THE AUTHENTICITY CONTINUUM: EMPOWERING INTERNATIONAL VOICES

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Introduction

This paper outlines a workshop which I conducted in Tokyo and Osaka in 2013 as part of an INSET program accredited by the Japanese Ministry of Sports, Education and Culture (MEXT). The course, entitled *Using and Adapting Authentic Materials to Help Motivate Students*, aims to give teachers a better understanding of the concept of authenticity as it realigns itself with the way English is used and taught around the world for international communication. My aims as the teacher/researcher were to understand more about how L2 teachers of English perceive the notion of authenticity and how this concept could be broadened to try and empower L2 users of English by helping them to start reconceptualising authenticity from a more international perspective. This paper first looks at some of the issues that arise when attempting to define authenticity and then, building on the distinctions laid out by Widdowson (1978), that authenticity is not something absolute but relative to learners, I suggest that authenticity might be best viewed as a continuum which incorporates international voices and moves away from culturally embedded definitions. With that in place I will describe the contents of the workshop, followed by an explanation of the data I collected as part of the workshop and how analysis showed that participants reported the notion of an authenticity continuum to be empowering and even increased their motivation to try and make their own classes more authentic.

The Authenticity Continuum: an attempt at synthesis

For an excellent overview of authenticity in language teaching and over a century of its history, see Gilmore (2007) who summarised the numerous different and often overlapping definitions of authenticity. Gilmore identifies eight inter-related definitions which I have further condensed into a simple diagram (see: Figure 1).

Clearly, with these definitions there is a great deal of variety and overlap, each one has its place in the overall picture yet one by one they are insufficient to give a complete view. In choosing

only one, for example number two, the 'real' definition, at first glance this would seem to be the most commonly used definition by teachers wishing to expose their students to learning materials which have not been created or doctored for language teaching purposes but remain 'authentic' in that they had a purpose in the real world beyond the transmission of declarative knowledge (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2010). The problem with defining authenticity in this way, or using any single definition, is that in order to bring this language into the classroom, it needs to be captured, preserved and then somehow taught or at least presented to the students (Widdowson, 1978).This seems analogous to planting a single tree in order to study a forest, or what Hung and Victor Chen (2007) call *extrapolation approaches*. Language is heavily pragmatic and context dependant (Mishan, 2004).Of course, not allauthentictextslose their context just becausetheyare brought into the language classroom, but extrapolation approaches to authenticity are quite limited because they lack much of the process of personal engagement required to make them interesting and relevant to the learners. In other words, we can take the material out of the real world but the material's *purpose* changes and cannot be transferred into the classroom. With this change in purpose comes a change in relevance to the real world, andTomlinson (2011: 11) includes both relevance and usefulness as essential components to the development of language learning materials, based on principles from research in second language acquisition. In order to develop a more inclusive concept of authenticity, rather than trying for a single definition, authenticity should perhaps be seen as a continuum with various dimensions(see: Figure 2).

Figure 1. Gilmore's (2007) eight inter-related definitions.

1. Native	• the language produced by native speakers for native speakers in a particular language community
2. Real	• the language produced by a real speaker/writer for a real audience, conveying a real message
3. Self	• the qualities bestowed on a text by the receiver, in that it is not seen as something inherent in a text itself, but is imparted on it by the reader/listener
4. Classroom	• the interaction between students and teachers as a 'personal process of engagement'
5. Task	• the types of task chosen
6. Social	• the social situation of the classroom
7. Assessment	• specifically the 'target language use domain' which is connected to the validity of language tests to be able to connect test-tasks to uses in the real world
8. Culture	• culture, and the ability to behave or think like a target language group in order to be recognized and validated by them

