

THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS' READING PROFICIENCY

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ABSTRACT

In teaching English as a foreign language, teachers frequently use authentic materials to teach their students in the classroom. Both in four language skills namely reading, listening, speaking, and writing and language components like grammar and vocabulary. In addition, these kinds of materials have greater influence to enhance students' foreign language ability because they are introduced directly to the materials which use English as the introductory language. This paper discusses what is meant by authentic text, kinds of authentic materials, why it is important to use this material, the strengths and weaknesses of using this material in teaching reading to EFL students in relation to the enhancement of students' reading proficiency.

Key words : *authentic materials, reading proficiency, EFL students*

1. Introduction

To carry out teaching and learning activity, teachers need some important components to make the process runs well namely books/modules, teaching aids, and a classroom. Selecting materials to teach to the students is not an easy thing to do since they must be appropriate with the students' level of ability. In teaching reading, teachers should design the materials carefully in order to be successful in transferring the knowledge to students. Most teachers choose to teach reading using texts which are commonly used by native speakers. This kind of text is still original for it does not pass through some modifications. The originality of the text itself is still authentic. Sanderson (1999) as mentioned in Tamo (2009) claimed, "Authentic materials are materials that we can use in the classroom and have not been changed in any way for ESL students." Authentic reading materials can be in the form of newspapers, recipes, and magazines. (Berardo, 2006, p. 63) asserted four important factors to consider in choosing authentic reading materials:

1. Suitability of content. The first factor firmly deals with the students' interest so that they become enthusiastic to study. In addition, the material should also be relevant to the students' need. It means that it is suitable with their field of study. For example, students from English major are more engaged in learning the material about language and linguistics. Moreover, the authentic reading material represents the type of material that the students will use outside the classroom as well.
2. Exploitability. The second factor is related to whether or not the text can be exploited for teaching purposes, for what purpose the text should be exploited and what skills/strategies can be developed by exploiting the text. A creative teacher should be

able to select the most suitable material to be taught to the students

3. Readability. The third factor deals with the level of difficulty that the text has. It can be in term of sentence structure or grammar or vocabulary. The more complex grammatical pattern in the text, the more difficult the text is. Besides, whether or not the text can be read by the students depends on the number of new vocabulary in the text. If there are more new words in the text, it will be more difficult for the students to understand the text. The words in the text should be relevant to the students' need.
4. Presentation. The last factor to consider in choosing authentic reading materials is dealing with the 'appearance' of the text. Authentic material tends to have good language in comparison with simplified text. The text should also be attractive and it catches the students' attention in teaching and learning process. Interesting text is able to drive the students' desire to study and read more.

A. What Is Reading?

Reading means a set of skills that involves making sense and deriving meaning from the printed word (Linse, 2006, p. 69). In order to be able to do that, we must be able to sound out the sentences consist of words and phrases and understand at least the gist of the text we read. Literacy is "the state of being able to read and write" (Hornby, 1987, p. 495). Thus, reading literacy means "understanding, using and reflecting on written texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and to participate in society" (OECD, 1999, p. 20 as cited in Shiel, 2006, p. 79-80). In contrast, Wojciechowski & Zweig (2003, p. 18) state that "reading aliteracy means having the ability to read but lacking the motivation to read which occurs due to the negative attitude begins very early in the lives of many

children". According to Brown (2004, p. 186), there are three types (genres) of reading:

1. *Academic reading*; General interest articles (in magazines, newspapers, etc.), technical reports (e.g., lab reports), professional journal articles, reference material (dictionaries, etc.), textbooks, theses, essays, papers, test directions, editorials and opinion writing;
2. *Job-related reading*, such as Messages, (e.g., phone messages), letters/emails, memos (e.g., interoffice), reports (e.g., job evaluations, project reports), schedules, labels, signs, announcements, forms, applications, questionnaires, financial documents (bills, invoices, etc.), directories (telephone, office, etc.), manuals and directions;
3. *Personal reading*; for examples: Newspapers, magazines, letters, emails, greeting cards, invitations, messages, notes, lists, schedules (train, bus, plane, etc.), recipes, menus, maps, calendars, advertisements (commercials, want ads), novels, short stories, jokes, drama, poetry, financial documents (e.g., checks, tax forms, loan applications), forms, questionnaires, medical reports, immigration documents, comic strips, cartoons.

