

Authenticity in Task Design for Vocational English Teaching and Learning: A Case Study of a Project-based Learning Module

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Abstract: *Authenticity* has been viewed as an important issue for ELT and particularly for vocational English (as a branch of ESP) in creating a communicative language environment – in order that learners are exposed to ‘real English’ with ‘intrinsically communicative qualities’ (Lee, 1995) and rehearse the real-world target communication tasks they will have to perform in their workplace contexts. This study explores the theoretical and practical issues concerning the notion of authenticity through a case study of a project-based learning (PBL) vocational English module in a Hong Kong vocational institution, and derives from the research findings a **3-level authenticity model** applicable for ELT task design.

This study has drawn on Bachman’s (1990) *dual notion of authenticity* (situational and interactional authenticity) in conjunction with Halliday’s triad construct of *context of situation* in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1978) as a conceptual framework. It examines the design features of the case PBL tasks through documentary analysis of the project brief and semi-structured interviews with practitioners in the specific purpose field to ascertain the extent to which the tasks are situationally authentic. It also investigates the authenticity of the learners’ interaction with the task features (i.e. the interactional authenticity) by eliciting the learners’ accounts of their engagement with the tasks through retrospective focus group interviews, alongside an analysis of the discourse produced by the learners in performing the tasks. The findings show that authenticity in task design is essentially the **construction of a Context of Situation** aligned with the learner’s Target Language Use (TLU) domain. This provides a rationale and direction for the collaboration between the ESP teacher and the trade specialists in the English-across-the-curriculum approach for vocational education.

Key Words: rubrics; alternative assessment; authentic assessment; ESL, task performance

Introduction

Authenticity has been viewed as an important issue for English Language Teaching (ELT) and particularly for Vocational English¹ for creating a communicative language environment (Widdowson, 1978; van Lier, 1998; Amor, 2002; Breen, 1997; Lee, 1995; Mishan, 2005; Dudley-Evan & St John, 1998; Harding, 2007) – in order that learners be exposed to ‘real English’ with ‘intrinsically communicative qualities’ (Lee, 1995, p.324) and rehearse the real-world target communication tasks they will have to perform

in their prospective workplace (Nunan, 2004, p.20). Thus, the issue of authenticity is highly pertinent in the context of Vocational English in that it brings into the second language classroom the use of authentic trade materials and real-world workplace communication tasks. Theories of language acquisition also emphasise the need for practice in the context of ‘real operating condition’ (Johnson, 1988), i.e. ‘Learners need the opportunity to practice language in the same conditions that apply in real-life situations.’ (Ellis, 2003, p.113).

Studies on authenticity have traditionally been confined

¹ Vocational English is a branch of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) and it aims to meet the learners’ workplace language needs.

to the discussion of texts (Swaffar, 1985, Little et al., 1998, Wong et al., 1995), but recent studies focus on the authenticity of tasks (Guariento & Morley, 2001; Mishan, 2005). As McGrath (2002) puts it, 'the narrow concern with text authenticity that characterized the early years of the communicative movement has since given way to a concern for the nature of tasks' (p.12).

Lewkowicz (2000) points out that 'despite the importance accorded to authenticity, there has been a marked absence of research to demonstrate this characteristic,' (p.45) and that 'such discussions [on authenticity] need to be empirically based to inform what has until now been a predominantly theoretical debate' (p.53). To fill this gap, the present study explores the way and the extent to which authenticity is achieved in practice by means of a series of tasks designed for a project-based learning (PBL) Vocational English module, as projects are often seen as 'a collection of sequenced and integrated tasks' (Nunan, 2004, p.133) that are designed to maximize authenticity (Beckett & Miller, 2006). PBL is a form of task-based learning which 'entails elaborate sets of sequenced tasks during which students are actively engaged in information gathering, processing, and reporting, with the ultimate goal of increased content knowledge and language mastery' (Beckett & Miller, 2006, p.21).

Conceptual framework

The present study has drawn on Bachman's (1990) dual notion of authenticity in conjunction with Halliday's triad construct of context of situation in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday 1978) as a conceptual framework.

1). *Authenticity and Context of Situation in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday 1978) – Language and context*

In defining authenticity, it is important to note that where authentic communication takes place, there is always a **context of situation** (Halliday, 1978). Halliday explains linguistic phenomena in terms of the social system. He views the linguistic system as a potential from which linguistic choices are made according to the context of situation in which the speaker, or writer, finds him/herself. Language assumes meaning when seen in relation to the *Context of Situation*, which has three parameters: **field**, **tenor**, and **mode**. Field refers to the ongoing activity in the context of situation, or the subject matter in which the participants are involved, and the nature of the social action that is taking place. **Tenor** refers to the interrelations among the participants (status and role relationships). **Mode** refers to the role that language is playing in the situation, its function in the context, including the channel (whether it be spoken or written or some combination of the two) and also

the rhetorical mode, what is being achieved by the text in terms of such categories as persuasive, expository, didactic, etc. (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p.12) Together these three parameters or dimensions of the context of situation determine the type of language that is likely to be used in the text.

