

Connecting Authentic Texts to Authentic Tasks

by [Autumn Westphal](#)

Developing students' receptive skills can pose many interesting challenges. One issue that my colleagues and I have worked hard to address is the creation of relevant tasks. What I mean by a relevant task is a task that can help students identify how they would naturally use reading and listening outside of the classroom according to the students' goals for learning English. In my mind, I can't think of a better way to create a relevant task than by pairing it with an authentic text. So, at TESOL 2016 in Baltimore, Maryland, my colleagues Noga La'or and James Stakenburg and I presented a session that provided some suggestions on how to plan relevant real-world tasks that pair with authentic texts.

Authentic Texts

Let's spend a quick moment clarifying what an authentic text is. For the sake of this article, it is anything written or recorded that was not originally intended for the language classroom. This can include anything from an episode of an English language TV show to an email written to you by a past ESL student. These texts, no matter who they were created by, were not specifically intended to be teaching material. Having a broad definition of an authentic text allows one to realize that almost anything is an authentic text as long as the intended audience or consumer exists outside of the classroom. As such, authentic texts can be found in many places which, surprisingly, can also include your coursebook. There are many textbook series nowadays that have unedited authentic texts within them, so searching for authentic texts often only requires a trip to the resource library.

Now that we have defined an authentic text, it is important to acknowledge that these texts present a challenge for teachers and students when brought into class in terms of the level of the material. There is no fix-all solution to this problem. However, here are a few tried and true tips to make authentic texts more accessible or less intimidating to your students:

1. Bring in authentic texts that were written by English language learners or nonnative speakers at a variety of levels. This can show students that accuracy is not always the goal. It can also give them a motivating model to work toward.
2. Bring in native-speaker written authentic texts with inaccuracies. The students will be floored. Native speakers make mistakes?! Go no further than the entirety of the Internet to locate such texts. I like to pull this kind of text from a classified site like craigslist.org or a consumer review site like yelp.com.
3. Allow the students to activate their background knowledge about the topic of the text before they read or listen.
4. Give the general context, key vocabulary, and any important background information to the students before they read or listen.
5. Allow students to predict what they will listen to or read about before seeing the text.
6. Before the students actively start looking for specific information, allow them to listen or look over the text in a relaxed "exposure" stage before you give out specific tasks.

Before moving on from this topic, one point I would like to stress is that in order to fully connect to the ideas in this article, you should choose only authentic texts that your students want or need to interact with on a regular basis. So, if your students don't need or want to read a newspaper, the newspaper is not going to be a good authentic text to try using these ideas. If you are teaching General English and all your students are huge movie buffs, then a movie trailer might be a great authentic text to bring in. If you are teaching Business English, the economics section of the paper would be particularly relevant. In order to really exploit an authentic text, it is important to consider its relevance in addition to its authenticity. If they match up to your students' goals and interests, some great authentic texts include:

- TV shows
- newspaper or magazine articles
- movie trailers
- commercials
- advertisements (Don't limit yourself to print! Take photos of interesting ads that you see during your morning commute and bring these in for your students to interact with.)
- emails from students
- student work from a previous course
- academic articles
- classified postings
- online reviews
- product descriptions
- podcasts
- popular viral videos on YouTube

Authentic Tasks

So, what makes an authentic task? The basic idea behind this is that the task replicates an action that a person (you or your student) would naturally do with the text outside of your ESL class. For example, one of my favorite authentic texts to bring into an ESL class is a cereal box or a chips bag. Every time I visit the grocery store, I scan product descriptions, prices, and ingredient lists in order to make decisions on what to buy. I am using scanning to do something that I, as a fluent reader, do on a daily basis without even thinking about it. To create this experience for my students, I bring a bunch of products into class from my pantry and give the students the following task:

You have a friend coming to stay with you for the weekend. She is allergic to soy. Which products are safe to have in your house for her visit?

