

# Literary and authentic materials: rationale and principles

## Introduction

The current versions of the National Curriculum for MFL (2014), new GCSE and A levels place greater emphasis on the use of authentic materials including literary sources than has previously been the case. However, the impact of using such materials on school-aged learners' motivational and linguistic development has received little research attention (Paran, 2008), as most studies to date have focused on adults, and more on motivation than on whether using such materials also affects linguistic development. While such studies do, by and large, indicate that learners find reading literature interesting and motivating (Paran, 2008), they tend not to directly compare using literary/authentic texts with less authentic materials (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). What is clearer, however, is that **how** materials are used is more important than whether they are authentic or not (Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Paran, 2008).

The following principles are important:

- Literary and other challenging texts can be beneficial for KS3 learners (e.g., for deepening word knowledge)
- Activities that prompt personal, emotional and imaginative responses enhance a more functional focus on grammar and vocabulary
- Individual differences matter in terms of which approach / text type suits different kinds of learner
- Pre, during and post-reading and listening activities need to maximise 'involvement'
- Comprehension, self-regulatory strategies can benefit self-efficacy and hence persistence with more challenging texts
- A focus on phonics is important for exploiting challenging texts, including sounding out words to help access meaning

## 1. What are the potential benefits of using literary/authentic materials?

### 1.1 Motivation

The use of literary and other authentic texts has the potential to benefit motivation for language learning, based on what we know from research about what motivates and demotivates learners in our context. Lack of interest in what they are learning and low-self efficacy or confidence are key drivers for giving up language study (Graham, 2002, 2004, 2018). By contrast, research indicates that intrinsic interest in learning about the language and its associated culture is an important reason for continuing with language study (Fisher, 2001; Graham, 2002, 2004, 2018). Learners at primary school report enjoying learning about the L2 culture but also identify a decreased focus on cultural aspects in language lessons as they move to secondary school, with a potentially negative impact on their intrinsic motivation (Graham, Courtney, Tonkyn & Marinis, 2016). Furthermore, using literary and/or authentic texts can potentially enhance the personal relevance of language learning; Taylor and Marsden (2014) found the latter to be a key factor in determining whether adolescent learners in England chose to continue language study after the age of 14.

Literary/authentic materials can also have an emotional or 'affective' impact. Emotions and enjoyment are closely linked (Dewaele, Witney, Saito, & Dewaele, 2017) but compared to other school subject areas (for example History, English, PSHE), language lessons typically steer clear of topics that might prompt an emotional reaction in learners and hence may offer 'relatively emotion-free (and therefore often boring) classroom sessions (...) that require little emotional investment and therefore little potential for unpredictability, outbursts, surprise, risk-taking, embarrassment, anxiety ... and enjoyment' (Dewaele, 2015, 13).

## 1.2 Learning outcomes

**1. Vocabulary gains** and progress in **reading** were found by Woore et al. (2018) for Year 7 learners who read semi-authentic, culturally-rich texts. Similarly, in a study by Maxim (2000), beginner learners of German (adults) who read a novel in class made gains in language tests that were equivalent to those made by learners who just studied the usual textbook.

**2. Intercultural understanding** and openness to the perspectives of others have been found to be more effectively developed through reading a poem that highlights aspects of the lives of others than through reading a fact sheet about their life (Scott & Huntington, 2002).

**3. Increased and more complex spoken interaction** (Kim, 2004) and significant improvement in **grammatical knowledge and usage** (Yang, 2001, 2002) have also been reported for classes reading literary texts.

## 2. Principles for using literary/authentic texts

### 2.1 Pre-, during and post-reading and listening activities need to maximise 'involvement'

Learning through extensive reading/listening is known as 'incidental learning', i.e., vocabulary is 'picked up' in an activity where the focus is on understanding the material rather than on explicitly or intentionally learning the vocabulary it contains. It can aid vocabulary growth because words need to be met many times and in many **different contexts** in order to be learned well. It also helps develop **depth of knowledge** (shades of meaning, collocations, etc.) as well as breadth of knowledge (i.e. number of new words learnt).

Incidental learning from extensive reading/listening does depend, however, on several factors (Ellis & Shintani, 2014, p.190):

- Learners need access to large amounts of input
- The input needs to be comprehensible
- The input also needs to be sufficiently linguistically rich to provide affordances for learning
- Learners need to not just comprehend the input but also pay attention to linguistic forms in the input that they have not yet acquired.

Schmitt (2008) also argues that incidental learning can be improved if learners are taught to become more accurate and effective in working out the meaning of unknown words from context, rather than just guessing wildly. In addition, for improved incidental learning there has to be mental and motivational 'involvement' (Huang, Willson, & Eslami, 2012; Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001) with to the text. We

can increase learners' incidental learning by providing intentional learning tasks that they complete before, during and after reading or listening (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001).

