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# An Analysis of the Problematic Discourse Surrounding “Authentic Texts”



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**Abstract:** In L2 (second language) pedagogy, texts are commonly distinguished based on whether language instruction was a consideration in their creation. Texts that are not created for L2 instruction, or “authentic texts,” have been thought to represent the target language in an accurate and reliable way (Zyzik and Polio 2017). Conversely, texts that are produced with language learning in mind (“non-authentic texts”), such as those often found in textbooks, have received a markedly negative depiction; they have been considered contrived texts with distorted and artificial language, and their sociocultural purpose has been questioned (e.g., Gilmore 2007; Glisan and Donato 2017). An analysis of these polarized characterizations reveals an overreliance on subjective qualities to distinguish the two types of texts and an implicit assumption that language can exist in an authentic, complete form. Additionally, the ideology of authenticity continues to influence our perception of language users, since native speakers are more often associated with authenticity than others. This paper problematizes the “authentic text”/“non-authentic text” dichotomy in L2 pedagogy and promotes a post-structuralist vision—one in which the value of a text is not determined in isolation from how students might interpret and interact with it in specific learning contexts (Guerrettaz and Johnston 2013).

**Keywords:** authentic texts/textos auténticos, L2 learners/estudiantes L2, native speakers/hablantes nativos, non-authentic texts/textos no-auténticos, post-structuralism/posestructuralismo, textbooks/libros de texto

## 1. Introduction

For the past several decades, “authentic texts” have been promoted with increasing enthusiasm in L2 (second language) pedagogy. This is evident in recent teaching standards developed by ACTFL (2013) and is reflected in teaching workshops and language education programs across the country. While the exact definition of the term “authentic texts” has been disputed (see Gilmore 2007), it typically refers to artifacts—newspaper articles, songs, poems, movies, short stories, menus, websites, etc.—that represent language use by and for speakers (often native speakers) of the target language, and the purpose for creating these texts was not L2 instruction (Zyzik and Polio 2017). Generally, “authentic texts” have been recognized as an important or even essential element of foreign language instruction (e.g., Glisan and Donato 2017). The problem is, they are often not described independently based on their perceived beneficial qualities. In the pursuit of promoting “authentic texts,” many researchers simultaneously make depreciative comments about texts they do not consider to be authentic, such as those that were created with L2 instruction in mind.

This discourse in pedagogical literature has created a dysfunctional dichotomy of “authentic texts” versus “non-authentic texts.” The distinction between the two is maintained through the frequent, implicit and explicit juxtaposition of the qualities of texts. For example, it has been asserted that “authentic texts” offer an “accurate and reliable representation” of a language (Zyzik and Polio 2017: 1) and have a significant sociocultural purpose (e.g., Glisan and Donato 2017). On the other hand, “non-authentic texts,” such as a reading or dialogue developed for a

textbook, have been considered contrived resources (e.g., Gilmore 2007) that lack a significant sociocultural purpose and have artificial content (Glisan and Donato 2017). These favorable and unfavorable qualities are often identified as if they were static and inherent to all “authentic” and “non-authentic” texts, respectively. Nevertheless, identifying and amalgamating static qualities of texts in this way is not in line with post-structuralist theory in literature (e.g., Barthes 1977) or Applied Linguistics (Bucholtz 2009; De Fina and Perrino 2011), which assumes that each instance of linguistic expression and interpretation is circumstantially unique.

To demonstrate that the “authentic text”/“non-authentic text” contrast is not adequately supported by objective criteria, several of the purported distinguishing qualities will be deconstructed. It will become clear that neither type of text is inherently more reliable, accurate, purposeful, distorted, contrived, artificial etc.; these concepts are dynamic and subjective (e.g., Train 2007). Furthermore, the concept of authenticity is unhelpful in the objective categorization of texts because it is a psychosocial creation. In other words, instead of a texts being authentic by nature, they undergo a process of “authentication” through which they gain legitimacy in society (Bucholtz and Hall 2005; Reyes 2016). By assigning different levels of authenticity to texts, we are maintaining an overt authentication process in L2 pedagogy that pre-determines their legitimacy. However, it is time to relinquish this power to instructors and students and allow them to authenticate learning materials according to their specific learning contexts (Guerrettaz and Johnston 2013; Widdowson 1998).<sup>1</sup> Finally, in addition to affecting the validity of language and texts, the ideology of authenticity also impacts the identities of language users, since some definitions of “authentic texts” require that they be created by native speakers (ACTFL 2012). Linking authenticity exclusively to native speakers puts L2 learners and heritage learners at risk of linguistic discrimination and hides the fact that native speakers are not inherently associated with linguistic authenticity or authority in society (Guerrettaz 2015).

The goal of this paper is to reveal the problematic assumptions—particularly about the nature of language—that are necessary to maintain the “authentic text”/“non-authentic text” dichotomy as it has been constructed in pedagogical literature. There is currently a clear bias against materials created for L2 learners, especially textbooks. If we remove the ideology of authenticity and replace the current polarized discourse with a more neutral one with well-defined terminology, teachers will be able to select texts in accordance with pedagogical/SLA theory and learning objectives, without influence from the positive and negative associations that are currently attached to “authentic” and “non-authentic” texts. The organization of this paper is as follows. Section 2 contains a discussion of the subjective qualities (e.g., accurate; reliable) that have been used to cement “authentic texts” privileged status. Section 3 deals with the dichotomies “contrived texts” versus “authentic texts” and “textbook language” versus authentic language, which includes an examination of the unfair depiction of textbooks (e.g., as distorted; contrived). In section 4, “authentic texts” are discussed in relation to the linguistic nativity of their authors. In section 5, a new categorization of texts devoid of the concept of authenticity is offered. Finally, section 6 concludes the paper.

