

Authentic materials: Definitions, perception,  
and usage by ELT practitioners

Mitaka Yoneda    Christopher Valvona

武庫川女子大学 学校教育センター紀要

第6号 2021年

## Authentic materials: Definitions, perception, and usage by ELT practitioners

Mitaka Yoneda\*      Christopher Valvona\*\*

### Abstract

Authentic Materials (AM) are language teaching materials that were not originally created for the purpose of language teaching. However, there is not always agreement among researchers over the exact nuances of the definition or the extent to which adapted materials remain ‘authentic’ or ‘genuine.’ Using a survey and semi-structured interviews, this paper investigates the topic from the perspective of English language teaching (ELT) practitioners, in order to discover whether they share the same concept as researchers regarding what constitutes AM. Also, the paper asks whether instructors believe AM to be important, whether they explicitly check for the inclusion of AM in their course materials, and what kinds of AM they introduce into the classroom. The paper concludes that while teachers believe AM to be important and are creative in their inclusion, teachers’ attention to and application of AM are not always consistent, and understanding of what constitutes AM varies.

**Keywords:** authentic materials, genuineness, authenticity, perception, materials development

### 1. Introduction

Authentic materials (hereafter referred to as AM) are spoken and written materials linked to the ‘genuineness’<sup>(1)</sup> of communication. They include text, video, and other resources that were not originally designed for pedagogical purposes. However, the precise definition of authentic materials may vary depending on the differing interpretations of researchers and instructors. Kilickaya describes that in reading the literature about AM, it is possible to find differing definitions and interpretations of the key term “authentic materials”<sup>(2)</sup>.

Discussion on using authentic materials has a long history. Especially, since the 1970s when communication started to be emphasized as an approach in English language education, authenticity in reading and listening texts and recordings has been viewed as desirable. The ubiquity of English in the modern world, with English now more or less accessible from anywhere by anyone, together with the fact that English is used widely around the world among native and non-native speakers alike as a *de facto lingua franca*, would seem to create an ideal situation for the selection, adaptation, and usage of AM in the modern language classroom. Whether this is actually the case, however, is not so clear. For these reasons, we believe it is important to study the awareness, attitudes, and practice of ELT practitioners in regard to AM.

This study reports on the perspectives of teachers engaging in English language teaching at various educational levels (junior high school, senior high school, junior college, polytechnic, language school, and university) located in Japan, the USA, and Singapore. It explores the definitions of AM, both by researchers and as understood by different teachers, what kinds of materials these teachers believe to be authentic, awareness of teachers regarding inclusion of AM in course materials, and finally what kinds of AM teachers have been using in class for the purpose of teaching language.

---

\* Professor, Department of English, School of Letters

\*\* Professor, Department of English Communication, Okinawa Christian University

## 2. Definitions of Authentic Materials within the Literature

As was stated in the introduction, how authentic materials are defined depends in part on the linguist or ELT practitioner defining them. First of all, the distinction between ‘genuineness’ and ‘authenticity’ is not always made clear. Widdowson<sup>(1)</sup> distinguishes these by proposing that genuineness is an absolute quality of the spoken or written text, or extract of text. That is to say, it is either ‘real,’ in the sense that it is a true and real-life example of the language in use, or it is not. Authenticity, on the other hand, is a more subjective concept that involves how the student interacts with and responds to the material in question; if the material appears to the reader or listener to be a sound approximation of how language is actually used, even if it is composed solely for the purposes of teaching (say, a fictitious newspaper article written for a textbook), then it has authenticity.

Simply put, AM are those that were not originally created with the goal of using them for language teaching, and they include magazines, menus, newspaper articles, and so on. They were made for some other communicative purpose, and therefore have not been rewritten or simplified to accommodate language learners<sup>(3)</sup>, but they may be adopted (though strictly speaking not *adapted* if they are to remain ‘genuine’ AM) into a language teaching context<sup>(4-8)</sup>. According to Richards and Schmidt<sup>(9)</sup>, “Such materials are often thought to contain more realistic and natural examples of language use than those found in textbooks and other specially developed teaching materials” (p. 42). Some researchers have claimed that AM are produced by and/or for native speakers<sup>(10,11)</sup>, though Zyzik and Polio<sup>(12)</sup> notably state that AM are “often, *but not always*, provided by native speakers for native speakers” [italics by the researchers]. Harmer<sup>(3)</sup> extends the language of AM to “competent” as well as native speakers of a language. Lastly, researchers have remarked on the social aspect of AM; that is to say, AM (as their original objective) serve a social purpose in a given language community<sup>(13)</sup> and that in doing so, the material itself may serve as a bridge to real life<sup>(14)</sup>.