2). *Authenticity as a dual notion: Situational authenticity and interactional authenticity*

Bachman (1991) proposes a dual notion of authenticity for language testing. He maintains that for a test task to be authentic, it has to achieve both situational as well as interactional authenticity. For a test task to be situationally authentic, it has to correspond to the features of a target language use (TLU) situation. On the other hand, interactional authenticity resides in the interaction between the test taker and the test task. Ellis (2003), in discussing task-based language learning, borrows this dual notion and defines authenticity as follows:

A pedagogical task is situationally authentic if it matches a situation found in the real world and it is interactionally authentic if it engages the learner and results in patterns of interaction similar to those found in the real world. (p.339)

The present study draws on this dual notion in its investigation into authenticity in Vocational English task design.

Research questions

The main research question is formulated as follows:

To what extent is authenticity achieved in the tasks designed for the Vocational English project-based learning (PBL) module under investigation? What is the nature of the authenticity that is manifested? What implications does this authenticity have for Vocational English (ESP and ELT in general) task design?

In the light of Bachman's dual notion of authenticity (that for a task to be authentic, it has to achieve both situational as well as interactional authenticity), the main research question is fractured into two specific research questions:

1. To what extent are the PBL tasks situationally authentic? How is situational authenticity realized in the design features of the PBL tasks?
2. In what way in practice do the features of the PBL tasks engage the learners? To what extent is the learners' interaction with the PBL tasks authentic? What is the nature of the interactional authenticity manifested, and what implications does it have for Vocational English task design?

Research design

To address specific research question 1 on situational authenticity, the following research methods were employed:

- i. Documentary analysis of the Project Brief of the PBL task series (see appendix) – to characterize the task design features in terms of situational authenticity
- ii. Semi-structured interviews with two fashion designers (practitioners in the TLU domain for the PBL tasks under investigation) – to ascertain the extent of correspondence between the task features of the PBL task series and those of the TLU tasks

For specific research question 2 on interactional authenticity, the following research methods were employed:

- i. Discourse analysis of the PBL task outcome products, i.e. the written project report and oral presentation produced by two sampled groups of learners – to characterize the learners' interaction with the task features in approaching the written project report and oral presentation tasks
- ii. discourse analysis of the team discussion session – to characterise the learners' interaction with the task features in approaching this project process task
- iii. retrospective focus group interviews with the two sampled groups of learners – to triangulate with the data collected from the above mentioned sources and to look into their experience of engaging with the PBL tasks

Background information regarding context of study and profiles of learner participants

The case Vocational English PBL module chosen for the present study is one run by the Language Centre for students from the Department of Fashion and Textiles undertaking a Higher Diploma programme in Fashion Design and Product Development at a vocational institution in Hong Kong. The programme required the students to take four Vocational English modules, and the case PBL module was run during the final year of the programme, which allowed students to consolidate the language skills acquired from earlier modules in the Vocational English curriculum. Since the PBL task series under investigation required learners to work in groups of four to carry out a team project, the present study sampled two of the groups to be the participants of the research. In order to select cases that are likely to be information-rich with respect to the purpose of the research, sampling for the present qualitative study was purposive. The two teams of subjects were selected for the present study for the following reasons:

- a. These two teams of learners had a track record of good class attendance and they participated in all the PBL tasks under investigation.
- b. Although there are individual variations of English language standard among the team members, the general English language proficiency of these two teams of learners is considered average or slightly above average among the student cohort. The present study purposively sampled typical cases (learners of average and slightly above average language ability) instead of extreme cases (learners of the lowest or the highest language abilities in class) so that the data yielded will be typical of ELT/Vocational English learners.

The first group comprises the members (pseudonyms are used here) Carrie, Christine, Chai Chi and Yan, while the second group comprises Carmen, Louis, Rachel, and San.

Findings and discussion

1). *Situational authenticity*

1.1. Situational authenticity in the form of constructed Context of Situation

An examination of the project brief shows that the learners are required to perform a series of language tasks (referred to as the PBL task series in subsequent discussions):

- a. reading and listening to trade-related texts from various sources;
- b. group discussions to share research findings and collaborate to come up with the design of a new fashion collection;
- c. writing up a project report;
- d. giving an oral presentation of their proposed new collection

An analysis of the design of the PBL task series shows that a *workplace scenario* (Chic Fashion House calling on its Product Design and Development Team to conduct research and propose new designs for the forthcoming season) is given here to serve as a *skeleton context* on which to hang the series of language tasks the learners have to perform (reading and listening to trade-related texts, group discussions, writing a project report, oral presentation, etc.). In this way, by means of this 'skeleton context', one task leads realistically to the next. Learners are informed of the key features of the communicative event including the subject matter, their role, role functions, the various tasks, etc. through the use of '*intrinsic documents*' (Bambrough 1994), i.e. documents presented

within the simulated world to achieve social and communicative reality (e.g. the e-mail message from the Project Manager to the Product Design and Development Team). (see appendix)

Through being presented with this workplace scenario, students are given a realistic purpose of the whole series of language activities in the PBL tasks series. The construction of this 'skeleton context' for the PBL tasks echoes Halliday (1978) that where authentic communication takes place, there is always a **context of situation**, whose three parameters are field, tenor, and mode. Thus, the context of situation constructed for the case PBL tasks under investigation is as follows:

