AUTHENTIC MATERIALS FOR THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM:
DIGITISED TEXTS VIA EMAIL ATTACHMENTS

Ann Rosnida bt. Mohd Deni
Sunway University College

Zainor Izat bt Zainal
Universiti Putra Malaysia

ABSTRACT

For many language teachers, the Internet has brought an endless supply of authentic, real world, up-to-date materials into their classrooms. Such incorporation of Internet materials into the language classrooms has improved learning and teaching in many ways and has empowered many students to become critical thinkers in learning. Internet materials that can be utilised in the language classrooms can be derived not only from various reliable websites but also from communication tools like emails, newsgroups and texts, and also audio and video conferencing. Digitised texts that are obtained via email attachments can also be a creative resource for language teachers. These texts that come in various modes cost practically nothing and most of them can be modified and adapted to suit different levels and types of students. This paper considers the following: authentic features of digitised texts transmitted via email attachments; the rationale for using these authentic materials in a language classroom; pedagogical considerations to be addressed before the utilisation of these texts; and a language teacher's experience in incorporating digitised authentic texts in her language classroom.

Introduction: The Internet and Language Teaching

Major development in Internet technology has improved language learning and teaching in many positive ways. In many language classrooms across the world, the Internet has made language teaching more meaningful, interesting and challenging. Such electronic technology opens up channels for alternative "means of communicating, informing, and knowing" and offer students "new possibilities for learning and connecting with others" (Norton & Wilburg, 2003, p. 5). The ability of Internet technology to cross boundaries of time and space enables learning to take place anywhere, anytime, transforming the classroom environment by providing "connections, communities and context" (December, 1996).

One of the major contributions that Internet technology has brought into language classrooms is the inclusion of a massive amount and variety of resources for students and teachers to choose from. Materials that can be employed in language classrooms are obtained from easily-accessed websites and through various communication tools like emails, newsgroups, and texts, and also audio and video conferencing via synchronous and asynchronous means. Teaching using materials from the Internet has great potential in improving learners' motivation as they are "visually attractive, easy to use, and easy to understand" (Dudeney, 2007, p. 3).

One type of Internet material that is useful for the language classrooms is digitally- formatted texts that are shared via email attachments. Like most materials from the World Wide Web (WWW), information in these digital files is presented primarily in graphic form (.jpeg, .gif, .bmp, .tif, and .flv files), text (.txt), readable but unalterable documents (.pdf files), and other types of executable files (Excel (exl), PowerPoint (pps), Notepad etc.). The main purpose of attaching these digitised texts to emails is for the sharing of information with the email recipients. They often contain various types of information ranging from: ways to detect symptoms of bird flu; pleas for information on a missing person or pleas for donations; motivating and inspiring stories of human survival or fight against disability, war, oppression and abuse; warnings on the latest techniques in crime and scams; jokes; and images, to weird and bizarre occurrences and phenomena just to name a few. Some of these digitised texts are compiled Internet materials that are organised thematically. Most of the time, the authors of these materials make the effort to encapsulate various interesting topics into interesting eclectic presentations combining text, sound, animation and images to evoke interest and to make an impact on email recipients who may then forward these files to others. These files range in size and are highly accessible and adaptable because usually no special software is needed to run or adapt them.

One of the other main features of these files that make them valuable is their high level of authenticity in terms of language, purpose and content. These digitised texts are produced in technologically authentic environment for the purpose of communication. Language is produced as a means to fulfil social purposes and thus language use and content is authentic. This paper will explore the following: authentic features of digitised texts obtained through email attachments; rationale for using these authentic materials in a language classroom; pedagogical considerations to be addressed before the utilisation of these texts; and a language teacher's experience in incorporating digitised authentic texts in her language classrooms.

Authentic Features of Digitised Texts

According to Morrow (1977, p. 13 in Mishan, 2004) authentic texts are texts that contain "a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort… texts that are written for the purpose of communicating information". Little et al. (1988, p. 27) state that authentic texts are texts that are "created to fulfil some social purpose", and they are not written or spoken for language teaching purposes (Tomlinson, 1998) nor produced to "illustrate specific language points" (Mishan, 2004, p. 12). Most of the digitised texts obtained via email attachments fit this description as most are produced by real people conveying real messages to a real audience (recipients of emails) using realistic, contextualised language. These texts are not created for the purpose of teaching or learning but to fulfil various social communicative purposes: to share and spread information, to warn, motivate and inspire, and to persuade, educate or entertain.