As alluded to above, researchers have also debated the extent to which AM may still be considered authentic if adapted in any way for the classroom. Harmer<sup>(3)</sup> argues that, since it is important the materials are pitched at the right level for students, reading and listening texts that are designed for the classroom and that “approximate” authentic language are good examples of suitable AM for the classroom (after all, a stage play, he writes, is the playwright’s version of what constitutes spontaneous speech). “The language may be simplified, but it must not be unnatural” (p. 306). Such materials, then, would fall within the scope of ‘authentic’ but not ‘genuine,’ according to Widdowson’s<sup>(1)</sup> earlier distinction. On the other hand, McGrath<sup>(15)</sup> states that, “Strictly speaking, an authentic listening text would be neither scripted nor edited” (p. 104), though he accepts that in reality this often proves unworkable and that AM are therefore modified for the purposes of better pedagogy. This raises the question, he points out, of the extent to which materials can be modified and still be classified as AM. If you keep modifying and simplifying the material, surely the whole point of using ‘real’ material as an effective and motivating approach will eventually be lost. Brown and Menasche (as cited<sup>(4)</sup>) tackle this issue by arguing that AM should be seen on a continuum of authenticity with five stages along it (genuine,

altered, adapted, simulated, minimal/incidental), rather than as a simple authentic-inauthentic dichotomy.

Based on the above definitions, we define AM as language teaching materials that were originally written, by/for either native or competent speakers of the language, for a social or other non-pedagogic purpose. Although the slightest modification to those materials would remove their 'genuineness,' practical educational realities mean that AM often are adapted to varying extents in the classroom. In this regard, they may retain their authenticity even if not being 100% 'genuine.' The extent to which materials can be classified as authentic may best be considered along a spectrum, where there are gradations of authentic/inauthentic materials, instead of a straightforward contrast.

### **3. Research Questions**

With the above in mind, the purpose of this research is to investigate AM from the perspective of language teachers. Specifically:

- how teachers define AM and what materials they believe constitute AM
- whether teachers pay explicit attention to the inclusion (or not) of AM in course materials, and whether teachers think the inclusion of AM is important
- whether teachers actually use AM in the classroom, and what kinds of AM

Identifying what teachers believe AM to be enables us as researchers to explore whether the AM used in the classroom match with the definitions that academics present. Furthermore, knowledge of how aware teachers are of AM within selected course materials, and what types they actually select if they do use AM, will be of benefit for future curriculum planning that aims to incorporate more authentic and meaningful usage of language.

### **4. Methodology**

#### **4.1 Procedure**

This study was conducted in two stages. The first is an online survey and the second is individual interviews, carried out as follows:

1. To research perspectives of English teachers and the situation of AM usage in the classroom, an online questionnaire was prepared in two languages (English and Japanese) using the online platform SurveyMonkey. Access to the online survey was first sent by email to teachers with whom the researchers have been acquainted, and then through these acquaintances the questionnaire was further distributed online to their colleagues or friends who are engaged in English language teaching. The questions asked the teachers to rate their agreement to various statements on a Likert scale, and then asked the reasons for their selection.

The questionnaire had 24 questions in total and consisted of the following contents (due to space limitations, the actual questionnaire is not attached as an appendix to this paper); the first section asked for participants' information including the institutional level at which they teach and their research speciality. The questionnaire proceeded to questions on their actual teaching situation, such as their students, teaching methods, textbooks, and methods of

selection of materials used in the classroom. In the main section of the questionnaire, questions on AM were asked. The questions included asking for participants' perceptions on the importance of using AM as the main course materials or as supplementary material, the frequency of using AM in the classroom, what kinds of AM they have used, reasons for not using AM (if they indicated they do not use them), observations of students when AM are used, what they believe AM to be, asking for examples of AM, and areas of language learning where AM can be used effectively. The final question asked them to share freely any comments or opinions about AM. All respondents completed the survey appropriately and it was not necessary to discard any responses.

2. To obtain further feedback from the teachers, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with English teachers who agreed to take part. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed.
3. The data of teachers' replies from the online survey and from the teachers' interviews were then analyzed.

The research was designed and conducted in such a way as to fully maintain confidentiality and anonymity and protect the privacy of the participants. Respondents to the survey were assured of these protections in the introductory description of the survey, and before participating in the individual interviews participants were given a form in which was explicitly stated the purpose of the research, details of the data collection methods, a description of the potential benefits of the research, and an assurance that participants could withdraw from the research at any time. It was also explained to participants that all the interviews would be recorded, transcribed, and translated when necessary, and that neither their identity nor their school name would be disclosed either verbally or in publications. Upon agreeing, they signed a consent form before participating in the interviews.

