Chapter 9
Using Authentic Materials at the Beginning Levels:
The Case of Hindi
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1. What Is Authentic?

The notion of authentic materials in the context of Hindi does not simply mean the use of natural or real language as opposed to contrived language teaching materials, as suggested by Omaggio (1986). It is also not fully captured by the categories of unmodified authentic discourse and simulated authentic discourse of Geddes and White (1978). Authentic language in Hindi is a complex phenomenon with many layers of social styles — urban educated style versus uneducated style, high caste language versus low caste language, standard radio and TV language versus everyday spoken language. In addition, Hindi has many regional dialects with special linguistic features.

To enhance students’ reading proficiency in their second language, the types of materials recommended for use by Grellet (1981) are unedited literary passages, poems, letters, postcards, telegrams, newspapers and magazines, advertisements, travel brochures, tickets, timetables, and various forms. One would imagine that the authentic or natural form of a language would be closest to its commonly used style. However, that is not the case in Hindi, where parallel styles of language exist for common use which are similar in grammatical structures but at times totally estranged from one another in terms of lexical usage. The vocabulary on a railway ticket or a certain government office form may not be understood by someone well-versed in Hindi. Similarly a headline of a newspaper could be opaque to another Hindi speaker not familiar with this particular style. Most native Hindi speakers pick up the lexicon through social interaction or education. They may use a variety of these styles depending upon the exposure or expertise they may have; some may remain part of their passive knowledge. In teaching Hindi as a second language, these alternative lexicons not only raise the difficulty level of the learner but at times become a hindrance in the learning process. In order to say “I think,” the learner must encounter three ways of saying it — "māñ sloćā ḫā,” “merā khayāl hai, “merā vicār hai.” The students encounter words in authentic written materials that they might never hear in speech, e.g., words like "grāmīna” villager," mudrā" currency," kāryakram” program,” dār-darshan” television.” They may have learned dehātī in place of grāmīna or karanśī instead of mudrā. There are at least three parallel styles in the authentic or real (unmodified and unsimulated) language. Which authentic style should be taught at the beginning level may not be an easy decision. One may prefer the colloquial style, but the most common announcements or items like tickets and pamphlets use high-style Sanskritized Hindi.

It is in this context that I would like to focus on two questions in this paper — how can authentic materials be used effectively in the Hindi language classroom and how should they be combined with other learning strategies in order to enhance the second language acquisition process.

2. An Experiment with Two Groups of Students

The observations and conclusions in this paper are based on my actual experience in the classroom. There were two sections of beginning level students, a mix of undergraduates and graduates. They were in the fourth week of their first semester of Hindi when I decided to introduce the authentic materials. In both sections, the students were of varying backgrounds. About 40 percent of them came from South Asian homes, born and raised in the United States; the rest were white Americans. I met the first section (group 1) only once a week for one hour; the rest of the time (four hours) they learned through the traditional grammar-translation method of teaching. The second section (group 2) had two hours of unedited authentic reading materials, two hours of simulated materials, and only one hour of grammar instruction.

Reading Materials

The reading materials were a collection of unedited authentic texts (a few times, the typed version was also provided, when the original was too hard to read) with appropriate exercises for the beginning level students, developed by a committee of experts with the ACTFL guidelines (Gambhir et al. 1991). The texts covered a wide range of cultural topics and provided enough extra-linguistic clues to make them comprehensible to beginning level learners (see sample texts 1–3 in the appendix). The comprehension questions were in English in order to help students get clues for reading. Since the most prevalent written styles use Sanskritized Hindi, the texts in the collection were also in this high style, except for few, such as a restaurant menu.

Strategies to Enhance Students’ Reading Ability

We used pre-reading as a brainstorming activity. Even at the novice level we tried to use Hindi only. As in brainstorming one idea leads to the another, everyone came up with some words or phrases. Sometimes a great number of these were generated at the pre-reading exercises. This process also gave students an opportunity to create with the language. In this way, right from the beginning, they were encouraged to create with the target language. This activity also inspired students to use their oral abilities as they tried to communicate ideas solely through Hindi. Of course, at times they did need their teacher’s help to formulate their ideas, but the pre-reading activity did break the ice. Since the students had very different perspectives on the topic, their general understanding of the topic increased besides the language input.
The students also received additional contextual information at the pre-reading activity; this worked as an advance organizer and helped them enter the main text with less apprehension. The questions in the main reading section also provided clues for making guesses and comprehending the text.

