

**The Effect of Using Authentic English
Language Materials on EFL Students'
Achievement in Reading
Comprehension**

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the effect of using authentic and non-authentic materials on EFL eleventh grade students' achievement in reading comprehension in English. The sample of the study consisted of two eleventh grade student sections in Al-Kourah Directorate of Education in Jordan. One of the two sections was randomly assigned as the control group (37 students) and the second section was assigned as the experimental group (35 students). Then a pre-test of reading comprehension was applied to examine the two groups' equivalence in reading comprehension achievement before starting the study. After treatment a post-test of reading comprehension was applied on the two groups.

The results of the study indicated that the mean scores of the experimental group was significantly higher than the mean scores of the control group in the reading comprehension achievement test after twelve weeks of treatment. This means that the use of authentic materials had a significantly greater positive effect on the eleventh grade EFL students' reading comprehension achievement scores than the effect of the use of the non-authentic materials after twelve weeks of treatment.

اثر استخدام مواد القراءة الاصلية في اللغة الانجليزية في تحصيل الطلبة في القراءة الاستيعابية

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الملخص

هدفت هذه الدراسة الى استقصاء اثر استخدام مواد ونصوص القراءة الاصلية في اللغة الانجليزية في تحصيل طلبة الصف الحادي عشر في القراءة الاستيعابية. تكونت عينة الدراسة من شعبتين من طلبة الصف الحادي عشر في مديرية تربية الكورة/ الاردن. شكلت احدى الشعبتين المجموعة الضابطة (٣٧ طالبا) ، والمجموعة الاخرى المجموعة التجريبية (٣٥ طالبا) . ومن اجل التأكد من تكافؤ المجموعتين قبل بدء الدراسة، طبق اختبار قبلي اظهرت نتائجه عدم وجود فروق ذات دلالة بينهما. تم تدريس المجموعة التجريبية بمواد قراءة اصيلة، بينما تم تدريس المجموعة الضابطة بمواد قراءة غير اصيلة. وبعد تطبيق الدراسة طور وطبق اختبار بعدي لقياس تحصيل طلبة المجموعتين في القراءة الاستيعابية باللغة الانجليزية. اظهرت نتائج الدراسة فروقا ذات دلالة احصائية لصالح المجموعة التجريبية التي درست باستخدام مواد قراءة اصيلة. وقد اوصت الدراسة بإجراء المزيد من الدراسات للتعلم بدراسة اثر استخدام مواد القراءة الاصلية على تحصيل الطلبة.

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Introduction

English has become a necessary language for every student to progress academically in most of the third world countries. In Jordan English is the means of instruction at college and university levels especially in faculties of science and technology. All Jordanian students have to learn English as a foreign language at schools. It is a compulsory subject for every student starting from the first grade through to the twelfth grade. Outside school, students seldom actively learn or use English. Furthermore, English language textbooks are designed with the traditional pedagogical objectives, such as vocabulary, grammar and sentence patterns which students find stifling.

EFL students all over the world usually have difficulties in learning English. One of the reasons might be lack of appropriate learning materials. Lin (2002) states that without interest and motivation, EFL students may spend long hours in classroom with poor achievement. Interest in the learning materials may affect students' achievement. Consequently, it is necessary for EFL teachers to use more interesting materials to enhance students' learning.

Authentic foreign language materials which are unaltered materials generated by native speakers for native speakers (Bacon, 1992; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992) and not designed for pedagogical purposes, have been proven to be effective and interesting in enhancing students' learning. Authentic materials are intrinsically more interesting and more stimulating in comparison to learning textbooks (Lee, 1995 & Shei, 2001). Moreover, authentic materials bring learners closer to the target language culture, and make learning more enjoyable (Kramsch, 1993). The use of

authentic materials achieves the acquisition of communicative competence, the expansion of vocabulary, understanding of cultural information and cultural value systems, and offers students the opportunity to deal with real life language and situations (Gonzalez, 1990; Omaggio, 1993; Vandergrift, 1997; Feyten, 1991). Providing and exposing students to a wide selection of authentic materials may increase their personal interest and therefore, it might be reflected on their willingness to learn and make them more active (Besco, 1998; Saito, 1994; Omaggio Hadley, 2001). Authentic materials are more interesting for students. They focus on content rather than form. They expose students to a variety of vocabulary, structure, and language style. They relate more closely to students' needs in the real world (Martinez, 2002; Richards, 2001; Peacock, 1997; Filice & Sturino, 2002).

