


CHRISTOPHER BRUMFIT ESSAY PRIZE 2021
RUNNER-UP

The story of a loner learner: Reconsidering authenticity and authentic engagement in second language learning

Ningyang Chen 

Soochow University, Jiangsu, People's Republic of China
Email: 13110120007@fudan.edu.cn

(Received 7 May 2022; accepted 21 May 2022)

The reviewers praised ‘an intellectually stimulating and thought-provoking essay. . . well conceived and constructed, skilfully drawing the reader in through the writer’s personal story, and offering a uniquely individual perspective on issues around “authenticity” in language learning and engagement. Despite the strong focus on the writer’s own personal experience and practice as someone learning, struggling and engaging with English, the essay also usefully integrates critical discussion around pedagogical considerations’.

The start of everything

Born into an average family in China at a time when the country opened itself to the world, I was first brought into contact with the idea of language by Grandpa’s collection of tape cassettes of classic songs from around the world – popular pieces like ‘Auld Lang Syne’, ‘Die Forelle’, and ‘Подмосковные Вечера’. Music collection was a trendy practice in the early 1990s as many Chinese people began to enjoy the exciting cultural imports, with foreign rhythms and lyrics holding a unique exotic appeal. My parents told me that I was exceptionally quiet and joyful when those cassettes were played, so the foreign tunes became my babysitter. As such, I grew up absorbed in the pleasing yet unfathomable sounds.

‘I do not know what I am talking about!’

At eight, I began to take English lessons taught by local graduates. It was a mandatory main course yet not difficult to learn because all the English we had was there in the textbook, which was no thicker or more complicated than a picture book, yet not as fun. We were instructed to memorise the illustrated words and phrases paired with Chinese translations and a text demonstrating how to use them. Though I recited everything as required, I could only imagine the meaning of certain alien items. It took me years to figure out, for instance, that the wiggly ‘girdle’ in the middle of that cartoon bun was supposed to be lettuce leaves.

My false visualisation of the word ‘hamburger’ may appear innocent, yet I could never get over the guilt of disappointing my first English schoolteacher – a kind and caring lady who gave me private tutoring to prepare for a speech contest. She did the research, wrote the script, transcribed the words into *pinyin* and tape-recorded her reading for me to imitate. It was probably the only possible way to make a contestant out of a beginner learner who had learnt her alphabet months beforehand. The speech was for the National Day celebration and opened with a recounting of history. Yet that was all I knew about my speech since I was only able to tell the Chinese names in the Martian text. On the day of my performance, I was gripped by stage fright and mumbled along till I got stuck right before Chairman Mao’s proclamation remarks when the extraterrestrial sound *si-chuang-hou-de* (‘stronghold’) slipped my mind. I must have looked comically embarrassed at that moment as I heard laughter

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press

from the audience. I wept at once – the combination of the uncomprehending mirth and that uncomprehended citadel was too much for me.

If comprehension alone were a measure for second language (L2) success, then my primary school English learning experience indicated a loser – yet a contended loser perhaps, as one of my proud achievements upon graduation was to have learnt to sing my favourite tune ‘Yankee Doodle’, again without making sense of the lyrics.

Exams are one thing; language is quite another

In secondary-school classes, the English that we were taught became more ‘practical’ since we used it mainly for scoring in exams. Among the main subjects, English was often the easiest to be trained to be exam-smart. All you needed was a good memory for things – from the longest wordlist to the minutest grammar points. You could go as far as to recite writing samples. The best-selling collections featured such luring titles as ‘Foreigners’ Essays’ and ‘American Students’ Essays’. Meanwhile, a comparison between Us (Chinese students) and the Other (native speakers) was constantly drawn in English classes to alert the former to the ‘gap’ and their ‘mistakes’. Though I continued to do well in exams, I could hardly convince myself that what I had been learning was a LANGUAGE. To me, it was more like a set of codes for deciphering the exam ‘pass’ word. Nor did I believe in the presumed divide between Us and the Other. So instead of purchasing snippets of writing authored by the suspicious ‘foreigners’, I spent my childhood savings on my first ‘all-English’ book – Pearson’s Physics series, a rare commodity in the incipient local market for imported books. I soon forgot most of my secondary-school English after the college entrance exam, but can still remember today the English version of Newton’s three laws of motion.