Broadly, Brown (2004, p. 189) also includes types of reading. They are among others:

- a. *Perceptive reading*. This type of reading involves attending to the components of the larger stretches of discourse: letters, words, punctuation, and other graphic symbols. Bottom-up processing is implied;
- b. *Selective reading*. This second type of reading uses picture-cued tasks, matching, true/false, multiple-choice, etc. A combination of bottom-up and top-down processing may be used.
- c. *Interactive reading*. Take some examples of the third kind of reading such as anecdotes, short narratives and descriptions, excerpts from Inger texts, questionnaires, memos, announcements, directions, recipes and the like. Top-down processing is typical for such tasks, although some instances of bottom-up performance may be necessary.
- d. *Extensive reading*. The last type of reading covers professional articles, essays, technical reports, short stories and books. Top-down processing is assumed for most extensive tasks.

B. Reading Proficiency And Comprehension

Somebody who is said to have good proficiency in English in general and reading in particular whenever he or she has good knowledge in terms of how to read a text effectively and efficiently, good at skimming when he or she does not have much time to read a text thoroughly, good at scanning as well whenever he or she intends to find out specific information in a certain text for instance; number, location, name of a person or a thing. Hence, the higher comprehension a reader achieves after reading a text, the higher reading proficiency a reader has. To obtain a good proficiency in reading, somebody has to get through a long process starting from a good reading interest, a good reading habit, and good reading

materials for reading. However, to get better comprehension, a reader, sometimes, needs several times to read and reread one particular text or reading material. According to Wilhelm (2012) as cited in Marliasari (2015: 249) stated that comprehension is the mind capacity to perceive and understand. In other words, reading comprehension is a psychological and mental capacity to grasp the meaning which is tried to be conveyed through a text. In order to obtain the point of a text, a reader must be creative in relating the information with the existing knowledge.

In addition, Marliasari (2015) stated that reading comprehension is the level of understanding of a message we are reading. In this case, the writer is interacting with the readers in a book, or an article in which the writer communicates the ideas about a topic he or she writes. She divided comprehension skill into four categories namely Literal comprehension, Interpretation

a. Literal comprehension

The first category characterizes the capability of a reader in getting the comprehension just by looking at the explicit information (the information which is clearly stated in the text) and this type of comprehension is the lowest reading comprehension ability that a reader has.

b. Interpretation

The second category is surely higher than the first one in which a reader can make a conclusion regarding the text being read. This ability puts a reader in a position where the content of a writing can be elaborated based on the topic given and the elaboration is not out of the context.

c. Critical reading

At this level of category, a reader has the capability to evaluate a reading material which deals with the appropriateness and the inappropriateness of a passage. He or she makes his or her personal judgement about the quality of a reading material, whether the information in the reading text is true or not.

d. Creative reading

At this level of category, a reader can give a solution or an alternative problem solving about the topic provided in a text.

C. Reading As A Receptive Skill

Basic language skill is divided into two main skill; The first one is productive skills namely speaking and writing and the second one is receptive skills like reading and listening besides other language components which are also important for examples grammar and vocabulary. Reading skill covers the skill of how to comprehend a piece of information in the written language (Siahaan, 2008, p. 106). Furthermore, he also stated that reading skill can be divided into three kinds; reading in the lines, reading between the lines, and reading beyond the lines.

1. *Reading in the lines*: it is a skill to comprehend the semantic meanings of a text. While the semantics

itself deals with the study of meaning in language (Adisutrisno, 2008, p. 1).

2. *Reading between the lines*: it is a skill to comprehend the semantic meanings with linguistic contextual meanings. It means that relating something which is being discussed and also has a close relationship with language viewed from scientific point of views.
3. *Reading beyond the lines*: it is a skill to comprehend the functional meaning of a text, i.e., the writer intended meaning, which can be different from the lexical and linguistic contextual meanings, put in a text.

From the explanation above, reading as a receptive skill deals with the way how readers grasp the information from the text. A reader can be a very skillful one which is called as superior reader, a skillful one which is called as advanced reader, an average reader which can be said as intermediate reader, and the one who has just started to improve his/her reading ability which is called as novice reader.

D. Levels Of Reading Proficiency

Every individual has different ability in reading depending on the speed, the ability to understand the whole content of the article being read. According to Omagio (1986) as cited in Siahaan (2008, p. 106) the type of readers is divided into several levels:

1. Novice-level readers can recognize the writing symbols, words, and expressions used in some texts which are already familiar to them since the texts are closely related to their daily life and activities such as animal around us, objects in the house, objects in the living room and so on.
2. Intermediate-level readers can get the main ideas of the text, detailed information, and some supporting details of narrative text types on familiar topics such as simple instructions, personal information, money matters, meeting arrangements, etc.
3. Advanced-level readers can comprehend main ideas, most supporting details of the abstract and factual topics with familiar contexts in descriptions, narrations and non-technical prose which contain newspaper accounts, instructions, directions, routine reports, non-technical prose, academic texts, current events, press, politics, economics, education, etc., with an enhancement of detail comprehension but not still totally precise.
4. Superior-level readers can comprehend most materials on concrete and abstract topics, get the main ideas and most of the supporting details, understand new vocabulary in context through contextual guessing strategies which are written in lengthy narratives and descriptions of all types of newspaper accounts, technical report, literary text that contains most practical, social abstract and professional topics in special fields of competence and particular areas of interest.