## **4.2 Participants**

### **4.2.1 Online Survey**

There were 50 respondents to this survey. They teach English in three countries: Japan, the USA, and Singapore. These three countries represent various ways that English is used and taught; English is taught as EFL in Japan and as ESL in the USA and Singapore, and it is used as one of the official languages in Singapore while it is the *de facto* national language in the USA. Twenty-seven of them are Japanese-speaking teachers and 23 are English-speaking teachers. Interviewing and getting the thoughts and opinions of instructors from these different contexts allows for diverse perspectives and provides a wider understanding of how AM are used. The detailed number of the survey participants teaching in these three countries are shown in the following Table 1.

**Table 1** *Countries Where Survey Participants Teach*

Country	Number of respondents
Japan	32
USA	11
Singapore	7
Total	50

The affiliations where they teach vary from junior high school to university. The details are shown in the following Table 2.

**Table 2** *Affiliations of Survey Participants*

Affiliation	Number of respondents
University	31
University & Junior College	5
University & Language School	2
University & Senior High School & Junior High School	1
Junior College	2
Polytechnic	1
Senior High School	1
Junior High School	5
Language School	2
Total	50

As the table shows, the majority of the respondents teach at university level. In the survey, the respondents were asked what their students' majors were. Their majors cover a broad range including medicine, science, business administration, food science, architecture, and engineering, though more than half of the respondents teach students with an English specialization. As for the level of the students, the answers varied (not only between respondents, but also individual respondents indicating they teach different levels). So, the learners' level of English that the respondents teach is wide-ranging. When asked about the first language (L1) of their students, 45 respondents replied that most or all students share the same first language, which is presumably Japanese, as the institutions where the respondents teach overseas, both in the USA and Singapore, are established for Japanese students.

As for the respondents' details, the number of years of English teaching experience varied as shown in Table 3 below.

**Table 3** *Number of Years of Experience as an English Teacher*

Number of years of experience	Number of respondents
5 years or less	4
6 to 10 years	9
11 to 20 years	15
21 to 30 years	16
31 years or more	5
Total	49

The ranges in which many participants replied are from 11 to 20 years and 21 to 31 years, so it can be said that the majority of respondents are mid-career to veteran professionals who have considerable English teaching experience.

As for their studies or research areas, 29 respondents replied that they studied TESOL or English language education. The rest are 19 non-TESOL-related and two did not answer. This shows that not only teachers who have had TESOL or English language teacher training are engaged in English language education. Research areas of the respondents other than TESOL or English language education include intercultural communication, sociolinguistics, literature, history, and international cooperation.

#### 4.2.2 Individual Interviews

Individual perspectives were also gathered through 24 individual interviews (the interview participants were asked to first take the survey in order to familiarize themselves with the topic). The interviews were semi-structured and were conducted in the researcher's office, the participant's office, or wherever the participants designated in Japan, the USA, and Singapore between September 2018 and March 2019. There were 12 Japanese-speaking teachers and those interviews were conducted in Japanese, while for the other 12 English-speaking teachers it was conducted in English. As for where 24 teachers teach, 13 teach in Japan, 6 in the USA, and 5 in Singapore. The affiliations where they teach are shown in the following Table 4.

**Table 4** *Affiliations of Interview Participants*

<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Number of Japanese-speaking Interviewees</b>	<b>Number of English-speaking Interviewees</b>
University	6	9
Junior College	1	0
Polytechnic	0	1
Senior High School	2	0
Junior High School	2	2
Language School	1	0
Total	12	12

As is seen in Table 4 above, the participants vary widely at different levels of educational institution. The participants who teach at tertiary level account for more than half of the total number of interviewees.