Figure 2. The authenticity continuum.
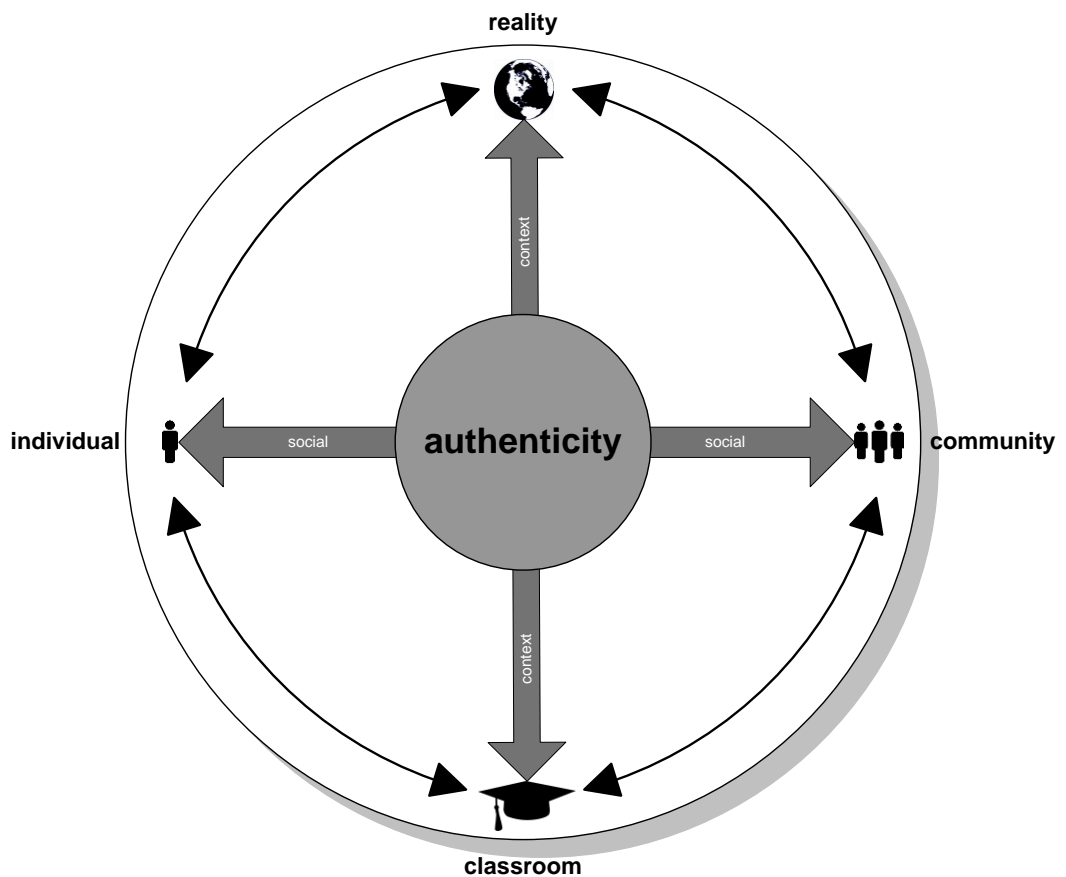
The authenticity continuum has two main axes, contextual and social. The contextual axis represents where the language is being used or intended for use. At one end is the classroom: a supportive environment where the primary focus is on acquiring new and practising known language and building on this. Assessment will also be part of the classroom environment too, so relevance to syllabus and achievement goals will also be considered, in-line with what Gilmore (2007) advocates when he states that authentic materials should focus on learning aims. At the other end of this axis is the real world, which is not necessarily opposite to the classroom situation but the supportive environment and learning dimensions are no longer prevalent, instead actual use for a purpose beyond learning characterises this dimension. This could be in a business situation or traveling abroad, or any type of environment where the language is used for its own sake, as a tool for communication with speakers of the target language.