In the past, one of the main difficulties in exposing students to a wide range of authentic materials was the scarcity of the resources of such materials. Nowadays, the World Wide Web has almost solved the problem. It provides learners with a wide range of websites and provides the accessibility of information based on categories and related features (Brandl, 2002; Chun & Plass, 2000; Walze, 1998).

The effect of interest in the materials and learning tasks on students' achievement is a common sense among researchers of TEFL. Therefore, it is essential for EFL teachers to use more interesting and effective materials to enhance students' learning.

In Jordan, learning English is one of the main difficulties students face in their study. Of course there are differences between the Arabic language and English. Significant differences in linguistic features like syntax, semantics, and phonetics make it more difficult to learn English in an Arabic-speaking environment. Because of these differences, Jordanian students face difficulties in learning English without appropriate learning materials in the classroom.

Regarding reading, researchers have begun questioning the speculative significance of the use of authentic materials in teaching this skill. Bachman and Cohen (1998) state that there is a need for an investigation into the defining characteristics of authenticity and the nature of language use tasks as a significant area at which further research should be directed.

Besco (1998) found out that when students use web-base material, they tend to focus on general meaning than on details. Lin (2004) found out

that the use of authentic materials significantly affects EFL students' achievement in reading comprehension. Maxim (1999) did not find a significant effect for reading longer authentic texts on students' language proficiency. Abanomey (2002) found out that the authenticity of texts does not affect the number of strategies students use in tests with authentic and non-authentic materials.

In spite of the significant theoretical importance assigned to the use of authentic materials in second/foreign language teaching in general and in teaching reading comprehension in particular, and although the need for and usefulness of authentic materials have been increasingly acknowledged, there is a striking lack of supportive research that can provide the appropriate practical justification for their use in foreign/second language teaching (Spence-Brown, 2001; Lewkowicz, 2000). Except for the study done by Lin (2004), there was no empirical evidence about the positive effect of using authentic materials in teaching reading comprehension in foreign languages. All that has been said about the positive effect of authentic materials on ESL/EFL learners' reading comprehension, has been theoretical and has not been supported by enough empirical studies. Regarding Lin's (2004) study, the sample was 102 learners, but the researcher used the repeated measure design in which the effect of maturation was neglected. Therefore, this study is an attempt to carry out more investigation on the effect of using authentic materials on EFL learners' reading comprehension achievement and to participate in solving the contradiction in the results of the studies written about it through providing more empirical evidence in this field taking into consideration the shortcomings of the reviewed studies.

Purposes of the Study

This study aims at investigating the effect of the use of authentic and non-authentic materials on EFL eleventh grade students' achievement in reading comprehension in English.

Questions of the Study

The study addresses the following questions:

1. Does the use of authentic material have a significant impact on the EFL eleventh grade students' achievement scores in reading comprehension after six weeks of treatment?
2. Does the use of authentic material have a significant impact on the EFL

eleventh grade students' achievement scores in reading comprehension after twelve weeks of treatment?

Significance of the Study

The positive features of authentic materials have been claimed in non-empirical studies. The claim that authentic materials have a positive impact on EFL learners' achievement has not been thoroughly examined. Moreover, there has been an increased interest in exploring the factors that affect students' reading comprehension achievement, but the use of authentic materials is a factor that is still almost absent from such studies. This study can help in answering the questions pertaining to theoretical importance assigned to authentic materials and whether such significance is justified on a practical basis. This study hoped to provide more empirical evidence regarding the role of the use of authentic materials in teaching foreign languages and their effect on EFL learners' achievement in reading comprehension.

Method and Procedures

Research design and procedures

This study was a quasi-experimental one using one control group and one experimental group. The primary variable was students' reading comprehension scores. The study was conducted over a period of twelve weeks (beginning in October/ 2004 and ending in December/ 2004) on the basis of , five hours per-week, with the group size and membership remaining constant.

The researcher approached the director of Alkourah Directorate of Education in Jordan and the two principals and teachers of English of the two schools involved in this study for permission to conduct this study. The length and purposes of the study were explained to them.

After randomly selecting two high schools from those at Alkourah Directorate of Education, one eleventh grade section was randomly chosen from each of the two schools. The purposes of the study were explained to the students. Then the students signed a consent form to agree to have their data included for analysis with this study.

Population and Sample

Students: The population of the study consisted of the EFL Eleventh grade students in Al-Kourah Directorate of Education in the academic

year 2004/2005. The sample of the study consisted of two eleventh grade student sections in Al-Kourah Directorate of Education chosen randomly using the cluster sampling method. One of the two sections was randomly assigned as the control group (37 students) and the second section was assigned as the experimental group (35 students). Then a pre-test was applied to examine the two groups' equivalence in reading comprehension before starting the study. The results are presented in tables 1 and 2.

