For most low-level, low-motivated EFL

students in Japanese universities, English is simply a required course to survive and get the necessary credit. They either see no benefit to themselves for learning English, or they do not want to make the sacrifice in terms of effort to gain the benefit. These students are often willing to use the English that they do know, but they quickly give up if something is beyond their level. To the extent that an AM can fall within their level, it can be effective. But AM linguistic and cultural content is native-like, and hence difficult. This actually has a de-motivating effect on these students, which is exactly the opposite of what we as teachers want. The best approach for the large EFL classes in Japanese universities is to simply find what works - find what gets students producing and processing L2 - whether it be AMs or non-AMs. If something works, then the students have likely benefited from it. It is our job, then, to work from that point in refining and developing other methods and materials that best suits our students.

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