Table 1: Context of situation constructed for the PBL task series

Field (subject matter, activities taking place)	Researching and developing new fashion products for Chic Fashion House – team discussions, project report writing, oral presentation
Tenor (Participants)	as members of Product Design and Development Team (reader(s) of written report and audience of oral presentation: company management; interlocutors in team discussion: fellow team members)
Mode (channel, role of language)	Written (project report); Spoken (team discussions, oral presentation) To explain design concepts and product details and persuade readers/audience to accept the proposed ideas team discussion: to share information and exchange ideas

1.2. Correspondence between features of the constructed Context of Situation (CoS) and those of the specific purposes Target Language Use (TLU) domain

1.2.1 Correspondence in terms of the field (Subject matter, ongoing activities)

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with two practitioners in the fashion industry. The first interviewee, Kelly, first worked as Fashion Merchandiser for a medium-scale garment firm and then as Fashion Designer for an international fashion company. The second interviewee, Joyce, was a fashion designer in a small-scale local fashion company. In the interviews, they were asked to review the PBL task series under investigation in terms of the features of the constructed CoS in relation to the real

world target tasks in the fashion industry, i.e. the specific purposes TLU domain.

The interviewees revealed that, in the TLU context, fashion designers and product developers have to submit written research reports/proposals of new fashion products every season. More often, they are required to present their proposed design orally to their boss or clients.

There is also correspondence between the task input texts used in the PBL task series and those that fashion designers have to process in the specific purposes TLU domain, and the procedures that the learners have to follow in interacting with the input texts resemble those expected in the TLU domain. This is, for example, illustrated by the comments from one of the interviewees:

As fashion designers, we have to regularly watch fashion shows and review fashion magazines and manuals in order to gather information about fashion trends and consumer preferences. (Kelly)

1.2.2. Correspondence in terms of tenor (Participants)

The interviewees confirmed that there is a correspondence between the real world target tasks in the fashion industry and the PBL task series in terms of the participants and their relative statuses and roles. For example, they commented on the tone and formality of the language used for different tasks as follows:

Our team meetings are usually not very formal, even with our immediate boss as the team leader. Usually, they're like brainstorming sessions.

Of course, we're a lot more alert and businesslike when presenting our proposal. They are our big bosses and clients. Our proposals need the green light from them. (Joyce)

Their comments on the job duties of fashion designers also shed light on the participants (and thus the **Tenor**) of the communicative events in the workplace:

As fashion designers, we often have to confer with management executives to discuss design ideas. We also have to collaborate with other designers to coordinate special products and designs. (Kelly)

1.2.3. Correspondence in terms of *Mode* (Channel, role of language)

Both interviewees emphasised the *expository* (to explain clearly the design features and uniqueness) and *persuasive* (to get across the selling points of designs) illocutionary functions of language in the TLU context and that communicative performance is an integral part of their professional performance.

For example, one of the informants clearly pointed out the role of language in the TLU context in relation to the PBL tasks under investigation:

To be a successful fashion designer or product developer, not only is it important for us to be able to do good designs and develop fashion products that suit the needs of the clients and the market, we also have to be able to communicate the uniqueness of our designs to them. Thus, being able to verbalise the selling points of our product designs is crucial. (Kelly)

They also stressed the importance of using language to express emotion and visual effects associated with different aspects of fashion product design:

For instance, you don't just say 'We have chosen black as the main colour tone for our collection'. You don't just say what colour, or what fabric you use for your design. You also have to be able to express the feeling, mood and visual effect associated with the use of different colours and fabric textures, like 'Black gives a sense of mystery and makes you look more elegant; Sky blue expresses a peaceful and tranquil feeling; lycra is highly elastic and allows good movement. (Joyce)

Thus, the role played by language in the TLU tasks, as suggested by the practitioners in the TLU domain, corresponds to that of the PBL tasks under investigation.

1.3. Two levels of situational authenticity conceptualised from the PBL task series

For specific research question 1, it is concluded that situational authenticity in task design is essentially the *construction of a context of situation (abbreviated as CoS in subsequent discussions)* within which the learner(s) communicates using the target language. Two levels of situational authenticity are

conceptualised from the PBL task series:

Level 1: Provision of a constructed CoS (as context of situation is a necessary condition for any real life communication event)

The kind of authenticity manifested in the design of the PBL task series is essentially the provision of a *constructed CoS* through an intrinsic document (an e-mail giving information about *Field*, *Tenor* and *Mode*). This *constructed CoS* serves to engage the language learner's *discourse domain* (which refers to 'the learner's internal interpretation of context' (Douglas, 2000, p.46). Thus, by means of the provision of a *constructed CoS*, the PBL tasks correspond to real world communication tasks in the sense that (as the basis of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistic model) *where authentic communication takes place, there is always a context of situation*, which determines the linguistic choices that are made. Thus this level 1 situational authenticity is the *provision of a constructed CoS to correspond to any real world communication event where a context of situation is a necessary condition*.

Level 2: Alignment of the constructed CoS with that of the specific purposes TLU domain

The second level of situational authenticity manifested in the PBL task series under investigation has to do with the *alignment of the constructed CoS with that of the specific purposes TLU domain*. As verified in the interviews with the practitioners in the fashion industry, the constructed CoS of the PBL tasks to a large extent corresponds to that of the specific purpose TLU domain in terms of *field*, *tenor* and *mode*.

