## What are Authentic Materials?

Authentic materials are print, video, and audio materials students encounter in their daily lives, such as change-of-address forms, job applications, menus, voice mail messages, radio programs, and videos. Authentic materials are not created specifically to be used in the classroom, but they make excellent learning tools for students precisely because they are authentic.

There are two main categories of authentic materials—**print** and **auditory**. English as a second language (ESL), adult secondary education (ASE), and adult basic education (ABE) students all can benefit from using authentic **print** materials. ESL students often use authentic **auditory** materials, although ABE and ASE students also may find them useful. Some examples of the many types of authentic **print** materials include

- Utility bills
- Packing slips
- Order forms
- ATM screens
- ATM receipts
- Web sites
- Street signs
- Coupons
- Traffic tickets
- Greeting cards
- Calendars
- Report cards
- TV guides
- Food labels
- Magazines
- Newspapers

Examples of authentic **auditory** materials include

- Phone messages
- Radio broadcasts
- Podcasts
- E-books
- Movies
- Videos and DVDs
- Television programs

## How can Students Benefit from Using Authentic Materials?

Authentic materials help students bridge the gap between the classroom and the outside world. Many students enroll in school to learn or improve a language-related task, such as helping a child with homework or speaking English at work. Others enroll because they have personal long-term goals that involve education, such as becoming an engineer or business owner. In working with new students, teachers need to identify why students have come to class. When teachers know learners' motivations, they can target instruction to meet those goals. A key way to help learners reach their goals is to use authentic, goal-directed materials.

Example: Cynthia, a woman in her mid-thirties, enrolls in an adult literacy program to help her pass a written exam to

become a baggage handler at the local airport. Following intake and assessment, the program assigns her to an ABE classroom and places her in a reading group. The reading group uses a course reader and workbook appropriate to Cynthia's level. Eventually, she will gain the general literacy skills that will move her closer to her goal of passing the baggage handler test. However, she enrolled in adult education with a short-term goal of passing a test and getting a job, and may find it difficult to see the connection between class instruction and her goal. As a result, teachers should not be surprised if Cynthia becomes discouraged and drops out after a few weeks or months.

To prevent this from happening, the teacher could spend time with Cynthia the first day she enters class and ask her to identify and record her learning goals. Then, the teacher can engage Cynthia in finding the authentic materials she needs to pass the baggage handler test. Following a few phone calls and some online research on the classroom computer, Cynthia and her teacher discover that the test consists of identifying airport codes from memory. They discover that they can download the list of codes on the spot. Next, they set up a daily schedule for Cynthia consisting of time in the reading group and time studying airport codes. The goal of passing the exam now seems within her grasp, and she is delighted that the instructional materials are aligned with her individual goal. It is likely Cynthia will be highly motivated to persist in adult education because her real-world and classroom goals are one and the same.

A study of ABE, GED, and ESL students (Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, and Soler, 2001) showed that, when they used authentic materials *inside* the classroom, they were more likely to engage in literacy activities *outside* the classroom. If students express interest in improving nutrition, having them read authentic materials such as food labels *inside* the classroom should increase the likelihood they will also read labels at the supermarket. A study of ESL students showed that using authentic materials and instruction can increase students' reading gains on standardized tests (Condelli, Wrigley, Yoon, Cronen, and Seburn, 2003).

## How can Teachers Incorporate Authentic Materials into Teaching and Learning?

The following strategies are adapted from the publication, *Creating Authentic Materials and Activities for the Adult Literacy Classroom: A Handbook for Practitioners,* which can be downloaded at no cost from www.ncsall.net.

**Always start with needs assessment.** The first step in using authentic materials is identifying students' needs and goals. Teachers can do this in a variety of ways: scheduling one-on-

one intake interviews with students, conducting weekly learner focus groups and discussions, administering written needs assessment surveys, etc. Regardless of the method of assessment, the key objective is to pinpoint each student's goals. Teachers may need to make several attempts and reframe questions many times before students narrow their responses from a vague, "I want to learn to read" to a more precise, "I want to be able to read road maps and freeway signs so I can travel outside my neighborhood."

