

AUTHENTIC MATERIALS FOR EFL WRITING: WHY AND HOW?

Lestari Setyowati

English Education Study Program

STKIP PGRI Pasuruan

lestari.setyowati@yahoo.co.id

Abstract—Not many foreign language (FL) writing teachers/lecturers are interested in using authentic materials. However, when selected carefully, authentic materials can become a powerful tool for learning to write. This paper is intended to describe why FL writing teachers/lecturers should utilize authentic materials for teaching writing, and how to do it for classroom teaching. This paper is written based on the writer's personal experience in using authentic materials during her teaching of writing for university level. Several reasons for using authentic materials for teaching writing are 1) these type of materials can serve as a bridge which connect what is learnt in the classroom and what can be found outside the classroom; 2) many of authentic materials are interesting and motivating for teaching and learning process; and 3) it can trigger autonomous learning as they are available everywhere, both printed and electronically. To be used for FL writing, three phases teaching can be elaborated in the classroom, namely pre-activity for the preparation of background knowledge, whilst activity, and post activity. Using authentic materials for EFL writing is very beneficial for foreign language learners because it trains not only their language skills, but also their critical thinking skills.

Keywords—authentic materials; foreign language; writing

I. BACKGROUND

The role of instructional materials is very crucial in classroom teaching. The instructional materials help both the instructor to deliver the teaching objectives as well as help the students

to reach the intended competencies [1]. However, in Indonesia, most teachers/lecturers prefer to use textbooks which are available and provided for them. It is true that textbooks are efficient, offers standardized instructions, a program structure and its syllabus, quality maintenance and has variety learning resources [2]. However, they also have some downsides. Richards (2001) states that the language used in textbooks are not the type of language used and found in everyday communication. He further states that the content discussed in the textbooks is scarcely authentic for the learners and oftenly do not quite match with their needs. Moreover, the frequent use of textbooks might reduce the teacher's skill to develop their own instructional materials which is suitable with the characteristics of their students [3]. This does not mean to suggest that it is forbidden to use textbook for teaching and learning process, yet it gives clear messages that it is necessary for language teachers to create their own instructional materials which match with the characteristics of the students' need. There are some important requirements needed to design and develop teaching materials. As stated by Richards (2006), those requirements among others are the author's knowledge and competence on the language use, the materials focus, and the activities/tasks that come with them

In the teaching of writing in foreign language context (FL), finding materials which are suitable with the students' need and level are not easy. Writing is often considered to be the most difficult language skills to master. It is not enough for the student-writer to have only ideas because to make a good piece of writing requires sufficient practical knowledge of how to put

those ideas into a meaningful discourse for the reader. When it is not easy for the student-writer, let alone for the writing teachers/instructor who have a big responsibility to make writing 'easy' for the students. Topic selection for writing activity usually becomes a problem for writing teachers [4]. They state that if the topic is not selected carefully, the students might get bored and have not much to write on the paper. Thus, it is important to select materials with challenging topics which are close to the students' personal life.

One way of doing this is through the use of authentic materials. Basically, authentic materials have been used since hundred of years ago for teaching a language [5]. Even though the term authentic material is not novel, there is no fixed definition of authentic materials. Peacock (1997) defines authentic materials as materials which are not intentionally produced and created for reaching the aims of language learning. Meanwhile [7] defines authentic materials as materials which involve the use of day to day language used for communication in the target language context. In addition, [8] also states similar opinion. He says that authentic materials are materials which are naturally written or spoken for communication based on the native speaker context. Based on these definitions, it can be concluded that the term authentic materials refers to authenticity of the language used naturally both in spoken and written discourse by the native speaker of the language in particular context. This paper is intended to describe why FL writing teachers/lecturers should utilize authentic materials for teaching writing, and how to do it for classroom teaching.

II. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

A. Reasons for Using Authentic Materials

Not many teachers/lecturers are interested to use authentic materials for their teaching. Some common reasons are 1) the use of authentic materials for classroom teaching needs careful preparation and selection, 2) it is not easy to find authentic materials suitable with the learners' need. As stated by [9], 'appropriateness' becomes the main concern of using authentic materials.

And 3) providing tasks and activities which are suitable with the learning objectives are quite challenging. However, these should not be the reasons for not using authentic materials for teaching foreign language skills. There are three main reasons why authentic materials should be utilized for classroom teaching, namely 1) they create a bridge which connects the artificial world (classroom) and the real world context, 2) they are interesting and motivating, and 3) they can trigger autonomous learning because these type of materials are available everywhere, both printed and online.