Along the social axis, at one end is the individual or the speaker/learner with their needs and personal reasons for learning – their motivations for learning. By motivation, I mean a complex, dynamic psychological system with multiple facets which can be attributed to the reasons behind actions taken by individuals. This is closely related to whatUshioda (2011)calls for when she advocates a *person in-context relational* view of motivation, and this way a strong conceptual link is forged between authenticity and motivation. At the other end of the social axis is the target language use community, the people who the learner/speaker intends to interact with. This could be speaking to a person from another linguistic community, such as a friend or stranger asking directions on the street. It might be colleagues from an overseas office or even an in-law from an international marriage within the family. Basically community represents any group or individual with whom the user will engage in communication using the target language.

Practical Examples

To show an example of how the authenticity continuum can be used to evaluate the authenticity of a material, a task or even lesson, I will provide two examples and plot them onto the proposed continuum. The first example comes from a class entitled *discussions on contemporary topics* which I taught to English-majors at Sophia University in Tokyo, Japan. I set a video project as the final assessment for this class, one that could be uploaded to YouTube or other public video

sharing sites. As a class, we negotiated the marking criteria together, but one of my stipulations was that the project should feature relevance beyond the classroom. One of the most impressive projects featured a group having badges printed which they sold on c7ampus and then donated the money they raised to a world hunger charity. After learning that 1.4 billion people live on less than $1.25 a day, as part of their video project the students attempted to live on $1.25 for a whole day, and they recorded what they ate in order to prove the point that it was not enough[1]. Clearly, this group was highly motivated, and they went above and beyond what was required of them for class. I believe one reason for this was the shared belief that what they were doing was highly authentic. If I was to plot this activity on the authenticity continuum (see: Figure 3), it would score highly on all four dimensions of authenticity, being highly relevant to the real world (donating money to charity) but also having been assessed as part of the class. It also had a strong connection with the target language community (being uploaded onto YouTube for others to watch and comment on) but also having been decided on by the students themselves and chosen because of their own interests and passions (students had a lot of autonomy in terms of choice of topic and formed groups based around these choices).

By reconceptualising authenticity as a continuum, almost any classroom material or interaction can be evaluated to see how it relates to the different areas of authenticity.For example,a Graded Reader (see: Figure 4) which has been abridged for a particular level might not be seen as authentic under previous definitions of authenticity, in that it exists specifically for language learning purposes. However, Graded Readers would certainly count as authentic in that they provide an experience of the language and do not focus specifically on declarative knowledge. If a student has selected the Graded Reader themselves or it is relevant or of interest to them, Graded Readers would score highly on the User section of the spectrum, although they might fare less well on Community and Reality because they have been abridged and may bear only a slight resemblance to the original text.

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[1]You can view the final video at http://youtu.be/iMmofI9PMt8. Please be sure to leave encouraging comments!