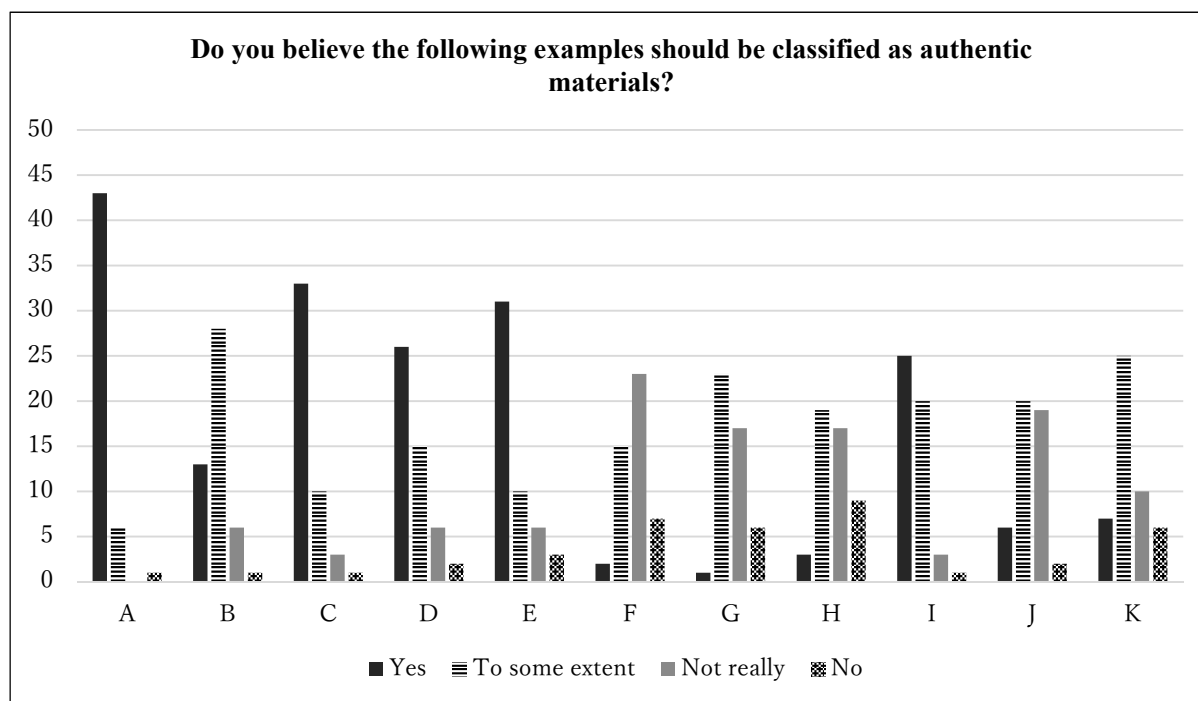
## 5. Results

### 5.1 Results from Survey

#### *Definition of AM According to Teachers*

As mentioned earlier, the definition and interpretation of AM are not always unified<sup>(2)</sup>. Therefore, in order to explore what English teachers believe are classified as AM, the survey presented specific samples that can be used as teaching materials in the English classroom. While it may be obvious that a newspaper used as it is for teaching would be considered as AM, some

other examples of AM may fall into more of a gray area. Therefore, in the survey, examples were somehow processed or altered, and the results show how much the process or alteration would be accepted and still considered by the English teachers as constituting AM. The respondents' opinions in this regard are shown in Graph 1 below.



- A** Newspaper article cut out from the newspaper
- B** A YouTube video played at 75% speed
- C** A magazine article retyped (word-for-word) in larger font
- D** An online blog written by a non-native speaker of English
- E** A 2-minute unedited clip of a longer movie
- F** Textbook activities specifically designed to look authentic
- G** A newspaper article with very low frequency vocabulary replaced by higher frequency vocabulary
- H** A well-known book edited for ESL/EFL learners i.e. graded reader
- I** An English TV show with subtitles in English
- J** An English TV show with subtitles in Japanese
- K** A restaurant menu with the teacher's handwritten translations of certain items

**Graph 1** *Examples that should be classified as AM*

Many participants believe that a newspaper article cut out from the newspaper, a magazine article retyped in larger font, and an unedited clip of a longer movie are “authentic” or “authentic to some extent.” These are materials whose contents remain the same as the original article or movie but are presented in a different form, such as a part of the whole contents, or retyped. That is, from the perspectives of the English teachers, if the contents are presented without changes



even if they are presented in different forms, they are considered authentic.

If we look at contents with additions like subtitles or a translation, an English TV show with English subtitles is considered “authentic” by half of the participants and “authentic” or “authentic to some extent” by most participants, while for an English TV show with Japanese subtitles, respondents who thought it “authentic” decrease to 6 and “authentic to some extent” count 20. A restaurant menu with translations of certain items is thought “authentic” by 7 people and “authentic to some extent” by 25 people. That is, visual help such as subtitles being provided in English will be considered authentic but if given in a language other than the target language, the degree to which people would consider it authentic decreases. Still, more than half of the participants feel it is “authentic” or “authentic to some extent.”

Another sample that obtained high consideration as authentic is an online blog written by a non-native speaker of English, which 26 people classified as “authentic” and 15 as “authentic to some extent.” These replies show that the respondents tend to accept as authentic English written by non-native speakers of English. Of course, online blogs do not consist of complete sentences or are not always written grammatically correctly, even when written by native speakers of English. Yet, this result seems to indicate that English teachers are quite embracing of varieties of English. The participants also seem to be tolerant of speed of English. For the example of a YouTube video played at three-quarter speed, 13 respondents classified it as “authentic” and 28 as “authentic to some extent.”