Different activities bring with them different degrees of 'involvement', which are influenced by three main factors: **need, search, evaluation** (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001):

- **Need** – how necessary is it to know this word to complete the task? How much does the learner 'need' to do the task? Need is lower when it is imposed by someone other than the learner (e.g. the teacher); it is higher when learners have a choice regarding the task and are intrinsically motivated. This includes having materials that they have a genuine desire to read or listen to. Recall also from previous CPD the idea of language being 'task essential'.
- **Search** – how hard does the learner have to work to discover the meaning of the word? Finding a word's meaning with relatively little effort by looking at a word glossary at the side of a text has a lower degree of involvement than working out the word's meaning by looking at those that surround it in a sentence. Recall from previous CPD the idea of 'desirable difficulty/challenge'.
- **Evaluate** – how much does the learner have to think about how to use a word in different contexts, about different aspects of its meaning, about whether it is the best word to use, and so forth? Higher levels of evaluation come from tasks that involve some form of output from learners, where they have to select certain words rather than others and combine them. Recall from previous CPD the importance of 'multiple word encounters'.

Increasing the evaluation element has been found to be particularly important to increase vocabulary learning (Huang et al., 2012).

Text book reading tasks that are accompanied by comprehension questions that can be answered by just finding a few key words tend to have lower levels of involvement load and hence are likely to lead to less learning. Here are further examples of different levels of 'involvement load':

	Lower load	Higher load
<b>Need</b>	Learners use a writing frame to create an interview. The support provided makes it possible to complete the task without engaging with the meaning of the words.	Learners script an interview with the main character in a text, choosing which questions to ask, and imagining how the character will answer, based on their reading of the original text and their knowledge of the writer.
<b>Search</b>	Learners complete a task where all potentially unknown words have been provided in a glossary.	Learners have to read further on in the text to hypothesise the meaning of an unknown word, then go back to it and substitute that meaning in to check if it makes sense.
<b>Evaluate</b>	Learners complete a gap-fill using certain words they are given. They have to decide which word goes where.	Learners have to write their own sentences using words in the text. They have to decide how to combine them with other words they have met elsewhere.

## 2.2 Activities that prompt personal, emotional and imaginative responses need to be used alongside a more functional focus on grammar and vocabulary

An area of debate is whether we should treat literary texts as 'literature' only or as 'language' only (Paran, 2008) – in other words, should we use tasks that encourage a personal emotional and interpretative response from learners, or tasks that use literature principally to exemplify grammatical structures and recycle vocabulary. The same questions apply to other kinds of authentic texts, too.

Recent evidence from Year 9 learners of French and German suggests that different learners need different types of input and tasks, and for the best outcomes, a combination of the two approaches would be most effective (Graham & Fisher, in progress; Hofweber & Graham, 2017). That is, activities that prompt 'involvement' by eliciting personal, emotional and imaginative responses can enhance a focus on grammar and vocabulary. Suggestions for activities for personal and emotional engagement appear in Handout 5.

## 2.3 Learning to comprehend and developing self-efficacy

Having a wide vocabulary, secure grammar and knowledge of phonics is very important for comprehension, but understanding more challenging texts also involves learners drawing on more general comprehension skills, especially to deal with unknown words. Those skills include 'the ability to engage in a range of strategic processes while reading more challenging texts (including goal setting, academic inferencing, monitoring) (Grabe & Jiang, 2013, p.4). Working with more challenging texts also requires persistence from learners and a robust sense of self-efficacy (confidence in their ability to understand).

Researchers have investigated whether we can improve comprehension skills through strategy instruction. Reviews of research (Ardasheva, Wang, Adesope, & Valentine (2017); Plonsky, 2011, 2019; Taylor, 2014) show benefits from such instruction particularly for reading but it is unclear how far they apply to younger and less proficient learners; the general view is that learners need a certain amount of linguistic knowledge first in order to benefit (although how much exactly is enough is not known – Taylor, 2014). Nevertheless, some findings to inform practice can be drawn out:

- Teaching self-regulatory, text engagement techniques for comprehension can benefit self-efficacy (belief in one's ability) and hence improve persistence with challenging texts; for example where the focus is on pulling together available evidence for what a word means and then checking the validity of the meaning attributed to that word
- Concentrating on a small number of strategies is beneficial
- Including a metacognitive component, e.g. asking learners to reflect on which strategies helped their comprehension and to evaluate whether any modifications in strategy application are needed, can be helpful.

Year 7/Year 8 learners of French who received that kind of strategy instruction in a study by Macaro and Erler (2008) not only became better at reading in French but also more confident about it. They also received phonics teaching and were taught to use 'sounding out' to help them work out the meaning of words. In Woore et al. (2018), strategy instruction and phonics teaching were separated out, so that learners received only one of those types of reading instruction for use with challenging

texts. Strategy instruction helped learners' self-efficacy for reading the challenging texts used at each test point (especially for learners with *lower levels of French* and *lower general academic attainment*), and vocabulary; phonics instruction helped decoding and vocabulary development. Combining the two approaches with challenging texts is likely to be the most effective, above all with lower attaining learners. For listening strategy instruction, the evidence is much more mixed, although a study conducted with Year 12 learners of French found that it did improve both listening and self-efficacy for listening (Graham & Macaro, 2008), using very similar principles to those implemented in Macaro and Erler (2008).

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