

## **Adolescent Instruction in the EsL Context: Situational Realism and Linguistic Realism in Material Selection**

*S. Kunaratnam Sita raman<sup>1</sup>,  
Evelyn Sharminnie S. Vasuthavan<sup>2</sup>*

*Academy of Language Studies,  
Universiti Teknologi MARA  
Segamat, Johor*

### **ABSTRACT**

*Youths today have come a long way away from conforming to ideals that have become so stereotype in society. The impulsive, defiant and often rebellious nature of youths especially in the adolescent stage needs to be addressed by all quarters of society, especially educators. In the ESL context, it is the responsibility of language instructors to select instructional materials that help learners connect with the lesson when designing classroom activities and tasks. Most adolescents would feel motivated only when they are able to connect what is laid down before them to real life. Learners therefore would need genre related specialized knowledge to catalyze their learning. This paper draws the attention of language instructors to linguistic and situational realism, in an effort to enhance communicativeness in the selected material. This is done by identifying weaknesses in 'Linguistic realism' and 'Situational realism' in dialogues presented in the texts. Justifications are made based on the context, setting and background of the interlocutors. The terms 'Linguistic realism' and 'Situational realism' are clearly defined to help language instructors see the imminence of adopting, adapting and authenticating instructional materials to not only encourage but also to attract, enthuse and encourage active learner participation in classroom activities.*

**Key terms:** *linguistic realism, situational realism,, specialized knowledge, authenticating instructional materials*

### **INTRODUCTION**

“We need to create and foster a better living and learning environment” (Samsudin, 2008:174) if we expect our youths to be prepared to deal with the changing world. This change of the global scenario in technology, world economies and politics penetrates and implicates not only social changes but also bears its brunt on educational issues – especially that which concern youths.

In schools especially, youth attitudes and behavior is often marginalized as inconsistent because it is not mainstream. Students' boredom and demotivation in the classroom often diverts them into becoming more preoccupied with other distracting or destructive activities. This ends in them being pulled up for disciplinary problems. Through all this, little do we realize that young adults by nature, have the desire and instinctive tendency to move away from routine – from the all too familiar to the unfamiliar. Thus, the onus is on the class instructor to rethink, evaluate and modify approaches, methods and techniques for more effective instruction.

One very obvious reason why adolescent learners of the English language resent language lessons is because of the continued use of unrealistic, illogical and stereotype kind of instructional materials by language instructors. Instructional materials used in adolescent education must reflect and to a certain extent be informational, motivational, instructional and facilitative so that these young aspiring adults are able to relate and get connected to the real world outside

In the ESL teaching scenario there is currently a continuing debate as to which type of materials are more suitable for oral and listening activities in the classroom. The choices are between authentic dialogues and materials taken from authentic sources such as radio interviews, magazine articles etc. and scripted dialogues prepared especially for the lesson by the teacher or some other English teaching source. Generally, the argument for authentic materials is that the materials should represent what learners will be confronted with in every day life when using English. On the other hand, proponents of scripted materials feel that by preparing the material students are not introduced to issues that may be beyond the scope of the current level. Both are valid arguments where the onus of making the choice is the teacher's. Thus, adapting materials is something that teachers ought to consider in the event of unavailability of authentic materials or when these materials do not lend well to the teaching objectives or simply not suitable for classroom instruction.

One of the more popular words in materials selection and adaptation for language teaching is 'contextualization'. This, means moving away from meaningless drills, situations and texts without contexts, which are designed specifically to teach (hoping to teach) certain aspects of the language. Time and again research has shown that real learning occurs only when the method and material used interests the learner. It is therefore the responsibility of teachers (materials selectors) to select instructional material and strategies that help learners achieve the objective of the lesson (Burden & Byrd, 1994:8). Learners feel comfortable only when they are able to connect what is laid before them to what they already know or at the least, similar things and situations that they have encountered or experienced.