Teachers: The control and the experimental groups were taught by their English language teachers who had a bachelor degree in English and a university diploma degree in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). The purposes and the procedures were explained for the teachers of English of both the experimental and the control groups. The teacher of the experimental group was provided with the whole materials needed for him and his students before the study started.

Materials

The control group used the non-authentic materials which eleventh grade students use. The experimental group used authentic materials chosen by the researcher from magazines, newspapers, and websites. The materials covered topics like: menus from restaurants on the web, weather, advertisements, entertainment such as movies, and food.

All the materials were chosen before the study started and were given to four eleventh grade teachers of English, two university professors of TEFL, and two supervisors of English from the Ministry of Education for their comments. Parts of the materials were deleted and new ones were added based on the experts' comments.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

To test the two groups' equivalence in reading comprehension, a pre-test was applied. The results are presented in tables 1 & 2. The pre-test in its partial draft consisted of three different comprehension passages and twenty-five multiple choice questions. All the three passages were taken from the ACE Reading Practice Test. After giving the pre-test to two TEFL professors, two TEFL graduate students, and two TEFL supervisors from the Ministry of Education in Jordan for their comments regarding its suitability and appropriateness, the test consisted of the same three passages and twenty multiple choice questions instead of twenty-five. Five points were assigned to each question.

After the study started a post-test for reading comprehension was prepared. It was also chosen from the ACE Reading Practice Test. The post test which again consisted of three reading comprehension passages and twenty-five multiple choice questions in its first draft was chosen by the researcher, two eleventh grade teachers of English, and by two supervisors of English from the directorates of education in Irbid. After giving it to the same experts of the pre-test, it consisted of the same three passages and twenty multiple choice questions in its final draft. The total score was out of a hundred (five points for each question).

The post-test of reading comprehension was applied twice on the two groups to investigate the effect of using authentic and non authentic materials over time. Both the control and experimental groups sat for the post-test on the same days. The first time was after six weeks (the middle of the study) and the second time was after twelve weeks (the end of the study). The students were given an hour each time to complete the test. Then their papers were collected and corrected by three teachers of English. After that, the averages of their marks were calculated.

To decrease the effect of outside factors, the experimental and control groups were chosen from two different schools using the cluster sampling method. Moreover, and again for the two groups, there were no homework assignments to be done outside the classroom. Also, the reading passages of the post-tests were not the same reading passages of the pre-test.

Data Analysis

In order to avoid the effect of maturation, the students' mean scores of the authentic material group (experimental group) in the two post-tests, after six and twelve weeks of treatment, were compared with the mean scores of the non-authentic material group (control group) in the same two post-tests.

Results

To analyze the collected data, descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and the T-test of independent samples were used.

1. Results of the Pre-test of Equivalence

A). Results of Descriptive Statistics: Tables 1 and 2 present the means, standard deviations and t-test results of the control and experimental

groups on the reading comprehension test of equivalence.

Table 1
Means and standard deviations of the experimental and control groups in the pre-test of equivalence

| Group | N | \bar{X} | SD | Standard Error |
|--------------|----|-----------|-------|----------------|
| Control | 37 | 54.05 | 10.20 | 1.68 |
| Experimental | 35 | 53.29 | 9.54 | 1.61 |

Table 2
The T-test result of the scores of the two groups in the pre-test of equivalence

| Group | N | \bar{X} | SD | DF | T-value | P>/t/ |
|--------------|----|-----------|-------|----|---------|-------|
| Control | 37 | 54.05 | 10.20 | 70 | 0.33 NS | 0.74 |
| Experimental | 35 | 53.29 | 9.54 | | | |

The results of tables 1 and 2 show that the means of the two groups before treatment were very close: 54.05 for the control group and 53.29 for the experimental group. The t-test result did not reveal any significant difference between the two groups before the study started which means that they were equal at the beginning of the study.

2. Results Related to the Study Questions:

Study Question 1: Does the use of authentic material have a significant impact on the EFL eleventh grade students' achievement scores in reading comprehension after six weeks of treatment?

