

Feature Article

„Schnapp..” to it!: Authentic materials in the Classroom
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When I reflect on my career as a teacher of foreign language, I am astonished at what is readily available to us now in comparison to the early days of my career and I cannot help but think: We take so much for granted. The beginning of my career involved dittos, unwieldy, space-gobbling filing cabinets, a typewriter, and chalk and a chalkboard. The day I got an overhead projector I thought I had died and gone to heaven. What a novelty! I no longer had to turn my back to the classroom and I could keep notes ready to display from year to year. Using records and reel-to-reel tapes to develop listening skills was the order of the day. Acquiring realia meant creatively borrowing it or traveling to the country to purchase it. Slide shows involved either buying ready-made slides or creating your own by photographing pictures in books. Showing a film was quite an undertaking; these were only to be had through a central library located in the state capital. Films had to be ordered months in advance to ensure availability. This meant knowing in August exactly what you intended to use and when with no guarantee that it would be obtainable. Don't get me wrong, we were all thankful to have these resources, but what a far cry in contrast to what we can currently access!

Today with access to a plethora of authentic materials being relatively easy, the issue now at hand is in making the selection and then deciding how to implement or use the selection. In the past, the decision of material selection was made for us, and while most textbooks now incorporate authentic materials, the benefit of selecting current material cannot be understated. The language in authentic materials has a purpose, is functional and up-to-date, is contextualized, and often exposes students to a wide variety of vocabulary and structures. Selecting the materials yourself allows you to zoom in on what will most interest and be applicable to your student community. All of these are important for keeping your students excited and learning happily! At the same time, you'll keep yourself "fresh" while tantalizing your students. This is no mean feat for those of us not surrounded by large communities that offer vibrant cultural activities and frequent meaningful interaction with native speakers. Once you've selected your material, some questions you may find helpful to answer include when to use the material, for what purpose, and how to implement it. In other words, make your material selection and then design backwards.

Designing backwards is the method I used in implementing a German song, and it is this song that will serve as an example for how to use authentic materials. While many of us had been using current songs for years, this song was somewhat different. Why? It was a children's song and it had become the Number 1 hit in Germany. Needless to say, the topic became practically an overnight sensation amongst German teachers in the US, and not wanting my students to be left out in the cold, I jumped on the bandwagon. Initially I used the song as a listening activity in my Level 1 classes, but I subsequently used the song in my upper levels, specifically targeting language usage in both interpretive and interpersonal modes. However, it often being difficult to find material suitable for Level 1, I chose my initial activities accordingly. The song's language was not only simple, there was a wealth of topics buried in the song, -- geography, a peek at family relationships, and animal behaviors for starters. My most difficult

task quickly became deciding what to do with it, for what purpose should it be used, at what point to use it, and with whom to use it? It was clear to me that the song's purpose afforded a wealth of opportunity. I was excited.

With my questions firmly in place (I had already answered with whom I would use it), I decided to use the song as a listening, reading, writing, and cultural comparison activity. That's a tall order for one song:

- I started simply, by developing an easy listening activity in which the students circled words and structures that they heard.
- My first goal was to have them practice the skill of "parsing". I asked them to look at the words they had circled and to guess what they thought the song was about.
- Then we closed that portion of the lesson by watching the music video and subsequently, discussed if their predictions matched what they had seen.
- The next step involved the students in a literacy activity in which they had to circle, underline, and box-in various topics and structures within the song.
- Next, they read the song for content, drew pictures to demonstrate what they understood, and then summarized their picture(s) in their own words. Thus the song became an opportunity to develop reading comprehension skills as well as some writing production.
- Finally, the questions came, "Why is a children's song so popular?" "What is going on in Germany to make this song an overnight sensation?" and so we were able to discuss and analyze a current topic, compare the topic with our own community, thereby making connections.

While the Backwards Design strategy guided the purpose and structure of the song's implementation, students developed a multitude of skills with the use of one current authentic material. They were thrilled, had fun, and came away happy. Many of them ordered the song as their ringtone – annoyingly cute. It was a "home run" lesson, one which quickly bumped up to the upper level albeit in an immersion format.

To close, in contrast to yesteryear, the arrival of the internet has resulted in a veritable smorgasbord of authentic materials. Our role has changed just as our world has changed and yet, our role remains the same. I hope I have demonstrated for you in this short essay how exciting, fun, and interesting your lessons can be when you use authentic materials, and I hope you are able to see how you can do so. As for myself, I will continue to be amazed that with a simple click of a button, we are able to bring current news, TV episodes, music, articles, and podcasts, to name a few, directly into our classrooms. The world is quite literally available to our students at the tips of their fingers and we have an amazing opportunity to be a part of that experience.