Still not getting it

I confessed my love of English in college as I dropped my hobby and turned ‘professional’ – an English major student in a domestically-run programme that is nowadays belittled for being ‘fake’ (Chen, 2020). The most exciting change for me was that we began to read articles authored by English names, as the textbook passages and exam materials we had been using were from unacknowledged sources, possibly the work by Chinese experts of English. The new textbook series was named ‘Contemporary College English’ and had a mixture of texts –, for example, Oscar Wilde’s ‘The Nightingale and the Rose’, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, Allen Davis and Harold Woodman’s ‘Why Historians Disagree’. The texts were adapted to fit the size and style of an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbook and contained tampered pieces of writing shorn of off-list words and outlandish expressions (e.g., ‘With the glow of good in her stomach, Bess began to spin stories’ in Dorothy West’s ‘The Richer, the Poorer’ became ‘With the glow of good food in her stomach, Bess began to tell stories’). The textbooks were taught by local teachers who believed in the training of ‘basic skills’ through conventional exercises of dictation and recitation.

With the exposure to a wider variety of English, we came to realise that the language was more than about getting a definitive answer and that being ‘grammatically good’ was not good enough. We began to crave the ‘icing on the cake’ – *di-dao* (‘authenticity’) as it was called in the Chinese language. ‘Your English is authentic!’ became the highest compliment one could get. It was for this ideal that I had spent my college years in vain striving. Though I passed all the tests and was eventually granted a B.A. in English, I did not feel deserving of it. To put it metaphorically, I had my driving skills tested on the simulator, but I had not yet hit the road. In fact, with little more than what the textbooks had shown us, I could hardly know what the road looked like.

My experiment

Against nationwide enthusiasm and efforts to teach and learn English, the local context was dominated by the ‘persistent folk notion that language learners go abroad to “really” learn the language’

(Siegal, 1995, p. 225). It was the common belief that without an extended trip to an English-speaking country, the best one could learn was stilted English, if not Chinese English or Chinglish. This popular idea prompted many of my peers to go abroad for further study. Upon arrival in the host country, they were mostly disappointed by their certificate-proven ability to use English. ‘It turned out that I couldn’t do anything with the language I’ve been learning for ten years!’ one of my classmates exclaimed.

Though I was persuaded to follow the crowd, I chose to pursue graduate studies at a local university. Financial concerns aside, I thought I might not benefit as much from an overseas experience language-wise. That was because, despite my love of the subject, I was one of the ‘difficult’ students in class: I never volunteered to answer a question, and I panicked when asked to speak. So I did not see much hope in curing my stubborn reticence by throwing myself into a stressful foreign environment. Nor was it my intention to challenge the mainstream belief and prove it wrong. I was driven by sheer curiosity to find out how far L2 learning could go with one valued ingredient missing – an ‘authentic’ environment. Moreover, it would be a worthy topic to investigate for a research-minded graduate student in applied linguistics. I had read numerous papers by home scholars extolling the value of authenticity and communication in L2 success, yet I wondered why the opposite learning scenario (e.g., the ‘mute English’ approach), which was criticised passionately yet prevailed widely, had not received much serious research attention.

In many ways, I considered myself the ideal guinea pig for such an experiment. For one thing, I had been learning English in a ‘quiet’ way for quite some time and did not bother to carry on. For another, the flexible schedule of graduate school and my inclination to work alone allowed me to turn the university library into a language acquisition lab. My design was to feign acquisition in a naturalistic manner. That is, rather than making deliberate efforts to learn English, which I had been doing for the previous decade yet with limited progress, I decided to live with the language in a way that symbolically resembled those blessed with a native-speaking environment.

During the seven years I stayed in the programme, I spent my unscheduled time (scheduled events included lectures, school chores, and occasional home visits) looking for the English I desired. It did not prove to be easy in a library filled with Chinese-language materials. I miss those free afternoons spent with collections of stories and poems, old academic readings from diverse areas donated by visiting scholars, and past issues of *Reader’s Digest* tucked away on the outcast shelves. This does not sound like a generous stock, yet it was heaven to a student who possessed few original English books. For fear of losing the English I collected, I copied excerpts from my favourite pieces and annotated my feelings upon reading them (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A snapshot of the English that I ‘hunted and gathered’ during the self-experiment

My choices were immensely expanded later with connection to the Internet and digital archives after I bought a laptop. Unfortunately, compared with borrowed books, electronic resources were less secure and lasting. When I knew my days to access Wikipedia were counted, I spent days copying entries of stuff I would like to know (hopefully for the rest of my life). And when they shut down Google, I became clinically depressed. While reading and writing, I would put on some ‘music’: classic songs, audiobooks, and – my favourite – poems read with flourish. Like the magical sounds from Grandpa’s cassettes, I found this background music very soothing and pacifying.

