

What is “authentic” English and where do I get it?

This series of articles on bilingual education in Thailand has, since July last year, addressed topics including models of bilingual education, benefits of bilingual education, student errors, native and non-native speakers as teachers and how English fits in to the Asian language environment. A central concern, however, in all these discussions is how students in Thailand can most effectively and efficiently learn to use English “authentically”.

What do we mean by “authentic” and “authentically” in regard to learning and using English? The previous article in this series spoke of “authenticity of language”. This term referred to “real, appropriate language”, such as that used by a native speaker. It could also, however, refer to authentic use of English – where English must be used to attain a genuine purpose, such as to gain information, express a need or transact business. In speaking of authentic English, therefore, we are speaking of English as it is actually used by a native speaker or used among

native or non-native speakers for a real purpose. Learning English authentically, then, means that we are learning the language by hearing, observing, speaking and writing from native or native-like models and through realistic experiences. With regard to reading, it means that we are learning to read English through texts that are natural, flowing and culturally acceptable models of written language.

In a bilingual school based on the Thai model of “parallel immersion” (where core curriculum areas are taught in both Thai and English), students spend much of their day listening to native and near-native speakers of English, watching their body language, seeing them communicate with each other as well as with their classes, reading the teacher’s notes on the white board, reading from different native-model texts and writing English for the teacher’s correction and assessment. The nature of tasks may vary, depending on the subject, but the language and process of instruction and the interaction between the teacher and students are models of authentic English. But is this enough?

The writer estimates, based on Canadian data and its application to the Thai situation, that a child in a bilingual program with about 50% English and 50% Thai needs at least eleven years of school-based instruction to attain academic bilingualism – the ability to study effectively in both languages at the appropriate level. This ability is attained by many students in bilingual schools, and not only by those who begin bilingual education in Kindergarten, though that certainly helps. This estimate of eleven years does not take into account additional English learning opportunities, such as Saturday tuition, practice at home and the like. However, one cannot say how “authentic” these out-of-hours experiences are. What, then, can be done to extend a child’s opportunities to gain authentic English language experience?

Obviously if one or more people in the family have native or near-native English ability, much can be done at home. However, in Thailand, we must assume this is not often the case (though it may well be so in the case of people reading this article). Let us consider a few other options.

First, one cannot deny the importance of giving children authentic reading matter. Depending on age, the difficulty of the text will vary; however, it is important that the reading material be attractive, interesting, written in a natural style and be a little above the child’s ability, but not too much (the child should be able to read without much difficulty 80% or more of the words). In Thailand much of this material will be imported and, hence, expensive. Access to libraries is vital, therefore, to parents who wish to provide extensive reading in English to their children. Well-stocked school libraries are a very important source of authentic reading material in English.

Second, VCDs and DVDs are valuable provided that the following conditions are met:

- (a) The speakers are either real human actors or animated characters that interact in authentic ways similar to their human counterparts. This is important so that children can observe body language and hear the stress, rhythm and intonation of authentic spoken English.
- (b) The spoken language is clear – not too difficult to hear or understand. Many contemporary and recent

English-language movies are not suitable because the actors do not speak clearly. In a recent discussion on the worldwide TESL-L forum, a major discussion list for English teachers, many native speakers agreed that they could not understand what the actors were saying in television movies, VCDs and DVDs. Even native speakers of English have to rely on the sub-titles at the bottom of the screen to learn what the actors are saying!

(c) It needs to be noted separately that, in Thailand, cheap DVDs have sub-titles that bear no resemblance either to what the actors are saying, or to any meaningful utterance in English! So, if you do not want your children to be completely confused and misled by the sub-titles, do not buy them cheap pirated DVDs.

A third highly valuable experience in authentic English is travel in an English-speaking country. Of course, this is expensive and beyond the financial capacity of most Thai parents to provide. However, for parents with some financial resources, Malaysia (especially Penang), Singapore and the Philippines are not far away, and,

although these countries are not exactly English-speaking countries (though Singapore is getting very close to being one), there is much good English spoken and opportunities to practise English in natural contexts and for real purposes. School-organised study tours to places like Australia, New Zealand and Britain also provide a very rich and intensive experience of English in its natural environment.

I'm sure readers have other ideas for extending children's opportunities to experience and use authentic English, but the options discussed above: bilingual schooling, authentic reading, careful selection of video material, and travel to places where English is widely used, are important sources of authentic language.

seeking out new ways of educating Thai children and learning from their experience as they go, they are creating pathways for the future. If they do so within the parameters of core Thai values and beliefs, they are as authentic and genuine as anyone can realistically hope for.