Therefore, on top of providing a constructed CoS to resemble the necessary condition of any real life communication as suggested by level 1, the features of the constructed CoS have to be aligned with those of the specific purposes TLU domain in order to achieve this level 2 situational authenticity in task design. This is exactly where needs analysis for ESP (Munby 1978) and verification by practitioners and subject specialist informants (Wu and Stansfield 2001) can facilitate this alignment in the task design process. This level of authenticity is especially relevant to ESP, where needs analysis aims to arrive at a sociolinguistic profile of the learner's prospective language use, and from there to develop a profile of their present learning needs. It seeks to find out about the language-using communities that the learner wishes to join and what their roles and purposes within that community are likely to be. Such information can be the basis for the design of tasks in terms of their linguistic and pragmatic authenticity.

Thus, the two-level model of situational authenticity conceptualized from the analysis of the task design of the case PBL task series can be represented as follows:

Figure 1: Two-level model of situational authenticity

Situational Authenticity

Level 2

Constructed CoS aligned with that of the specific purposes TLU domain

Level 1

Provision of Constructed CoS (as a necessary condition for any real life communication)

Within this 2-level model, level 2 of situational authenticity is implicational of level 1, i.e. this 2-level model is an implicational hierarchy where level 2 of situational authenticity also subsumes features of level 1.

2). Interactional authenticity

Specific research question 2 examines the nature of the learners' interaction with various features of this level 2 situationally authentic PBL task series and gives a characterization of this interactional authenticity manifested.

From the analysis of the project outcome products (i.e. the written project report and the oral presentation), it was found that the learners indeed demonstrated awareness of and interacted authentically with the three parameters of the constructed CoS in various ways, but some 'inauthenticity' was at the same time manifested.

2.1. Authentic interactions with the contextual features

2.1.1. Learners' interaction with the field of the constructed CoS

The learners' interaction with the field of the constructed CoS is mainly demonstrated by the engagement of their specific purpose background knowledge. The analysis of the written project report and the oral presentation produced by the learners shows that the learners did make reference to the context of the real world Hong Kong fashion market, engage their fashion design creativity in their proposed designs, and make reference to and process trade-specific authentic texts (They chose and used as task input genuine sources used in the professional fashion field, such as the Pantone Colours website and the WGSN website, etc.).

The interaction between the learners' specific purpose background knowledge and language ability is also evidenced by the learners' use of trade-specific lexical items and language expressions in the project report and oral presentation. For example, numerous vocabulary items related to elements of fashion design such as colours, lines, fabrics, silhouettes are present in the discourses analysed. Some instances are quoted as follows:

Fashion Design Elements	Trade-specific Lexical Items
Colours	Pastel colours, earth tone, green, shocking pink, white, golden olive, silver grey, croissant, snorkel blue, different shades of blue, monochrome, etc.
Lines and patterns	floral prints, animal prints, vertical and horizontal stripes, geometric patterns, checks, paisley, etc.
Fabrics	lightweight, breathable, quality natural fabrics such as organic cotton and silk, lycra, spandex, polyester, linen, nylon, rayon, etc.
Silhouettes	Balloon silhouette, loose-fitting, high waistline, etc.
Others	Ensemble, casualize

Language expressions describing the feelings and moods associated with colours can also be found in the project report and oral presentation. Some examples are:

Pastel colours and earth tones use for maternity clothes give a comfortable feeling and a sense of peace. Sharp colours stand for happiness. (Carmen's group)

Cheerful colours will be a trend. Dynamic and energetic colours such as yellow, red and shocking pink play an important role in the coming season. (Carrie's group)

As expressing emotion and visual effects associated with different design elements is a language feature specific to the

field of fashion design, the presence of these language expressions describing the feelings and moods associated with colours in the learners' discourse is also a manifestation of the interaction between the learners' language ability and specific purpose background knowledge (in this case, the learners' professional sense of colours) activated by the *Field* parameter of the constructed CoS.

2.1.2. Learners' interaction with the contextual parameter mode

The learners' awareness of and interaction with the Mode of the constructed CoS are illustrated by the learners' attempt to achieve the illocutionary functions of *explication* and *persuasion* to fulfill the communicative goal of the discourse. Indeed, the learners' attempt to *explicate* and to *persuade* is manifested in different parts of their project report. For example, immediately in the introduction section of the report, both groups tried to justify the choice of their project topic. Carmen's group, for instance, tried to do so by quoting from famous fashion magazines, which gives more authority and thus persuasiveness to their choice of designing a maternity wear collection:

Pregnancy is often regarded as 'one of the happiest times in a woman's life' but it can also be 'the most sartorially frustrating' period since 'it's tough to feel beautiful when you're swollen up, and there are diminishing choices in your wardrobe' (InStyle 2003, p.166).
(Carmen's group)

This illustrates the learners' awareness of the communication goal of the text to persuade and their attempt to convince the reader of their sensible choice of the topic.