E. What Is An Authentic Material?

A material is said to be authentic if it is used as is without any change or editing so it can be defined as a text which is based on real-life situation and it is not written for pedagogical purposes (Wallace, 1992:145). In addition, an authentic text is "created to fulfill some social purposes in the language community in which it was produced" (Guariento and Morley, 2001, p. 347). From those definitions mentioned above, we can safely conclude that authentic materials are written texts which are not commonly used for teaching and learning purposes rather than used to deliver thoughts and ideas.

F. Kinds Of Authentic Materials

There are mainly two kinds of authentic materials which can be given to EFL students namely written and spoken materials. It is suggested for teachers to find the material with the same topic but in different format as mentioned by Millar (2011, p. 9). Some examples recommended among other things:

1. A video of cooking show vs. a recipe in a cookbook
2. A taped weather report from the radio vs. a weather from the newspaper
3. A video or tape recording of the evening's news vs. a newspaper
4. A video of a sporting event vs. the report of the event in the newspaper
5. A video of students' brawl at schools vs. the report of the event in the newspaper
6. A video of how to operate a computer vs. the instruction in a manual.
7. A video of on location flood disaster vs. the report of an event in the newspaper

Transcribed versions of the materials could probably be more detailed than the audiovisual ones. Thus, teachers have to make sure that there are no differences between those two formats. In other words, the transcribed and audiovisual versions give the equal information about the topics which will be taught. In other words, animate formats look more interesting and catch students' attention than unanimate ones.

G. Examples Of Authentic Materials

An authentic material is not only created by someone whose first language is English but also anyone who has an excellent English proficiency. Some experts said that it cannot be utilized for teaching and learning purposes due to its difficulty but some others have different point of view as the advantages obtained from the text. The examples of authentic material among other things: billboards, pamphlets, English advertisements, English-written newspapers, and many more.

H. Authentic Materials For Esl Students

Even though less experts argue that authentic texts can only be given to students whose background is natural science but most of them have a quite different point of view about this matter. The first group of experts still consider about the complexity of sentence

structure if the students are given such a text in the setting of teaching and learning process while the second group thinks that students can learn a new knowledge and experience from those kinds of texts such as culture, language, food and many more which are not familiar in their own life. Apart from the contradiction, authentic texts are able to give students a new learning experiences which can increase students' language ability especially structure, and vocabulary.

I. Authentic Versus Simplified Texts

To make a text easier for students, it is necessary to simplify it by changing its structural items and vocabulary because this kind of text tends to apply both complex and compound complex sentence. Here is the comparison between an authentic and simplified texts:

Authentic text

Ministry to decide on RSBI on Monday

Jakarta: The Education and Culture Ministry has said that it will take a final decision on the fate of international-standard-pilot project schools (RSBI) on Monday. Education and Culture Minister Mohammad Nuh said that the decision would be made after the ministry had held a meeting with the heads of local education agencies from all over the country. Nuh also said that the meeting would also discuss whether the RSBI would be automatically disbanded or was in need of a transition period. Nuh expected the RSBI to remain operational but with an orientation that would be consistent with the Constitutional Court ruling that had declared them unconstitutional. Earlier this month, the Constitutional Court (MK) declared that the RSBI was unconstitutional and should be dissolved. The court granted the judicial review filed by a teachers' union and a NGO coalition, which challenged Article 50 of the 2003 Education System Law on RSBI administration. The MK said that the implementation of the RSBI had violated the principle of education for all and had created social gaps among students. MK chief Justice Mahfud MD earlier said that the ministry had until April to decide the status of all existing RSBIs.

Simplified Text

Ministry to decide on RSBI on Monday

Jakarta: The Education and Culture Ministry will make a decision on Monday about whether to discontinue the international-standard pilot project schools (RSBI) or to change them. The ministry will have a meeting with local education agencies from around the country. The Education and Culture minister expects that the schools will be continued but with some changes that would make them constitutional. The school had been declared unconstitutional by the MK (Constitutional Court), but the court allowed the teachers union and an NGO to review the ruling. The court had ruled that the RSBI violated the ideals of education for all and created social divides among students.