**Initial Response of the Two Groups**

Before introducing the materials to the class, I had explained to them the nature and method of use of these materials. However, they were not given any written instructions on how to use the materials. The students were excited and seemed to be looking forward to the upcoming new approach. At the same time, as expected, their excitement was mixed with apprehension.

The materials were culturally rich enough to stimulate the students’ initial interest in them. The texts retained the original layout and were supported by visuals that stimulated the students’ curiosity. The students felt gratified to experience the authentic world of another language right at the beginning of instruction. But very soon some problems began to surface. The students complained that the materials had to read because of the poor printing. For example, in the first reading text about the map of India, the names of the cities and states of India on the map were illegible to most students. These students had only recently been introduced to the Devanagari script and therefore were not yet ready to deal with the obscurities of the script along with the ignorance of the subject. They began to feel frustrated. Some of the students with some previous knowledge about particular Indian cities were able to guess, but others began to give up. Here the students familiar with India had an advantage. A number of them had either heard of these places or actually visited them, and they could place them on the map without actually reading the names letter by letter.

The other problem was the students’ inevitable habit of reading each and every written word on the text and not limiting themselves to reading what the question-answer sheet had intended to guide them to read. Besides my insisting that they were not to read the names of all the cities on the map but only the ones they could easily read or the ones that were required in order to answer the questions, they kept on trying to read all of them. Failing in this they inevitably felt frustrated. This particular problem continued with a number of texts. Furthermore, some texts were much harder to read because of very small print or fuzzy photocopying. In order to maintain their authenticity, most of the time the print was neither enlarged nor retyped.

At times the students did experience a sense of achievement when they were able to decipher certain words. I encouraged them to work in groups, which made the task easier, but at times a whole group failed in its endeavor. In one of the texts about a new village-style restaurant in one of New Delhi’s posh hotels, students were unable to relate the village atmosphere to a restaurant. With no knowledge of vocabulary and no clues from the illustrations, they were completely confused. As a result they were reading a simple English word “lunch” in Devanagari script as “sunch” and “dinner” as “linner.” They never imagined that the text had anything to do with a restaurant. They kept saying that the pictures depicted an ashram, so what did it have to do with the Ashoka hotel (which was placed at the bottom left-hand corner of the text). One student did have some idea of this being a restaurant, but, afraid of being wrong, she withheld this speculation in the class and only expressed her idea later. In a few other texts as well, the visual clues were misleading or did not provide any help. In the text about the light and sound show, almost every word on the program was unfamiliar to them and they could not figure out what the program was about. But in this case the architecture of the text helped to indicate that it was a program announcement and eventually, working in a group, they were able to figure out.

A partial cause of this overall failure was that the students were afraid to guess. They had to be reminded each time to use this privilege. But the fear of sounding foolish was so deep in them that they avoided guessing unless they were sure they were right.

**Reaction of Group 1**

The students of group 1 — used to the traditional teaching styles — were becoming less and less responsive to these unconventional materials. They were inhibited in making guesses and would not make any assumption unless and until they were sure of their understanding capability. They were also very uncomfortable with the ambiguities in the text. There was a natural urge to know and understand everything on the page, which they could not because of the level of difficulty, or because the materials were so designed that they were to ignore those sections. The students who were top achievers suffered more from the ambiguities and uncertainties in the texts. They kept insisting that the materials should be made more readable with better printing and retyping. They also expressed concern about reading silently in class, as they were not sure that by reading in this manner if they were pronounced the words correctly. They genuinely felt that, after they had learned the language well enough through the simulated materials and grammar drills, they should be able to read authentic language as well. They had not realized that learning with artificial language materials was hardly going to help them with the authentic materials because the two were far apart in their syntax, lexicon, and usage. They insisted on their demand for larger print and more clarity in the language learning materials.

A stage came when their tolerance for ambiguities ran out. The students began to resist the use of authentic materials in the class. Despite my explanation about the use of the materials, they were feeling too uncomfortable to learn through them.