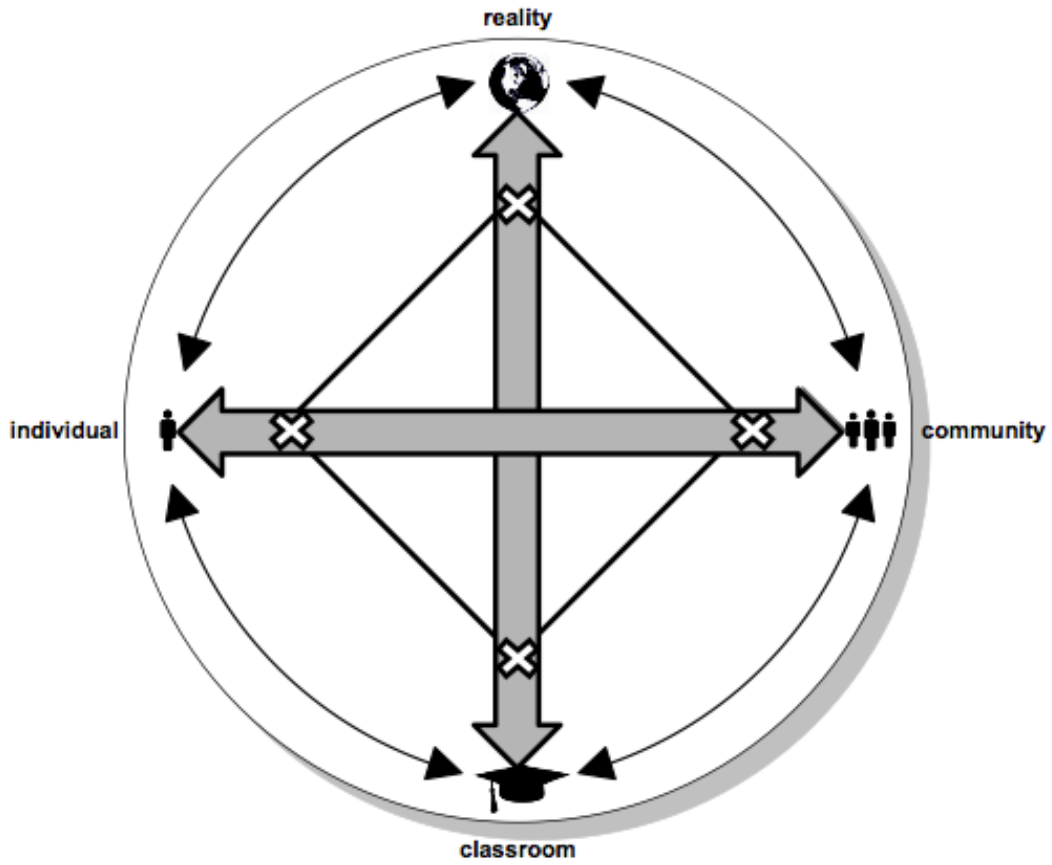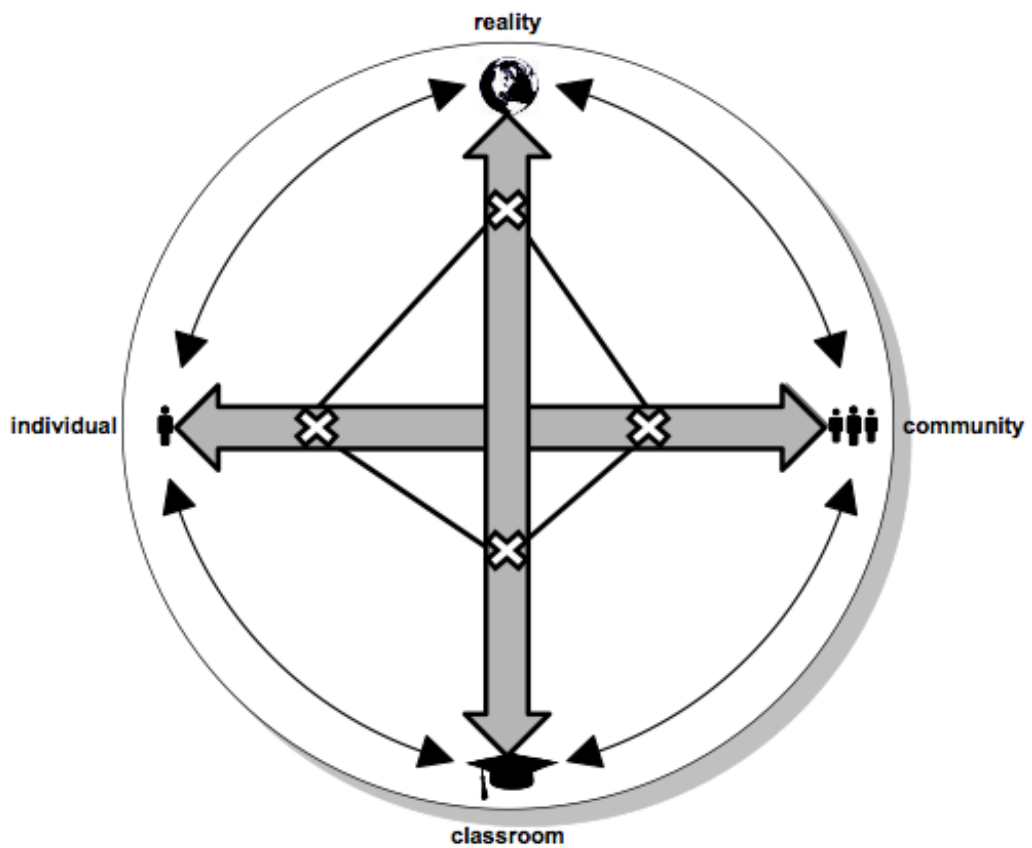Figure 3.Video project – awareness campaign and raising money for charity.