The learners' attempt to *persuade* is especially evident in the section 'Recommendations: Proposed New Collection' of their project report, where the learners tried to justify their proposed design based on the research findings. They refer to their research findings using phrases such as 'in view of the survey results', 'according to the findings above', 'with reference to the survey report', 'based on the findings of the survey', 'in

the light of the market research findings', etc. to give more credibility to what they are proposing by showing that it is well-informed by research findings. There are also an abundance of instances where the learners used cause-and-effect phrases (as highlighted in italics below) in giving reasons to support their proposed collection, and thus to *persuade*. Some examples are quoted as follows:

As modern women have a high purchasing power, they are willing to buy trendy and high quality pregnant clothes when they are pregnant.

A majority pregnant women do not buy pregnant clothing **due to** they need to wear formal dressing when they are working.

Since the survey shows....., **therefore** the price of our maternity collection can be middle-high.
(Carmen's group)

With reference to the Pantone Fashion Color Report for S/S 2008, cheerful colors like blue, yellow, red will play an important role in coming season. **Therefore**, these colors will be included in our collection.

The survey shows that the majority of respondents were in favor of **Hence**, it is proposed that our color palette of our collection would include blue, yellow, red, pink,

...**Thus**, it is suggested that floral prints, animal prints, checks, dotted prints and vertical stripes will be adopted in our collection.
(Carrie's group)

To achieve the *persuasive* illocutionary function for the discourse, clear explication of ideas and arguments plays an important role. In the project reports, there are instances demonstrating the learners' strategies to explain ideas clearly such as making use of various discourse markers to sequence ideas and mark the change of topics:

Several methods were used to obtain findings of this research. **First**, **Second**, ... **Third**, **Finally**,....
(Carmen's group)

Regarding the Pantone Fashion Color Report, ...

With regard to their monthly income, one-third of the respondents earned....

As far as their shopping habits are concerned,
(Carrie's group)

It is interesting to note that, although the learners made frequent grammatical mistakes in their written project report and oral presentation, the examples discussed above nevertheless illustrate the learners' illocutionary competence to *explain* and to *persuade*, the role expected to be played by language governed by the *Mode* of the constructed CoS. This shows that the constructed CoS indeed established the discourse domain for the learners and engaged their communicative language ability (CLA) (Bachman and Palmer 1996) in terms of their grammatical, textual and functional knowledge. The learners were well aware of the *Mode* of the constructed CoS (and this was confirmed in the triangulation with the data from the retrospective focus group interviews) and attempted to achieve the illocutionary functions required in the constructed CoS. Thus, *task design as the construction of CoS* has significance for both pedagogical and assessment purposes. For assessment purposes, as the constructed CoS establishes the discourse domain for the learners and thus informs them of the illocutionary functions they are expected to achieve in the discourse, this engages the learners' CLA and thus can distinguish learners of higher grammatical competence from those of lower grammatical competence attempting to achieve the expected illocutionary functions. Pedagogically, this shows what lexical and grammatical areas the learner is weak in for achieving certain illocutionary functions, and therefore sheds light on those particular language items to be focused on at a post-task stage. Thus, the CoS model can indeed complement Willis' Task-based Learning (TBL) framework (Willis 1996), where a language focused component is needed at the post-task stage.

2.1.3. Learners' interaction with the contextual parameter tenor

A major linguistic feature associated with Tenor is the formality of tone of the discourse, as the tone reflects the interpersonal relation of the participants. From the analysis of the project report

and oral presentation and also from the retrospective interviews, it was found that the learners were well aware of the tenor set up in the constructed CoS and they did try to employ an appropriately formal tone in the discourse they produced. The inconsistencies found such as the use of informal expressions like "by the way", "a little bit", etc., contracted forms and sentence fragments in their written report were due to their failure to master the correct usage rather than a lack of awareness of the tenor of the constructed CoS.

2.2. Inauthenticity manifested

Despite the learners' authentic interactions with the features of the constructed CoS discussed, there is nevertheless inauthenticity manifested.

2.2.1. Learners' unauthentic interaction with the field

Despite evidence showing that the learners have made use of their specific purpose background knowledge and that their proposed designs are well justified with reference to the real world Hong Kong fashion market, they nevertheless admitted that the contents of their PBL product outcomes, i.e. the written project reports and the oral presentation, are inadequate for a real life trade project. When asked how they would have approached the project differently if it were a real life fashion development project, the learners commented that much more research would have to be done:

Of course, we would have to do a lot more research, like more detailed market research, budget estimations (Louis)

And, we would also have to verify the information we got from the web. There're so many inaccuracies (Rachel)

The content is not adequate for a real fashion design project. More details on the proposed new collection are needed. (Christine)

They also indicated that they were also very conscious about this project as an English language project in which they had to fulfill the language requirements stated in the Vocational English project brief.

2.2.2. Learners' unauthentic interaction with the mode

While the learners did demonstrate attempts to *explain* and to *persuade*, which illustrates their awareness of and interaction with the Mode of the constructed CoS, they nevertheless considered *content* to be peripheral. This was evident particularly when they admitted that the content is 'inadequate' in comparison with that required in a trade project.

When asked how they would have approached this project differently if it were a project for a trade subject, they made comments such as the following:

Well, for this project, we were more concerned about grammar, pronunciation, and fluency. We tried to proofread the report and checked the language we used after we finished. For trade subjects, like Fashion Design, Visual Merchandising, Fashion Business and so on, well, the projects and assignments are also in English. So, the difference may not be big. But for trade subjects, we are not as concerned about the language thing. We focus more on content for these content subjects. (Chai Chi)

This shows that the learners view content and language as largely discrete and they have different focuses for projects of vocational and language subjects. This sheds light on the difference between how the learners approach this Vocational English project and how they approach a real life workplace project as far as the roles of content and language are concerned.