**Reaction of Group 2**

During this period, the group that had almost 50 percent of class time devoted to the authentic materials was still enjoying the challenges posed by these new reading materials and had learned a great deal through them. (The details are given in Section 4 below under the subheading “The Secrets of Success for Group 2.”)
3. Analysis of Recent Theories for Reading Comprehension

According to recent research findings (see, e.g., Goodman 1967), reading is a process that involves much more than loud reading with simultaneous translation in the native language. In the teaching of Hindi, as soon as a student becomes familiar with the Devanagari letters, we presume that he or she knows how to read Hindi. And as Wilga M. Rivers says, "We stand them up and make them read aloud, preferably from previously unseen texts, to demonstrate 'how well they read.' Then, to cap our ineptitude, we ask them questions on what they have just been reading aloud. Each of these common procedures could hardly be better designed to thwart the student who wishes to learn to read the second language effectively, in the sense of drawing coherent meaning from the text" (Rivers 1978).

In the evolution of language, the spoken language generally precedes the written one. Therefore, unless one is already familiar with the concepts in a given language, it is impossible to extract meaning by decoding only the script. A script like Urdu requires the reader to be already familiar with the words he or she is going to read. There are no signs for short vowels. There are four signs for the consonant "s." The reader has to make guesses on the basis of pre-acquired knowledge of the linguistic as well as the sociocultural code.

It has been established in recent research that the reader's preexisting knowledge about both the linguistic code and the world can be as important as the actual words on the page. According to Frank Smith, "only a small part of the information necessary for the reading comprehension comes from the printed page" (Smith 1973). The more the second language reader gets bogged down in individual words, the harder the task becomes. Most of the time, the reading task is a laborious decoding process for our students, mainly because they are unfamiliar with the code. They lack not only the knowledge of the linguistic code but also the knowledge of the cultural context of the reading material, which can be as foreign as the language in which they are reading.

Another startling finding of Frank Smith is that comprehension must precede the identification of individual words. Inefficiency in reading is thus related to the amount of knowledge a person has, not only of the language forms but also of the conceptual and informational area in which the passage has been written. One could very well be familiar with the grammar and vocabulary of a language and still not be able to operate within it because one does not have the necessary links within the conceptual networks to the new forms. Therefore it is also true that the more non-visual information the reader possesses, the less visual information is needed. This fact also suggests that rushing to a bilingual dictionary is of very little help to second language learners because meaning is embedded in the cultural context and not in the isolated words. In the traditional setting, of course, a dictionary is an inevitable part of the process of learning to read because the emphasis is not on the extraction of information from the text but on the reading process itself.

It seems that, in my two classes, the students' positive response and learning or resistance to the authentic reading materials was largely a question of the students' attitudes toward reading or the concept of reading as well as familiarity with the cultural contexts.

What the students were trying to accomplish was a fluent decoding of the text, whereas, according to Goodman (1967) fluent reading is a "psycho-linguistic guessing game" that requires "skill in selecting the fewest most productive cues necessary to produce guesses."

4. Causes of Failure in Reading the Authentic Materials

The process I used in these classes was exactly counter to what students are generally used to in our language classes — reading-translating and decoding each individual word. The new authentic materials I was using were not designed to be used in the conventional reading method. The students nevertheless tried to decode each word individually. The process of comprehension preceding the identification of individual words did not occur because of the students' impatience with acquiring cultural clues and their personal lack of knowledge in this area. The moment they looked at the text, they would either ask for the meaning of a word they did not know or discretely consult the dictionary they always brought to class. The meanings of the words did unfold themselves as the students proceeded systematically. But a number of students could not hold themselves until then. The results proved disastrous.

At a certain point, the class that received four weekly hours of traditional grammar-translation instruction (group 1) refused to read the authentic texts any more. They felt that the ambiguities caused so much tension that it was not worth trying. They also felt that it was better to know one word for one object rather than to expose themselves at once to different styles of Hindi and get confused about it. The texts also did not provide (they were not supposed to provide) any kind of grammatical explanations or vocabulary lists, which added to the students' frustration. They were not sure whether they were learning at all through these materials, since so many things remained vague; and, as their exams were based on the other grammar-related materials, they found themselves even less motivated to change their habits and waste their time on these.