Textbook activities specifically designed to look authentic, a newspaper article with very low-frequency vocabulary replaced by higher frequency vocabulary, and a well-known book edited for ESL/EFL learners (i.e. a graded reader), are obviously created for the purpose of teaching, and would not be considered authentic according to most of the definitions presented in Section 2. However, 15 respondents, 23 respondents and 19 respondents respectively regarded them as “authentic to some extent.” For the latter two, nearly half of the respondents classified them as “authentic” and “authentic to some extent.” It seems, then, that the range of materials that English teachers accept as authentic is quite wide and, more significantly, somewhat at odds with researchers’ definitions.

### ***Respondents’ Recognition of Authentic Materials***

The respondents to the survey were asked about their recognition of AM. They were asked if they pay attention to when AM are used in textbooks, such as whether it is explicitly mentioned at the front or the back of the book. Ten respondents replied that they pay attention, 17 do so sometimes, while 14 rarely do so and 8 never do so (see the following Table 5). More than half of the respondents pay attention to whether the use of AM is mentioned in the textbooks, and thus it can be said that English teachers’ recognition of AM is reasonably high. It is notable that learners are aware of the difference between when AM are and are not used in the classroom<sup>(16)</sup>. As we will discuss later, the recognition of their materials as being authentic or inauthentic is important in the learning environment for both instructors and learners, as it will influence later learning habits.

**Table 5** *Attention to Inclusion of AM in Textbooks*

Answer Choices	Number of Respondents
Always	10
Sometimes	17
Rarely	14
Never	8
Total	49

Then, the respondents were asked about the importance of AM incorporated into teaching materials. First, they were asked how important they consider it to have AM incorporated into textbooks. Eight people replied that it is very important, 30 important, 9 not too important, and 1 answered not important at all (see Table 6 below).

**Table 6** *Importance of AM Incorporated into Textbooks*

Answer Choices	Number of Respondents
Very important	8
Important	30
Not too important	9
Not important at all	1
Total	48

Next, the participants were asked how important they consider it to supplement their own teaching with AM. For this question, 18 replied it is very important, 28 thought it important, while 7 answered that it was not too important and none replied it was not important at all (see Table 7 below).

**Table 7** *Importance of AM Incorporated into Supplementary Materials*

Answer Choices	Number of Respondents
Very important	16
Important	28
Not too important	6
Not important at all	0
Total	50

From the replies, it can be said that many English teachers think it is important to incorporate AM into their teaching materials, and even more think it is desirable to have AM in supplementary materials, if textbooks and supplementary materials are compared. Thus, the English teachers' recognition or interest in the use of AM in the classroom is quite high and more

than half of the respondents consciously confirm whether AM are used in their textbooks. The respondents' recognition of AM and perception of the importance of the use of AM have been explored; in the next section, what the respondents believe authentic materials are in the first place will be examined.

## 5.2 Results from Interviews

Individual interviews with 24 English teachers conducted after the questionnaire aimed to discover more detailed thoughts on what English teachers consider AM to be and what they use in the classroom. The results are shown in the following tables (Tables 8 & 9).

**Table 8** *Teachers' Perspectives and Usage of AM (12 Japanese-speaking Teachers)*

Participants (Affiliation)	Definition of AM	Usage of AM
#1 (Senior high school)	Materials that are not for teaching English but for teaching contents through English.	TED talks. Newspaper articles.
#2 (University)	News for listening, newspaper for reading. Newspapers that are not very much changed for easier reading. News on Student Times or other newspapers that are written for learners.	Textbooks on CNN & ABC with DVD. Newspaper articles.
#3 (University)	Reading materials written in very fine sophisticated English such as classics of literature by Shakespeare, theories by Chaucer, Saussure and theory of political science by Hobbs.	Michael Sandel's What money can't buy.
#4 (University)	Literature works or newspapers written for English native speakers and published in English-speaking countries such as the UK.	Oscar Wilde's novels. Movies based on literature, e.g. Romeo and Juliet, Pride and Prejudice, and Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Website about local news for foreigners. Overseas YouTube commercials.
#5 (University)	News like CNN or newspapers.	Textbooks on news with CD. Newspaper articles.
#6 (Junior high school)	English that is used in real life and is brought into the classroom.	Newspaper articles. TED talks. Yahoo, Internet sites.
#7 (University)	Newspaper articles that are not altered.	none
#8 (Senior high school)	English used in English-speaking countries.	Homepage of United Nations. BBC news. Newspaper articles. TED talks. National Geographic videos.
#9 (Language school)	Older materials that have more 'weight' such as a dictionary or publications.	The Economist.
#10 (University)	English that is not created for teaching.	Animations on Peter Rabbit's video. Movie trailers. Tourist guide information.