## 2. What Makes a Text Authentic?

As mentioned, the sharp divide between two classes of texts is fueled by the praise for “authentic texts” and criticism of “non-authentic texts” that coincide in L2 pedagogy. Contributing to the positive image of “authentic texts,” scholars have made claims about the uniqueness of these texts’ linguistic nature (Zyzik and Polio 2017) and sociocultural significance (Glisan and Donato 2017). Nevertheless, the concepts used to support these claims are ill-defined and subjective. In an attempt to increase objectivity and attenuate the discursive divide between two classes of texts, I will begin with a deconstruction of four of the concepts that have been used to position “authentic texts” as being qualitatively different from “non-authentic texts.”<sup>2</sup>

## 2.1 Linguistic Modification

Some researchers have attempted to establish a correlation between linguistic modification and authenticity. For example, Zyzik and Polio (2017) explain that a teacher-made text, such as a recorded interview with native speakers about their favorite foods from their culture, would not be authentic because they would be aware that the interview was being recorded for L2 learners. As an accommodation, the interviewees “might naturally modify their speech when talking to non-native speakers, the students” (Zyzik and Polio 2017: 3), and this modification would result in a loss of authenticity. However, this assumption is not in line with an increasingly accepted perspective in Applied Linguistics: all language is modified according to speakers’ interlocutors/audience, and this is a natural part of communication (e.g., Bucholtz 2009). In an interactional encounter like an interview, “speakers may radically change their accent and other prosodic, syntactic, and discursive aspects of their language in response to their interlocutors’ identity and role” (De Fina and Perrino 2011: 4). Speakers also shape their linguistic expression in order to “take stances, create alignments, and construct personas” (Bucholtz 2009: 146).

Therefore, while it is true that native speaker interviewees would likely modify their speech upon learning that their audience consisted of L2 learners (Zyzik and Polio 2017), they would also variably modify their speech when communicating with other native speakers in order to dialogically co-construct meaning and identities (Bucholtz 2009). Under recent conceptualizations of style and stance, speech modifications in all communicative events are interpreted as meaningful interactional moves, not as threats to the naturalness or authenticity of the communication (De Fina and Perrino 2011; Jaffe 2009). To reflect this trend, we should no longer disqualify texts from being authentic in L2 pedagogy based on the linguistic modifications that might occur during their creation (Zyzik and Polio 2017).

## 2.2 Sociocultural Purpose

Zyzik and Polio (2017) further challenge the authenticity of an interview about food preferences that was created for students, claiming that there would be “no real-world activity associated with such an interview” (3). Glisan and Donato (2017) similarly assess texts’ authenticity by considering the significance of the text outside of the classroom. They explain that “authentic texts” are:

created for various social and cultural purposes *by* and *for* monolingual, bilingual, or multi-lingual users of the TL and various other cultural groups. The term *authentic* . . . also implies the text has not been simplified or edited for the purpose of foreign language instruction. Additionally, authentic texts . . . have a sociocultural purpose . . . that goes beyond providing contrived, artificial, and unmotivated examples of the target language to learners, as is the case with most textbook material. (65, italics in original)

According to these scholars, texts are authenticated based on the sociocultural purposes for their creation (Glisan and Donato 2017) and their significance in the “real world” (Zyzik and Polio 2017), before they are interpreted by students; how a text is used in the L2 classroom and the significance that it might have for L2 learners do not contribute to its authenticity. This idea is not supported by post-structuralist theory, however. As Barthes (1977) explains, “a text’s unity lies not in its origin, but in its destination” (148). This means that no matter the context of a text’s creation or the intentions of an author (i.e., its origin), the final determination of meaning and significance of a text is made by the reader (i.e., its destination).

This post-structuralist conceptualization of texts is at the core of Guerretaz and Johnston’s (2013) influential study on the use of textbooks in the classroom. Echoing Barthes (1977), these scholars explain why a text’s value cannot be determined based solely on the purpose for which it

was created: “once an artifact such as a textbook leaves the hands of its designer(s) and is actually used in the world, it often provides affordances that were not intended or perhaps even imagined by the designer” (789). In Guerrettaz and Johnston’s study, textbook materials offered many unanticipated opportunities for language learning through meaningful interactions. Because these learning opportunities arose as a result of the incorporation of these materials in a specific classroom context with unique participants, Guerrettaz and Johnston (2013) concluded that “examining materials in isolation from their use in classrooms can only ever give us an inadequate understanding” (791) of the relationship between learners and classroom materials. By this standard, Glisan and Donato’s (2017: 65) dismissal of “most textbook material” is predicated on an incomplete assessment, since they do not consider how students and teachers might interpret or interact with such material. A post-structuralist approach to text analysis (Guerrettaz and Johnston 2013) seems preferable because it allows educators to sideline ideological assumptions about texts’ authenticity as determined by their original sociocultural purpose, and instead focus on texts’ contribution in the sociocultural context of the classroom.