2.2.3. Learners' unauthentic interaction with the tenor

Although the learners were well aware of the *Tenor* (the participants and their role relationships) of the constructed CoS, they mainly approached the written project report and oral presentation tasks as language assignment tasks, focusing on displaying 'good language' to the language assessor, instead of presenting a trade project to their bosses and clients.

This is particularly evidenced by their

strategy of a pre-arranged scripted question-and-answer (Q&A) session at the end of the oral presentation. The Q&A part at the end of the oral presentation was almost the only interaction found between the learners and the audience throughout the whole presentation. It was observed that the interactions are not at all authentic or spontaneous, in that the learners were able to answer the 'on-the-spot' questions instantly without having to take time to consider as in real life situations. They were able to give their answers very fluently without hesitations. The authenticity of their interactions in the Q&A session was further investigated in the retrospective focus group interviews, where the learners admitted that their Q&A interactions were indeed scripted.

Yes, we arranged with a classmate in the audience beforehand. We gave her the question and rehearsed the answer, so that we could answer the question fluently. (Rachel)

Of course, we'll be more confident if the Q&A is pre-arranged. If somebody really asks a question on the spot, we may not be able to respond in English correctly and fluently.... (Chai Chi)

Here, the learners pre-arranged the Q&A session to avoid demonstrating their language weaknesses and to display their 'fluency'. This again shows that they approached the task as a language assignment rather than authentic interaction in a real life workplace project.

2.3. Characterising the interactional authenticity in team discussion

The nature of the team discussion task is different from both the written project report and the oral presentation. While both the tasks of the written project report and the oral presentation carry an element of assessment (each carries 50% of the module mark), the team discussion session is not assessed. It is among the process of the project that the learners had to go through before arriving at the *products* of the project, i.e. the written project report and the oral presentation.

In the team discussion session under investigation, the constructed CoS governs that the purpose for which the team members seek to use language is to **cooperate** (to share information and exchange ideas) so as to come up with a new design collection to be proposed to the company top management.

An analysis of the discourse of the team discussion session will shed light on the extent to which the learners interacted to achieve the purpose of communication, i.e. to *cooperate*.

In analyzing learner interaction, Jacobs and Ward (1999) suggest that, of Halliday's (1978) three metafunctions, the one most relevant to learner cooperation is the *Interpersonal* metafunction, which realizes the *Tenor* of the context of situation, and one area of grammar most closely associated with the interpersonal metafunction, and thus *Tenor*, is *mood*.

Mood refers to whether the piece of language under focus is a statement, an imperative, or an interrogative. Jacobs and Ward (1999) argue that mood relates to the interpersonal metafunction as, for example, 'the interrogative reverses the roles in a statement – In a statement, the speaker seeks to give information, while in a question, the speaker seeks to receive information or ask for others' opinions' (p.8). They argue that 'imperatives tend to suggest domination, while interrogatives suggest *cooperation*' (p.8).

From the transcription of the team discussion, an abundance of interrogatives are found, and the language functions of these interrogatives are mainly to seek information, clarifications, agreement, and opinions from others. Some instances of the interrogatives found in the team discussion and the language functions they serve are quoted as follows:

Table 2: Instances of interrogatives in the team discussion session and the language functions they serve

Examples of interrogatives found in the data:	Language functions:
Which one do you like best? (Chai Chi)	Seeking opinions
What do you think? (Carrie)	Seeking opinions
Do you mean to create two different collections, one for the younger customer group, one for the more mature group? (Rachel)	Seeking clarification
So, shall we base the design on Alexander McQueen? (Louis)	Making suggestions
Do you agree with this idea? (Yan)	Asking for agreement
How are we going to attract the customers? (Louis)	Seeking opinions

Examples of interrogatives found in the data: Language functions:

San, did you find out about the latest fabric trend? (Carmen)	Asking for information
Shall we vote on this? (Carmen)	Making suggestions

The abundance of sentences in the interrogative mood found in the spoken discourse, which mainly serve the functions of asking for information, seeking clarifications, asking for agreement, asking for opinions from others and making suggestions, indeed suggests cooperation among fellow group members.

Despite the plentiful interrogatives in the discourse of this team discussion session, the indicative mood, or the statement, is nevertheless predominant in the discourse. Jacobs and Ward (1999) argue that the preponderance of statements in a discourse 'suggest that there is little in the oral interaction that would encourage the [participants] to cooperate with each other' (p.9). However, an examination of the language functions served by the statements in the team discussion reveals that this is not the case. Rather, apart from stating some facts and personal opinions, the speakers were using these statements to show agreement with others, to clarify oneself for others, to respond to others' point, to make suggestions, etc.

