

An Eye on Using Authentic Reading Materials: Practice & Adaptation

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Abstract

This paper is intended to provide practical guidelines to language teachers who are thinking of using authentic language materials for the first time, or those who are seeking new pathways to utilize such materials in their ESL reading classes. To accomplish this goal, the paper contains three main sections. The first section exhibits the researchers own definition and categories of reading authentic materials based on their own teaching experiences and their readings about some previous theories and publications and attitudes and beliefs of some educators around the world on this issue. In fact, they divide the authenticity of any language reading materials into three dimensions; text, task and learner authenticity. Then, the paper concentrates on exposing students to these three categories of reading authentic materials in real classroom settings in order to reveal their perspectives about whether using these materials will help gearing them toward enhancing their language reading comprehension skills. Finally, the paper highlights the challenges the researchers face in harnessing such materials for providing an enjoyable, useful and comprehensible language reading classes.

1. Introduction

The idea of using authentic materials in teaching reading in an English language classroom has been capturing the attention of many EFL teachers. In fact, the majority has endeavored to implement such materials in real reading classroom settings. Yet, they have raised a number of fundamental wonders which might lead them to avoid using authentic materials and stuck into teaching their students inauthentic or “created” materials for their reading classes, instead. Some of these are worth to be highlighted; can any reading text be called an authentic text? Can a text from newspaper develop my students’ language skills? And a crucial question is how can it be taught?

Diverting the scope toward the literature of authenticity and ESL reveals that researchers have had focused on fighting forward and backward about the real definition of authentic reading text for more than thirty years. Porter and Roberts (1981) defined authenticity as “‘real’ language not intended for non-native learners” (p.37) [6]. Harmer (1983) also added that “authentic texts (either written or spoken) are those which are designed for native speakers: they are real texts designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language in question” (p. 146) [4]. Moreover, Gilmore (2007) pointed out that “there is a considerable range of meanings associated with authenticity, and therefore it is little surprise if the term remains ambiguous in most teachers’ minds” (p.98) [3].

From the researchers’ point of view, authenticity is a misleading term and the focus when we talk about EFL and authentic materials should be on providing EFL teachers with practical guidelines on implementing such materials.

This study is the first study, as far as the researchers know, that aims not only to acquaint EFL teachers with the three identified dimensions of authentic reading materials. Instead, it endeavor to solicit ESL learners’ voices about these categories in order to equip their teachers with some practical tips to better understand the meaning and implementation of the authenticity of language materials and students’ responses to these kinds of materials.



2. Methodology

2.1 Objectives

This study aims at:

1. Identifying the types of reading authenticity.
2. Exploring common EFL students' attitudes and perspectives of the different types of authentic reading language materials.
3. Identifying challenges in implementing such materials in ESL reading classrooms.
4. Helping teachers start using authentic materials as part of their teaching techniques for developing reading skills.

2.2 Producers

The main data collection method that the researchers has relied on is their reading classroom experiences since they both have been teaching English for second language students for more than six years. However, the researchers have also involved intermediate-English language level students who are from two higher education institutions in Oman, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) and Modern College of Business and Science (MCBS). Students have been exposed to the three categories of authentic reading materials during their reading classes and for three teaching weeks. Their attitudes have been measured by an Authentic Reading Feedback Form which (ARFF) has been given to student to fill in immediately after each lesson. The ARFF contains three questions;

- Q1. Did you find the text interesting or boring? Why?
- Q2. Is the language used difficult or easy? Explain.
- Q3. After reading the text, what things have you learned?

This form has enabled the researchers to get a deeper insight of their students' perspectives about authentic reading materials in promoting their language reading skills.

3. Discussion & Findings

This paper attempts to assist teachers to have effective and enjoyable reading classes. Three dimensions of authentic reading texts are highly recommended to be taken into consideration when teaching reading to EFL students that are related to material, task and learner authenticity. The following lines will exhibit a real experience of these authentic reading materials with two groups of students from different higher education institutions in Oman and some striking findings are highlighted, then.

A. Students' perspectives of different types of authentic reading materials:

1. Material Authenticity

Two texts were chosen: one was from a local Omani newspaper (Times of Oman) and the other one was from a British newspaper (The Guardian). Students were exposed to the texts and asked to write a summary and select two new vocabulary. Table (1) shows data of reading Times of Oman text whereas table (2) shows data of reading the Gurdian text. In fact, the former was more interesting and easier than the latter. This can be accounted for two important justifications;

- a. The learners' own prior knowledge, interest, and curiosity were activated and engaged by the reading text. Breen (1983, p. 63) has clarified that selecting authentic materials that activate background knowledge will result in being more interested and motivated [1].
- b. The topic was comprehensible and familiar to the learners where the anxiety of reading such text was low and motivation toward reading the text was high, instead. Thus, this allows the fluidness of the text. In fact, most linguists such as Anderson and Lynch (1988, p. 20) and Long (1986 as cited in Hadley, 2000, p.177) have pointed out that the learners gain sense of confidence in their language abilities (reading, summarizing, speaking) when they are exposed to understandable, recognizable and interesting input [4].