From this perspective, we can find more purpose in the hypothetical “non-authentic” interview about native speakers’ favorite foods that Zyzik and Polio (2017) suggested had “no real-world purpose that would guide the speakers” (3). We must first understand that the L2 classroom is part of the real world and is a legitimate sociolinguistic context in which meaningful communication takes place (Blyth 2003; Guerrettaz and Johnston 2013; Van Patten 2017). For the native speakers, the real-world purpose of the interview about food would be to provide students an opportunity to appreciate their language and culture. This would allow students to strengthen their interpretive L2 skills and add to their knowledge of foods in different cultures, thus developing their global competence (National Standards Collaborative Board (NSCB) 2015). Any text that contributes to the development of this competence has a significant sociocultural purpose in the L2 classroom. Once this purpose has been established, an instructor can simply determine a text’s appropriateness in the L2 setting based on learning objectives (see Gilmore 2007 also). The origin of a text—who created it and why—may not be a factor in this determination of appropriateness if it is not relevant to the learning objectives of a lesson.

### 2.3 Reliability and Accuracy

#### 2.3.1 Reliability

Zyzik and Polio (2017) begin their book by explaining the attractiveness of authenticity and identifying additional attributes of “authentic texts”:

Most language teachers would probably agree that using authentic materials is desirable. *Authenticity* is unequivocally a positive attribute: We value authenticity in cuisine, artwork, and merchandise. By the same token, authentic materials in language classrooms are beneficial because they provide an accurate and **reliable** representation of the target language.” (1, bold my own)

Nevertheless, the tremendous amount of variation in any language challenges the authors’ assertion that all linguistic representations in “authentic materials” are “reliable” in the context of L2 learning. Imagine that an L2 learner of English were learning how to refer to future time in written language. Tagliamonte (2016) showed that there is variation (e.g., “gonna,” “going to,” “will,” “’ma”) depending on whether someone is instant messaging online, text messaging, writing an email, or writing an essay. Crucially, however, variation in future expression is not just a result of genre or register differences; it is also influenced by subconscious linguistic factors, such as the animacy of subjects (animate versus inanimate), clause type (main versus subordinate), and sentence polarity (affirmative versus negative). Tagliamonte (2006) also found that speakers tend to express futurity differently depending on age.

Thus, the shaping of language is complex and rather unpredictable, influenced by both genre and social/semantic/syntactic/cognitive factors. To consider yet another factor, every speaker has a unique idiolect, as Otheguy et al. (2015) explain: “the set of shared features of any two speakers that the society dubs as belonging to the same named language is unlikely to ever be the same set; each speaker-dyad, even among the closest of relatives or friends, most likely shares a slightly different set” (294). This means that even among native speakers, what might be an acceptable representation of a language for one person may not be acceptable for another. In addition, it is important for students to understand that speakers have linguistic agency, and they can either exploit or disregard certain linguistic patterns according to the stances they choose to take and their overall communicative intent (Bucholtz 2009). The interplay of the myriad factors mentioned above results in variable language use and judgments about language use, and both are often context-dependent. This means that any sample of “authentic texts” can offer very different representations of the same language, which makes it difficult to pinpoint the characteristics that make them “reliable” (Zyzik and Polio 2017). In the next section, it will become clear that students cannot always rely on the linguistic representations in “authentic texts” for successful communication.

### 2.3.2 Accuracy

Recall that Zyzik and Polio (2017: 1) also claim that “authentic materials” “provide an accurate . . . representation of the target language.” Similar to reliability, the notion of accuracy is complex when dealing with a global language, especially when this language has continued to develop for hundreds of years with the same name, such as Spanish. Linguistic accuracy/correctness is socially determined, and Train (2007) points out that “the authenticating practices attached to (in)correctness in spelling and grammar can also be framed as a historically contingent set of standardizing practices” (226). These standardizing practices in a language usually exclude the language of working-class, less educated, and rural people; it is usually the language patterns of the elites that are considered accurate during any given period (Train 2007). Complicating the issue further, Randolph (2017) revealed that standards of accuracy can be unique to each individual. For example, he found that when a group of teachers assessed heritage learners’ language production, “there was no consistent way that the teachers made . . . judgment calls as to what was considered acceptable or ‘proper’ speech,” and that the “dynamics of the relationship among language, identity, and power in the classroom” (283) influenced a teacher’s judgment.

Because accuracy is constructed socially and politically during a specific time period (Train 2007), and even at the individual level (Randolph 2017), no text offers an inherently accurate representation of a language by the simple virtue of it being an “authentic text” (Zyzik and Polio 2017). Astute students are aware of this reality, since they cannot always rely on “authentic texts” as accurate depictions of the language when producing output. For them, using the target language accurately is simply a matter of adhering to the standards of accuracy of their teacher or assessor, and these standards are often very different from those that authors of “authentic texts” subscribe to. For instance, Advanced Placement (AP) Spanish Literature and Culture students are required to read “authentic texts” that were written on three different continents over a span of more than 500 years, and concurrently learn to write in a modern, standard way. For students to receive full points on their AP exam, their language use must be “generally accurate” with “very few errors in conventions of written language (e.g., spelling, accent marks, punctuation)” (College Board 2018: 3). However, what the AP graders are truly looking for is very few errors in conventions of *modern standard* written language. They want students to be able to analyze the required readings *Lazarillo de Tormes* (Rico 2011[1554]) and a letter from Hernán Cortés (1971[1520]), but when elaborating their textual analysis, students are disallowed from using many of the lexicogrammatical conventions that the authors of these texts used

(e.g., postposed clitics on a finite preterite verb: *el ciego mandóme que llegase cerca del animal*; Rico 2011[1554]: 10).