Another feature of these texts that makes them authentic, other than their language and social communicative purpose is the cultural content. These digitised files often contain actual representations of target and foreign culture which according to Mishan (2004), is another feature of authentic texts. Cultural content in these files is not censored nor altered to produce a safe, simplified representation of a certain culture (as found in most textbooks). In other words, the cultural information transmitted through these files is genuine. These files can also be authentic in terms of the topics that they put forward. These topics are presented as they are—sometimes bizarre, unusual and even taboo. They are not simplified or 'repackaged' to suit classroom use and are presented as they are. This feature makes these digitised files authentic.

Rationale for Using Digitised Authentic Texts

One of the reasons for utilising these digitised texts in the language classroom is because of the presence of authentic language so unlike the doctored or simplified form found in textbooks. According to Tomlinson (1998, p. 23), materials at all levels should "provide frequent exposure to authentic input which contains characteristics of authentic discourse in the target language." The use of such texts can sensitise students to the "use of English in the real world" (Wong et al., 1995, p. 318). Using authentic texts such as the ones found in digitised format can assist in developing the ability of language learners "to use the target language accurately, fluently, appropriately and effectively" (Tomlinson, 2006, p. 77). Furthermore, exposing students to real world language as found in most digitised texts can help students acquire "an effective receptive competence in the target language" (Guariento &

Morley, 2001, p. 347). As these materials are produced by real people who are often not expert users of the target language, they contain genuine language mistakes. These real language mistakes can be used as interesting materials for the teaching of grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure and provide platforms for classroom discussion on communication problems that could result from the improper usage of the target language. In addition, most of the time, there are similarities in the type and nature of these real errors made in these texts with those produced by students, creating relevance for their inclusion in the language classroom.

Another rationale for using digitised authentic texts transmitted via email attachments is because of its unfiltered cultural information. Mishan (2004, p. 44) advocates the use of authentic texts (like the digitised files sent through email attachments) in language classrooms as they represent the three 'C's—*culture,* as they "incorporate and represent the culture/s of speakers of the target language; *currency,* as they often offer current topics and language use that are relevant to students; and *challenge,* as they are more challenging "yet can be used at all proficiency levels." Digitised authentic texts can expose students to different cultures of the target language and the cultures of the users of the target language. According to Mishan (2004), authentic materials can expose students to the actual presentation of a foreign and target culture. As these attachments often contain real messages whose writers' intentions are focused on imparting information or communicating with others, the kind of cultural information that is transmitted will be genuine . Exposing students to such materials may help expand students' perspective of the world and it can be exploited to develop students' inter-cultural competence (Tseng, 2002). In other words, when using these materials, as the cultural content is not filtered and controlled, students are exposed to a diverse collection of cultural representations which may improve their understanding of different cultures, particularly the culture of the target language and allow them to compare and contrast cultures, which marks the starting point for "deeper explorations" (Mishan, 2004, p. 46).

Digitised materials obtainable via email attachments are interesting as they are unlike textbook materials that can be "physically restricted" in terms of topics and amount of materials presented (McGarry, 1995). They may provide exposure to real topics and real perspectives that people have on certain topics or issues. Even though some of these topics and perspectives can be considered taboo and controversial, they have generated great interest during discussions as students often want to share their ideas and thoughts on topics that are atypical and rarely discussed. As stated by Mishan (2004, p. 55), "traditionally taboo subjects… are potentially the most engaging and stimulating to learners". This will require

students to cross boundaries, be creative and think outside-the-box when analysing the content of these materials. Integrating them into a language classroom can help increase students' motivation level as authentic materials are often "more interesting and stimulating than artificial and non-authentic texts" (Peacock, 1997, p. 144) and can bring about a positive impact on affective factors like empathy and emotional involvement which according to Mishan (2004), are essential for language learning.

