

EFL LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE USE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS FOR READING COMPREHENSION IN IELTS PREPARATION COURSES

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Abstract. Teaching materials in IELTS preparation courses are considered as a focal concern of both IELTS teachers and material designers. In the meantime, authentic materials emerge as one of the possible sources for learning and teaching IELTS reading skills. However, the application of such non-pedagogical materials as reading texts has received considerable controversy. This research aimed to explore EFL learners' perceptions of the roles of authentic material use for reading comprehension in IELTS courses. A group of 150 learners from a language center in Ho Chi Minh City were recruited to answer a questionnaire and ten of them participated in semi-structured interviews. The quantitative data was processed by the SPSS software, while the qualitative data was analysed using content analysis. The findings revealed that EFL learners agreed on the important roles of authentic material utilization for reading comprehension classes. Moreover, they had positive perceptions of the roles of authentic materials for reading comprehension, leading to the implication that real-life materials can be a feasible and efficacious type of material for IELTS reading classes.

Keywords: Authentic materials; EFL learners; IELTS; perceptions; reading comprehension.

1. Introduction

These days, IELTS has become a conventional and reliable benchmark for learners' language competence. Hence, IELTS courses have been a dominant choice for many ESL and EFL learners recently. The concerns of IELTS teaching varied. One of them is teaching materials for IELTS reading. In this manner, authentic materials are considered a feasible source of teaching materials.

The benefits of authentic materials for the English language class have been recognized and underscored. Many researchers Larsen-Freeman [1], Guo [2], Kilickaya [3], and Tomlinson and Masuhara [4] regard authentic materials as a means that can help learners expose themselves to genuine language outside the classroom, thus enhancing their language competence. Richards [5] pointed out that authentic materials would provide authentic knowledge of culture, which can be used to describe many features of the culture including practices, beliefs, and behavior. Furthermore, non-pedagogical materials used in the classroom are interesting, which can give learners positive motivation about language learning [6], [7].

In the Vietnamese context, the use of authentic materials in EFL classrooms is still uncommon probably because of the strict curriculum of the Vietnamese education system, which teachers might not be advocated to alter or transform the course syllabus and teaching materials, and because this might take teachers a prodigious amount of time to search for suitable sources

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as well as create activities and exercises relating to the materials [5]. At a language center in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, teaching reading using authentic texts is not paid much attention despite the fact that getting familiar with real-life information can be of great help for IELTS reading tests.

To draw more attention from English language learners, teachers, and material designers to the use of authentic materials, it is therefore of essence to conduct a study aiming to explore EFL learners' perceptions of the use of authentic materials for reading comprehension. The research question of the study is presented as follows:

- What are EFL learners' perceptions of the roles of authentic material use for reading comprehension in IELTS preparation courses?

2. Content

2.1. Literature Review

According to Heitler [8], authentic materials refer to all types of text that are written by people whose first language is English. They are written with the purpose of communicating rather than teaching [9]. They can be in the forms of literature, news, brochures, menus, ATM receipts, websites, or calendars [10], [11]. In summary, authentic materials are any sources taken from real life, which are initially created for native speakers.

Authentic materials generate benefits to English language teaching in terms of learning autonomy, motivation, language skills, and cultural knowledge. The use of authentic material encourages learners' autonomy [7], [12], [13] and motivation [6], [14]. Moreover, using authentic materials is of great help in enhancing learners' intercultural communicative competence because "they remind learners that there is a real-world community that functions exclusively through the use of the target language" (p. 163) [15]. In other words, the application of authentic materials has effective impacts on the development of learners' language skills [14], [16], [17], [18], [19], [20]. Another benefit is for culture acquisition because non-artificial texts introduce the culture and the natural use of the target language to learners [21], thereby facilitating learners to perceive original and authentic "customs, behaviors and interactions" (p. 47) [13]. To conclude, authentic materials appear to bring certain benefits to English language teaching, which are demonstrated via learning autonomy, motivation, language development, and culture acquisition.

Language emerging in authentic texts might be inappropriate for language learning and teaching as there were myriad advanced words and idioms, which are likely to cause opacity to most learners [22], [23], [24]. Morton [25] opined that authentic sources such as newspapers and magazines generally use colloquial language so they scarcely provide an accurate style of academic discourse for learners. In addition, the inclusion of authentic materials in the classroom can increase the workload and pressure for teachers [5]. In summary, the presence of authentic materials in the language classroom might bring several drawbacks for not only learners but also teachers.