By pairing the authentic text with a task that re-creates reading outside of class, I am trying to bring the real-world into the classroom for receptive skill development. The goal behind this is that authentic interaction with texts in class will create a stronger connection between reading and listening in class and outside of class. Tasks that use multiple-choice or true/false questions don't always prepare the students for what they will actually need to do with these texts when they are in the real world. The authenticity of the task comes from the regularity with which the

students would do this action outside of class. Context is everything when assessing the authenticity of a task. Therefore, keep in mind that your students may benefit from reading a product description (especially if they are living in an English-only environment), but it may be more helpful to consider authentic tasks they will encounter in the specialized area you are preparing them for, particularly if you are teaching English for specific purposes.

As mentioned above, authentic texts can pose challenges for students as the text is often above the level of the class. Keep in mind that when preparing students for the authentic task that you have planned, it is important to identify the reading or listening subskill or strategy that is used to do the task. This way, in your task instructions, you can add in helpful guidance on how to use the skill or strategy effectively. This will make the text and the task more accessible to your students.

Planning Authentic Tasks

When coming up with an authentic task on your own, the first step is to choose a text that will be meaningful and relevant to your students. Once you know what you will bring in, I would suggest the following steps as a guideline:

1. **Identify the purpose.** Why are you/the students reading/listening to this text? What information would you/your students normally/naturally want to get from the text? Identifying the purpose behind interacting with the text is the first step in making sure your task will create a real-world experience for your students.
2. **Identify the subskills and strategies.** How did I get the information I wanted from this text? Considering this question allows you to identify any relevant reading/listening subskills or strategies that your students may need to develop in order to do the task well.
3. **Plan the task.** What is the authentic task your students will do? Create an authentic task by combining the purpose for reading/listening with the information you/your students need to get from the text with the sub-skill/strategy that should be used.

For example, let's think back to my chip bag task above.

1. **Identify the purpose.** I am reading a chips bag to learn what exact ingredients are contained in the product to make the best and healthiest buying choice.
2. **Identify the subskills and strategies.** I would often use scanning to do this, but I may also use detailed/intensive reading for hard-to-find words or very dense ingredient lists.
3. **Plan the task.** Because my purpose is to learn what the exact ingredients are to make the best choice for buying a product, my students will need some criteria to help them decide which products are suitable. Therefore, I included an added contextual complication (your friend is allergic to soy). Soy is a tricky ingredient to find as it may take many different forms, so students may use a combination of scanning and intensive reading.

Here are a few more examples of texts and tasks:

| Authentic Text | Teaching Context | Authentic Task |
|----------------|------------------|----------------|
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| The snack foods section of an online grocery shopping website | ESL to students who will be living in-country for an extended period of time | You have a friend coming to your party who is a vegetarian. Which snack products can you serve to her? |
| Academic article on a topic your students are familiar with | English for academic purposes | As you read the article, prepare questions for your professor on the following: What are you confused about? What do you want to know more about? |
| A funny Internet or TV commercial | Any context | Why is the ad funny? Would this ad be funny in your culture? |
| An article giving business advice | Business English | You are training a new manager and you are reading this article in order to give them some good advice. Come up with a list of advice for the new manager as you read. |

Benefits and Considerations

So, why try this out in your classroom? In my experience, it not only helps the students build reading/listening skills, but it also builds motivation. I have found that students can find receptive skill-based lessons dry, demotivating, or intimidating. By making the lessons more relevant, the students perk up and work hard. Assigning homework becomes much easier as well—ask your students to find an additional real-world situation to try the authentic task out in. You will be impressed with what your students bring back on Monday.

In all seriousness, though, by connecting an authentic task with an authentic text, you are building an opportunity for students to predict and troubleshoot comprehension problems in the classroom before they happen in the real world. This is particularly relevant if you bring things into class that match the students' learning goals like a job application form for new immigrants or a university lecture for EAP students. Students can develop ways to improve their reading and listening within a natural context by reflecting on the experience and identifying the need for additional practice before they are in the real situation. We often consider the relevance of the task when preparing productive activities for our students; I believe the same benefits can be gained in the preparation of receptive tasks as well.

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