#11 (Junior College)	English that is not graded for English learners.	Recipes on YouTube. Documentaries. Newspaper articles. Music.
#12 (University)	English that is not planned for teaching, or that is not created for learners of English as a second language and is created for native English speakers.	TED talks. CNN for Students, BBC for Students. Novels and movies read/watched consecutively.

**Table 9** *Teachers' Perspectives and Usage of AM (12 English-speaking Teachers)*

<b>Participants (Affiliation)</b>	<b>Definition of AM</b>	<b>Usage of AM</b>
#1 (University)	Materials that are not usually used as teaching materials.	Magazine articles. The Economist. TV programs.
#2 (University)	Materials that are not edited for a specific audience, for the distinct purpose of education, or for certain levels of English readers.	Current event books, articles from the Internet. Stephen Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Successful People.
#3 (University)	Things that have come from the real world, anything really and that has not come out of a textbook exactly.	Video. Reading and watching a video one after the other e.g. Treasure Island, A Tale of Two Cities.
#4 (University)	Anything. like a book, or a newspaper article, even a conversation.	Videos. Movie clips. News programs. News clips.
#5 (Junior high school)		The Internet, The Truman Show movie, Charlie Chaplin movies.
#6 (Polytechnic)		YouTube videos.
#7 (Junior high school)	Simplified articles are not AM.	Don't use them because it is too difficult for my students. Newspaper articles but they are simplified for students already from a website.
#8 (University)		TED Talks. TED-Ed. Newspaper articles. Breaking News English (for English learners). YouTube. Real English Conversation podcast.
#9 (University)	It connects the students from academic reading into the real world. Something new – something real that is happening.	News For You (ESL newspaper). Novel.
#10 (University)	Something that connects students to the area.	Locally produced newspaper. Novel. Kahoot.
#11 (University)	Materials that are not written for ESL students.	Movies, e.g. Wizard of Oz, Harry Potter, Star Wars. Sitcoms, e.g. I Love Lucy, The Cosby Show. Newspaper articles. Novels e.g. Little Women (retold version). TED. StoryCorps (National Public Radio).
#12 (University)	Materials that are not made for ESL students. They are in English and not made for ESL students.	Videos. Movies, e.g. Witness. The Wizard of Oz. StoryCorps. TED Talks. Newspaper articles. Songs.

Overall, most interviewees use or have used AM in class through their own choice and ingenuity. One respondent (the #7 English-speaking respondent) teaching at a junior high school states clearly that he doesn't use AM in class because it is too difficult for his students. However, during his interview, he mentioned that he uses newspaper articles from a website to encourage his students to read more, but the website takes real articles and simplifies them for English learners, so he does not count them as AM. We'll discuss this point later, but some respondents regard these simplified or altered version as AM.

Almost everyone who gave a clear definition of their own states that AM are materials that are not created for pedagogical purposes but are used for real life, which is in keeping with the definitions offered in Section 2. A few other thoughts were that AM included classical literature, materials used for native English speakers in English-speaking countries, or something more 'weighty' such as a dictionary. However, when asked what kinds of materials they use in class besides textbooks, they replied newspaper or magazine articles, news programs, or a book. This indicates that some teachers use AM unconsciously, which could happen when teachers who teach English in Japan are not trained to become an English teacher, unlike those who have undergone TESOL training. Therefore, it is not a surprise that some are not so familiar with the pedagogical term of AM and there may be many cases like this.

For content of AM, many respondents use newspaper articles and TED Talks. Needless to say, these are easy media to access for both instructors and learners. Many respondents teach in the EFL context, and for college instructors, most of them teach English as one of the courses in the liberal arts for first and second year students. Therefore, general English taken from these accessible sources can be chosen as materials.

On the other hand, some choose more specific topics. Another phenomenon observed was that instructors tend to choose AM related to their specialty. For example, the #4 Japanese-speaking respondent whose specialty is English literature, teaching English at college, uses literature works as AM for teaching. Also, considering the specialty from the learners' side, the #10 Japanese-speaking respondent chooses recipes from YouTube and documentary videos on food for nutrition majors, and the #1 English-speaking respondent chooses a magazine, *The Economist*, for students majoring in Business, Economics, Law, and Politics.

The definitions described by other respondents seem to correspond to the general agreement among academics. However, if we turn our eyes to the details of what materials they use for teaching in the classroom, believing them to be authentic, some discrepancies seem to emerge. For instance, the #2 Japanese-speaking respondent mentions that newspaper articles that are not very much altered for easier reading and articles that are written for learners are considered AM. Likewise, the #2 and #4 Japanese-speaking respondents use textbooks on news with a DVD or CD. These textbooks handle current affairs and are usually prepared with scripts, guides, and activities. News readings recorded with a DVD and CD are used as they are used in real life, and in many cases the speed of reading can be changed. There is probably no discrepancy between this style of teaching material and what academics believe to be AM, as long as news *per se* is used. However, learners report that they do understand the difference between AM and

regular textbooks and some even mention that using regular textbooks demotivates them from learning<sup>(16)</sup>. From this perspective of motivating learners, one of the greatest merits of using AM may be somewhat lessened.