Figure 4.A Graded Reader chosen by the student for self-study.

I would like to stress that although these diagrams plot authenticity according to their relevance to extremes on a continuum, the purpose of the continuum is not to measure authenticity but to validate the various and equally important dimensions of authenticity. These measurements are indications only and of course as a result they are rather general.

Considering authenticity as a continuum is not a new proposal (Hung & Victor Chen, 2007) but it tries to achieve a synthesis between the various definitions and calls for best practice in authenticity in language learning materials.

The Workshop: an attempt at praxis

In Japan, MEXT has decreed that teachers must undertake a certain number of accredited teacher training workshops in order to renew their teaching licence every ten years. I was invited to run one of these workshops at Sophia University, where I am a faculty member. This was the third year I had run the same workshop, entitled *Using and Adapting Authentic Materials to Help Motivate Students*. I taught the session twice in 2013, once in Osaka (n=10) and once in Tokyo (n=25) to a total of 35 Japanese teachers of English, mainly at High School level. The workshop is given entirely in English, although participants can of course communicate with each other in their native Japanese. There are four parts to the workshop, each lasting 90 minutes. At the end of the session, in order to give the participants credits towards the renewal of their licence we must set an assessment of some form and collect data as evidence of participation. I used the opportunity to set the assessment as a reflective essay about how the participants' ideas about authenticity may have shifted over the course of the session, since part of my aim as the teacher/researcher was to gain an understanding of their perceptions of authenticity and to see how they would react to a definition based around a continuum incorporating international voices. The fact that the data I collected were from pedagogical sources, natural products of what happened in the training course anyway, means that the study's methodology falls under the exploratory practice framework because "exploratory research embeds data collection into the actual practice of teaching"(Ellis, 2012: 31). I included a tick-box at the bottom of the sheet to ask if teachers consented to my using their responses in the study to ensure the data collection was in-line with ethical guidelines, and not all of the participants opted in (2 out of 35 chose to opt out, their data was omitted from the coding), so the total number

of participants in the study was n=33. This study furtherbelongs to exploratory practice because I am trying to understand something about my own practice (both as a teacher and as a teacher trainer) but I am not necessarily going to change my own practice, initially all I am seeking at this point is, paraphrasing Allwright (2003), a deeper understanding of the central puzzle, in this case authenticity as it is viewed by L2 teachers.

Despite being the least practical, the first session for me was the most important one in laying the groundwork for the rest of the workshop. This workshop is very much about achieving praxis – the conversion of theory into practice. It is vital that participants broaden their definition of authenticity in order to incorporate themselves and their own classes into that definition. In the first session, I started off by asking the participants for their definition of authenticity and then, after discussing in groups, I asked 'how many of you mentioned native-speakers in your definition?'. I made a note in my teaching journal that at least one person from each group raised their hands. After this, I talked participants through Gilmore's (2007) famous *eight inter-related definitions* and participants discussed them in groups. After which, I explained the idea of authenticity as a continuum, although I do not provide any references for the continuum or state that it is of my own devising, so as to try and keep participants responses in the data more honest. During the session, there is also an activity where participants are given three examples of different texts and tasks and asked to rate which one they find most authentic (see: Figure 5).