1) Authentic materials create a bridge

Every language learner wants to have a near native competence as a result of their learning of the target language. Similarly, every teacher/lecturer wants to equip their students with sufficient knowledge about the language and how to use it for communication. One way to reach this aim is through the use of authentic materials. As in Indonesia, English is learnt as a foreign language which results in not much exposure found as soon as the students go outside the classroom. What the students learnt in the classroom is the artificial world of how the target language is used. Thus, the foreign language learners surely need an exposure in what way the language is actually used for real communication.

Authentic materials create a bridge between the artificial world (the classroom) and the real world. Among the many examples of authentic materials is the short stories which are written in the target language. The teachers/lecturers can use short stories for teaching the language skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing) as well as the language components. The students can learn the syntactical structure, the vocabulary, the style, the idioms, and the culture presented in the story. As stated by [10] the use of short stories for teaching a language has many advantages, among them are it can be used to teach all four language skills simultaneously and also the language components. Moreover, the use of short stories, say for example for teaching reading, offers opportunity for the learners to have emotional and personal connection [11] which results in

sharpening the students' critical thinking skills [12]. The 'bridge' which connect the classroom and the real world can be seen in the syntactical structure and word choice used in the short stories. [13] state that popular short stories/essays offer real language used which is relevant to the learners' experiences which in the end may result in the natural language acquisition.

2) Authentic Materials are interesting and Motivating

Authentic materials are interesting because they are real. For foreign language learners who never have a chance to visit the country of the native speaker, having a clip of the real postcard written by the native speaker or a birthday card invitation typically used by the native are quite appealing. When these postcard and birthday card are brought into the classroom, they might switch the learning atmosphere from boring to motivating. When the real world is brought into the classroom, it will create the 'affect' reasons [9].

Another reason why authentic materials are interesting and motivating because they are varied, ranging from printed to electronic sources. When FL teachers/lecturers have aims to teach a procedure text of how something is done, short videos from You Tube can be downloaded. For example, the students can learn how to make toys from unused materials from the You Tube videos. Or, if the teachers/lecturers want to teach how to write a short essay developed by comparison and contrast paragraphs, they can download short movies from You Tube, then ask the students in what way the movies are similar and in what way they are different. In addition, nowadays, there are many web application for writing which are usually equipped with model texts, for example storybirds.com. In the storybirds, there are many reading materials (short stories, picture story book, flash fictions, poems) written by people of all ages. As stated by [14], storybird is beneficial to develop the students' literacy skills both in reading and writing for foreign language learners. The reading materials in the storybirds are interesting and motivating because they are equipped with pictures.

3) Authentic Materials trigger autonomous learning

With the advancement of technology nowadays, the information can be accessed by everyone and everywhere. When one need to find out how to write an application letter typically written for a company, he/she can find it from the internet as fast as a blink of the eyes. Learning is no longer confined to the classroom walls as the world spread so wide from the smartphone and gadget which offers various application for learning.

One case for this is the use of storybird for reading and writing. As explained earlier, Storybird is a web application which enable anybody to read the short stories and to learn to create short stories and poems. Reading narrative genre in the storybirds is enjoyable because it has colorful pictures which accomodate the story. The teachers can assigned the students to read the stories in the storybird, then make their own comprehension questions. Or, the students can be assigned to make their own stories, either picture story book or flash fiction. Reserach has shown that the use of storybird for teaching reading help the students to improve their receptive vocabulary [15]. Other research also shows that the use of storybird improves the students vocabulary and reading comprehension (Chuang, Kuob, & Chiang, 2013). The good news is, storybird can be accessed everywhere by anyone as long as there is an internet connection.

B. How

In this part, the writer explores how authentic materials from various sources can be utilized for teaching writing (paragraph and essay). The following ideas are the ones that have been implemented in classroom teaching. However, the use of athentic materials, are not limited only in the ones presented in the following sub section. Here, the writer focuses only on procedural writing, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and problem solution essay.

1) Writing Process/procedural (using You Tube video finished in two meetings)

In meeting 1, the lecturer discussed a short essay developed by process or chronological order. The students were given an authentic sample text downloaded from the internet and analyzed the rhetorical focus and linguistic features. The students identified the structure of the text. Some practices were given in relation to the phrases typically used for procedure essay, such as *first, second, next, after that*. The students made sentences from the phrases individually, then exchanged the work with other friend to identify grammatical error.

