Using Commencement Speeches to Link Global Issues with Language Learning

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Introduction

This article outlines a rationale for the use of teaching materials that link global education themes and language learning in an EFL context. Based primarily on the belief that education is a non-neutral process and that teaching can play a strong role in addressing social/global injustice, the idea is based on examining global issues through the provision of authentic, meaningful and interesting spoken texts. An instructional procedure based on meaningful interaction with and about a specific type of authentic text (university commencement speeches) is suggested for intermediate-level Japanese university students enrolled in content-based language courses.

The approach suggested here is essentially a flexible work plan with the dual aims of helping students build much-needed listening and language description skills, and developing interest in global education issues. The authentic text featured in this paper can be mined in such a way that individual teachers can negotiate an appropriate balance between global issues content and language teaching aims – this will obviously vary, based on the wide range of situational teaching contexts. The approach involves a primary focus on language skills but the meaning and importance of the target content is always central. Depending on the teaching context, the overall balance can be either meaning/content centered, or geared to more prominently feature form and language development throughout.

Why Commencement Speeches?

The materials we select as language teachers and how we present them can have a deep impact on students. One source for English teaching materials is university commencement speeches - inspiring speeches by famous guest speakers given at university graduation ceremonies. There are many great commencement speeches available featuring global education issues ranging from the environment to gender to social responsibility to poverty. I have used speeches by, among others, screenwriter Nora Ephron (Wellesley College, 1996, gender equality), feminist leader Gloria Steinem (Tufts University, 1987, personal politics and gender equality), Tom Hanks (Vassar College, 2005, social responsibility), Al Gore (Johns Hopkins University, 2005, the environment) and Madeline Albright (University of California Berkeley, 2000, Iraq sanctions with a very moving rebuttal from valedictorian Fadia Rafeedie).

First, these speeches are presented as authentic texts. For our purposes the concept of authenticity simply refers to texts which are not originally designed for pedagogical purposes. Little et al., (1988) provide us with a useful working definition of authentic texts as any text "created to fulfill some social purpose in the language community in which it was produced" (p. 27). As authentic spoken texts, commencement speeches contain realistic and natural examples of language and usually feature inspirational rhetoric by well-known speakers aiming to motivate and inspire young people to fulfill their potential and social responsibility. They are easily accessible from the Internet and therefore activities are not confined to the classroom. Commencement speeches also provide us with a manageable text size (usually 10-15 minutes), which can be further cut into smaller extracts for more detailed focus.

For this article, a recent university commencement speech – Bono's 2004 University of Pennsylvania address - has been selected for several reasons. It features a pressing global education theme and has motivational value in that the speaker is well known to students. Guariento and Morley (2001) have noted the motivational impact of authentic texts in giving "the learner the feeling that he or she is learning the 'real' language; that they are in touch with a living entity, the target language as it is used by the community that speaks it" (p. 347). The speech deals passionately with poverty in Africa, blending a politically charged message with humor and a variety of cultural references. Although my aim is always to incorporate authentic mediated spoken language through the provision of audio files, teachers can also easily utilize written versions of this and other commencement speeches. Although written texts are much easier to find than audio files, much more can be done pedagogically with the spoken versions, where available.

Focus: Listening and Language Description

For this teaching procedure, the primary focus is on listening and describing the features of spoken language. Commencement speeches can be utilized for a variety of language teaching aims

including vocabulary development, discourse organization, language description and listening. As one example of how such texts can be mined for vocabulary purposes, Lingley (2007) has identified features of the Bono speech to focus on how the speaker uses multiple word unit (MWU) vocabulary items and metaphor to construct meaning, structure discourse and convey an emotionally charged message. Different types of MWUs can be used for analysis including the idiomatic expressions, phrasal verbs and lexical phrases that the speaker uses to structure the flow of natural speech.

A more specific approach focusing on key extracts of the speech can be used to show how students can improve fluency in recounting a story or in explaining what another person has said. If we think about how we use language in daily life, telling stories and sharing experiences through short narratives are central, and Bono's commencement address provides two brief, moving streams of speech which are particularly effective in demonstrating such features in use. Let's start with Extract 1 at right.

Bono Extract #1: "Betray the Age"

This first extract offers obvious chances to springboard into many global issues discussion topics. There is the passionate suggestion that we need to act ('*If you want to serve the age, betray it.*'), the history of segregation in the U.S. and how it was abolished, and the pointed challenge to re-think how we really view Africans – something at the core of social responsibility. However, students will first need significant help in linguistically accessing this brief stream of speech (only 2:47 seconds). It is filled with difficult vocabulary items ('*foibles*', '*certitudes*', '*pieties*'), colloquial use of language ('*called it as it was*', '*came down*', '*blind spots*', '*proving ground*', etc.), and difficult cultural references ('*Brown vs. Board of Education*'). It also gives the teacher a chance to consider the concept of authenticity along a continuum.

This extract is from a part of the speech in which the speaker is actually reading more carefully from written notes. In other parts of the speech, such as Extract 2 below, Bono seems to be speaking more naturally, perhaps from notes but not reading notes. As such, we are able to consider the text on many levels – the spectrum of authenticity at text level, the global issues of poverty and social responsibility at content level, and vocabulary and cultural references at the language learning level. The text becomes that much richer when we consider these levels organically rather than separately.