I noted in my teaching journal that example C was rated as the most authentic by a large majority (77 per cent in Tokyo and 90 per cent in Osaka), after which example B came second, with the 'classic' newspaper example C coming last of all.

Figure 5. Authenticity task rating exercise.

Example A:	*The teacher brings an English language newspaper to class and has students read the text and underline every instance of the present perfect aspect or passive tense, and then asks them to copy each sentence out into their notebooks.*
Example B:	*The teacher uses an 'inauthentic' text from a published course book which was contrived specifically to practise reported speech and then discusses other ways in which the speakers from the text could have said the same thing in a different way.*
Example C:	*The teacher asks students to use the internet to research about their favourite celebrity or hero and then create a short presentation in English to the rest of the class about that person.*

After the first session, I move on to the methodology section, in which the theories and definition discussed in the first session are put into practical terms, looking at how these theories will influence classroom materials. This is achieved by a detailed examination of the nature of English as a global language and how this has forced authenticity to be re-examined for contemporary English use. Although this in itself is not a new idea or particularly radical, since the participants are L2 teachers, many of whom live in the shadow of native speakers (Cook, 1999), it is intended to be empowering and to help participants move away from the native-speaker definitions that are often still embedded in their minds. Teachers' concept of themselves as L2 teachers of English may severely impact their self-image and professional efficacy (Moussu & Llurda, 2008).

The remainder of the session is a practical workshop where participants adapt various authentic materials and create a lesson plan around these materials which they present to the rest of the group. The final session is geared around multimedia tools and how these can be exploited to create meaningful interaction with other groups, such as international online exchange programs or remote access field trips. At the end of the session, the assessment is set as a one hour written report, which also featured an optional questionnaire. This was where the majority of data for the current study came from.

The Study: an attempt at reflection

This study collected data from two groups of teachers during an INSET training activity which was part of a MEXT accredited training course. After the course, participants were asked to write a reflective paper (either in English or Japanese, 3 out of 33 wrote in Japanese which was then translated by the author and a native speaker of Japanese) which was then typed up onto the computer for coding and analysis. The question at the top of the reflective paper was:

> What is your opinion about the authenticity continuum? Has your idea about authenticity changed by participating in this workshop? In what way (if any)?

Most of the data are qualitative, and the study design was based on exploratory practice. Although at times I present data in a way which quantifies the responses, the majority of data analysis was done in an interpretive way, coding the data as I went through it and then re-coding it as the bigger picture emerged. I used NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software to create nodes and run word frequency queries as I worked through the data, which helped in selecting the major themes for the responses, outlined in the results and analysis section. All names have been changed.

Results and Analysis: an attempt at understanding

Culturally Embedded Definitions

Perhaps the most striking part of the study was the number of participants who came to the workshop initially believing that authentic materials were the sole domain of the native speaker. From a total of 33 participants at both workshops, all of them experienced Japanese teachers of English, 23 (almost 70 per cent) had culturally embedded definitions of authenticity, with 18 participants (over 50 per cent) specifically making reference to native speakers:

> Before I took this lesson, I thought that authenticity should be 'native'. I mean that the material should be written by native speakers, so retold textbook materials are not authentic and we should choose more authentic ones. However, after the lesson, my understanding has been widened. I think materials are not limited to those written or spoken by natives, but should be relevant to learners' needs (Keiko, Osaka).

Here Keiko makes a very clear point about how her concept of authenticity has changed as a result of the workshop. The concept that authenticity should be connected to learners' needs and interests was a central part of the authenticity continuum, and for many participants, such as Momoko, this was a vital aspect of the session:

> Before this workshop I just thought that 'authentic' means 'native'; using a newspaper in English class is better than using a textbook. But now, at the end of the workshop, I can talk more about authenticity, giving my experiences today as an example.
>
> I have felt negative about myself as a non-native English speaker who teaches English. Now, I don't. Authenticity connects me not only to English but also learning. (Momoko, Tokyo).