The Secrets of Success for Group 2

The story with group 2 was different. These students also had initial mental resistance, fear, and frustration, but I had more time to work with them. I made sure that the class atmosphere was relaxed and as unthreatening as possible. Right at the start I began to work on influencing their attitudes towards welcoming and accepting the new approach in language learning. The prereading sessions were productive as well as enjoyable. They were given full freedom to bring in any ideas they had about the topic. Thus new vocabulary and expressions were generated at these pre-readings, which worked
as advance organizers for the main text and made it easier for students to handle the materials.

After pre-reading and before skimming texts, they were asked to examine the layout, presentation, and origin of the document and, on this basis, to hypothesize as to the content and function of the text. This helped students recognize the function of the text, which enhanced their global understanding and they felt more confident about decoding the meaning. They became so used to predicting or guessing while reading these texts that they no longer lost the fear of guessing but used it as a natural process in their learning. By the end of the year they were making guesses without being aware of it. Over time they developed awareness as to how these texts were organized and they moved much faster in comprehending them.

The key word for this class was the creative approach. In addition to the use of authentic materials, priority was given not to the memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules but to creating with language right from the beginning.

The students were encouraged to express their own meaning right after they were introduced to a productive skill. In the hours devoted to construction with grammar and simulated materials, the emphasis was put on creating with language within the constraints of the structural patterns: talking about the daily routine while learning the present habitual, or describing their house while learning post-positions, or talking about their families while learning the possessives. Communicative practice was thus structured right at the elementary level.

Writing assignments also emphasized the approach of creating with the language right from the beginning instead of writing grammar-translation sentences. The students wrote on topics that were meaningful to them: Myself, My family, My apartment, My vacations, My hobbies, My schedule for tomorrow. The grammar structures were combined with communicative skills while the students’ difficulty level was kept in mind in the choice of topics. A combination of emphasis on grammatical accuracy and meaningful communication was given right from the beginning of instruction. The students were encouraged to communicate their own meaning even if they had to go slightly beyond their current level of competence and run the risk of making errors.

These authentic reading materials were also combined with authentic survival situations in the target country. These situational role plays were part of the post-reading activities. They were helpful in reinforcing the vocabulary in the context in a meaningful way. The written assignments also used these situations as the students were asked to write dialogues based on these authentic situations.

As the students grew more tolerant of the materials, the materials themselves began to seem quite easy. Of course, they had also become used to handling them and the ambiguities stopped bothering them. As a result they were also becoming comfortable with the different styles of Hindi. This was the first elementary class of Hindi I ever taught who could read Hindi nu-

merals with great ease. The cultural understanding of the students was enhanced to a much higher level than in previous years. The class became student-centered and the students were constantly engaged in class activities. Their progress in oral, written, and reading proficiency was certainly higher than that of any previous group of students that I have taught.

Summary of the Differences Between Group 1 and Group 2

a. Initial response to unconventional authentic materials was almost equal in the two groups.

b. Dependence on non-textual knowledge or cultural context was much greater in group 2.

c. Dependence on grammatical constructions was much greater in group 1.

d. Use of a dictionary was much less in group 2.

e. Reaction to silent reading was more positive in group 2.

f. Attitude toward global understanding of a passage was much more positive in group 2.

g. Dependence on word meaning for comprehension was far more prevalent in group 1.

h. Reaction to unedited authentic text in original type format was much more positive in group 2.

5. Pedagogical Implications

A. What needs to be stressed here is that the students' attitude must be changed. They should not be looking for "literal" meaning all the time. The acceptance of the living meaning, or the changing nature of meaning in context, is essential to the development of effective reading strategies. Therefore, as Rivers (1978) emphasizes, "We have to encourage second language readers to tolerate vagueness, so they will be open to the unfolding meaning as segment is added to segment and first impressions are corrected by later information."

B. One must expose students to such authentic materials right at the beginning of the instruction, so that they develop patience with ambiguity and vagueness in the learning process. After all, even as a native speaker of a language one is constantly making adjustments to ambiguities in communication. The key question is whether the overall approach in the teaching and learning of a second language must emphasize the use of that language in order to accelerate the process of communication.

C. It is advisable to give students more context in order to understand a text rather than sending them to the dictionary. They must understand the importance of the global understanding of a text and refrain from dismissing lack of context as vagueness.

D. Students should be encouraged to work in groups. They feel less inhibited to guess when they are among their peers.
E. It should be impressed on learners that guessing or predicting is part of the natural process of learning. In a classroom they are learning and not being tested, therefore there should be no risk in guessing.