TESOL specialists presented a number of resources available for teaching. For instance, Real English Conversation podcast, News For You, Kahoot and StoryCorps. They are very well-thought-out sites and apps and they provide elaborate teaching materials (or possibilities for creating your own materials and quizzes) that instructors can bring into the classroom right away. Real conversations and input are used in these sites, but there remains the question of whether these should actually be considered as AM; as one respondent, the #7 English-speaking respondent, mentions, some specialists showed their doubt over any versions being altered from the original and remaining authentic.

## **6. Discussion and Conclusion**

The first research question related to how teachers define AM and what materials they believe constitute AM. When taken in light of the stricter definitions of AM as presented in Section 2, it seems that participants (many of whom have ELT research backgrounds and all of whom work as English instructors) interpret AM somewhat loosely and inconsistently. Going by the strictest interpretation put forward by McGrath<sup>(15)</sup>—that texts should not be altered or edited in any way if they are to remain authentic—many of the examples of material presented to respondents in the survey should not technically be classed as AM, and certainly not ‘genuine’ according to Widdowson’s<sup>(1)</sup> distinction. However, the spread of responses to each example shows that there is far from consensus among practitioners, and specific examples of differing interpretation and inconsistency include: a significant number of respondents believing that textbook materials made to look real are authentic; many respondents stating that replacing vocabulary with higher-frequency words is still authentic; respondents believing that the method of presenting subtitles on a video clip (but not the video clip itself) changes the authenticity; and a significant number believing materials such as graded readers are authentic. Furthermore, though most interviewees provided sound definitions of AM (for example, “Materials that are not edited for a specific audience or for educational purposes”), examples given of actual authentic materials included: newspapers written specifically for language learners; news channels adapted for students; and retold novels (i.e. graded readers).

To be clear, this is by no means meant as criticism of the participants or a comment on their teaching quality. The survey examples were deliberately selected to be ‘gray areas’ where teachers would feel more or less strongly that they are examples of AM. The wider point to be drawn from this is that ELT practitioners are not so concerned about what is, strictly speaking, authentic or not. Or, perhaps more significantly, if they wish to choose AM to make their classes more meaningful and engaging for students, then they are more likely to think about ‘authenticity’ as distinguished from Widdowson’s<sup>(1)</sup> ‘genuineness,’ and be more concerned with ensuring the materials are adapted in order to make them as accessible as possible for students. That is to say, such practitioners would be happy to use materials that approximate real communication and

that are authentic *as far as the students can tell*, and they would not think it wrong to adapt the material to fit the classroom situation. This is certainly no bad thing, and it no doubt works up to a point, although it should come with a note of caution: a study by the researchers<sup>(16)</sup> found that students in general recognize when AM are used in the classroom and they are aware of the difference between AM and other regular textbook material. Thus, one risk of not carefully selecting material that is genuinely authentic is that the benefits of increased engagement and motivation are lost should the students not really feel the material to be authentic. On the other hand, an opposite but equal risk is that students take the non-authentic materials to be genuine and develop a false impression or misunderstanding of English in real life, thus negating the bridge to real life proposed by Guariento and Morley<sup>(14)</sup>.

The second research question asked if teachers pay explicit attention to whether AM are included in course materials, and if teachers think the inclusion of AM is important or not. The survey provided some interesting results. The majority of teachers (38 out of 48) stated that they thought it was important or very important that AM be incorporated into textbooks and an even greater majority (44 out of 50) thought it was important or very important that AM should be incorporated into supplementary materials. The fact that more teachers saw importance of AM in supplementary materials rather than main textbooks perhaps indicates that there is still a belief among some practitioners that AM are not as integral to a course as traditional materials. It might also indicate that teachers prefer using AM as supplementary rather than main materials because this enables them to have more control over which materials are selected and how they are adapted and exploited in the classroom. A commonly cited disadvantage of AM that they are too difficult or inappropriate for some students, so it would make sense that teachers would prefer to use them in a supplementary manner that allows them the freedom to choose and use as they see best. One anomaly in the data is that despite teachers indicating that they believe AM to be important, just a little over half of respondents (27 out of 49) stated that they actually pay attention to whether AM are included in materials. It seems, therefore, that there is still a slight disconnect between the stated sense of importance attached to AM and the active desire to see that they are incorporated into the classroom.