*When a learning task is presented to people who have no relevant experience on which to draw, learning is facilitated if instruction follows a sequence from direct experience, through representations of actual experiences (films, pictures etc.) and then to symbolic representations of experiences. (Brunes, 1966)*

Burden & Byrd (1994) too concur that concrete experiences facilitate learning and the acquisition, retention, and usability of abstract symbols. Thus instructional/teaching materials should reflect real life experiences and situations in order to captivate and motivate learners to indulge in active learning.

Since language involves communication, it is important that instructions in the teaching of language be meaningful and appropriate giving due weightage and focus on realism - naturalness in language use, context and situations. In language learning, situations and circumstances often set the register and language content in accordance to the purpose of the speech act. Many factors from the situation will intervene, whether they be psychological, social or genre related requiring specialized situational knowledge or non-standard language or even cultural implications (Nunn, 2005). Thus there is a need for teaching materials to be sociolinguistically conceivable and acceptable to the user/learner.

In an effort to highlight the importance of designing near authentic instructional materials, this paper seeks to identify weaknesses in language use primarily in dialogues in selected English language instructional materials used in educational institutions pertaining to realism in language forms and functions, in relation to the specified context, setting and status of the interlocutors.

### **Situational realism**

In real life the very essence of language is message bearing, transferring information between or among human communicants. In actual situations therefore the message is always real, genuine communication. In classroom teaching, however, this aspect of 'real, genuine communication' is looked upon lightly by most second language teachers. It is the lacking in this aspect that makes language lessons tedious and boring for students. Therefore, it is imminent that messages and language teaching materials are realistic in nature – situational and believable.

Situational realism in the contexts of a teaching text actually means an artistic approximation to realism because not all authentic material is suitable for classroom instruction. It would be ridiculous to insist on true realism with all the false starts and hesitation markers, restarts and so on to be included in the elaboration for exercise and practice. So, what a teacher should seek to provide is actually the illusion of reality in situations that are meaningfully developed and presented in a manner that suggests actual communication. If this is evident in the text then the aspect of situational realism is taken care of.

*Below is an example of a teaching text that lacks or has no situational realism*

**Dialogue 1**

Mai: Guess what? No one in the lift smiled back at me when I smiled at them.

Gina: And why did you smile at them when you hardly know them?

Mai:.....  
.....

Gina: The next time you walk into a crowded elevator, turn around and face the door

Mai:.....  
.....

Gina:.....  
.....

Mai: Are there any rules stating that we can't smile at people?

Gina: No, but...

Mai: Well, does that mean that I've broken the rules?

Gina:.....  
.....

Excerpt from Pearson's *Stride Ahead (2009)*, p.132

It is quite evident that the above dialogue seeks to give practice on making statement and justifying arguments. Notice here that situationally this does not occur in real life. It is two friends who are old enough to go on a lift by themselves talking about something that is a norm in all "lift situations". It is perfectly normal for strangers to turn or look away while in a lift. As such, for such a conversation to take place in real life is so remote It is very unlikely that children at this age would talk about this as an issue. This text neither gives consideration for the age and interests of learners nor is there any indication of any realism in the context. Altogether, it lacks situational realism. Below is another bad material followed by a more appropriate version.

**a. The original text**

Salmah was returning home from the market when she saw smoke billowing out of her neighbour's house. She quickly telephoned the police and ran towards the front of the house. She then knocked on the front door and called out to En. Jamal who was taking a nap. En. Jamal opened the door and asked what had happened. Salmah told him about the fire. Soon the firemen arrived and put out the fire.

*Taken from a Form Two class handout prepared by a trainee teacher*

**b. The glaring unrealism.**

Salmah was returning home from the market when she saw smoke billowing out of her neighbour’s house. She quickly telephoned the police (*Salmah wouldn’t have been in a leisurely state to make the call herself*) and ran towards the front of the house (*she was returning from the market but no reference to what she was carrying*). She then knocked on the front door and called out (*merely knocking on the door and calling out is not exactly what we would do in an emergency*) to En. Jamal who was taking a nap (*It was still early in the morning as Salmah was returning from the market ... so taking a nap does not fit in well in this situation*). En. Jamal opened the door and asked what had happened (*The moment he woke up he would have realized that there was a fire at least from Salmah’s screams- no need to enquire!*). Salmah told him about the fire. Soon the firemen arrived and put out the fire.