In other words, successful students of AP Spanish Literature and Culture must develop an advanced metalinguistic knowledge that allows them to separate archaic and dialect-specific textual input from their knowledge of the modern standard language that they are expected to use in their essays. Rather than “authentic texts” inherently representing the target language accurately (Zyzik and Polio 2017), students must realize that there are competing and evolving accuracies in any language, and that the representation of written Spanish in 16th-century Spain (or any other period) would not necessarily be deemed accurate if replicated on educational assessments in the year 2019. When students are preparing to write about *Lazarillo de Tormes* (Rico 2011[1554]) on their AP exam, a sample teacher-written essay about the novel would undoubtedly serve as a better model of appropriate language use than the very text that they are writing about. Because “authentic texts” often fail to serve as an example of accurate language production for students’ purposes, the connection between “authentic texts” and accuracy is dubious in the context of foreign language teaching.

The previous sections reveal that “authentic texts” have been promoted based on subjective qualities, such as the degree of linguistic modification, reliability, accuracy (Zyzik and Polio 2017), and the sociocultural purpose of a text (Glisan and Donato 2017). To be clear, I am not questioning the merit of “authentic texts” in L2 instruction. Rather, my goal is to weaken the basis for the hierarchy of authenticity that allows for teacher-made texts and textbook materials to be positioned (implicitly or explicitly) as “non-authentic texts,” and consequently, second-class resources.

### 3. Textbooks versus “Authentic Texts”

Textbooks are difficult to categorize because they are a singular text that often includes both “non-authentic” and “authentic texts,” and there is significant variation with regard to the proportion of each type of text they contain. However, this reality is underappreciated in L2 pedagogical literature. Through comparisons with “authentic texts,” textbooks are commonly depicted as a homogenous genre that is characterized by linguistic deficiency, distortion, contrivance and a lack of reality and authenticity. In the next section, I will begin by highlighting the subjective nature of these negative portrayals, and I will end with a call for a more nuanced characterization of textbooks.

#### 3.1 Distortion, Authenticity, and Contrivance

In L2 pedagogy, “textbook language” and textbook materials have been positioned as the antithesis of “authentic texts,” with the former thought to provide “a poor representation of the real thing” (Gilmore 2007: 98). Gilmore (2007: 104–105) explains that “textbook writers often run the risk of presenting a distorted view of the language,” and that any distortions will ultimately have serious effects on learners’ language use. G. Cook (2000), however, turns the table on those who claim that textbook materials are a more distorted representation of a language than “authentic texts.” He points out that if the process of choosing “authentic texts” for the classroom involves prohibiting much of the language related to ideas that highly interest humans, specifically conflict and intimacy (e.g., vulgar/violent/sexual language), “a distorted image of language use is created through doctoring and manufacture by selection” (G. Cook 2000: 169). From this perspective, the question should not be whether 1) the creation of textbook materials or 2) the highly controlled selection of “authentic texts” based on their content (censoring by selection/prohibition) is more “distorting.” Both processes are similarly limiting since they result in students being exposed only to the language and content that is appropriate for the sociolinguistic context of the classroom or other educational settings.

In addition to G. Cook (2000), several other pedagogical researchers have cautioned against comparing subjective textual qualities without considering the specific sociolinguistic context in which texts are interpreted. VanPatten (2017), for example, argues that the discourse in many “authentic texts,” while natural in its original context, can seem artificial when presented to learners in a communication-based L2 classroom. He explains: “**The classroom is its own authentic context.** It has real participants in a real setting. The classroom is not the doctor’s office. It’s not a restaurant. It’s not a train station. It’s a classroom full of particular people: students and teacher . . . Language use is authentic only if informed by the communicative context in which it occurs” (72, bold in original). This means that while a medical consent form or a dinner menu may contain language that seems authentic and natural in a doctor’s office or a restaurant, the same language would seem less natural in the L2 classroom because the contextual factors are completely different. Likewise, the language used in a textbook reading might seem perfectly natural in the L2 classroom, but unusual in non-academic settings. Widdowson (1998) adamantly agrees with this post-structuralist perspective of texts, insisting that subjective discursive qualities such as authenticity, reality, and distortion do not “travel with the text” (711). Put differently, texts do not inherently possess these qualities—we only perceive them, and this perception changes based on the context in which we interpret the texts and our familiarity with the community in which they were created (Widdowson 1998). For L2 instruction, then, textbooks and “authentic texts” should not be compared in the abstract. When determining texts’ appropriateness, it is crucial to consider the nature/limitations of the sociolinguistic context of the classroom and how these factors might affect students’ interpretation of and interaction with these texts.