F. To enhance the process of learning, these reading materials must be combined with other communicative strategies, for example, situational roleplays, meaningful and personalized conversations, and written assignments.

G. Testing should be compatible with the teaching process. Students should be tested for successfully performing in the roleplays, meaningful personalized conversations, written assignments, and other such creative activities, not for formal grammar exercises in the language.

H. Students should also be made aware right at the beginning that they are going to learn with unconventional materials so that they develop less resistance.

I. Students should be asked to read carefully the instructions for using the materials provided in the preface of authentic reading materials. This helps to prepare them to deal with the novelties of the materials.

6. Conclusions

At the end-of-year evaluations, it was revealed that these students were excellent in communicating themselves in the target language whether it was reading, writing, or oral communication. However, they did make more grammatical errors compared to the group who received a more traditional course using grammar-translation methods. This more grammatically oriented group did not, however, use the language to communicate and its members were rather tongue-tied when required to speak the language.

In the following year the pattern of instruction was changed. Both groups received 50 percent of grammar-based and simulated instruction and 50 percent teaching with the authentic materials and communicative approach. A couple of students felt that it was too much to absorb simultaneously because they had to learn the simulated materials with grammar exercises as well as the authentic materials in the same week with different instructors. But by the middle of semester they got used to processing the information in their minds and I feel so far that this has been the best solution.

Of course there is no single method of language instruction that can work with every kind of group. Therefore one needs to experiment constantly to make language teaching most effective. However, I feel that using authentic material as opposed to simulated materials in itself made the learning as well as the teaching a very exciting and enjoyable process. The students felt that they were experiencing the target culture directly rather than through someone else. It also brought a quality of authenticity to the classroom where students felt that they were learning “the real stuff.”

Based on my experience with these two groups I can state with conviction that, if we want our students to make their second language learning a part of their life experience and not just an experience limited to their college years, it is very important not only to expose them to the authentic materials in the target language but to expose them to it at the very beginning of their instruction. Furthermore, there are bound to be initial difficulties with the materials or with the students’ attitudes but it is worth surmounting these obstacles in order to achieve success.

References


Chapter 10
“Learn Hindi-Urdu in Just Thirty Years?”
Designing a Dictionary of Constructions for the Advanced Student

Peter Edwin Hook

The position of Hindi-Urdu among the languages of the world is anomalous. The number of its proficient speakers, over three hundred million, places it in third or fourth place after Mandarin, English, and perhaps Spanish. The number of its mother-tongue speakers is, by comparison, very small: people living today who have learned Hindi-Urdu (not some more or less similar Indic language spoken in the Gangetic plain) from their families may number no more than thirty million or ten percent of the total. Its use in verse predates its use in belle-lettristic prose by several centuries; there are hardly any examples of the latter before 1800. Its use as a written language of administration is equally recent. In either its Hindi or Urdu recension it has yet to become the de facto official language of any nation. Its domains of use are similarly restricted. Virtually no technical or scientific material is first published in it. Its use in the social sciences is mostly translational. The elite in the worlds of government, industry and finance, medicine, and education rarely use it in their professional lives. It remains by and large the language of home, bazaar and mosque, mass media, and the military. A consequence of these restrictions in domain is that the segments of the Indian and Pakistani populations whose students from North America and Europe are most likely to meet and most able to interact with and identify with are the segments of the population least likely to use Hindi and Urdu, especially with English-speaking visitors from abroad. Much more than students of Chinese, Japanese, French, or Arabic, students of Hindi-Urdu must struggle to create situations for language learning, even when in a Hindi-Urdu speaking milieu.

The position of Hindi-Urdu among the “less-commonly” taught languages in North American universities is equally anomalous. At my university enrollments in Hindi-Urdu rival Japanese in rate of increase. Over the past ten years they have gone up by 900 percent. Yet the number of graduate students remains after twenty years at the same single-digit level. Among undergraduates the most proficient and the most talented students of Hindi-Urdu are often the least interested in increasing their knowledge of it. And almost no undergraduates continue study past the fourth semester, certification level. One unexpected result of the overall upsurge is that teaching resources are fully employed in meeting the demand for instruction from elementary and intermediate level students, with even less time and energy than before available for teaching students at the third and fourth year.