**Invite students to participate in the process of identifying authentic materials.** Students may be puzzled when teachers ask them to bring order forms, coupons, recipes, and other *non-school* materials to class. They may consider these materials inappropriate for school, based on their earlier academic experiences or their cultural perspectives. Teachers can engage them in conversations about the rationale for using authentic materials and ask them to collect and bring authentic materials to class to support their learning goals.

**Collect *local* materials.** Many teachers have a habit of collecting authentic materials wherever they go in the community. Authentic texts vary by type, region, and context. Research tells us that students will benefit more from using local authentic materials than using ones that are a step removed from their lives (Jacobson, Degener, and Purcell-Gates, 2003). For example, generic charts and maps from life skills textbooks may not be as motivating to students as the local theater schedule, local rainfall charts, or the municipal bus map. There is a wealth of local authentic materials available online, such as city council meeting agendas, library schedules, and recipes for favorite regional dishes.

**Use authentic materials in authentic ways.** It is important to use materials in *authentic* ways, not in traditional *school-based* ways. The purpose or function of authentic materials often will determine how teachers use them. For example, it is far more beneficial to use a current newspaper to search for relevant information, such as what the weather will be tomorrow or the best place to buy new tires, than it is to use an outdated newspaper to locate proper nouns. The first example shows authentic use of materials; the second is a school-based approach. Keeping authenticity at the forefront, teachers can help students

- Create and update personal calendars and address books,
- Write postcards they will mail after class,
- Make shopping lists they will use that evening, and
- Respond to e-mail from their children's teachers.

**Warn students of the challenges ahead.** Authentic texts can be challenging for learners. Depending on the nature of the text, teachers should caution learners about frustrations they may encounter in reading a letter from their children's schools or studying the small print on parking tickets. Even if the student cannot read every word of the parking ticket, the teacher can *scaffold* (provide temporary support to students to reduce the complexity of a task) his or her reading skills and minimize the difficulty of the text by helping with vocabulary words and teaching scanning skills. Some teachers scaffold students' check-writing skills by providing pre-printed wallet cards that show the spelling of each number. Although students may not independently read parking tickets or write

checks, they will practice reading real-life materials, and the satisfaction of solving real-life problems will provide powerful incentives for future learning. Another means of scaffolding is teaching shortcuts, such as scanning for expiration dates on coupons. With practice, students can locate expiration dates quickly and enjoy the rewards of using coupons.

**Assess in authentic ways.** Students generally like having their learning assessed in authentic ways. If a student's learning goal is to match packing slips with invoices at work, a logical and authentic method of assessing progress is to simulate the task in the classroom. The teacher can keep a chart comparing performance on the same task week to week until the student masters the skill. Multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank tests are *inauthentic* ways to assess a skill such as invoice matching. Reproducing the task is a more meaningful way to assess learning because it measures how the student will perform the task in the real world. It measures exactly what the student came to class to learn.

## What Additional Resources are Available on Authentic Materials?

Condelli, L., Wrigley, H. S., Yoon, K., Cronen, S., & Seburn, M. (2003). *What works study for adult ESL literacy students: Final report.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Jacobson, E., Degener, S., & Purcell-Gates, V. (2003). *Creating authentic materials and activities for the adult literacy classroom: A handbook for practitioners.* NCSALL teaching and training materials. Boston, MA: NCSALL at World Education.

Purcell-Gates, V., Degener, S., Jacobson, E., & Soler, M. (2001). Taking literacy skills home. *Focus on Basics, 4*(D), 19-22.

Wrigley, H. (2003). A conversation with FOB: What works for ESL students. *Focus on Basics, 6*(C), 14-17.

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