In meeting 2, during the pre-activity, the students were asked about their childhood experience whether they had once played with things made from second hand items. The point of this activity is to prepare their background knowledge about the topic. The question was followed with the materials to make the toy and how to make it. The students gave various answer about the questions. Then, the lecturer wrote on the white board the rhetorical focus and the language focus to make a procedural paragraph. In the whilst- activity, a short You Tube videos was shown to the students about making toys from unused things. The video showed about making a bowling set from the unused drinking bottle. It lasted about 3 minutes. After that, the students were asked to discuss the vocabulary, the rhetorical focus (*first, second...*) and the language focus (the verb). Then, the students were grouped to create their own innovation. The topic was making something from the unused thing. With their own selected member, the students discussed about the topic, and make plan of how to do it. After finishing the discussion, they wrote their ideas in the form of a short procedural paragraph. They might also present their work in fornt of the classroom by using slides. Finally, in the post-activity, the lecturer asked the students about what they have learnt. In the next meeting, the students might present their paragraphs by completing it with the product which they had invented. The lecturer can also assign the students to publish their work either in their blog, You Tube Channel, or other social media.

2) Writing comparison and contrast (using literature and You Tube Video finished in two meetings)

In the meeting 1, the lecturer discusses the comparison and contrast essay. The students were given an authentic text developed by comparison and contrast, discussed the features, the thesis statement and its rhetorical focus. Some rhetorical practices and grammar practices were given to the students. The practices were making sentences by using particular phrases used for comparison and contrast essay, such as *compared to..., on the other hand, similar to...* The students work were exchanged with other students to identify grammar problem, and discussed them.

In meeting 2, during the pre-activity, the students were asked whether they are familiar with H.C Cristian Andersen and his works, namely *the Ugly Duckling, The Swan, the Little Mermaid*. The students were introduced with one of his work. Then, in whilst activity, the students were given *The Little Match Girl*. A copy of the short story was delivered to the students (the story can be downloaded freely in <http://hca.gilead.org.il/> or other websites). The students were given 5 minutes to skim and scan the story without discussion of the comprehension questions. After finished reading, the students were shown the short video about the *The Little match Girl* (the video can be downloaded from You Tube in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npBPh-CDRyk>, or other channel, choose the short version les than 7 minutes).

Eventhough the short story and the short movie tells about the same character (the little match girl), there are some differences in terms of its intrinsic elements. The students were asked to guess the similarity and the differences during the classroom discussion. After that, the students write a short essay by using comparison and contrast paragraph development individually.

3) Writing Problem Solution essay (using articles from news paper, YouTube video, literature)

In meeting 1, the lecturer presented the objectives of the learning. The students were asked whether they had once problem in their

life, and what they did to solve their problem. The students were presented with a problem solution model essay downloaded from the internet, and discussed it through group work. The lecturer prepared some questions for the students to answer in group. Some of the questions were asking the students to identify the feature, rhetorical phrases typically used for problem solution text, and the feature. Some comprehension questions related to the text were also given. After that, practice focusing in language and rhetorical focus were given. The students made sentences from the phrases on a particular topic, namely *the problem with, the solution(s) is/are, in relation to the problem, therefore, one of the solution is*, etc. As always, the students exchanged the work with other group for error analysis.

In meeting 2, the students were asked about the environmental problem that they usually see in their surrounding life. The students were shown a short video about the excessive use of plastic which become one of the water pollutant in the river and the sea. A short discussion was done to prepare the students background knowledge. After that, the students were given a short article from Jakarta Post about *Reduce and Reuse Plastic Bag Plight* downloaded from <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news>. Some comprehension questions were given to the students to have better understanding of the news. Then, the students were grouped in pair to give their opinion about the excessive use of plastic for shopping and the effect for the environment. The students were instructed to give at least two solutions and give specific examples to solve the problems. After they were done discussing, they had to present their ideas in the form of short essay, at least four paragraphs essay. In the post activity, a short classroom discussion emerged to discuss the solutions proposed by the students in writing.

An alternative of problem solution essay is giving the students a literary text. The students were asked to respond to the text and give their opinion whether the story they read is difficult or not, and how to solve the problems when they find difficult text. An example that has been done was using a short story written by HC Andersen

entitled *The Wicked Prince*. This short story is simple in its premise, but difficult in terms of its vocabulary. The students were asked to discuss the text either in group or in class discussion, either orally or written through comprehension questions. After that they were asked whether the text is difficult or not, and what they would do to solve the problem in understanding a difficult text. The following is the sample of the student's work.