The third research question asked whether teachers use AM in the classroom, and what kinds. The interviews showed that almost all teachers do use AM to varying extents, with only two teachers stating that they do not. The reason given by one of those teachers was that AM are too difficult for the students – this would certainly be a problem if practitioners were to adhere absolutely to the “any modification to AM removes the genuineness” rule, but as written above, AM can and perhaps should be modified *up to a point* in order to maximize their effectiveness for students. As for the types of AM used, teachers demonstrated creativity through the range of possible materials: videos, books/novels, and newspapers inevitably being common answers, but also more inventive AM such as TED talks (particularly favored by Japanese-speaking interviewees), recipes, tourist information, and local news for foreigners living in the area. Most ELT practitioners clearly have the desire and flexibility to adopt different types of AM into the classroom – perhaps all that is lacking is more sharing of ideas and more examples of AM used in



existing course materials to act as inspiration.

In conclusion, this paper has shown that while there are differences of nuance within the literature regarding the exact definition of AM, the literature can be drawn upon to provide an effective working definition for researchers in this area. One nuance, though, that is perhaps not clarified enough in the literature is the distinction between ‘genuineness’ and ‘authenticity.’ Greater clarity in this regard will help researchers and academics in future discussions about what do and do not constitute ‘authentic materials,’ although the pedagogical implications of this may be limited, since it seems that practitioners do not overly concern themselves with whether materials are authentic or not; rather, they just select what they believe to be best for students, regardless of definition. Also, it would likely be of benefit for more people to recognize AM on a spectrum of authenticity, rather than the reductive polarization of just ‘authentic’ and non-authentic.’ Again, and for the same reasons as above, this is more likely to have implications for the research of ELT than the practice of it. As for the research, it can be tentatively concluded that while ELT practitioners largely understand the formal definitions of AM, in practice they may well interpret them differently, though this is not necessarily to the detriment of teaching quality. Practitioners do believe AM to be important, though perhaps in reality there is still some way to go to get teachers to actively seek out and incorporate AM into their classrooms. Finally, the types of AM that are used by practitioners are varied and potentially of great benefit to learners, but it would be good if teachers were given more opportunities to share and learn both from their peers and from readily available coursebooks. The pedagogical implication of these final points is that use of AM would almost certainly increase within ELT as a whole if access to effective materials were greatly increased and made easier – either by more explicitly incorporating them into future published materials, by publishing materials consisting solely of AM, or by simply raising awareness and creating more opportunities to share.

## 7. References

- (1) Widdowson, H. G. *Teaching language as communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- (2) Kilickaya, F. ‘Authentic materials and cultural content in EFL classrooms.’ *The Internet TESL Journal* 10(7), 2004.
- (3) Harmer, J. *The practice of English language teaching*. 5th ed. Essex: Pearson Education, 2015.
- (4) Nunan, D. Task-based language teaching: A comprehensively revised edition of *designing tasks for the communicative classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- (5) Wallace, C. *Reading*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- (6) Jordan, R. R. *English for academic purposes: A guide and resource book for teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- (7) Richards, J. C. *Curriculum development in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- (8) Tomlinson, B. ‘Materials development for language learning and teaching.’ *Language Teaching: Surveys and Studies* 45(2), 2012. pp. 143–79.



- (9) Richards, J. C. and Schmidt, R. *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics*. 3rd ed. London: Pearson Education, 2002.
- (10) Bacon, S. M. and Finnemann, M. D. 'A study of the attitudes, motives, and strategies of university foreign language students and their disposition to authentic oral and written input.' *The Modern Language Journal* 74(4), 1990. pp. 459–73.
- (11) Martinez, A. Authentic materials: An overview. Karen's linguistic issues. 2002. Available from: <http://www3.telus.net/linguisticsissues/authenticmaterials.html>.
- (12) Zyzik, E. and Polio, C. *Authentic materials myths: Applying second language research to classroom teaching*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017.
- (13) Peacock, M. 'The effect of authentic materials on the motivation of EFL learners.' *ELT Journal* 51(2), 1997. pp. 144–56.
- (14) Guariento, W. and Morley, J. 'Text and task authenticity in the EFL classroom.' *ELT Journal* 55(4), 2001. pp. 347–53.
- (15) McGrath, I. *Materials evaluation and design for language teaching*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002.
- (16) Yoneda, M. and Valvona, J. 'Authentic materials selected for the future needs of students: Difficulty, interest, and autonomy as perceived by learners.' *Studies in English Teaching & Learning in East Asia* 7, 2019. pp. 41–56.

### **Acknowledgements**

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP17K02915.

We would also like to thank the teachers for sharing their thoughts in the questionnaire and interviews. Without their passionate participation and input, this study could not have been possible.