

Editorial: Reflections on Authenticity

David I. Smith

The ideal of authenticity has informed the development of foreign language pedagogy over at least the past three decades. Through its influential role in the rhetoric of communicative language teaching, it has helped to motivate far-reaching curricular change, despite being assigned meanings that are not only diverse, but potentially in tension with one another.

The ideal of authenticity, as embraced by proponents of communicative language teaching, has displayed three main facets. First, the term ‘authentic’ has perhaps become most familiar to teachers in the context of talk of ‘authentic texts’. The idea here was that foreign language texts used in the classroom should wherever possible be those composed in the target culture by native speakers for genuine communicative purposes, rather than texts written artificially for the pedagogical purposes of the language classroom. This led, especially in the early phases of the communicative movement, to the replacement of cartoon stories with reproductions of realia such as forms, advertisements and menus in textbooks. The emphasis on authentic texts was also commonly accompanied by the recommendation that such texts should be encountered by means of legitimate tasks. In other words, what the learner is asked to do with the texts should have some resemblance to their intended use outside the pedagogical setting. We could call this first ideal ‘textual authenticity’.

The concern for legitimate tasks relates closely to another form of authenticity, namely authenticity of language use. Communicative language teaching arose from a variety of theoretical and practical sources as an alternative to the long-dominant emphasis on the structural dimension of language, an emphasis frequently accompanied by pedagogical reliance on artificial utterances used as examples of possible structures – “the horns of the cow are too long”, and the like. Theories of communicative competence emphasized the importance of mastering rules of *use*, without which a knowledge of a language’s grammar may not in itself lead to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately. With the development of notional

and functional syllabi as supplements or alternatives to the traditional grammatical syllabus, attention shifted from language as a structural system to contextualized language *use*. The elements of language came to be viewed as “tools for doing, not as facts for knowing”.¹ The aim was to move from “language put on display” to more realistic practice in using language for practical communication, approximating more closely the ways in which the language being learned is used outside the educational context. Learners should put language to the same uses inside the classroom as those to which it is put outside the classroom. We might call this ‘functional authenticity’.

A third facet of the ideal of authenticity places the spotlight on the learner. A focus on linguistic form, some have argued, leaves the meanings expressed somewhat arbitrary and the individual learner secondary to the central focus on the impersonal, systematic structure of the language. We need to give learners more freedom to express things meaningful to them as individuals. This emphasis on authenticity in terms of the learner’s subjective sense of meaning has been implemented differently in different strands of communicative pedagogy. Functional/notional approaches have continued to rely on a predetermined linguistic syllabus, interpreting orientation towards the learner in terms of a prior analysis of projected learner needs. Process-oriented and humanistic versions of communicative language teaching place a more primary emphasis on the creation of spaces for the learner to use the target language to express personally significant meaning in an interpersonal context. The emphasis in more process-oriented pedagogies on self-expression, personalization, self-esteem and autonomy relates to this idea that the language learned should be authentic to the individual learner’s experience, feelings and identity. We might term this ‘personal authenticity’.

These three facets of the ideal of authenticity have helped to motivate change in foreign language pedagogy in two complementary ways. On the one hand, they have implied that older pedagogies were in significant respects fakes, offering artificially created texts, using language out of its natural context for display and detached manipulation, and imposing tasks and utterances upon learners which made little personal sense to them. On the other hand, they provided an alternative ideal of real texts, genuine communication, and greater opportunities for individual self-expression. Whether or not the implied criticisms were entirely fair, the new vision sounded bracing. The three reference points of the target culture’s texts, the

everyday uses of language, and the learner's self promised a form of language learning that was ... well, more *authentic*.

How could this be anything but a good thing? Well, a rather extreme example from my own experience may be the most economical way to highlight a worrisome feature of the threefold ideal. When my younger sister was in high school, she was asked by her Latin teacher to think of someone she knew and write a curse on them, making it as realistic as possible. I suspect that this task would perturb most Christian educators – cursing our acquaintances does not usually have a prominent place in the goals of Christian education. Note, however, that it fulfils all three aspects of the authenticity ideal. It is personalized, puts language to a real-life use, and it is culturally authentic in terms of Ancient Roman culture.