Reading and understanding a text whether it is in the form of a novel or even just a short story is never that easy to do especially when the text is written in a foreign language in which the readers do not even speak the language in their everyday life but that does not mean difficult nor impossible to do. Literary work is meant to entertain and or give information or lessons to its readers meaning it is meant to be understood by anyone so it is safe to say that there is no text or story which is too hard to be understood. There may be something getting in the way when someone is trying to understand a text and regardless of how hard those things could be but just remember that nothing is unsolvable. So, if you find a hard text or short story, like "The Wicked Prince" by H.C. Anderson, there are several things that you can do to understand the story, such as scanning the story and finding the important or main points about the story.

Hard texts tend to be written longer than simple texts are. Therefore, when you are about to read a long text then the first thing you may need to keep in mind is that do not get too distracted over the long texts but just read the text, the whole text, by doing a reading scanning and the second thing you may do would be: do not try to worry about the hard vocabulary you may possibly find in the text because it won't do you any good. Just read the text wholly and carefully and do it fast the best you could manage. The other important thing to

do is that to find the main or important points about the text and you can do that while you are reading scanning the text. So, in other words, you can do both reading and finding the main points all at once. So, again, you do not have to worry about the words in which you do not understand. Just read the story and you will understand eventually.

Finally, from what I have revealed above, now we can safe to say that reading scanning and finding the main points would be the best to do when you are trying to understand a text or in this very case is a hard text instead of worrying and or having to care about the long text or the difficult words you may find in it. (by Lintang Puspitasari, 423 words)

The sample writing written by the students above shows how she presents their ideas when she reads difficult text. She elaborates her solutions when she had problems reading *The Wicked Prince* by HC Andersen. Instead of having the students give solutions of a problem only from their imagination, they need to face real problem when they read real difficult text. This shows that authentic materials offers real life problem and challenge the students' critical thinking skills to solve them.

4) Writing Cause and effect essay (using articles from newspaper)

In meeting 1, the lecturer presented the organization of cause and effect essay and gave a sample essay downladed from the internet for the students to analyze. The students analyzed the rhetorical focus, the thesis statement, and its features. After that, the students were given language practice in making sentences by using phrases typically used for cause and effect essay, namely *as a result, the effect of, therefore, thus, because, because of*, etc. The students made sentences based on the topic given. After that, the students exchanged their work for error analysis.

In meeting 2, the lecturer prepared the students' background knowledge about a

particular topic through classroom discussion. The topic was about smart phone and children. The lecturer asked whether it was necessary to give children a smartphone. Some students might agree while others disagree. The students then given an article entitled *How Young is too Young for a Smart phone* taken from online newspaper downloaded from <https://www.thestar.com.my/tech/tech-news>. The students were given some time to skim and scan the text and find difficult vocabulary. After that, they were assigned in group to discuss the article and to state their opinion whether to agree or disagree. The lecturer present a cause and effect text structure and asked the students to fill them out. This became their pre-writing stage. The students filled the structure with their ideas in the form of phrases or sentences. When they were done, the students write the essay individually. In the post activity, the lecturer asked the students' opinion randomly about what they learnt so far and concluded the day learning.

III. CONCLUSION

The use of authentic materials for teaching writing is both fun and challenging. When the students give their respond on particular issue (social, environment, technology), they find the issue that they are discussing is not something far and strange. Those issues are real as they can read in the newspaper (printed and online), as well as listen to and watch on TV or You Tube channels. When the issues are brought into the classroom, they bridge what happen outside the classroom and what is inside the classroom. As the technology are becoming more and more sophisticated, distance and time are no longer become the boundaries to improve the quality of teaching. This shows that there is no excuses not to use authentic materials for teaching, more specifically for paragraph and essay writing for higher education or univeristy level.

However, further study needs to be conducted to find out the effectiveness of authentic materials for teaching writing in university level by using an experiemntal design. Having the information whether authentic materials are effective/not for improving the quality of teaching writing in EFL

context is important for the writing instructor to develop instructional materials which employs authentic materials from various sources. Secondly, more research also needs to be done to find out in what way authentic materials benefits learners in terms of the writing elements, such as how the students' open the essay in the first paragraph, their ability to state thesis sentences, their ability to give details and examples, and their ability to make concluding paragraph for the essay. All in all, the use of authentic materials for teaching writing is highly recommended because these type of materials trains not only the students' skills in writing, but also their higher order thinking skills.

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