

# Effective Ways to Use Authentic Materials with ESL/EFL Students

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This paper explains how authentic materials can be effectively used in the ESL classroom. Each pair of students is given a copy of the authentic material accompanied by a set of questions about the contents of the handout. Students work together with a partner to extract pertinent information that is necessary to answer the questions.

## The Authentic Materials

### Background

We have been using authentic materials for over 10 years and have found that they complement English classes by enlivening the class and creating a more positive attitude toward learning. We now have an extensive collection of materials that include menus, maps, newspaper inserts, store advertisements, travel brochures, catalogs, phone books, real estate pamphlets, and various pamphlets of sightseeing and tourist information. We have found that using sets of materials are particularly appealing. A set could include a map, a travel guide, a menu, and a store advertisement from the same town -- all of which are interwoven, immersing the student in a multidimensional English experience.

### Choosing Authentic Materials

There are several important points to consider when choosing authentic materials. You should make sure that you have enough copies of the materials to be used so that each student or pair of students can have a copy to use. It is best not to use material with too many pages, unless the pages are clearly numbered for easy reference. If you plan to use the same materials in more than one class, it is important that they be hardy enough to withstand a lot of handling and they should be easily refolded and put back together. Materials with multiple pieces or pages that fall out or come apart should be avoided. Also, keep in mind that some materials are more easily dated than others. For example, last season's catalog does not have the same impact as a current one which is filled with items which the student could actually order. A menu, on the other hand, can be used as long as the prices remain contemporary. Students are generally uninterested in special events, for example an Expo, that have already past. Remember to choose material that is appropriate for the students' level. However, a certain amount of adjustment can be made depending on the type and level of questions used in the accompanying question handout.

### Using Authentic Materials

When we first began using authentic materials, we handed out materials to each student and had them work individually. However, experience has shown that having students work in pairs is a better approach because they tend to be more enthusiastic and work harder. We give each pair the authentic material and a question handout. Interestingly, the student with the stronger command of English is not necessarily the one who is able to extract the most information from the material. Students of different abilities tend to complement one another and, as a result, do not get bogged down easily. Students tend to contribute individual strengths to the completion of the task. We usually tell students that question handouts will be collected since this keeps them more focused on the completion of the exercise. The teacher's personal anecdotes and other background information should be shared before the students begin concentrating on the material.

After the authentic material has been distributed, we give a brief explanation and point out, for example, the importance of the table of contents in a pamphlet or the legend in a map. We point out small print and other parts of the material that are easily missed. We have

found that pointing out Japanese words and products raises the level of interest in the material. This is a good time for the teacher to explain measures, abbreviations, and difficult words and expressions.

While the students are working on the assignment, we help them by answering questions and commenting on their work. This is also a good chance to give hints to those who are stuck on a particular question.

Once the allotted time is up, we collect the material along with the question handout and go over the difficult questions with the class. If the handouts are to be factored into the students' grades, it is a good idea to make sure they have a chance to work with various partners over the course of the semester.

## Putting the Question Handout Together

For the authentic materials to be effective, the questions must be well constructed to (a) give the students the opportunity to practice English, (b) help the students gain confidence in their English ability, (c) expose the students to cultural differences and customs, and (d) help the students develop their ability to find pertinent information quickly.

### Tour Questions

The first part of the question handout should contain easy multiple choice or fill-in factual questions. These questions give the students a 'tour' of the material and exposes them to a variety of question types. The students gain an overview of the material as they answer these initial easy questions and this makes them feel confident enough to tackle more difficult questions later.

### Cultural and Personal Choice Questions

The second part of the handout should contain questions that can be used to bring attention to cultural differences in packaging, sizes, and pricing. Authentic materials often contain references to cultural events such as holidays, and questions can be used to bring these to the students' attention. Questions which require one word or written answers could be used at this stage. Furthermore, students are familiar enough with the material at this point to answer personal choice questions. These questions usually require the students to choose items from the material or a course of action based on personal preference. These often lead to lively discussion because students must agree on what answer to write.

### Challenging Questions

The third part should have questions that are more challenging and time consuming. Because of the differences in abilities (and sometimes luck), the time it takes students to complete a question handout can vary considerably. The more challenging questions at the end of the handout tend to work as 'equalizers' and slow down faster students so slower students can catch up. Questions can involve reading the small print, be especially detailed, or involve deductive reasoning. When students are working on the challenging questions they often begin to compare their progress to that of their neighbors'. Deliberately misleading 'red herring' questions add to the competitiveness while developing the students' critical thinking.