While this task may be somewhat unusual, it does serve to highlight the deficiencies of an ideal of authenticity that stays confined within the immanent loop of my own self, everyday language use and the realities of the target culture, without any more transcendent ethical or spiritual reference points. Christian faith locates authenticity not in being true to my own self and its individual agendas or to the world as I find it, but rather in the imitation of Christ and a vision of creation renewed. This includes “a basic ethic which views the demands of God to be embedded in believers’ hearts and tested by every word they speak to their neighbors”² – our speech is answerable to a further standard of authenticity beyond my desires and the patterns of language use on the street.

Does this take us beyond the legitimate concerns of the language classroom, floating away from necessary concerns with identifying appropriate use of the target language towards loftier realms that may be noble but make little practical difference? I think not, for three reasons.

First, while discussions of communicative language pedagogy have tended by and large to rest uncritically within the immanent loop described above, there are occasional signs that some wider context needs to be taken into account. Henry Widdowson, in an influential exposition of communicative language teaching, wrote that

“Realizing linguistic knowledge as use, as opposed to simply manifesting it as usage, must necessarily commit the learner to an acceptance of conditions which control normal communication. Thus he will have to be concerned not simply with whether his sentence is correct or not but

whether the statement that it counts as is true or not.”³

In other words, if learning a language is not simply a matter of examining linguistic structure, but of dealing with the “conditions which control normal communication”, this must invite a consideration of aspects of language learning beyond the narrowly linguistic. It suggests a need to consider the wider human context of communication, including questions of truth and honesty. If, as Breen & Candlin put it, communicative language teaching “needs to reflect and support the integration of language with other forms of human experience and behaviour”,⁴ it would seem to follow that the ethics of language use and the connection between our spiritual commitments and the way we speak might be of interest. Lying is, for instance, a common communicative act among native speakers of a language, and it is often engaged in for purposes in which the individual concerned has a high degree of personal investment and in a culturally appropriate manner. Taking the threefold authenticity outlined here as our sole standard, it might therefore be a potential target competence. This is not a far-fetched example; Rivers argued explicitly that lying in the classroom is a justified communicative behavior because of its common incidence outside the classroom as a “form of real communication”.⁶ I wish to argue to the contrary, that inside the classroom as well as outside, we should be interested in the ethics as well as the pragmatics of language use.

Second, the three versions of authenticity outlined above are an inadequate guide for choosing topics for conversation or texts for study. Note that a great deal of real communication may be of personal interest to those who engage in it, but nevertheless inconsequential, or even counter-productive, in relation to wider educational goals. Target language texts may likewise be trivial, or may invite a critical reading which runs counter to the interests of their authors. A learner with a highly materialistic outlook and an addiction to shopping might find language learning that focused largely on magazine advertisements and role-playing of consumer transactions set in a variety of stores to be authentic in all of the senses discussed above, but once a wider concern for fostering spiritual development (or even critical awareness) is brought into play, such learning is likely to seem inadequate from an educational point of view. There are values reflected in our choices concerning what to talk about.

Third, the three facets of authenticity described above are at least potentially in tension with one another. Textual authenticity implies that the

guiding principle of curriculum design should be the interests and utterances of the target culture. Personal authenticity implies that the driving force should be the identity and experience of the student. Widdowson has recently suggested that these two ideals, the authority of the native speaker and the primacy of the individual's learning processes and goals, are logically incompatible, and the tension between them is a significant part of what animates a pedagogy such as that advocated by Claire Kramsch, in which the perspectives of the learner, the native culture and the target culture are seen as standing in unavoidable conflict.⁷ Again, adopting a Christian standpoint raises further questions. Barbara Carvill and I have argued elsewhere that a goal of foreign language learning should be to foster among students an ethic of hospitality to the stranger.⁸ This emphasis runs against the grain of many influential versions of the ideal of personal authenticity. It suggests that I will find authenticity not in the sovereign reign of my own interests and perspectives, but in attentive love of my (foreign) neighbor. It also hints that there may be a way of combining personal engagement with an orientation to the other's perspective, the voices and stories emerging from the target culture, without demanding that learners become passive receptacles of anything foreign that comes their way. The host is not a mimic, and love must be accompanied by discernment.