Authenticity as an illusion

In contrast to the laypeople’s staunch belief in the value of authenticity, definitions of this elusive term remain murky. What is authenticity after all? Who shall be the trusted judge of authenticity? Should authenticity be the holy grail of advanced L2 learning? In the long-lasting scholarly debate over authenticity, the term has been variously defined, with its scope ranging from the specific and particularistic (e.g., “real” language not intended for non-native learners’; Porter & Roberts, 1981, p. 37) to the general and universal (e.g., ‘a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort’; Morrow, 1977, p. 13, in Gilmore, 2007, p. 98). There has been a tendency in the international literature to embrace a more relaxed, inclusive, and liberal view of authenticity and to dispel popular myths, most typically a positive correlation between authenticity and quality (Cook, 2001; Widdowson, 2003). While the emotion-charged term (Cook, 1997) tends to be associated with correct or exemplar usage, authenticity gives a neutral denotation of relevance to learning purposes (Gilmore, 2007). Moreover, innovative efforts have been made to revamp the discourse built on the native and non-native speaker divide by including diverse voices on a continuum of authenticity (Pinner, 2014).

Contrary to this influx of novel and liberating interpretations of the term, my English education experience reveals the strong prevalence and influence of a dated and restrictive perception, one that is culturally embedded and tinged with native-speakerism. Why would the local teachers cling to the conservative understanding? Why would they humbly play their role as authentic model users of English (Pinner, 2015) while secretly honouring the native speaker halo? Apart from inertia and biases, there could be a practical barrier to the application of an expanded view of authenticity in contexts where learners-turned-teachers base their judgements and practices on highly diverse L2 experiences. Given individual differences in learning achievement, habits, preferences, and efforts to maintain proficiency in an L2-as-a-foreign-language environment, they tend to make distinct and sometimes even opposing judgements on the same language. An idiomatic usage recommended by a locally trained senior teacher can be frowned upon by his newly recruited colleague – an overseas returnee Ph.D. from the U.S. What one reviewer applauded as good language can be another reviewer’s eyesore. It is not uncommon to see domestic language experts quarrel bitterly and desperately over the idiomaticity of an expression none of them had used or heard used before. Meanwhile, these judges of authenticity produce diversified versions of the language, each shaped by an individualistic learning context. By the broadened definition, all are equally valid sources of authentic language for the students to follow, the idealists among whom, however, might be frustrated by the filtered, modified, or distorted language, which they consider as distant from the version they intend to approximate.

Therefore, the renewed perception of authenticity, though potentially empowering, might land us in a dilemma. In theory, the conceptualisation of authenticity needs to be expanded to accommodate the changing linguistic landscape and to acknowledge the agentive capacity of non-native-speaker practitioners. In practice, however, there is a need for authenticity to anchor itself in a contextualised purpose that addresses the linguistic reality the learner is about to encounter. For instance, one who plans to work in a multinational corporation may need different authentic instruction from another who wants to teach in a local school. Even those who share the motivation to pursue overseas studies may prefer to refine their authentic instruction needs to fit their destination country.

While a lack of accordance between the language introduced and practised in the classroom and the language produced in the target reality is what formal instruction generally suffers (McDonough & Shaw, 2003), the degree of such discordance intersects heavily with a range of potent factors, including resource access, language policy, and sociopolitical temporalities. In a monolingual context with restricted contact with the foreign language, local practices with the language rely to varying degrees on L2 individuals' experience-informed imagination about the Other. There would always be aspects of the language that falls beyond the imagination. Even native speaker teachers who adapt their language to local students may fail to demonstrate in full what the language looks like in their home country. Moreover, in the changing world of languages characterised by diversity, plurality, interaction, and admixture, it is increasingly difficult to attribute the provenance of a language product. The absolute 'authentic language' uncontaminated by the influence of globalisation is hard to find. The much sought-after ideal of authenticity might simply be an illusion.