Another interesting feature of digitised materials is the way they are packaged. As the purpose of producing these digitised texts is for authentic communicative reasons, they are often packaged in an interesting way that would be appealing to the email recipients. According to Tomlinson (1998, p. 23), materials at all levels should "provide frequent exposure to authentic input that varies in style, mode, medium". Tomlinson (1998, p. 7) further suggests that materials to be used in the classroom should have these features: "novelty (unusual topics, illustrations and activities)", "variety", "attractive presentation - use of attractive colour", and "appealing content." This description matches the features of most digitised materials transmitted via email attachments. As these authentic materials are often creatively presented, students are often excited when they are utilised in classrooms. As stated by Jensen (1997, as cited in Tileston, 2004), only little intrinsic motivation is needed when learning takes place in an environment that involves the use of various forms of media. Furthermore, the variety of formats in which these materials are can suit different types of learners making their learning more effective. According to Tileston (2004), about 87% of the learners in a classroom are either visual or tactile learners. Utilising these digitised files in class can benefit the majority of the students who learn mostly through visual representations of information and through direct involvement in the learning process.

With the proper pedagogical approach, these digitised authentic texts can be valuable resources for language classrooms as they can make language learning a meaningful process, impacting language learners' motivation in a positive way. The writer has been utilising these digitised materials obtained via her emails in many ways. She has used them as preludes to reading and writing activities; as an introduction to a new topic; as a conclusion for her lessons; as a way to break classroom monotony; as a tool when teaching a certain language point and also as a catalyst to provoke students to give opinions on a certain issue or subject. These email attachments can build an atmosphere where learning and critical thinking are encouraged; an environment where students are not merely passive receivers of knowledge but active participants in the learning process. Prior to utilisation, however, several pedagogical considerations need to be addressed to ensure a productive outcome.

Pedagogical Consideration

Many teachers may not be interested in using digitised materials from email attachments due to the challenges that they may bring into the language classrooms. According to Lightfoot (2006, p. 219), "the nature of email as a medium of communication encourages writers to create spontaneous messages that "are less inhibited than standard written text." Since this is so, a teacher may need to through the time-consuming process of selecting suitable materials to match students' levels and needs. This is important as some of these materials may be unsuitable as they may contain authentic language that is too difficult to be comprehended by students. In a study by Yano et al. (1994, p. 193), students found that authentic texts, in comparison to simplified and elaborated versions, are the most difficult to understand and according to Williams (1983, p. 175) an authentic text at a high level of language will force the students to focus on linguistic codes and not on meaning. In addition to this, digitised authentic texts, as they may be produced by speakers of low or medium proficiency, often contain language of low quality containing serious language errors. What is worse, as in real language, it is common to find unsuitable slang, jargon or taboo words used in these digitised texts.

Due to this, the introduction of digitised authentic texts in the language classroom has to be done cautiously. Utilisation of such materials has to be carefully aligned to match learning outcomes. Some digitised texts that contain serious language problems, for example, can still be utilised if focus is placed on highlighting miscommunication problems that may occur due to problems in language. It is quite risky to introduce an authentic text that contains taboo words; however, if the main content is interesting, relevant and appropriate, a teacher can still use it but she needs to prepare her students and draw their attention to the main aspect of the text that she wants to highlight.

The level of language difficulty of these materials, most importantly, must match students' level and needs. This is supported by Day (2003, p. 6), who stresses that in choosing materials for the language classroom, focus should be placed on the appropriateness of materials to match the abilities and types of learners. Students who are introduced to authentic texts that contain complex presentations of real language need to have a high level of proficiency and sophistication. This is necessary since the use of Internet resources (like most digitised authentic texts) "completely depends on reader judgement, which presupposes solid language proficiency and critical reading skills" (Brandl, 2002, p. 88). In most cases, the writer found that most students who are proficient in the target language are quite receptive and are not easily discouraged when exposed to authentic texts that are one or two levels higher than their own. These challenging authentic language

features may train the students to "rise to a challenge" and this can be an experience that can help improve "their confidence and instil a sense of achievement" (Mishan, 2004, p. 60). According to Mishan (2004), practice in rising to a challenge can encourage students to become risk takers, which according to Oxford (1999), is vital to learning. For students with a low level of proficiency, the use of authentic texts with minimal language errors may lead to a satisfactory outcome; however, there are undoubtedly limited choices for these students but it is very important to provide them with accurate examples of the target language.