Bono's Commencement Address
(University of Pennsylvania 2004)

▪ **Extract 1:**

There's a really great, truly great Irish poet. His name is Brendan Kennelly, and he has this epic poem called the Book of Judas, and there's a line in that poem that never leaves my mind: "If you want to serve the age, betray it." What does that mean, to betray the age? Well to me betraying the age means exposing its conceits, it's foibles; it's phony moral certitudes. It means telling the secrets of the age and facing harsher truths. Every age has its massive moral blind spots. We might not see them, but our children will. Slavery was one of them and the people who best served that age were the ones who called it as it was, which was ungodly and inhuman. Ben Franklin called it when he became president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. Segregation. There was another one. America sees this now but it took a civil rights movement to betray their age. And 50 years ago the U.S. Supreme Court betrayed the age May 17, 1954, it says here, Brown vs. Board of Education came down and put the lie to the idea that separate can ever really be equal. Amen to that.

Fast-forward 50 years May 17, 2004. What are the ideas right now worth betraying? What are the lies we tell ourselves now? What are the blind spots of our age? What's worth spending your post-Penn lives trying to do or undo? It might be something simple. It might be something as simple as our deep down refusal to believe that every human life has equal worth. Could that be it? Could that be it?

Each of you will probably have your own answer, but for me that is it. And for me the proving ground has been Africa. Africa makes a mockery of what we say, at least what I say, about equality. It questions our pieties and our commitments because there's no way to look at what's happening over there and its effect on all of us and conclude that we actually consider Africans as our equal before God. There is no chance.

Bono Extract #2: "Take My Son"

Extract 2 provides us with something further along the continuum of authenticity. It can be used to contrast the authenticity features of Extract 1, and it is an inspirational and personalized story highlighting poverty and famine in Africa. It offers much in the way of spoken language features.

Drawing students' attention to features of natural spoken language is effective for teaching listening and helping them to cope with 'real' language

Bono's Commencement Address
(University of Pennsylvania 2004)

■ **Extract 2:**

An amazing event happened here in… Philadelphia in 1985, Live Aid, that whole 'We Are The World' phenomenon, the concert that happened here. Well after that concert, I went to Ethiopia with my wife, Ali; we were there for a month and … er …an extraordinary thing happened to me. Er… we used to wake up in the morning and er the lift, the mist would be lifting; we'd see thousands and thousands of people who'd been walking all night, and er…to our food station where we were working. And one man – I, I was standing outside talking to with the translator – had this beautiful boy and he was saying to me in Amharic, I guess it was, I was saying I, I can't understand what he's saying; and this nurse who spoke English and Amharic said to me, he's saying will you take his son. He's saying please take his son; he, he, he would be a great son for you. And I was looking puzzled and he said, "You must take my son because if you don't take my son, my son will surely die. If you take him he will go, go back to where he is and get an education." Probably like the ones we're talking about today. And, I of course, I had to say no; that was the rules there, and I, I walked away from that man. I've never really walked away from it. But I think about that boy and that, that man…

in use. For example, spoken language is messy and can be very hard to follow even when it is lacking in lexical density.

Understanding spoken language means being able to account for performance variables - Bono makes false starts, exhibits hesitation and redundancy and even makes the odd grammatical slip ('*that was the rules'*, '*he will go back to where he is'*). He also confuses tense in recounting the story, and there may be difficulty for the learner in determining the flow of the story because of the wide use of pronouns and referring expressions.

The extract also features examples of morphological and phonological reduction. Add to these the idiomatic features ('*walk away from*') and the cultural references, and the average intermediate level EFL student is faced with a most daunting challenge in understanding this brief stream of speech (time: 1:40 seconds). Repeated listens to samples like this, accompanied by a wide range of collaborative transcription activities, can help the learner to become more comfortable with and knowledgeable about spoken language.

This is clearly a "bottom up" approach to the teaching of listening using authentic texts. Field (2003; 2008) has noted the need to shift attention back to "the primacy of signal" (p. 325) to better complement top down strategies. As such, this approach is not a test of listening comprehension. It is an organic look at spoken text features with a process-based approach to help students identify problematic areas in listening. A collaborative student-student or teacher-student description of what we are actually hearing provides students with clues to help process listening.

Some operational tips

This approach is offered as one suggestion for how authentic materials can be exploited as meaningful input in the global education/language classroom. To summarize, find motivational speeches – ones that motivate either you or your students. May and June is the best time of year to search for speeches from North American schools. The whole text can be used but a focus on selected extracts will be more manageable for students and allows the teacher to provide tuition in, or revise, a more specific area. Next, repeated listenings accompanied by different kinds of collaborative work (teachers should work together with students to transcribe listening texts) keeps the focus on the process of listening rather than the product. Build up a bank of transcriptions with students that can be used for future classes, and vary activities frequently (full transcription, while-listening transcriptions, gap fill, every other word, etc.). Finally, be aware that students find the first segments of a stream of speech more difficult than the back end, and that their background with written texts will override what they are hearing.

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