It is important to note that this L2 teacher of English felt 'negative' about herself as a 'non-native English' teacher. Even though 80 per cent of language teachers around the world are L2 speakers (Canagarajah, 2005), it is possible that for many of these people authenticity seems somehow out of reach, which is likely to have a devastating effect on their efficacy as teachers and even on their professional identity as English language teachers. The issue of efficacy is of great importance, not just to EFL teacher education but teacher cognition in general, because it influences teachers' classroom behaviour, as well having links with student achievement (Mills, 2011). Efficacy is also a vital component of teacher motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

Even more surprising was the fact that two of the participants stated that they were unable to change their culturally embedded views of authenticity, and that they remained stuck on the native speaker definition, even after the four 90 minute sessions which were designed specifically to alter this perception.

> I have to confess that I have not really comprehended the concept of the authenticity continuum. I still have the idea that the language used by so-called 'native speakers' in L1 countries is authentic. It is hard for me to eliminate the conventional ideas about authenticity (Maymumi, Tokyo).

Clearly this participant still thought of L1 countries as being the main source of authentic materials and language, but I am not sure from her answers why she could not escape the L1 definitions since she said later on in her answer that '[c]lassrooms are also part of reality and the English used in the classroom can be authentic.' I think that basically, like the rest of us, this participant was quite confused about authenticity. After initially stating that she only 'partially agreed with' the authenticity continuum, she later concluded that she agreed 'with the concept of the authenticity continuum in general' but that it left 'some problems unsolved'. Those problems seemed to stem perhaps from a misunderstanding that L1 models were not authentic, or that L2 models were more authentic than L1 models. Perhaps this participant thought I was trying to argue that L1 speakers are less authentic in general than L2 speakers, whereas what I was actually trying to argue was for a balance with social and contextual dimensions as the central point of departure.

The remaining teachers with culturally embedded definitions made statements that showed they felt authenticity was 'real' language which seemed to exclude their own teaching. For example, Nanae explained:

> I used to feel that authenticity is in the real world which is outside of Japan. However I realized that authenticity means being relevant to the person's interest. [The workshop also] gave me the idea of connection of authenticity and motivation, too. So now I feel like teaching with authentic materials more than before to motivate my students (Nanae, Osaka).

Nanae's perception of the real world seems to exclude the EFL context, which would mean her idea of reality is still centred on the L1, although she did not specifically mention native speakers in her answer. It is interesting that she also mentioned that the broader understanding of authenticity she took from the workshop gave her a desire to use more authentic materials in her own classroom. We can see how closely her own

motivation to use authentic materials is bound up with a desire to increase student motivation. Motivation was an important part of the workshop, as I explained earlier, and I am pleased to see that this participant makes a direct connection between her motivation and her students', as well as a connection between authentic materials and motivation because of increased relevance and interest being factors when selecting authentic materials.

The Continuum as a tool for widening the definition of authenticity

Since one purpose of conducting this research was to gain a better understanding of teachers' perceptions of the authenticity continuum, I asked specifically what the teachers thought about it.

> I think the authenticity continuum is very useful to evaluate the materials from several aspects. Also, it is important to know whether the materials are authentic or not before giving them in class. [...] Evaluating the materials will lead us to improve our lessons. It's also possible to say that even the students can assess the materials after the class by using the authenticity continuum to improve the lessons more. I think the authenticity continuum [can be used] to improve the lessons more (Mari, Tokyo).