Another issue that needs to be addressed before a teacher can utilise digitised authentic texts in the language classroom is the trustworthiness of the content of the texts. According to Brandl (2002, p. 88) there is "no control over the quality and accuracy of the information" from the Internet. Ciolek (1996, p. 45) supports this when he states that WWW documents are mostly "unattributed, undated, and unannotated", with the information about the author and publisher often being "unavailable or incomplete". It cannot be denied that trustworthiness of digitised authentic texts is very much in question, most particularly due to the absence of information about the authors who created these texts. Most of these digitised texts are created by anonymous authors whose background is unknown to the receivers. It is not difficult to find many digitised texts containing prejudiced, biased and untrustworthy information on the topics that they highlight. Credibility of the authors and trustworthiness of content of texts are negligible, however, if the reason for using the texts in the language classroom is to focus on improving specific reading or writing skills, introducing grammar points or new target language vocabulary. Text trustworthiness may only become significant if the focus in the language classroom is on academic writing, tone and style which would entail the need for trustworthy texts and credible authors. Even then, these digitised texts can still be introduced as examples of texts that are not suitable for academic writing.

Before utilising digitised authentic texts in the language classrooms, the issue of distorted cultural information needs also be considered. Use of authentic texts, for example, can lead to cultural stereotyping (Guest, 2002). Stereotyping can lead to negative and distorted perceptions of a culture and this may affect learners' level of confidence and integrity. It is therefore vital that teachers highlight the fact that the digitised authentic texts they are using only represent the author's own cultural interpretation. It is thus very important that the teacher has adequate cultural knowledge of the people that the text is representing. If this is not so, she may give the wrong perception of a culture or may confuse the students with the wrong information about a certain culture.

Incorporating Digitised Authentic Texts into the Language Classroom

Incorporating digitised authentic materials can create a positive learning environment if proper pedagogical considerations are addressed prior to utilisation. The next part of this paper will provide four examples to illustrate how digitised email attachments were incorporated into the writers' language classrooms.

Example 1: The Window

One of the email attachments received was a PowerPoint presentation entitled 'The Window'. 'The Window' was created by an anonymous author who presented the idea that a person's judgement can be distorted depending on the 'window' that he/ she looks through. The learning outcome of the class was a written essay on the danger of passing judgment. 'The Window' tells a story of a newly-wed couple who had just moved into a new house. The wife often looked through her window and she noticed that her neighbour's clothes that were put out to dry were always not clean. This happened several times and one day she noticed that the next door neighbours' clothes were cleaned. She wondered who had taught them to do the washing. The husband replied to this by stating that he had woken up early and cleaned the window. The idea was presented through text and images with a song playing in the background. The teacher found that the presentation was a good closure to the discussion as it clearly exemplified a situation where passing judgment can lead to an embarrassing outcome. There were some grammatical mistakes on the slides and these slides were not modifiable. The teacher highlighted the grammar mistakes before she discussed the content of the slides with her students.

Example 2: Male and Female Procedures at the ATM machine

Another digitised material transmitted through email that brought a lot of excitement to the class was the one entitled 'Male and Female Procedures at the ATM Machine'. It presented two distinctive procedures, one for 'men' and another for 'women' on ways to operate a drive-thru teller machine. The origin of this digitised text attachment is unknown but the content centres on a 'general' opinion that men are efficient when it comes to procedures and women are clumsy and often face problems when dealing with procedures. The teacher utilised this as a prelude to a discussion on 'Stereotyping'. Following the presentation of the document was a discussion on the author's underlying perception of women in general. Even though the content, particularly on the procedures for 'women' were an exaggeration as there were more than 27 steps that women had to follow, it provoked students to

relate their own experiences and share their own opinions on the matter discussed. The teacher then related students' opinions to the discussion on 'Stereotyping'. The topic discussed was quite a serious one but the introduction of the document in the classroom injected elements of humour, making the discussion a light but an effective one.

Example 3: Never give up
'Never Give Up', a digitised attachment received in video format, is the actual footage of a motivational speaker who was physically challenged (he does not have arms nor legs) making a presentation in front of a group of school students, persuading them not to give up in life. Focus was placed on how the speaker made full use of his voice and his 'body' to deliver his speech effectively. The video was shown to the class after a lecture on delivery and vocal techniques for persuasive speech. The teacher found that the video sent a very strong message as it illustrated a physically challenged person who succeeded in evoking strong emotions in the audience through effective body language and vocal strategies. This video brought in affective elements into the language classroom.