Table 3 below presents the results of the t-test of the mean scores of the two groups in the post-test after six weeks of treatment

Table 3
Results of T-test of the mean scores of the two groups in the post-test after six weeks of treatment

| Group | N | \bar{X} | SD | Standard Error | DF | T-value | P>/t/ |
|--------------|----|-----------|------|----------------|----|---------|-------|
| Control | 37 | 56.35 | 8.79 | 1.45 | 70 | -1.58 | 0.12 |
| Experimental | 35 | 59.57 | 8.52 | 1.44 | | NS | |

NS: Not significant

Although the results in table 3 show that the mean score of the experimental group (authentic materials group) was higher than the mean score of the control group (non-authentic materials) after six weeks of treatment, the t-test did not reveal any significant difference between the two mean scores of the two groups at $\alpha = 0.05$ (T- value = -1.58, P = 0.12). This means that the difference between the mean score of the experimental group and the mean score of the control group was statistically not significant at a = 0.05

Study Question 2: Does the use of authentic material have a significant impact on the EFL eleventh grade students' achievement scores in reading comprehension after twelve weeks of treatment?

Table 4 below presents the results of t-test of the mean scores of the two groups in the post-test after twelve weeks of treatment

Table 4
Results of T-test of the mean scores of the two groups in the post-test after twelve weeks of treatment

| Group | N | \bar{X} | SD | Standard Error | DF | T-value | P>/t/ |
|--------------|----|-----------|------|----------------|----|---------|---------|
| Control | 37 | 58.51 | 8.00 | 1.32 | 70 | -2.27 | 0.02 ** |
| Experimental | 35 | 62.57 | 7.12 | 1.20 | | | |

** Significant at a = 0.05

The results in table 4 show that the mean score of the experimental group (62.57) was higher than the mean score of the control group (58.51). The results also show that there was a statistical significant dif-

ference between the mean score of the control group and the experimental group. The mean scores of the experimental group was significantly higher than the mean scores of the control group in the reading comprehension achievement test after twelve weeks of treatment at a = 0.05 (T-value = -2.27, $P < 0.03$). This means that the use of authentic materials had a significantly greater positive effect on the eleventh grade EFL students' reading comprehension achievement scores than the effect of the use of the non-authentic materials after twelve weeks of treatment.

When comparing the mean scores of the two groups after twelve weeks of treatment to their mean scores after six weeks, it appears that there was an improvement in the scores of the two groups but the improvement in the experimental group was greater than that of the experimental group.

Discussion and Implication

The justification of the results above could be that authentic materials focus on content rather than form; expose students to a variety of vocabulary; structure and language style; relate more closely to student's needs in the real world; help teachers in developing creative tasks; and better match students' learning styles (Martinez, 2002; Richards, 2001; Peacock, 1997). Authentic materials are more difficult than non-authentic materials. They are real samples of the target language. These two characteristics contribute to such materials being more interesting, engaging, motivating, relevant, and culturally enlightening (Lee, 1995).

Many previous studies have indicated that in contrast to the design of textbooks, authentic materials are intrinsically more interesting and stimulating (Lee, 1995, Shei, 2001). Moreover, authentic materials make learning more enjoyable which might result in better understanding (Kramsch, 1993). If this is the case with authentic materials, it might be reflected in learners' achievement. The more the text is enjoyable, the better the students' achievement is expected to be which explains the results of this study. The use of authentic materials could have affected the students' motivation which could have also been reflected on their willingness to study and on their achievement in reading comprehension.

The duration of treatment is important. After six weeks of treatment there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and the mean scores of the control group but there was a significant difference after twelve weeks. The reason might be due to the difficulty of the materials. Authentic materials usually have more difficult

words and structure in comparison to non-authentic materials. Non-authentic materials are usually simplified ones and easier for non-native speakers to understand but may not be as useful as authentic materials. It seems that EFL students need enough time to understand the native speakers' styles of writing. Furthermore, the longer EFL students are exposed to authentic materials, the more new vocabulary they learn, and the more aware of the target language culture they become. Some other conditions could facilitate the use of authentic materials. Such kind of materials might be more suitable for upper level of English language classes than lower level ones.

Pedagogical Implications

The results of this study support the use of authentic materials in teaching English as a foreign language in general and reading comprehension in particular. The results revealed that the use of authentic materials in teaching English to EFL students is more effective than the use of non-authentic materials. Therefore, EFL teachers and EFL textbooks designers are advised to include authentic materials in the English language classes and textbooks. Teachers of English are advised to provide their students with different sources of authentic materials to increase their interest and motivation because authentic materials are closer to students' real life than non-authentic materials.

Based on the results of this study, it is recommended to carry out more investigation on the effect of the use of authentic materials in EFL classes. More studies are needed to investigate the effect of using authentic materials on EFL students' abilities of different levels (primary stage, intermediate stage, high school, etc.) and on EFL students of different levels of language proficiency.

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