I think you've made a good point here. (Carmen)

I mean that we can add a ribbon to make the style more feminine. (Rachel)

Yes, that is what I mean. (Christine)

Yes, you're right. But I don't think there's a big difference between the two designs. (Chai Chi)

I suggest we add some lace near the waistline. (Louis)

Even when the speakers were stating personal opinions, these statements are very often followed by interrogatives either to seek opinions or agreements from their fellow members:

I think this style is more comfortable and trendy. What do you think? (Rachel)

The point is, organic products, that's their lifestyle. Don't you agree? (Louis)

So, the price is about \$150 to \$200. Is that right? (San)

There are also some tag questions, which form 'a halfway position between bald statements of opinion and requests for such information as another's opinion' (Halliday, 1985, p.69) and thus

also suggest cooperation:

This one is very lovely, isn't it? (Christine)
Synthetic fabrics will cause skin allergy for the pregnant women, will they? (Carmen)

On the other hand, the imperative mood is rarely found in the discourse of the team discussion, except for what Halliday (1985, p.347) calls the imperative 'we', i.e. the 'let's' construction. Examples found in the team discussion are:

Let's take a look at the photo here. (Louis)
Let's have two separate collections for this line then. (Carmen)
OK. Let's talk about our target customers. (Carrie)
Perhaps let's have a closer look at the colour trend ... (Chai Chi)

Here, the speakers were not using the imperatives to give commands or orders that suggest domination. Instead, they were making suggestions that include the others (that is why Halliday calls this the imperative 'we'), thus giving a sense of cooperation.

3). Internal and external Context of Situation (CoS)

An examination of the concept of CoS shows that there are *internal* as well as *external* CoS. The internal CoS is the CoS internal to the simulated world, i.e. the world of the Product Design and Development Project for Chic Fashion House, while the external CoS is the world external to the simulated world, i.e. the immediate context for the learners – the second language classroom, where the learners have to fulfill the language requirements as stated in the Vocational English project brief.

The dichotomy of the *internal and external CoS* can be utilized here to account for the unauthentic aspects of the learners' engagement with the PBL tasks. It was found that, although the learners were well aware of the features of the internal CoS, it is evident that the learners did not always operate within the internal CoS, i.e. the scenario created. Instead, they shifted between the internal and external CoS. For example, while the learners did engage their specific purpose background knowledge and made reference to the real world Hong Kong fashion market, which resembles the process of a real life trade project as governed by the *internal CoS*, it is also obvious that they were very conscious about this PBL project as a language assignment in which they had to fulfill the language requirements governed by the *external CoS*. This kind of 'conflict' between the internal and external CoS becomes more obvious when it comes to the *Tenor* where the audience of the written report and the oral presentation is the company management

of Chic Fashion House in the internal CoS whereas that in the external CoS is the language assessor. This 'non-correspondence' has thus resulted in the learners focusing on displaying 'good language' to the audience at the expense of authentic interaction, as exemplified in the learners' pre-arranged, scripted Q&A interactions. This kind of conflict between the *internal CoS* (a fashion design project) and the *external CoS* (an English language assignment) has led to the learners' perceived separation of content and language in their engagement with the tasks, resulting in an 'inadequate' content and a preoccupation with form rather than meaning. In contrast, in the team discussion session, instead of being preoccupied with form rather than meaning, the learners demonstrated authenticity in their cooperative interactions to achieve a common goal. While there is a conflict between the internal CoS and the external CoS of the written project report and oral presentation tasks, which has led to the inauthenticity discussed, there seems to be more harmony between the internal CoS and the external CoS of the team discussion task – Here, the *Field* of both the internal and external CoS governs that the subject matter is 'an informal meeting' and the purpose is to 'come up with details for a new collection'. In terms of the *Tenor*, both the external and internal CoS involve fellow team members cooperating in their discussion towards achieving the same goal. The harmony of the *Field* and *Tenor* between internal and external CoS also suggests harmony of the *Mode* – that the role of language in both the internal and external CoS is to *explain, share and exchange information and ideas* in order to arrive at an agreed new fashion collection.

4). A third level of situational authenticity

Thus, the dichotomy of *internal and external CoS*, the harmony of which leads to authenticity of the learners' interaction and the conflict of which leads to inauthenticity, indeed sheds light on a *third level of situational authenticity*, which complements the 2-level model of situational authenticity discussed earlier. This third level of situational authenticity has to do with the alignment between the internal and external CoS. Thus, this three-level authenticity model for task design can be represented as follows:

Figure 1: Three-level authenticity model for task design

Situational Authenticity

Level 3

Internal CoS aligned with external CoS

Level 2

Constructed CoS aligned with that of the specific purposes TLU domain

Level 1

Provision of a Constructed CoS

Implications: Integration of vocational English projects with trade projects – Collaboration between the Language Centre and parent departments