Authentic engagement as a bodily experience

Preoccupations with decontextualised authenticity seem to have led to more confusion and chaos than solutions in L2 pedagogy. Then, could the ultimate solution reside in one's physical experience in a communicative native-speaking environment? Beyond its objectifiable manifestations in materials and evaluations, authenticity also depicts a learner's 'experience of being and becoming' (MacDonald et al., 2006, p. 256) or pursuit of 'a richer mode of existence' (Taylor, 1992, p. 74).

During the experiment, I engaged myself with English in a distinctively personal manner. To me, it was no longer learning but being with the language and enjoying its presence. Though reminiscent of the resourcing strategy (Hanf, 2015), my note-taking practice was more of a spontaneous reaction to the text than a purposeful act to learn from it. As I jotted down each English word, I felt the curves of the letters and their smooth connections as they spread over the page. The background English readings mixed with music was processed primarily for form – the rhythm and cadence of the language that came in 'a single ever-changing package' with novel and familiar features (Marcus, 2012, p. 508).

In practical terms, my experiment was not very successful – it did not lead to a significant increase in linguistic capital or my employability in an 'overseas-returnee-first' job market. However, it brought me closer to the language without physically getting in touch with the environment and its people. I was surprised to find, towards the end of my experiment, that English had irreversibly become my private language: it is now in my journal entries, my self-talk, my dreams and daydreams, and my intuition and thought. I have grown increasingly dependent on English as it offers handy encoding of feelings and emotions that are not as easily utterable in Chinese. Almost unknowingly, I embraced a living L2 self. Odd as it may sound, the language seemed to have entered my body and become mine.

My subjective feeling of being liberated from the alienness and otherness of a 'foreign' language seems to suggest that communicative activities may not be the sole dominant form of one's language experience that leads to development and that physical immersion may not be a necessary condition for psychological closeness. It also indicates that the flexibility and adaptability of the language faculty may be subject to constraints that are more mental than maturational. This can be taken as resulting from prolonged authentic engagement, which one may describe as a mindful bodily experience of the language through one's senses. It entails a combination of sensory, emotional, and physiological responses to the language stimuli and the joy and pleasure that only language can supply.

One noticeable feature of this unique engagement is meaning or the absence thereof. Instead of being abandoned completely, meaning is processed in parallel with form or is made secondary (e.g., I am particularly drawn to poems that have fascinating sounds yet are notoriously difficult to understand). Though this quirkiness might have something to do with my high tolerance of 'meaningless' language from early on, it points to language as a multifaceted source of meaning with which engagement concerns not only its socio-cultural connotations and pragmatic potentialities but also its full semiotic dimensions and modalities.

Authentic engagement as such may lead to a feeling of connectedness; lack of it may cause a sense of detachment from the language. This could happen to learners today who enjoy far more authentic L2 input than their predecessors but have not yet seen more exciting progress. One possible reason is that we are often concerned about what the language DOES for us and ignore how the language LOOKS, SOUNDS, and FEELS to us. Such a tendency may have been motivated and reinforced by teaching and research practices that foreground an instrumental role of language. Pedagogic discourse dominated by communication reduces language to a tool that needs to be ‘obtained’, ‘wielded’, ‘sharpened’, and ‘honed’; research powered by databases and algorithms condenses texts to profiles of dry linguistic and discourse features. These efforts may have made language learning more goal-oriented and less troublesome, but they help little to make it fun and enduring.

It is a pity that we once seemed to have much fun and a great drive to learn. Few sights are more cheerful than a child merrily engaging herself with her language. Yet, we outgrow that impulsive response to languages after ‘abandoning the nourishing but unpredictable flows of natural, sensory life for the illusory control offered us by logos’ (Coats, 2013, p. 137). Perhaps we can restore the fun and drive to learning by encouraging authentic engagement through curriculum invitation for learners to notice and appreciate the substance of the language, to ‘feel’, ‘taste’, ‘savour’, and ‘meditate’ on its cornucopia of lively details – its orderly patterns as well as wayward idiosyncrasies, so as to make them curious, passionate, and adventurous explorers into the wonder of human language.

Towards life-giving pedagogy and practice

Looking back, my English learning experience seems commonly unique and at times pathetically amusing. In the post-globalisation and post-tech boom era, when mobility becomes the new norm and when we can experience computer-generated 3D realities with our avatars, my primitive way of engagement with the language seems like the adventure of a Maverick learner given to self-denial. However, before cross-national learning experiences and technologically-enhanced learning facilities become universally available and affordable, the ‘authentic’ experience of a foreign language remains a luxury for many eager learners around the world.