**c. The modified version to enhance situational realism.**

*( Notice also the choice of words to enhance the urgency of the situation.)*

Salmah was returning home from the market when she **spotted** smoke billowing out of her neighbour’s house. **Dropping her groceries**, she **screamed and alerted** the neighbours as she ran towards the front of the house and **frantically banged** on the front door calling out to En. Jamal who was probably still asleep. The noise Salmah made woke En. Jamal **instantly. Within seconds** En Jamal was out **coughing and grasping for breath**. One of the neighbours had called the fire brigade and the fire was quickly put out by the **brave** firemen. .

**Linguistic realism**

Linguistic realism on the other hand concerns the use of language on a given situation and contexts. It is a question of whether the language used is a satisfactory example of normal human relationship in the given context i.e. do the speakers make statements and offer reactions that convincingly reflect the personalities and situation involved. The following dialogue is supposed to be a lead-on to teach leisure activities. Notice how artificial the conversation is. Clearly, there is no concern for **linguistic realism**.

*Below is an example of a text that is linguistically unrealistic*

**An exercise on polite expressions.**

Sales assistant : Hello! Would you like to look at our new mobile phone models?

Merzhad : Hello, good afternoon. Yes, (1)

.....  
Sales assistant: What features would you be looking at?

Merzhad : Well, I am interested in (2)

.....  
Sales assistant:

(3).....  
Merzhat : My budget is RM700.00

Sales assistant: Wonderful! Here are..... (4)

*Excerpt from Pearson’s Stride Ahead (2009) , p.10*

The whole conversation seems so artificial. It is difficult to imagine that a sales assistant would be uttering such a long sentence asking a customer if he/she wants to have a look at new mobile phone models. The exchanges sound so unreal. The language is quite superfluous.

Compare the original first exchange to the modified version below

### Original text

Sales assistant: Hello! Would you like to look at our new mobile phone models?

Merzhad : Hello, good afternoon. Yes, (1)

Sales assistants do not normally ask customers if they want to see their products but would rather call them in and show them what they have. And notice the reply. It's so unnatural for a customer to say hello, then greet and the say yes. Thus linguistically this exchange does not sound real for students to relate to. Consider the modified version

### Modified version

Sales assistant: Hi! Looking for mobile phones? Here, these are the latest in the market

Merzhad : Hmm... that looks smart. Any special features other than the normal?

Following is a conversation that is simply not advisable for practice on asking and answering questions:

*It is the first day of school. Chong and Chee Seng meet for the first time.*

Chong : Hello, what is your name?

C. Seng: My name is Teh Chee Seng.

Chong : How old are you?

C. Seng: I am sixteen years old.

Chong : What are your hobbies?

C. Seng: My hobbies are reading, travelling and swimming.

The above dialogue does not seem real because it is interrogative in nature. One party questions and the other answers. Notice that even the replies given by Chee Seng are not real. A sixteen year old student would just say, "Chee Seng" in response to the question "What is your name" and not "My name is Teh Chee Seng". In normal oral interactions it is very unlikely that interlocutors will answer in full grammatically complete sentences. The use of contractions too will be natural whereas in this dialogue no contractions are used. Since this extract does not reflect real communication it may be deemed as lacking in linguistic realism.

To make the dialogue more acceptable in the aspect of linguistic realism it could be modified thus.

Chong : Hi! I'm Chong.

C. Seng: Hello, I'm Chee Seng.

Chong : Are you also in Form Four?

C. Seng: Yes. In Four Nilam.

Chong : Looks like we'll be in the same class.

