

# Virtual Realia

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**virtual realia:** (in language teaching) digitized objects and items from the target culture which are brought into the classroom as examples or aids and used to stimulate spoken or written language production.

The use of realia is commonplace in the ESL/EFL classroom and is widely considered to have great value in fostering an active teaching–learning environment. By presenting information through diverse media, realia helps to make English language input as comprehensible as possible and to build "an associative bridge between the classroom and the world" (Heaton, 1979). As Berwald (1987) notes, realia "are not only a series of artifacts that describe the customs and traditions of a culture, but they are also a set of teaching aids that facilitate the simulation of *experience* in the target culture" (my italics). Realia provides language learners with multi-sensorial impressions of the language which, as Rivers (1983) notes is "learned partly at least through seeing, hearing, touching, and manipulating" items. And interaction with authentic materials aids in contextually grounding instruction by bringing students into contact with language as it is used in the target culture in order to meet actual communication needs. The use of realia, then, can enhance linguistic and cultural comprehensibility, which are both prerequisites for real language learning.

As Hess & Sklarew (1994) note, learners can explore aspects of American culture which are expressed in everyday realia items such as a Big Mac wrapper or the cover of *People Magazine*. And realia like greeting cards can provide great vocabulary in the form of puns, idioms, and slang. They can also serve as a springboard for a discussion of underlying cultural values, beliefs, and behavior as well as provide an often non-language-dependent means of introducing students to the lesson topic (Short, 1991). Further, there is evidence that through the use of realia teachers may increase the number of student responses (Waltz, 1986) and, therefore, overall participation and interest in learning activities.

With the increasing integration of computers into language instruction and the phenomenal growth of the Internet, the idea of digitizing realia and organizing it into a web site is a logical further development in language teaching in the digital age. If we accept [Tanguay's](#) (1997) assertion which states "that which can be digitized, will be digitized," then why not realia? Whereas traditional

realia is linear in nature, when transferred to a more interactive and flexible medium, Virtual Realia merges an established technique with the new educational technologies in bringing culturally-based authentic materials into EFL classrooms worldwide.

I developed the idea of a Virtual Realia web site while working as an EFL teacher-trainer at the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg in Germany. Almost all of the teachers in our in-service training seminars are from eastern Germany, and most have never been to the United States. The teachers are faced, however, with a curriculum which requires them to teach American culture. In addition, many of the English teachers in our program are former Russian teachers who have undergone or are presently undergoing extensive requalification in English due to the increased demand for English instruction at the expense of Russian which occurred following the political changes in East Germany. As computer-based instruction is a key component of the teacher-training curriculum at our university, I wanted to develop a way to combine the new educational technologies with successful EFL teaching practices and techniques while addressing the specific needs and challenges of our teachers. The result was the ***Virtual Realia*** web site.

Virtual Realia is a collection of linguistic and non-linguistic authentic materials which have been compiled, scanned, and posted on our WWW server. The site offers a new perspective to using authentic materials by allowing EFL teachers instant access to American cultural realia. It benefits especially those international teachers who are less mobile or unable to collect their own materials.

Like more traditional realia, virtual realia is motivating and meaningful in that it brings an authentic piece of the target culture into the language classroom. The added advantage with this new medium is that realia-based lessons need not be bound to cities and places that the teacher has physically been to but, rather, can be based on materials from a variety of places collected from a variety of people with various interests. Further, students interact directly with these materials rather than with someone else's interpretation and analysis of them and thus may find virtual realia even more appropriate for their interests than traditional authentic materials collected by the teacher. Another benefit of virtual realia is that the materials are truly interactive and more flexible than traditional ones in that they can be easily adapted and up dated. For example, a page from a brochure can easily be digitally altered for use in an information gap activity without damaging the "original." Further, teachers can choose which pages of the document to use in class rather than being forced to use the entire item. Also, the computer-savvy instructor can juxtapose the digital items when developing virtual realia-based communicative activities, or create documents which contain only certain types of virtual realia. These images and

activities can be stored on a disk and easily accessed or printed out. Moreover, these materials can serve as the basis for various computer-based collaborative projects, as supplemental materials, or as on-line assignments and tests.

The contents of the Virtual Realia site are arranged by topic rather than by difficulty level. The reasoning is that teachers are often discouraged from using an attractive piece of realia because it appears to be too difficult. By not assigning a "level" to the items, teachers are more likely to select pieces which will compel their students to "reach" a bit. Also, rather than judging the apparent difficulty of the realia item itself, one should ensure that the accompanying tasks reflect the appropriate ability level for the students concerned. Traditionally, authentic materials have been reserved for intermediate to advanced levels. However, as Adams (1995) notes, "students at lower levels stand to gain at least as much by exposure to well-selected authentic texts appropriate to their needs and abilities." With this in mind, special attention has been given to items rich in context and graphics and modest to moderate in text.