Despite the lack of agreement on how to conceptualize authenticity in language education, this subjective quality has still been used to isolate textbook materials from “authentic materials” in empirical pedagogical research. For instance, in his study on the relationship between teaching materials and learner outcomes, Gilmore (2011) explains why textbook materials are not authentic: “an imagined textbook dialogue, composed by a writer, would not be termed authentic . . . because it is not produced contingently by two real speakers, collaborating in real time to construct a conversation together” (791). The author then lists several types of “authentic materials,” which include “films, documentaries, reality shows, TV comedies, Web-based sources, home produced video of native speakers, songs, novels, and newspaper articles” (794). The problem with this textbook/“authentic materials” contrast is most obvious when considering the dialogue in novels. While Gilmore considers them authentic, novels commonly contain *imagined* dialogues, composed by a writer, that are not produced contingently in real time by two real, collaborating speakers; recall that this is precisely the charge that the author levels against textbook dialogues. To summarize, it is not possible to assign authenticity to texts based on how real or imagined they seem. As G. Cook (2001: 371) points out, if we were to determine the authenticity or meaningfulness of a text according to how well it represents the real world as we know it, we would have to invalidate all works of fiction and any form of communication involving hypotheses or lies.

Less directly, Gilmore (2011) discursively distances textbook materials from “authentic materials” by describing the former as “contrived,” which implies that they were created through unnatural manufacturing. This is another unfair descriptor of textbook materials, since “authentic materials,” too, are often meticulously constructed and can contain unnatural discourse. Consider a traditional haiku poem, for example (G. Cook 2000). This type of poem has three lines with a total of 17 syllables. There are five syllables in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third: “Creamy plum blossoms: / Once upon a time there was / A pretty princess . . .” (Wright 1998: 1–3). This “authentic” poem can be considered contrived since it was created through purposeful manufacturing as to adhere to specific stylistic requirements. Moreover, the discourse in this poem might seem unusual, which contributes to a perception of contrivance. Still, this is not a challenge to the poem’s authenticity because authors can purposely disregard socially-constructed, neutral discourse patterns in order to achieve a certain effect



(Jaffe 2009). In Wright's poem above, the reader may struggle to find the connection between the image of "creamy plum blossoms" and the beginning of a story about a princess in the following lines. The author could have done this to intrigue or surprise a reader with strong discourse expectations, just as a composer can bring a symphony to a jarring halt in the middle of the piece for dramatic effect. Because many "authentic texts" do not adhere to neutral discourse expectations and require scrupulous attention to linguistic detail during their creation, they can have an unnatural, manufactured feel. It is unclear how this contrivance is qualitatively different from any perceived contrivance in textbooks, which means it is misleading to only associate textbooks with this quality.

Whether we refer to texts as "authentic" or "contrived" is not a pointless debate over terminology, as Gilmore (2007: 98) suggests. Especially when contrasted with the term "authentic," "contrived" indisputably carries negative connotations (G. Cook 2000). This could result in an aversion to texts with this negative label, which includes the majority of textbook materials under Gilmore's (2011) conceptualization. Text selection need not be unnecessarily influenced by terminological undertones, particularly in light of recent research that shows the benefits that textbook materials can provide in the L2 classroom (Guerrettaz and Johnston 2013). In section 5, I will propose a new paradigm for classifying texts, one which is more semantically neutral.

### 3.2 Lexicogrammatical Content

Researchers have also reinforced the problematic textbook/"authentic text" dichotomy by suggesting that the lexicogrammatical content is inherently different in each. For instance, Zyzik and Polio (2017) claim that "[a]nother powerful reason for using authentic texts is that they provide richer input than textbooks or other instructional materials" (7), and that "textbooks may fall short of presenting fully accurate descriptions of language. Words and phrases, too, can be underrepresented" (8). Additionally, Glisan (2012) comments that "[h]istorically, language teachers tended to integrate the texts that were presented in textbooks; i.e. those that were written for foreign language students and sanitized to include primarily the vocabulary and grammatical structures that had been previously learned" (520). Both authors seem to suggest that a symptom of inauthenticity in texts is having less lexicogrammatical variation, and their comments give the impression that language external to textbooks exists in an "unsanitized" form, with a standard amount of words and phrases being represented. Nevertheless, there is no threshold at which words and phrases can be deemed "underrepresented" in a text, and "sanitizing" a text can be better understood as making it level-appropriate, which aides comprehension and language acquisition (VanPatten 2017).

Words and phrases can only be considered "underrepresented" in textbooks in comparison to "authentic texts" (Zyzik and Polio 2017) if a standard level of word and phrase usage in "authentic texts" has been established. However, establishing such a metric is impossible because lexicogrammatical diversity and complexity vary tremendously in these texts. If a children's book, a young adult novel, an adult novel, and a PhD dissertation can all be considered "authentic texts," there is clearly no minimal lexicogrammatical diversity and complexity that a text must have in order for it to be authentic. Further complicating the issue, even in the same general genre of "authentic texts," there can be a noticeable difference in the complexity and style of two authors' works (compare Ernest Hemingway's writing with Charles Dickens'). Since "authentic texts" can have relatively low lexicogrammatical complexity and diversity without being characterized as linguistically deficient (e.g., young adult novels), the same should be true for textbooks.