C. Seng: That's great! I'm new here. Maybe you can help me get around.

Chong : Don't worry; I can sense that we're going to be good friends.

C. Seng: Hey, do you have any hobbies...

Notice how naturally the conversation has progressed. There was no need to formally ask for the other's name. Chee Seng's age is also known with the mention of the class he is in. Notice also that it is only after the mention and indication of 'going to be good friends' that the topic of hobbies is brought up which is perfectly relevant for peer interaction.

### **Analysis Of An Exercise From An English Usage Text For Spm**

The following excerpt from an English Language Usage text (Fajar Bakti, 2000) is yet another example where the absence of both situational and linguistic realism is sorely felt.

*Read the following dialogue and complete it by choosing the correct pronoun in brackets.*

**GuanTeck** Hello, Roslan. What kept you so long?

**Roslan:** I had to go to the police station to make a report.

**Guan Teck** Why, what happened?

**Roslan** Well, Azman and (I, me) were returning home from work along (my, his, our) usual route when we suddenly heard a screech of brakes and a cry.

**GuanTeck :** Oh, was someone injured?

**Roslan** Yes, and as we ran over to (him, her, them) the car just drove off. Anyway, we found that the car had hit a small boy. He was lying unconscious on the road.

**GuanTeck :** So what did you do? I wouldn't have known what to do..

**Roslan** Yes, you never really know what to do in such situation, but (one, you) can usually help best by making the victim comfortable and phoning for the police and ambulance; ... (this exchange goes on for almost 130 words in length).

## COMMENT

1. Linguistically “Hello” is not the correct response to greet a person who has kept you waiting.
2. Roslan’s reply to Guan Teck’s “Why, what happened” is not appropriate for the situation (he just witnessed an accident and was directly involved in what followed). He casually starts with “well...” and begins to narrate how he and his friend were walking home, “along our usual route”. There is no emotion or even the anxiety or urgency in the response – for one who had helped the victim, sent him to the hospital and had probably rushed to keep the appointment with Guan Teck..
3. In the third exchange, the linker “anyway” is linguistically unreal in this context. Furthermore he says “... we ran over to him...” implying that they had already seen the victim. Then, says “anyway, we found that the car had hit a small boy”. This seems to contradict the earlier statement.
4. Towards the end of this excerpt, Roslan is enjoying an uninterrupted “monologue” by giving advice on what’s best to do and relating the whole sequence of what happened. This does not happen in real life. This descriptive kind of giving an account of the incident does not fit the situation of a hit-and-run accident.
5. Strangely until the end (of the text), we do not know why Guan Teck was waiting for Roslan and whatever happened to the mystery person Azman (whom Roslan mentioned was with him).

It is quite evident that the writers of this book (this exercise in particular and a few others) were only concerned about the grammar practice and totally ignored situational and linguistic realism. As a result, the whole text is confusing and communicatively unacceptable.

Sentences or discourse lacking in linguistic realism would not only be boring but will also be choppy and artificial. Particularly distressing would be the patterned manner in which the dialogue or drill unfolds to the unimaginative manipulation of the teacher or writer who designed it simply to fit in the structures that he/she intends to teach for the day, with little consideration for context and sociolinguistic aspects of the utterances. Consequently, infringing realism in language use.

### **The importance of situational and linguistic realism in teaching materials**

As observed from the above examples of material where linguistic realism and situational realism were not an aspect of concern, they become artificial and mechanical in nature. It would be a mammoth task for teachers to use such materials and promote interest and motivation in students to aid learning and acquiring the language.

By using a scripted dialogue, the teacher can steer the class towards new or recycled language skills while keeping irregularities to a minimum. Especially in the case of lower level classes, where enhancing communication skills are generally the primary target of teaching materials and, the teacher can use his/her knowledge of the class's ability to model the conversational flow.

One of the important principles of communicative language teaching is that authentic language should be used in instruction whenever possible (Omaggio-Hadley, 1993). It would be blatant ignorance and disregard for the English language curriculum which is founded on a communicative syllabus, if one chooses to ignore the aspect of realism in language use.