Despite the fact that the students were not neither familiar nor own prior knowledge about the Gurdian text, a high number of students from both institutes express their willingness to read the text. They developed several meta-communication and learning skills such as guessing the words in context and to talk about international news. This indicates that "learners appreciate authentic

materials as conducive to language learning, (perhaps therefore) enjoy working with them and do not innately associate a high degree of authenticity with a high degree of difficulty” [2]

Table 1	Q1	Q2	Q3
MCBS (15 Ss)	Interesting: 15	Easy: 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New vocabulary • Summary skills • Being up-to-date
SQU (12 Ss)	Interesting: 12	Easy: 10	
Rationales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • related to the students' context • reflects students' feeling (happy) • easy and clear • topic is important 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiar topic • Clear and interesting • Easy meaning 	
MCBS (15 Ss)	Boring: 0	Difficult: 3	
SQU (12 Ss)	Boring: 0	Difficult: 2	
Rationales		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New vocabulary 	

Table 2	Q1	Q2	Q3
MCBS (17 Ss)	Interesting: 13	Easy: 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New vocabulary • Summary skills • Being up-to-date • New information • Guessing meaning from context • Knowing about international news
SQU (14 Ss)	Interesting: 11	Easy: 8	
Rationales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing about a new real story • Knowing about latest news around the world. • An extraordinary event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear 	
MCBS (15 Ss)	Boring: 4	Difficult: 12	
SQU (14 Ss)	Boring: 3	Difficult: 6	
Rationales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are other interesting articles • Feeling sad • Not important topic and not related to their context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New vocabulary 	

2. Task Authenticity

Five different texts were selected from various local and international newspapers where the focus was on developing an authentic task in which students worked in groups and were given some pictures related to the texts. Meanwhile, they were asked to predict the content of the text through building up a number of questions which they might find answers for. Then, students went around the class to match the picture they had with the appropriate text. Each group read the texts and shared their summary with their group members. Later, each member from different groups were asked to sit in a group that consists of students who have different texts in order to inform their peers about what they had read.

Breen (1983, p. 66) has asserted that authenticity of task is the one that is designed to allow communication of ideas and meaning [1]. The nature of the tasks that were assigned to the students in their classroom exhibits that the tasks are authentic and students have developed skills they usually have when they inform their friends about a news they read from newspapers, social media and or books. Table (3) shows that students have developed not only communication

skills (discussing and writing questions in order to predict the content of the text via the picture, matching the picture with its appropriate text, summarizing the text) but the tasks also allow them to develop learning language skills (guessing the meaning from context). Twenty one (21) students from both institutions were able to perform the tasks in which they were interested in communicating their ideas and understanding.

Table 3	Q1	Q2	Q3
MCBS (15 Ss)	Interesting: 14	Easy: 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New vocabulary • Summary skills • Guess the meaning from context • Guess the content from the pictures
SQU (10 Ss)	Interesting: 7	Easy: 5	
Rationales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear, simple and interesting • Language is easy 	
MCBS (15 Ss)	Boring: 1	Difficult: 3	
SQU (10 Ss)	Boring: 3	Difficult: 5	
Rationales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complicated • Information is not useful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New vocabulary • 	

3. Learner Authenticity

Students were asked to bring texts that they are interested in reading in order to share the information of the texts they read with all their classmates. Gilmore (2007, p. 98) and Breen (1983, p.68) have insisted on the participation of learners in selecting reading texts from real reading sources [1] & [3]. In fact, the researchers have noticed how motivated students were toward reading and summarizing their authentic texts they had brought. As Table (4) displays, all the students were interested in reading their own reading texts for these readings meet special needs for them such as getting new information, reading favorite topics, changing the routine of the reading class where they are reading texts that cater international audience. This implies that in our real life we always expose ourselves to texts we will benefit from, we will have arguments around the content of the texts and texts that meet our needs.

Table 4	Q1	Q2	Q3
MCBS (15 Ss)	Interesting: 15	Easy: 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New vocabulary • Summary skills • Knowing about different topics • Developing speaking and reading skills
SQU (15 Ss)	Interesting: 15	Easy: 12	
Rationales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New information • Favorite topics • Changing routine • Help students to socialize and know each other more • Titles of the texts are attractive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear and interesting 	
MCBS (15 Ss)	Boring: 0	Difficult: 5	
SQU (15 Ss)	Boring: 0	Difficult: 3	
Rationales		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New vocabulary • Some international newspaper 	

B. Challenges in Implementing such Materials in EFL Reading Classrooms:

From the experiment that has been done with the students in this paper, some challenges were encountered by researchers while implementing the different dimensions of authentic reading materials. They are;

1. Researchers have faced a problem in selecting the appropriate authentic materials that can suit the students' language level and meet their interest and background.
2. Some students were not interested in knowing what is happening in other countries around the world; however, they were motivated to know more about their local news.
3. It was hard to find different texts with the same length, difficulty, and language level with which students can work in groups to do the same task and finish at the same time.

4. Conclusion

Understanding the concept of authenticity in language learning materials is not an easy thing to achieve, and the term authenticity in itself is problematic and confusing, and applying authenticity in the classroom is much more challenging than we think. This paper has asserted that there are three keys that should be taken in consideration when thinking about authenticity; the authenticity of text, the authenticity of task, and the most importantly is the learner authenticity. In addition, this study has showed a real implementation of these three categories of authentic reading materials on students from two different higher education institutions. The purpose of conducting such a case study is to get a deeper insight of English language learners' perspectives about authentic reading materials and to help EFL teachers start using authentic materials in their reading classes. From the researchers' point of view, it is the teacher's job to decide what should be used and implemented in the class according to the educational context and their students' interest, background, and language level. Teachers with high motivation and who would like to implement new ideas in their classrooms should be aware of their context and try to adapt things to suit their students' needs. In fact, using authentic materials and thinking about authenticity should not replace the use of other artificial materials, but should work as supplementary materials, and as teachers, we should always think of the four questions that Breen (1983) suggested when we think about authenticity which are: "What is an authentic text? For whom is it authentic? For what authentic purpose? [And] in which particular social situation?" [1].

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