The Virtual Realia items are intended to serve as "raw materials" for teachers designing lessons focusing on American cultural studies, content-based lessons, and skill area units. The sample activities included with many of the items suggest ideas that teachers can use when designing their own exercises. The high-beginner/low-intermediate-level [Ellis Island](#) brochure contains two pages of pictures and text and gives an immigrant's account of his ordeal on Ellis Island at the beginning of this century. [Sample activities](#) and exercises I designed to accompany this page include guided, short answer and vocabulary exercises as well as more open-ended, expressive activities like a role-play and "letter home" writing assignment. I also included student-generated drawings which give a pictorial account of the immigrant's experience in a sequential ordering activity.

Virtual Realia items were also selected to provide insights into American culture which delve below the surface and explore lesser known aspects of the United States and the American people. [The Plain People](#), for example, takes a look at the Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Their history, daily life, and beliefs are examined in a brochure from the Lancaster County Tourism Office with photographs and [sample exercises](#) provided. An entire unit on [Martin Luther King](#) has been provided which demonstrates how teachers can take multiple pieces of Virtual Realia and combine these items with other on-line materials and teacher-produced activities into an integrative American cultural unit which can be easily adapted to any proficiency level. This unit includes a brochure about the Selma Movement with a [map](#) of important sites, a brochure about [Dr. King's birthplace](#) in Atlanta as well as a [post card](#) with a [C-test](#)-like

writing activity based on facts mentioned in the birthplace brochure. The text of Dr. King's famous "[I Have a Dream](#)" speech is included with a link to the audio version. And finally, there is a link to a special Martin Luther King site maintained by the Seattle Times which allows students to further research Dr. King's life and achievements. While the units provided suggest a starting point for teachers interested in designing their own Virtual Realia-based lessons, the activities themselves can serve as a downloadable template for future on-line exercises the teacher may wish to develop.

Both the adoption of authentic materials in the classroom and Internet access appear to be on the rise (Adams, 1995; [Cerf, 1997](#)). Thus it will be easier for international teachers to take advantage of the benefits and "cultural experience" that Virtual Realia can provide. The Internet explosion has allowed teachers (and students) to travel through cyberspace anywhere in the world. And through the use of carefully selected virtual realia gathered during these journeys, teachers can expose students to many if not most of the printed materials they could expect to encounter during an actual stay in the target country/culture. Indeed, the hypertextual nature of Virtual Realia "removes the limitations of the printed page and breaks down (the) geographical boundaries" (Negroponte, 1995) which once served as obstacles to procuring authentic materials. It allows the teacher to stop at a small café off the beaten path, pop into the train station to check departures for the weekend, or clip some coupons and check over a shopping receipt from the local supermarket just like a native of that town might do and then bring this collection back to class to use in lessons without ever having left their home or school.

***Can virtual realia still be considered realia?*** The larger question regarding authenticity of which realia is a part paints a confused and contradictory picture at best. What does seem clear, however, is that authenticity is a relative matter and that different aspects of it can be present in varying degrees ([Taylor, 1994](#)). To help answer the question above, let us first consider a few definitions of realia.

**realia:** (in language teaching) actual objects and items which are brought into a classroom as examples or as aids to be talked or written about and used in teaching. (Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics. Richards, Platt, & Platt. 1992. Essex.)

**realia:** anything which has a purpose outside of the ESL classroom and can be brought into the classroom. (Realia: Bringing the Real World into the Classroom [Online]. Dickens, Robertson, & Hofmann. <http://www.wlc.com/oxus/realia.htm>. 1995. Victoria, BC.)

**realia**: objects of any origin used to illustrate vocabulary and structure in the L2. (Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 1988)

**realia**: concrete objects and the paraphernalia of everyday life. (Zukowski-Faust, 1997)

If we accept a synthesis of these working definitions, concede that realia does not *necessarily* have to be something tangible (e.g. authentic audio clips), and further agree that something which is brought into the classroom digitally still counts as being brought into the classroom, then our answer is clearly, yes.

***But virtual realia isn't really the object at all; it's just a digitized image of the item.***

Foreign language practitioners do accept modifications of realia items such as the lamination of authentic materials onto a card (Zukowski-Faust, 1997).

Wood (1980) even presents the postage stamp as a cultural artifact that may be easily photographed and enlarged to facilitate its use and discussion in class. I propose that as long as the item concerned is a true facsimile of a piece of realia and the integrity and practical authenticity is preserved, then the item can be considered realia.

Of course, not everyone will be able to take advantage of Virtual Realia. However, if you are reading this article online, you surely can. And by performing the relatively painless bits to atoms conversion of the Virtual Realia materials (printing them out), anyone can use this resource in classroom instruction. What one realistically needs to exploit this resource is a computer, a modem, Internet access, a printer, and a free web browser such as Netscape.

Virtual Realia can be used as an on-line tool in making the vague concrete for language learners. It can facilitate the integration of computer-based foreign language instruction with other disciplines, such as cultural studies, history, and literature. In doing so, Virtual Realia reveals the similarities and differences between native and target cultures as well as raises (multi-) cultural awareness. Virtual Realia can improve the quality and availability of culturally-based, authentic EFL materials. It was designed with the belief that studying a foreign language is a means to a greater end--*communicating* meaningfully with another culture and its people.

Visit the [Virtual Realia](#) web site.

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