The presence of linguistic and situational realism promotes and helps enhance active learning where students engage cognitively in the learning process. The real situation, context and language use in the text allows for and enables learners to relate, interact and respond genuinely in a communicative atmosphere. It is therefore crucial that classroom activities reflect, in the most optimally direct manner, those communication abilities that the learner is most likely to engage in (Canale & Swain, 1983:33).

Although authentic materials would be excellent for realism, it is not always that such materials serve the purpose at hand for the teacher. It may be difficult to use them for practical reasons. A pragmatic alternative is the utilization of "faked authentic" materials (Lim, 1993:13) which are illusions to the real thing. It is at this manipulating and adapting stage that teachers and material writers should be sensitive to the issue of linguistic and situational realism. Materials can be made more realistic simply by supplying familiar language use, contexts and settings which students recognize allowing the exercises and examples to become more interesting and real to them. (Compendium. Vol.3: pp.62).

## Conclusion

It must be noted that it is quite impossible to write a perfect book without any form of flaw; however, every material writer should research well and strive to keep flaws to the minimum if it can be helped.

As for teachers who rely a lot on adapted materials, it is important that they know the specific language abilities of each student and work within their capacity. Teachers and instructors of the English language in a multi-ethnic context of emancipated youths, should be knowledgeable in particular cultures and heritages and their compatibility to selected materials. Instructors should walk the extra mile to include appropriate cultural experiences in material adapted or developed - adapt only specific materials requiring modifications, and do not attempt to change too much at one time. Most of all, ensure that material progresses at a rate that is appropriate to student needs and abilities.

Using authentic materials to be safely docked to situational and linguistic realism is fine but it must facilitate smooth transition to the course of the lesson and its objectives. 'Faked authentic' materials (Lim, H.P., 1993: 13) can be designed excellently with basic understanding of human emotions and interactional patterns. A general understanding of the cultural aspects of the target group and their maturity level is also essential (Craco, 1992) for developing and designing teaching materials which are situationally and linguistically real.

## References

- Acar, A. (2005). The "communicative competence" controversy. *Asian EFL Online Journal*, 7(3).
- Brumfit, C. & Johnson, K. (Eds.). (1979). *The communicative approach to language teaching*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Burden, P.R. & Byrd, D.M. Methods for Effective Teaching. Allyn and Bacon: Massachusetts (1994)
- Compendium: A Handbook for ELT Teachers. Volume Three  
Ministry of Education Malaysia (1991)
- Craco, M.B. Communicative Interaction and Second Language Acquisition *Tesol Quarterly*. Vol. 26, No. 3 Autumn 1992.
- Crystal, D. (Ed.). (1997). *English as a global language*. Cambridge:



Cambridge University Press

Crystal, D. (2004). *The language revolution*. Cambridge: Polity.

Finster, G. (2004). What English do we teach our students? In A. Pulverness (Ed.), *IATEFL 2003 Brighton conference selections* (pp. 9-10). Canterbury: IATEFL.

Holden et. al. (2000). *Remedial English Grammar & Usage*: Fajar Bakti (2000) pp.77.

Kachru, B. (1985). Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk. & H.G. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the world. Teaching and learning the language and the literature* (pp. 11-30). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press/British Council.

Lim, H.P. Papers on ELT. (1993).Inti College Malaysia: Selangor

McKay, S. (2002). *Teaching English as an international language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Moeschler, J. (2004). Intercultural pragmatics: a cognitive approach. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 1(1), 49-70.

Ponniah, A.L. et al (2009). *Stride Ahead: Focus on English*. Pearson Malaysia: Selangor

Roger Nunn .( 2005) "Competence and Teaching English as an International Language", Volume 7. Issue 3,

Samsudin A. Rahim (2008). *Media Generasi Muda*. Youth Research, Institut Penyelidikan Pembangunan Malaysia: Putrajaya