Example 4: Videos on 'Stress'
This attachment came in a series of three videos showing authentic footage of people losing their patience and becoming violent at their workplace due to stress. The videos were shown to business students as a pre-writing activity. The task of the day required the students to write a proposal on ways to improve the working environment to reduce stress at the workplace. The teacher decided to show these videos as she found that most of her students were school leavers and did not have any working experience and thus might not understand how stressful a workplace environment can be. The videos showed vivid images that depicted real people in actual workplace situations who resorted to violent behaviour over small matters due to stress. This injected elements of reality into her classroom and helped the teacher to authenticate the writing task in her Business English class.

Conclusion

Digitised materials received through emails can indeed be valuable materials in a language classroom as they are authentic, easily adaptable, and full of engaging content. The authentic features of the digitised materials received via emails bring challenge and surprise into a language classroom, making learning meaningful, fun and motivating. Using these materials in class will provide the students with the

opportunity to be exposed to real incidents, opinions and issues. Unaltered content of teaching materials may help these students confront realities in life and make them creative but realistic thinkers. Even though these attachments may also bring unwelcome elements into the language classrooms the writer believes that with the proper application of pedagogical principles and suitable exploitation in class, these materials will create a positive atmosphere in the language classrooms. To ascertain the effectiveness and the usefulness of digitised authentic texts in the language classroom, it is vital that future research be conducted to obtain concrete evidence on students' perceptions of using such materials in the language classrooms and most importantly, to disclose how digitised authentic materials affect students' language learning.

References

Brandl, K. (2002). Integrating Internet-based reading materials into the foreign language curriculum. From teacher to student-centred approaches. *Language Learning and Teaching, 9*(3), 87-103.

Ciolek, T. M. (1996). The six quests for the electronic grail: Current approaches to information quality in WWW resources. *Review Informatique et Statistique dans les Sciences humaines (RISSH), 1-4*, 45-71.

Day, R. R. (2003). Authenticity in the design and development of materials. In W. A. Renandya (Ed.), *Methodology and material design in language teaching. Current perceptions and practices and their implications* (pp. 1-11). Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.

December, J. (1996). *The Internet potential for teaching and learning. Keynote speech for the Second Hong Kong Web Web Symposium 96.* Retrieved August 28, 2007, from http:// www.december.com/present/hkws96.txt

Dudeney, G. (2007). *The Internet and the language classroom. A practical guide for teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Guariento, W., & Morley, J. (2001). Text and task authenticity in the EFL classroom. *ELT Journal, 55*(4), 347- 352.

Guest, M. (2002). A critical 'checkbook' for culture teaching and learning. *ELT Journal, 56*(2), 154-161.

LeLoup, J. W., & Pontiero, R. (1997). Internet technology for authentic language learning experiences. ERIC Digest. ERIC Clearinghouse on languages and Linguistics. Washington: Centre for Applied Linguistics.

Lightfoot, J. M. (2006). A comparative analysis of email and face-to-face communication in an educational environment. *Internet and Higher Education, 9*, 217-227.

Little, D., Devitt, S. & Singleton, D. (1988). *Authentic texts in foreign language teaching: Theory and practice*. Dublin: Authentik Language learning Resources.

McGarry, D. (1995*). The role of authentic texts*. Dublin: Authentik.

Mishan, M. (2004). *Designing authenticity into language learning materials*. Bristol: Intellect Books.

Norton, P. & Wiburg, K. M. (2003). *Teaching with technology. Designing opportunities to learn*. Belmont: Thomson Wadworth.

Peacock, M. (1997). The effects of authentic materials on the motivation of EFL learners. *ELT Journal, 51*(2), 144-156.

Prodromou, L. (1988). English as a cultural action. *ELT Journal, 42*(2), 73-83.

Tileston, D, W. (2004). *What every teacher should know about media and technology.* California: Corwin Press.

Tomlinson, B. (Ed.). (1998). *Materials Development in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tomlinson, B. (2006). Developing classroom materials for teaching to learn. In J. Mukundan (Ed.), *Focus on ELT Materials* (pp. 77-82). Selangor: Pearson Longman.

Yano, Y., Long, M. H., & Ross, S. (1994). The effects of simplified and elaborated texts on foreign language reading comprehension. *Language Learning. 44*(2), 189-219.

Williams, E. (1984). *Reading in the language classroom*. London: Macmillan.

Wong, V., Kwok, P., & Choi, N. (1995). The use of authentic materials at tertiary level. *ELT Journal, 49*(4), 318- 322.