## Types of Questions and Sample Questions

### Multiple Choice:

1. How many *Navel Oranges* can you buy for a dollar? a) 3 b) 4 c) 5
2. Which is the cheapest? a) orange juice b) grapefruit juice c) tomato juice

### One Word Answer:

1. What country are the seedless grapes from? \_\_\_\_\_
2. On the back page it says *Chilean Asian Pears* for \$1.00 each. What do you think "Asian pears" are called in Japanese?  
\_\_\_\_\_

### Written Answer:

1. Why are the strawberries on the back page called *California Strawberries*?
2. How do you order coupons on the Internet for this store?

**Lists:**

1. You want to make sandwiches for your family. What would you buy?
  1. Stone Ground Wheat Bread - 2 loaves - \$4.00
  2. \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ - \$ \_\_\_\_\_
  3. \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ - \$ \_\_\_\_\_
  4. \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ - \$ \_\_\_\_\_
  5. \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ - \$ \_\_\_\_\_
2. You are having a party for five friends at your house. You can spend only 50 dollars. What would you buy for the party?
  1. Cape Cod Potato Chips - 4 six ounce bags - \$6.00
  2. \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ - \$ \_\_\_\_\_
  3. \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ - \$ \_\_\_\_\_
  4. \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ - \$ \_\_\_\_\_
  5. \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ - \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**Factual:**

1. How many large brown eggs can you buy for \$1? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How much are two jars of *Mayonnaise* on page 7? \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**Analytical (multi-step):**

1. How much do 10 ears of *Florida Super Sweet Corn* and 2 pounds (lb.) of *Fresh Ground Round* cost? \$ \_\_\_\_\_
2. Which costs more, one lb. of *Fresh Boneless Shark Steaks* or one lb. of *Whiting Fillets*? \_\_\_\_\_

**Personal Preference:**

1. Look at the back page. What fruit would you like to eat? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What flowers do you want to give to your mother on Mother's Day?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**Conversion:**

1. How many ounces are there in a two liter bottle of *Pepsi One*? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How many grams of *Florida Red Potatoes* can you buy for five dollars? One pound is about 453 grams. \_\_\_\_\_

**Red Herring:**

1. One *Florida Juice Orange* costs \$2.00. True or False (NOTE TO TEACHERS: The advertisement says one bag is \$2.00.)
2. Which is cheaper, one lb. of *Whiting Fillets* or one lb. of *Crunchy Clam Strip*? \_\_\_\_\_

**Obvious:**

1. What is the name of this store? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What month is the Mother's Day Sale? \_\_\_\_\_

**Challenging:**

1. Find something that is cheaper in Japan than in the USA. \_\_\_\_\_.
2. What can you buy in a glass jar that is usually sold in a plastic bottle in Japan? \_\_\_\_\_

# Activities

There are other methods of using authentic materials. Some of these can be used as a supplement to the question handout, or on their own, for variety. Here are four examples of effective activities with brief explanations.

## Word Search

The students search for parts of speech such as adjectives on a given page or search for certain categories of things. An advantage of this activity is that students do not need identical copies of the authentic material.

## Crosswords

The teacher prepares a crossword puzzle using words from the handout. The questions for the handout can also be presented as crossword clues. Crossword generating programs found on the Internet make this easy.

## Personalizing

The students write a list of purchases for an imaginary party using a supermarket handout, plan a trip using a travel brochure or plan a meal with a menu. The students could also be asked to fill out a mail order form with an imaginary order of purchases for family members, boyfriends, girlfriends, and themselves.

## Pair Practice

The students ask and answer the printed questions on the handout and are encouraged to ask their own questions. The students can role play the parts of customer and clerk either following a sample conversation provided by the teacher or making up their own.

## Internet

The Internet can be used to provide authentic material as well. The teacher can search for sites that focus on a specific topic, make questions, and post them online. These online lessons can be completed by the students on their own. Although the Internet has many advantages, it cannot replace the hands-on, three dimensional quality of real materials brought into the classroom by the teacher.

See the following URLs for examples of online lessons:

- Web Site Guides for ESL Students  
<http://iteslj.org/guides/>
- Internet Treasure Hunts for ESL Students  
<http://iteslj.org/th/>
- EFL/ESL Lessons Using Web Sites  
<http://iteslj.org/t/ws/>
- Travel Plans for Conversation Practice  
<http://aitech.ac.jp/~offner/travelesson/>

## Conclusion

When used effectively, authentic materials help bring the real world into the classroom and significantly enliven the ESL class. Exposing the students to cultural features generates a deeper understanding of and interest in the topic. On one hand, the students develop their ability to zero in on relevant information, and on the other, they learn how to disregard what is not relevant. As students pool their individual strengths they gain confidence in being able to function in an English-speaking society.