Non-pedagogical materials have a crucial position in teaching and learning reading skills as the language in the authentic texts creates authenticity in the English learning environment [26] and provides a considerable amount of useful knowledge and culture that help people understand each other [27]. These materials are likely to improve learners' language skills [15] and minimize the gap between the language used inside and outside the classroom [28]. Furthermore, Oguz and Bahar [29] emphasize authentic materials, when used as a supplementary source along with course books, can bring numerous merits to the learning environment, creating motivation and interest among foreign language learners. In other words, as stated by Guariento and Morley [30] real-life material use would be a way to sustain and elevate learners' motivation for language learning. To summarize, authentic material use has a vital role in language learning

classes because it brings numerous benefits to learners' language competence and motivation for their learning.

The use of authentic materials has gained significant concern from many researchers. Many studies were conducted to investigate the effectiveness of authentic material use in language learning classrooms such as the studies of Guo [2], Marzban and Davaji [19], and Jooyandeh [31]. The three studies divided the participants into two groups: one learning with authentic materials, and the other learning with traditional books. The overall results showed that the former groups in all studies outperformed the latter ones regarding vocabulary improvement and reading comprehension, which can be concluded that authentic material application in the language classroom is efficacious.

When it comes to learners' perceptions of the implementation of authentic materials, Albiladi [32], and Fitriana et al. [33] carried out research to explore learners' perceptions of authentic material use. Albiladi [32] conducted a study with the purpose of investigating learners' perceptions of the pros and cons of authentic material use in ESL reading classes in the United States. Observations and semi-structured interviews were employed to gather data. The results showed that the participants were interested in reading different types of materials. They believed the use of real-life texts improved their motivation and cultural awareness. However, most of the participants admitted text difficulty was the most common problem. The second problem of authentic material use was the lack of pedagogical intentions. Similarly, Fitriana et al. [33] conducted a study aiming at exploring learners' attitudes towards the incorporation of authentic materials for reading skills at Al Ilyas Vocational High School in Indonesia. Using questionnaires and observation, the study revealed that learners had positive perceptions towards the use of authentic materials in the reading class. The participants thought reading using authentic materials was straightforward and interesting, and the learners were more active in the reading class.

In Vietnam, Dinh [34] carried out research to investigate teachers' and learners' perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of authentic materials used in teaching English; and explore the differences between teachers' and learners' perspectives on authentic materials. Ninety-three juniors and five teachers of English at Hanoi University of Home Affairs in Vietnam took part in the study. The survey using a questionnaire and semi-structured interview revealed that the majority of the teacher and learner participants had positive attitudes towards authentic material provision in their class including enhancing learners' language skills, motivation, and cultural knowledge, and supporting a teaching approach to teachers. On the other hand, Nguyen [35] did a study to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of the readability of authentic texts and how modified authentic materials are used in teaching reading in Vietnam. A questionnaire and a test were employed to gather data from 26 EFL teachers. The outcomes depict that awareness of readability and modification of authentic texts in teaching reading are advantageous to the teachers in facilitating their teaching process and to the learners in their language acquisition. From that, it can be seen that research on learners' perceptions of the use of authentic materials for reading comprehension has not gained attention recently.

2.2. Research methodology

2.2.1 Research setting and participants

The study was conducted at a language center in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The center provides six main courses including Basic IELTS (target 2.5), Pre IELTS (target 3.5), IELTS Pre-Foundation (target 4.0 - 4.5), IELTS Foundation (target 5.0 - 5.5), IELTS Fighter A (target 6.0 - 6.5), and IELTS Fighter B (target 7.0 - 8.0). Each course lasts around two months and a half, instructed by IELTS trainers who have attended the IELTS teaching training and an IELTS certificate of band 7.5 and above. Regarding the reading class, learners were provided authentic

texts on different topics extracted from the website of Belfast Zoo and The New York Times online newspaper.

A cohort of 150 learners from level A and level were conveniently recruited to answer the questionnaire, and 10 of them were invited to take part in the interview on a voluntary basis. Regarding the background information of 150 participants in the questionnaire survey, there were 97 females (64.7%) and 53 males (35.3%). These respondents were classified into four age groups: under 16 years old (4%), from 16 to 18 years old (23.3%), from 19 to 22 years old (34.7%), and over 22 years old (38%). The majority of the participants (73.3%) were learners from level A, while 26.7% of them were from level B. In terms of the amount of time learning IELTS, 54.7% of learners spent under one year, 32.0% spent from one to two years, and only 13.3% spent over two years learning IELTS.