Here, the teacher thinks the continuum is not only useful to teachers in assessing materials but also for students. Explaining to students the relevance of the materials being used in class is certainly an admirable strategy to encourage autonomy and engagement. Quite often I think it helps to directly explain the value of the materials being used in the class, and even localised textbooks possess a degree of authenticity on the continuum if they are well designed or the teacher makes the most of them using appropriate tasks. There is certainly an argument for explaining the authentic value of the materials to learners, as Clarke (1989) advocates, because involving the learners in assessing the materials leads to greater involvement and thus potentially increased motivation. This way such materials and lessons can be authenticated and their learning value made clearer.

> In my opinion, as authenticity includes some complicated elements such as materials, language in use, tasks, production, classrooms, culture or community, the authenticity continuum helps us understand what the important things are for both English teachers and learners. Living in the modern international world, it is very important for English teachers and learners to communicate with people who speak different languages (Shiori, Osaka).

Again, these comments show that teachers see the value in involving their learners with the materials and encourage them to engage and evaluate them.

Authenticity and motivation

Not only did teachers feel that the authenticity continuum would be helpful in their planning of lessons and involvement of learners in the evaluation process, but also they commented on how it had helped them to expand their own ideas about authenticity, which for many was a motivating or empowering experience. In addition to the comments I have already cited above from Momoko and Nanako about being motivated to use more authentic materials in class, I would draw the reader's attention to the following comments:

> This continuum gave me wider and more flexible ideas about 'authenticity'. I will try to use more various 'authentic' materials and be more careful about planning 'authentic' tasks (Takako, Osaka).

As I stated earlier, the intention behind the workshop was to gain some kind of praxis and to be able to convert theories of authenticity into something practical. Momoko stated that '[t]he authenticity continuum is one of the best clues to make English lessons practical.' She stated that she believed using the continuum to assess the authenticity of the materials she was using could make her lessons more practical because it forces her to assess her students' needs. Again, this demonstrates the strong conceptual links between authenticity and motivation.

> The authenticity continuum tells me how to evaluate the authenticity of materials, and it's interesting. Before I participated in this workshop, I believed that authentic materials were the English statements used in countries like the UK or USA, English native countries. However, when we evaluated the authenticity of the Wall Street Journal according to the continuum, its authenticity was not high. Also, by comparing three examples of tasks, I realised that I chose A [see figure three], the task using an English language newspaper, as the least authentic. I was surprised at the result myself, and it was interesting to know that most of the teachers here had the same choice. This experience made me think it is important to have several points of view, or factors, to assess the authenticity of materials, and of course how to use them (Aya, Tokyo).

Although widening the concept of authenticity may endanger it by making it "too elusive to be useful"(Gilmore, 2007: 98), what Aya has observed here is that because of the complexity of authenticity, it is helpful to view it as being comprised of various dimensions because it *is* a multifaceted concept. Rather like the six blind men all touching a different part of the elephant and coming to a different conclusion about its nature, having just one definition for authenticity makes it hard to get a true understanding of the concept.

Conclusion

Almost all the participants mentioned that their concept of authenticity had changed or 'widened' as a result of the workshop, (30 out of 33 or 90 per cent, with one saying their concept had not changed and two ambiguous responses). For me, this is a great success as I feel strongly that this wider definition authenticates L2 teachers and would hopefully allow them to take more ownership of the language they are teaching, thus increasing their motivation and sense of efficacy, which will in turn motivate the students in feedback loops of a "reciprocal and recursive pattern of causality"(Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011: 191).

This exploratory practice inquiry suggests that the authenticity continuum is mainly useful as a way of guiding decisions about materials choice, and as a framework for assessing materials and how they relate to the various dimensions of authenticity. For many teachers, I expect it would just be something in the back of their minds when looking over a textbook, searching for authentic materials or planning lessons. Some teachers may also use it to justify their use of materials in the classroom, but overall as a practical tool I think it might best be seen as something to be internalised by teachers and referred to in the planning process, rather than a model to be adhered to strictly.

Another intention is to empower L2 teachers specifically, and also learners, by shifting the focus of the materials they use to something more relevant to how they will actually *experience* English as a tool for international communication.

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