It is important to recognize that texts, regardless of their perceived authenticity, are usually created with their intended audience's literacy level in mind. Therefore, the linguistic content in L2 textbooks is not "underrepresented" due to a failure to represent the language in a complete way; instead, textbook authors attempt to represent the language in a *level-appropriate* way

according to the estimated literacy level of L2 learners. This sometimes involves limiting, or as Glisan (2012) puts it, “sanitizing,” linguistic content, but this process is not specific to textbook writing. To provide an example of how even “authentic texts” are “sanitized” as to make them level-appropriate for readers, I will briefly extend the discussion to the realm of non-literary “authentic texts.” The United States government recently passed the “Plain Writing Act of 2010,” which established guidelines to eliminate “stodgy” writing “full of long, dry legalisms and other jargon” (36) in all government communications to the public ([plainlanguage.gov](http://plainlanguage.gov)). Specifically, the intention of this Act was to promote “clear Government communication that the public can understand and use” (1). If the removal of complex, unfamiliar language from government communications could be regarded as a “sanitization” due to the simplification of linguistic content (Glisan 2012), it is clear that such “sanitizations” can be beneficial since they facilitate the comprehension of a text. A written text, whether directed at L1 or L2 readers, should be mostly comprehensible, otherwise it is not optimally contributing to successful communication, literacy development, or language acquisition (VanPatten 2017). The conscious shaping of linguistic content to suit readers’ literacy level is an important process in the creation of both textbooks and “authentic texts,” and texts with less linguistic diversity/complexity are not linguistically deficient—they are just linguistically simpler.

In sections 3.1–3.2, I outlined several ways that researchers have discursively distanced textbooks from “authentic texts.” Textbook materials have been characterized as “contrived texts” (Gilmore 2011) that are prone to having “underrepresented” (Zyzik and Polio 2017), “sanitized” (Glisan 2012), and “distorted” (Gilmore 2007) linguistic content. While scholars use an array of positive and negative words to dissociate “authentic” and “non-authentic” texts, at the core of this dichotomy lies the belief that there is an authentic, complete form of the language. In order to classify language use as “distorted,” “sanitized,” and “underrepresented,” there must be some form of the language that, by contrast, is “undistorted,” “unsanitized,” with words and phrases all being properly represented—“the real thing” (Gilmore 2007: 98), in other words. However, privileging this form of a language—or even assuming it exists—is now controversial in many modern strands of Applied Linguistics (De Fina and Perrino 2011). It is not fair to continue to compare the language in textbooks to an idealized, linguistically-undefinable form of language or discourse in all “authentic texts.” Even if this most unadulterated form of a language could be characterized, it is not clear why it should always be most beneficial for L2 learners, since it would often be too advanced. The value of written texts should be based primarily on their appropriateness in relation to the literacy level of readers, not on abstract assessments of their lexicogrammatical content. More linguistic diversity/complexity is not always better ([plainlanguage.gov](http://plainlanguage.gov); VanPatten 2017).

### 3.3 Reframing Textbooks in L2 Pedagogy

The use of the term “textbook language” (e.g., Gilmore 2007) has been a powerful discursive tool in the hierarchization of texts. It has helped create a clear division between the language in textbooks, which is often portrayed as being deficient, and the authentic language of “authentic texts.” Although this division is problematic for reasons elaborated above, there is a more obvious reason that the comparison between textbooks and “authentic texts” is unjustifiable: the modern textbook commonly contains “authentic texts.” Gilmore (2007: 7) recognizes that “authentic texts” can be found in textbooks, but in his article, textbooks are associated more with contrivance and distortion. If a significant number of textbooks now include “authentic” short stories, poems, and songs, then textbooks should no longer serve as the straw man figure that “authentic texts” are compared to. Alternatively, more researchers could participate in the reshaping of textbooks to ensure the incorporation of a variety of text types, including more “authentic texts” if desired. Although textbooks are not preferred by all instructors, they remain

an important resource, especially for those who are not experts in curriculum design or those who teach multiple levels and do not have time to independently create several text-based curricula.

An example of a textbook that highlights “authentic texts” is *Lazos: Gramática y vocabulario a través de la literatura* (Frantzen 2009). *Lazos* is a textbook in the traditional sense that it provides exercises to foster the development of grammar and vocabulary, but this is achieved through a systemic-functional/stylistics analysis of the Spanish language in fifteen “authentic” short stories. Such an analysis allows students to study how highly proficient language users employ linguistic forms (e.g., *ser* versus *estar*) and patterns to convey meaning and achieve rhetorical effects in situated contexts (Yáñez Prieto 2010). With this approach, teachers provide students with the tools to manipulate the language according to their own communicative purposes. In the present day, the fact that the incorporation and processing of “authentic” input is so commonly achieved with a textbook suggests that the negative comments about this language-learning resource are misplaced. To change this discourse, we must begin asking clarifying questions when others assert that “most textbook material” does not have a sociocultural purpose that “goes beyond simply providing contrived, artificial, and unmotivated examples of the target language to learners” (Glisan and Donato 2017: 65). Minimally, we ought to ask which specific textbooks are being referenced so that the image of progressive works like *Lazos* and other modern textbooks is not damaged by broad criticisms of this genre.<sup>3</sup>

#### 4. Authenticity and Linguistic Nativity

While the previous sections have been focused primarily on claims about the linguistic qualities of texts, the ideological construct of authenticity also raises concerns for creators of texts. Because language and identity are inherently linked (Niño-Murcia and Rothman 2008), a determination of linguistic authenticity also entails a judgment of the speakers of a language. Consequently, the continued suggestion that “authentic texts” are produced by “native language users” (ACTFL 2012) is both misleading and potentially discriminatory.<sup>4</sup> First, this idea is misleading because there is no inherent connection between L1 speakers and authenticity; these speakers’ linguistic authority is often challenged (Guerrettaz 2015). Second, L2 speakers or those who are deemed to be nonnative speakers are implicitly relegated to a position of inauthenticity or deficiency (Loveday 1982). In society, the struggle for language ownership is real, and all speakers are affected by and simultaneously participate in the process of linguistic authentication (Bucholtz and Hall 2005).