There has been much that is positive in the pursuit of authenticity – the desire to do more justice to the language itself, to the people who speak it and to the needs of students. I suggest that Christian educators should, however, be pushing the argument further. We should be tracing as concretely as possible the ways in which the ideal of authenticity points beyond the pragmatics of everyday language use and evokes a wider moral and spiritual context, a sense of what it means to communicate authentically that ultimately leads back to the question of how we should live, and the relevance of Christlikeness to our lives as language learners and users. We should be doing so with an eye to the detail, combining our attempts to articulate the ideal with an attentiveness to the day-to-day practical consequences in terms of pedagogy. Perhaps we can play a role in calling our field to a deeper authenticity that is often left out of the picture, but without which the picture makes much less sense.

Introduction to volume 3

As we seek to build upon Phyllis Mitchell's pioneering work as the journal's first editor, this third issue introduces some changes in format. At the core stands our existing purpose of publishing quality research articles. In this issue those articles include a study of the effects of a pedagogical intervention at a Christian college designed to help students to think in Christian terms about the purposes of language learning, an examination of Cervantes' attitude to Scriptural texts in *Don Quixote*, and a discussion of what North American Christian students can gain from interaction with Latin American culture. All three articles take up, in their different ways, the concern described above with a wider context of faithfulness beyond a merely pragmatic view of language education.

Research articles remain our central concern; arranged around them, the present issue adds new sections that we hope will serve to broaden and deepen exploration of the relationship between Christianity and foreign language education. In addition to a more extended editorial, we have added a **book review section** and a **forum**. The book review section offers space for discussion of books relevant to the concerns of the journal, whether books that are themselves directly concerned with faith-learning integration in foreign language education or books which raise issues, positively or negatively, that should be of particular concern to Christian foreign language educators. We invite submission of reviews and of suggestions of books that should be reviewed.

The forum is intended to offer space for other kinds of writing than the research article. More meditative or provocative pieces, reports of research in progress, and reports of successful pedagogical strategies will, we hope, appear in this section. We are looking here for shorter pieces of writing which, while not being fully referenced research articles, will stimulate discussion or make concrete pedagogical suggestions. Although the referencing will be less, we are still looking for careful, high quality writing and relevance to the concerns of the journal and its readers.

We commend this third issue of the *Journal of Christianity and Foreign Languages* to you, and look forward to receiving your contributions to future issues.

David I. Smith and Donna West

NOTES

¹ Savignon, Sandra J. "Research on the Role of Communication in Classroom-Based Foreign Language Acquisition: On the Interpretation, Expression, and Negotiation of Meaning." *Foreign Language Acquisition Research and the Classroom*. Ed. B. F. Freed. Boston: D. C. Heath, 1991. 31-53, p.33.

² Baker, William R. "'Above All Else': Contexts of the Call for Verbal Integrity in James 5:12." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*.54 (1994): 57-71, p.59.

³ Widdowson, H. G. *Teaching Language as Communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, p.133.

Breen, Michael P., and Christopher N. Candlin. "The Essentials of a Communicative Curriculum in Language Teaching." *Applied Linguistics* 1.2 (1980): 89-112, p.102.

⁵ Rivers, Wilga M. *Communicating Naturally in a Second Language: Theory and Practice in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p.44.

⁷ See Widdowson, *Teaching Language*; Kramsch, Claire. *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

⁸ Smith, David I., and Barbara Carvill. *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality and Foreign Language Learning*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.