The text above was taken from the Jakarta Post daily English newspaper. From those two different kinds of texts, we can see that there are some simplifications made by the second text in terms of sentence structures, phrases, clauses, kinds of sentences and word choice (diction) so that the second text gets right to the point and cuts the sentences which are considered less important and sharpens the more important ones. Hence, the sentences are more effective

2. Result

A. The Importance Of Using Authentic Materials

Nowadays, more and more teachers, lecturers and also educational staff involve authentic materials in teaching one particular subject at both school and university levels since those kind of materials offer more realistic solutions to students' problems and difficulties in learning a foreign language in this case English. The materials present real samples, experiences, and practices on the basis of the concerned culture of the language itself. Some researchers claim that authentic materials make learners utilize and experience the real language in terms of meaning use. Authentic materials can increase students' motivation in learning and significantly enhance their on-task behavior and positive attitudes towards learning especially language (Peacock, 1977). To sum up, authentic materials are beneficial for language learners to:

- a. Expose learners to language that serves a useful purpose. The purpose of learning a language not only limited to identify sounds, symbols, sentence structures but also learning to know the culture where a language derives for instance; why something is allowed and prohibited to be done.
- b. Provide a refreshing change from the textbook. A textbook has its own way of presenting lessons for both ESL and EFL students. Sometimes, the way of how one single lesson is presented exactly the same as the previous ones. So that is why, to make students keen on learning English, a textbook should provide enjoyable and interesting materials for students to study.
- c. Focus more closely on learners' interest and needs. Teaching learners what they need to know is much more important than teaching them what they want to know since this activity will significantly increase their knowledge and the materials which interest them the most will drive their motivation to study.
- d. Provide information about a variety topics. Materials which are based on real life facts most probably have many kinds of new information as well as new experience and enrich their insights. Moreover, these sorts of materials also give learners a large number of contextual examples that can be understood by them easily.
- e. Increase learners' motivation. The authenticity of all events and happenings will increase the students' curiosity about phenomena explained in the materials

such as culture (way of life), attitude (way of acting), and perceptions (way of thinking).

- f. Connect the classroom with the outside world. The relationship between the materials and the real fact is one of the most important things in relation to enhancing the quality of the material so that the teaching and learning process will be more meaningful for them.

B. *The Strength And The Weaknesses Of Authentic Materials*

There is nothing which is good and bad, everything has its own pluses and minuses let us say teaching materials (something to study), and teaching and learning strategies (A way of how to convey something). There are some important points to highlight regarding the strengths and weaknesses of authentic materials as mentioned by Berardo (2006, p. 65).

1. Strengths:

- a. The language used in the materials have a lot of variations which can be seen from grammar, vocabulary, and writing style from the writers of the articles;
- b. The materials are very suitable to teach/practice the basic skill of reading namely skimming and scanning. Normally, this sort of materials likely to be short/concise and they only discuss important things and neglect the less important ones.
- c. Students are more well-informed about the world situation nowadays; authentic texts are more likely to discuss the latest issues of what is happening in the world now. Therefore, students indirectly get new information about something.
- d. The same piece of material can be used for different task; normally, one single piece of material can be used for only one single task. However, this kind of material can be used for more than one tasks. (5). Authentic material can encourage reading for pleasure habit for it provides many kinds of reading topic so that readers may choose the one which is suitable for their needs and interests.

2. Weaknesses:

- a. It is difficult to understand culture outside the language community. Since the text presents foreign way of life, students most probably unfamiliar with the culture described in the text.
- b. Irrelevant vocabulary items to the students' immediate needs. Words, phrases, idiomatic expressions used in the text are rarely encountered by them in common type of text. That is why, they cannot practice using vocabulary in the text.
- c. An authentic text can be time consuming to prepare because a teacher must prepare it in advanced before he/she gives it to the students.
- d. News, stories can be easily outdated along with the appearance of the newest issues.

3. Conclusion

Judging from its advantages as well as disadvantages and its level of difficulty as well, authentic materials

which give readers a lot of information are still widely used for teaching and learning activities. Moreover, these readings contain much high-quality information from all over the world which sources are from local, regional, and international. Thus, students are well-informed because they almost always get the latest development in science, technology, culture, education, life-style, etc. In conclusion, authentic materials still attract students to improve their reading skills especially the basic ones like skimming and scanning and challenging to satisfy their curiosity in many things. The sentence structure which tends to be more complex in comparison with other kinds of texts can increase students' proficiency in grammar especially about clauses and phrases, tenses, and all grammatical aspects in English. Most vocabulary items used in authentic texts are categorized into words, phrases which are seldom used in common texts (low frequency vocabulary) and in turn support their vocabulary mastery.

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