While ACTFL’s (2012) definition of “authentic texts” requires that they be produced by native speakers, there is no inherent connection between these speakers and linguistic authority/authenticity. For instance, in a Spanish-Maya bilingual area of Mexico, Guerrettaz (2015) showed how an L2 learner of Maya with low proficiency positioned himself as having greater authority than L1 Maya speakers who were fluent but could not write the standardized form of the language. This L2 learner explained: “[T]hose of us who are studying [Maya]—we are going to write it correctly as it is supposed to be written” (177). Another L2 learner of Maya even took the authority to correct a L1 Maya speaker after the latter used a lexical borrowing from Spanish while speaking Maya. The L1 Maya speaker was treated as a non-expert in this moment because she did not speak *pure* (or perhaps authentic) Maya, which shows that language ownership is not something that native speakers are automatically granted. In reality, ideological constructs like linguistic purity or authenticity can be used to exploit the dynamic between language and power (Fairclough 2001), and this can be done by both L1 and L2 speakers.

As another consequence of native speakers being the sole producers of “authentic texts” (ACTFL 2012), heritage speakers in the United States would lose their indexical connection with authenticity when authors such as Benmamoun et al. (2010) deny them native status. The authors justify this nonnative positioning with the assertion that heritage speakers’ Spanish is

symptomatic of “incomplete acquisition.” However, Otheguy (2016) explains that comparing heritage speakers’ (or who he calls “second-generation Hispanic bilinguals”) language system with their parents’ as a basis for making conclusions about native linguistic competence is a flawed methodology, because child language acquisition is not a “process of perfect reproduction of parental grammars” (301). Therefore, the relegation of heritage speakers to a class that is “less than native” is based more on social-political considerations than linguistic-psychological ones (Otheguy 2016). Facing the same potential discrimination as heritage speakers, teachers who are L2 learners of the target language might not be considered authentic language users when compared to native speakers. But, according to V. Cook (2001), it would be more realistic for students to aspire to be highly-proficient bilinguals—like many of their teachers—instead of perpetually feeling like “shadows of native speakers” (407). Kramsch (2012) echoes this sentiment. She suggests that in lieu of encouraging our students to be savant-like polyglots that can speak like monolingual native speakers, we ought to help them become semiotically-resourceful multilinguals. In sum, attaching authenticity to native speakers establishes an unnecessary hierarchy of sociolinguistic dominance in L2 education.

## 5. Redefining Texts

Because of the misconceptions and power struggles that the concept of authenticity encourages, I advocate for the retirement of the term “authentic texts.” Many educators may choose to rely less on labels altogether and simply select or create texts according to learning goals. However, for those who find it useful, I propose the following terms as replacements for “non-authentic texts” and “authentic texts,” respectively:

- **Learner-centered (LC) texts:** texts that were created with L2 learners’ proficiency/literacy level or learner outcomes in mind, often with the intent of communicating information relevant to learners (based on their interests, age group, and other factors).
- **Non-learner-centered (NLC) texts:** texts that were created to communicate information without regard for L2 learners’ proficiency/literacy level, learner outcomes, or other factors related to these learners.

The terms “learner-centered (LC) texts” and “non-learner-centered (NLC) texts” highlight the most objective motivation for the former divide between two classes of texts: whether factors related to L2 learners were considered when the author created the text. In the context of L2 Spanish learning, an article from the Spanish newspaper *El País* would be an NLC text since it was not written with L2 learners in mind, while the short story *Ángel* (VanPatten 2017), which was written for intermediate L2 Spanish learners, would be an LC text.<sup>5</sup> Thus, researchers and educators, if they wish, can still categorize texts in a way that resembles the former “authentic” versus “non-authentic” contrast, but crucially, the concept of authenticity has been removed. This will allow for a more objective view of learning materials in both research and teaching. When comparing types of texts in research, no texts will be automatically granted the “unequivocally . . . positive attribute” of authenticity (Zyzik and Polio 2017: 1) at the outset of an investigation. What is more, teachers will no longer potentially feel the shame associated with using contrived, “non-authentic” textbook materials with artificial and distorted content. Removing the ideology of authenticity will also help combat the idea that only certain texts represent a language in its most complete, authentic form, which is implicit in many pedagogical discussions. Finally, the new terminology does not encourage a power struggle among the creators of texts; deference is no longer implicitly given to those who have the strongest association with authenticity. In the final section of this paper, the discussion will be reframed in terms of NLC and LC texts instead of “authentic” and “non-authentic” texts.