2.2.2. Steps for data collection and analysis

Data was collected from participants' responses via the use of the questionnaire and interview to gauge learners' perceptions of the roles of authentic materials for reading comprehension. Two instruments were designed based on the reviewed theories and research purposes, and they were conducted in the Vietnamese language to ensure no difficulties and misunderstandings for the respondents. The questionnaire of this study consists of two main sections. The first section (Section A) gathers respondents' demographics regarding their gender, age, level, and number of years learning IELTS. The second section (Section B) has 10 items attempting to gauge respondents' perceptions of the roles of the use of authentic materials. Section B uses the five-point Likert Scale because it can grasp the respondents' extent of agreement. The responses include '1' for Strongly Disagree, '2' for Disagree, '3' for Neutral, '4' for Agree, and '5' for Strongly Agree. The reliability of the study was authenticated due to the Cronbach Alpha being at .96. To gather in-depth responses to have detailed information, the semi-structured interview was conducted. Ten participants were invited to answer three intensive questions about their perceptions of the roles of authentic material use for reading comprehension. All interview sessions were recorded for later transcription to ensure that there was no information overlooked.

Quantitative data collected from the questionnaire was analyzed with the assistance of SPSS in which frequency, mean, and standard deviation were calculated. The interval mean scores for the EFL learners' perceptions were deciphered as follows: 1-1.80: strongly disagree; 1.81-2.60: disagree; 2.61-3.40: neutral; 3.41-4.20: agree; and 4.21-5.00: strongly agree [36]. Qualitative data obtained from the interview was analyzed in the form of content analysis which took place via five steps in order: writing a descriptor next to each comment, categorizing comments into different areas, determining the frequency of comments, putting issues in each category into groups, and commenting on the groups.

2.3. Result

EFL learners' perceptions of the roles of the use of authentic materials

Table 1 indicates that the mean score of EFL learners' perceptions of the roles of authentic material use for IELTS reading comprehension was high ($M=4.26$; $SD=.53$). This means that learners had positive perceptions of the roles of authentic material use. Specifically, it is apparent that most of the items received high agreement from most of the learners. They asserted that authentic material use played a vital role in learning IELTS reading comprehension (item R01: $M=4.42$; $SD=.72$). Therefore, these materials had positive effects in the IELTS reading classes (item R02: $M=4.40$; $SD=.66$). The positive roles of the materials were reasoned by four prevailing factors namely: language development, cultural acquisition, classroom-real life gap minimization, and exciting and comfortable atmosphere in the order of highest to lowest. A large number of the learners agreed that the use of authentic materials in IELTS reading classes was helpful for their

language development (item R07: M=4.45; SD=.69). This is followed by the idea of facilitating culture acquisition (item R08: M=4.34; SD=.74). Also, the important roles of authentic materials were agreed as they can minimise the gap between the classroom and real life, which was the third highest agreement in this section (item R06: M=4.28; SD=.76). The other benefit contributing to the importance of authentic materials were also noted including creating an exciting and comfortable reading classroom (item R03: M=4.19; SD=.86; item R04: M=4.15; SD=.81). As a result, the idea that allocating time for learning reading comprehension with authentic materials in class gained strong agreement from most of the learners in this survey (item R05: M=4.27; SD=.79). Most of them thought that these types of materials should be used as a supplementary material in IELTS reading classes (item R09: M=4.21; SD=.87). However, the opinion of using authentic materials as a source of homework gained the least agreement in the questionnaire and responses to this item were inconsistent (item R10: M=3.95; SD=.92).

Table 1. EFL learners' perceptions of the roles of authentic material use

No.	Items	N=150	
		M	SD
R01	The use of authentic materials plays an important role in learning IELTS reading comprehension.	4.42	.72
R02	The use of authentic materials has positive effects in IELTS reading classes.	4.40	.66
R03	The use of authentic materials creates an exciting IELTS reading classroom.	4.19	.86
R04	The use of authentic materials creates a comfortable IELTS reading classroom.	4.15	.81
R05	Spending time learning IELTS reading comprehension with authentic materials in class is necessary.	4.27	.79
R06	Learning IELTS reading comprehension with authentic materials helps learners minimize the gap between the classroom and real life.	4.28	.78
R07	The use of authentic materials in IELTS reading classes is helpful for learners' language development.	4.45	.69
R08	The use of authentic materials in IELTS reading classes is helpful for culture acquisition.	4.34	.74
R09	Authentic materials should be used as supplementary material in IELTS reading classes.	4.21	.87
R10	Authentic materials should be included for homework in IELTS reading classes.	3.95	.92
Average		4.26	.53