The establishment of the Level 3 authenticity in the CoS model for task design, which calls for the alignment of the internal and external CoS in maximizing authenticity, provides the rationale for the English-across-the-curriculum approach to learning and teaching with the collaboration between the trade departments and the language centre. (The need for the collaboration between the ESP teacher and the trade subject specialists has been advocated by ESP academics such as Hutchinson and Waters (1982), Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), Almagro and Vallegro (2002), etc., and the present study has further provided a rationale for this advocacy.) English-across-the-curriculum refers to the practice of integrating the learning and use of English throughout the vocational curriculum. In integrating a vocational English project with a trade one, of which language and communicative competence is an integral part, there will be minimal distinction and thus enhanced harmony between the internal and the external CoS. In this connection, in the light of the present study, further research should be done on the actual interactional authenticity as manifested in this kind of tasks at Level 3 authenticity, the findings of which can further inform the modifications of and thus enrich the CoS model derived from the present study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study has explored how authenticity is a potentially useful notion for the conceptualization and realization of practical Vocational English task design and has both theoretical and practical significance for the field of ELT (and Vocational English in particular). This study is a response to the incompleteness of previous discussions on the 'elusive' definition of authenticity in terms of language learning tasks (Mishan, 2004, p.1) and the lack of empirical research done on the extent to which authenticity is achievable in the second language classroom (Beckett & Miller, 2006, p.28) despite the wide recognition of the vital role of authenticity in ELT and ESP discussed in literature. It has provided a logical link between Halliday's triad construct of Context of Situation within the Systemic Functional Linguistic model and Bachman's dual notion of authenticity. It has added to the body of knowledge concerning authenticity by establishing that authenticity, apart from being a dual notion as suggested in literature, is also a three-level construct as far as ELT task design is concerned. This three-level authenticity model derived from the present study is also of practical value to teachers of ELT, ESP, and Vocational English in particular for designing authentic language learning tasks to meet the specific needs of their learners.

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Appendix: Project Brief of Case PBL Module

Project Brief: Notes to Students

Project Task 1: Written Project Report

In this project, you need to form groups of 4 and write a project report of 2000 words. To prepare for the report, your group has to carry out some research and, based on the findings of the research, design and propose new fashion products for Spring/Summer 2012. For details, please refer to the Project 'Situation Brief'.

This written project report takes up 50% of the total marks of the project.

Objectives of the Written Project Report:

1. To describe the background, rationale and purpose of the research
2. To present findings including fashion trends, market scope, target customer profile, design inspiration, colour and fabric selection, etc.
3. To make recommendations based on findings and explain design details

Deadline for Submission

You team has to submit your proposal by _____.

Project Task 2: Persuasive Oral Presentation

For details of situation of this oral presentation, please refer to the 'Situation Brief'.

The oral presentation will be conducted as detailed below.

Date	Time	Venue	Duration	Weighting
				50%

Preparation

This is the Persuasive Oral Presentation task of the Product Design and Development Project. You are given the Project Brief 10 weeks before the oral presentation.

In this task, you will be required to work with your team members and give an oral presentation of your research and proposed fashion products/ collection for 15 minutes to persuade the audience (i.e. the senior management of your company) to accept your proposal. The presentation will be followed by a 3-minute question-and-answer session in which your team invite and answer questions from the audience. Prepare the presentation as a team. Divide the presentation among team members so that each member will have around 4 minutes for presentation.

Objectives of the Oral Presentation Task:

- To organize information from a written text into spoken discourse for a particular audience and purpose.
- To use persuasive language and communication techniques
- To handle questions from an audience

You will receive an individual mark based on your performance in the overall group presentation.

Team Discussion Task (to be held in Week 5)

After your group has decided on a research topic, divide up the research work among your members. In Week 5, group members have to attend a team discussion session. In this session, members have to share their research findings and work together to come up with details of the new product line/collection your group is to propose.

Project Brief: Situation Brief

You are a member of the Product Development Team (consisting of 4 members) of Chic Fashion House, which specializes in menswear, womenswear, as well as children's wear. Read the following e-mail from the Product Development Manager. Then carry out some investigative research and work out a product development proposal as requested.

To: Product Development Team <product_dev_team@chic.com>
 From: Product Development Manager <product_manager@chic.com>
 Date: 21 October 2011
 Subject: Product Development Proposal for S/S 2012

Dear Team Members

Our company would like to develop a new product/product line for the coming season, and I would like your Team to do some research and work out a proposal for the development of new fashion products for Spring/Summer 2012. To carry out the research, your team has to:

1. Identify a problem/a need/ an opportunity related to the Hong Kong/ China / international fashion market.
2. Make sure that the merits and potential of your proposed product(s) are well justified by research findings.
3. Carry out an initial Internet search on your chosen topic to see if you can find substantial information about it.
4. You have to investigate the market needs as well as the fashion trend (including colour, fabric, silhouette trends etc.)
5. Based on research findings, your proposal should detail the design of the proposed product/ collection (including the special features, colour selection, choice of materials, lines, patterns and silhouettes, and technical information) and the target market.
6. You should also present your strategies for the new product/ collection. For example:
 - Branding, packaging, other product features
 - Pricing strategy
 - Promotion (What advertising, product launch and sales promotion?)
7. Prepare a written project report of about 2000 words (excluding references and appendices) which include details of your research as well as your proposed product/ collection. (Project Task 1)
8. Give an oral presentation of your proposal in the next staff meeting to persuade the senior management to accept your proposed product/ collection. (Project Task 2)

Peter

About the Author

Annie Choi is Senior Lecturer at the Languages Planning and Development Office of Vocational Training Council, Hong Kong. She has taught English to students of various disciplines including Business Administration, Design, Engineering, and IT in tertiary education, and has worked on various English curriculum development projects. Her research interests include language curriculum development, English for Specific Purposes, and phonological and grammatical development of ESL learners.