## 6. Conclusion

The main goal of this paper is to shift our attention away from the ideology of authenticity that results in an unhealthy competition between non-learner-centered (NLC) and learner-centered (LC) texts. This competition is largely a consequence of juxtaposed depictions of the two types of texts, with NLC texts receiving a more favorable characterization. Once dissected, however, it is clear that the suggested positive qualities of NLC texts (e.g., greater social purpose, authentic, accurate, reliable) are highly subjective. Accuracy and authenticity, for example, are not encapsulated in texts. The perception of these qualities fluctuates in time and in different spaces (Train 2007; VanPatten 2017; Widdowson 1998), and even varies from person to person (Randolph 2017). Identifying purported qualities of LC texts, such as contrivance, does not make the matter of distinguishing the two types of texts any easier. As a haiku poem makes clear (G. Cook 2000), contrivance cannot be contrasted with authenticity; many NLC texts are beautifully contrived. There is no reason that NLC and LC texts cannot function together in a non-hierarchical relationship; the modern textbook is an example of a singular text that often contains both (e.g., *Conexiones*; Zayas-Bazán et al. 2013). This reality renders the term “textbook language” inoperative as a reference to only LC input.

Regarding the creators of texts, the connection between the linguistic nativity of a person and authenticity is weak. The process of authentication often occurs through subtle positioning and nuanced discourse (Bucholtz and Hall 2005), and both L1 and L2 speakers can be authenticated or delegitimized (Guerrettaz 2015). However, in L2 pedagogy, authentication currently occurs in an undisguised way through the use of the label “authentic.” Native speakers and sociolinguistic contexts outside of the classroom are associated more with authenticity through their link with “authentic texts” (e.g., ACTFL 2012), which implicitly positions nonnative speakers and the sociolinguistic context of the classroom as being less authentic. By removing the overt ideology of authenticity from language teaching, this negative positioning will be subtler and ideally less impactful.

The enthusiastic promotion of NLC texts in conjunction with the unflattering framing of LC texts may distract educators from focusing on the appropriateness of teaching materials and the consequences of their implementation based on SLA principles and pedagogical theory. In multiple SLA theories (e.g., input processing (VanPatten and Williams 2014) and usage-based approaches (Ellis 2015)), the comprehensibility of a text, which allows learners to make form-meaning connections in an L2, is considered more consequential to language acquisition than a text’s perceived authenticity. There are also pedagogical frameworks (e.g., Classroom Ecology framework; Guerrettaz and Johnston 2013) that do not encourage a hierarchy of authenticity in texts. Guerrettaz and Johnston (2013) showed how even textbook materials can “[come] alive” (791) in ways unintended by an author, which demonstrates the important role that students and teachers have in giving texts value and significance (see Barthes 1977 also). For a holistic understanding of how texts contribute to classroom discourse/interaction and language learning, we must analyze how students and teachers interact with them in a situated learning context (Guerrettaz and Johnston 2013).

After decades of debating the meaning of the term “authentic texts” (see Gilmore 2007), it seems that we have reached the point where, as Otheguy (2016) concluded with regard to the term “incomplete acquisition,” it is “highly unlikely that it can ever be salvaged by means of conceptual refinement” (302). Any attempt to objectively conceptualize the authenticity of texts will fail because “authentic speech and authentic speakers do not exist naturally in the world. Rather, what we have come to understand as authentic must have already undergone processes of authentication that emerge from interaction and circulate within social domains” (Reyes 2016: 314). Both LC and NLC materials have made an important contribution to L2 pedagogy and will continue to do so (e.g., Frantzen 2009; Guerrettaz and Johnston 2013). With increased objectivity in pedagogical literature, educators will be able to select materials according to

their learning objectives without feeling pressure from polarized discourse. To this end, we should be more critical of the negative depiction of LC texts/textbooks (e.g., as non-authentic, distorted, contrived, artificial) and the misleading suggestions about NLC texts (e.g., that they are authentic, accurate, reliable). It is this type of subjectivity that has kept us “chasing our tails” (Gilmore 2007: 98) in the important discussion of text selection for too long.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The terms “texts” and “materials” will be used interchangeably in this paper.

<sup>2</sup>My analysis of terminology/discourse and ideology in this paper should not be interpreted as a broader critique of the works I am citing. For example, while I oppose the “authentic”/“non-authentic” dichotomy that Zyzik and Polio (2017) use to refer to texts, their book offers a wealth of ideas for text implementation and is a valuable resource for instructors of all levels. It should also be clear that Zyzik and Polio (2017) do not suggest that *only* “authentic texts” should be used in L2 instruction; they state that “non-authentic materials”—while qualitatively different—are also useful. The goal of their book was not to debate which type of texts are better, and similarly, this is not the goal of the present paper.

<sup>3</sup>*Conexiones* (Zayas-Bazán et al. 2013) is example of a modern intermediate Spanish textbook with both “authentic” and “non-authentic” texts in each chapter.

<sup>4</sup>Many authors no longer associate “authentic texts” exclusively with native speakers (e.g., Glisan and Donato 2017; Zyzik and Polio 2017). However, this association is still very common, and ACTFL’s (2012) definition was selected as just one example.

<sup>5</sup>A reviewer pointed out that the distinction between NLC and LC texts is also naturally transferable to L1 learning contexts. For example, in the context of an L1 English classroom, an unabridged version of *Moby-Dick* (Melville 2007) would be an NLC text since the author’s target audience was not “learners” with developing language/literacy skills; on the other hand, the children’s novel *Charlotte’s Web* (White and Williams 1952) would be an LC text because the author specifically targeted learners’ with lower literacy levels.

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