To overcome the disillusion of authenticity, much can be thought about and done in teaching and research to encourage authentic engagement by making learning more accessible and enjoyable. Practices towards evoking one’s innate desire and creativity to access and respond to languages may have the potential to solve some of the thorny practical problems in language pedagogy. For instance, how to help resource-deprived learners learn on a minimal budget? How to engage learners on the lower end of the ‘willingness to communicate scale’ (McCroskey & Baer, 1985)? How to teach a language that ‘makes one happy’ (Blommaert, 2016)? Above all, learning a new language gives us a chance to re-experience the instinctive joy of engaging with a language as ‘magic without meaning’ (Morrison, 1993) and to discover amazing connections between even the most distant systems. As such, it shall be practised in a way that helps us become authentic human beings with a better understanding of our shared humanity and the opening of a parochial monolingual mind.

References

- Blommaert, J. (2016). Teaching the English that makes one happy: English teaching could be far more effective if targeted at specific niches of ‘integration’. *English Today*, 32(3), 11–13.
- Chen, N. (2020). Where are we going and where have we been? A response to ‘back to basics’. *English Today*, 36(4), 30–32.
- Coats, K. (2013). The meaning of children’s poetry: A cognitive approach. *International Research in Children’s Literature*, 6(2), 127–142.
- Cook, G. (1997). Language play, language learning. *ELT Journal*, 51(3), 224–231.
- Cook, G. (2001). ‘The philosopher pulled the lower jaw of the hen.’ ludicrous invented sentences in language teaching. *Applied Linguistics*, 22(3), 366–387.
- Gilmore, A. (2007). Authentic materials and authenticity in foreign language learning. *Language Teaching*, 40(2), 97–118.

- Hanf, A. (2015). Resourcing authentic language in television series. In D. Nunan, & J. C. Richards (Eds.), *Language learning beyond the classroom* (pp. 138–148). Routledge.
- MacDonald, M. N., Badger, R., & Dasli, M. (2006). Authenticity, culture and language learning. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 6(3-4), 250–261.
- Marcus, G. F. (2012). Musicality: Instinct or acquired skill? *Topics in Cognitive Science*, 4(4), 498–512.
- McCroskey, J. C., & Baer, J. E. (1985). Willingness to Communicate: The construct and its measurement. Paper presented at the annual convention of the Speech Communication Association, Denver, CO.
- McDonough, J., & Shaw, C. (2003). *Materials and methods in ELT: A teacher's guide*. Blackwell.
- Morrison, T. (1993). Toni Morrison Nobel Lecture. 7 December 1993. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/> (accessed 18 November 2021).
- Morrow, K. (1977). Authentic texts and ESP. In S. Holden (Ed.), *English for specific purposes* (pp. 13–17). Modern English Publications.
- Pinner, R. S. (2014). The authenticity continuum: Towards a definition incorporating international voices. *English Today*, 30(4), 22–27.
- Pinner, R. S. (2015). Authenticity in a global context: Learning, working and communicating with L2 teachers of English. In J. Angouri, T. Harrison, S. Schnurr, & S. Wharton (Eds.), *Learning, working and communicating in a global context* (pp. 135–139). Scitsiugnil Press for the British Association for Applied Linguistics.
- Porter, D., & Roberts, J. (1981). Authentic listening activities. *ELT Journal*, 36(1), 37–47.
- Siegal, M. (1995). Individual differences and study abroad. In B. F. Freed (Ed.), *Second language acquisition in a study abroad context* (pp. 225–244). John Benjamins Publishing.
- Taylor, C. (1992). *The ethics of authenticity*. Harvard University Press.
- Widdowson, H. (2003). *Defining issues in English language teaching*. Oxford University Press.

Ningyang Chen is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the School of Foreign Languages, Soochow University, Jiangsu, PRC, where she conducts research and teaches English major undergraduates. She received her B.A. in English from Xi'an International Studies University, Shaanxi, PRC and then went to Fudan University, Shanghai, PRC, to pursue graduate studies. She has broad academic interests and is particularly interested in humanistic approaches to teaching and researching languages. Her recent publications have appeared in *Language and Semiotic Studies*, *English Today*, and *Bilingual Research Journal*.