The qualitative data collected from the interview session was in agreement with the results above. All of the interviewees (100%) agreed on the important roles of authentic material use for IELTS reading. The reasons for this included the authentic language, real-life content, and outside knowledge emerging in the materials. They favored the language used in authentic materials, making them see the vital role of these materials in the reading class. Another reason for the positive perceptions is the exposure to real-life things and affairs that are happening outside the classroom. Although only one of them thought authentic materials were good but not really necessary to apply in the reading class and should be used as extra materials instead, the idea that it was necessary to learn IELTS reading comprehension with these materials was agreed by 90% of them. The materials were thought to be indispensable to create a more exciting atmosphere

and foster motivation in learning reading, language skills, and social knowledge. Their opinions are exemplified below:

“The use of authentic materials is helpful because the language from the articles was authentic. I do think I can become a more natural user of language thanks to this.” (S10)

“Authentic materials play an important role in the reading class. Things emerging in real-life materials are practical. I can be well-prepared for knowledge in the future. These materials also arouse my interest since I cannot expect the next reading texts I will be given in the class. They are not repetitive.” (S6)

“It is very important to learn reading comprehension with authentic materials. The application of authentic materials has brought creativity to the classroom, not just a dull traditional reading class. It also helps me gain present-day social knowledge.” (S2)

“Authentic material-based classes are lively and dynamic. They are not like a normal class, they are more of a discussion or workshop. I feel more comfortable. So, I think authentic materials are really necessary for reading classes.” (S5)

In the third interview question, when being asked whether authentic materials should be used as supplementary material in IELTS reading class, most of the learners did not hesitate to say yes and admitted the combination of two different types of texts fascinated them. Some of the examples are listed below:

“While traditional books are appropriately planned and logically structured, guaranteeing learners’ language acquisition; authentic materials give me more experience with real-life situations. So I believe the use of both types should be considered in the reading comprehension class.” (S10)

“The teacher should combine pedagogical books and authentic materials to make the reading class more effective, and interesting. I think learning something outside the academic environment sounds attractive to me.” (S1)

“The combination of two different types of materials is good. The teacher should let learners use these two types in the same class meeting.” (S5)

Overall, the survey indicated that learners reached a consensus that authentic material use in IELTS reading classes played a vitally important role in IELTS reading comprehension.

2.4. Discussion

The vast majority of the learners believed that these materials played a salient role in reading comprehension classes. There are four possible explanations for this.

One of them can be that authentic materials helped the learners develop their language competence, which was agreed upon by most learners participating in the survey. Among 150 respondents, nearly 55% of them spent just under a year, and more than 30% spent from 1 to 2 years learning the IELTS, which can be understood that the majority of the participants were in the period urgently in need of improving their language competence so in this circumstance the use of authentic materials is probably meaningful for them.

Another explanation for the positive perceptions of the roles of authentic material use for reading classes might be the improvement of cultural knowledge, which was approved by most of the learners in the survey. The learners could be able to find valuable cultural elements in authentic texts to learn. This idea was consistent with the idea of Jooyandeh [31], expressing that the important role of effective factors in learning was obvious and the incorporation of authentic materials was one of the ways to arouse and intensify learners’ motivation.

Thirdly, the reason can be that authentic materials might help learners to alleviate the discrepancy between the classroom and real life, thereby supporting overall language

improvement as stated by Akbari and Razavi [16], the application of authentic materials aided learners in bridging the gap between knowledge within the classroom and knowledge used outside; so this use can greatly develop learners' communicative competence in the target language.

Finally, in all probability, the positive perceptions of the roles of authentic materials are explained that the incorporation of authentic texts for reading comprehension, confirmed by most participants, would create an exciting and friendly classroom. This can be because authentic texts do not resemble pedagogical texts, which are artificial and predominantly academic. The authentic texts used in this study were retrieved from a newspaper and a website purposely written for native speakers, which probably made the learners feel more relatable and curious. This response supported the result of the previous study by Fitriana et al. [33], who suggested that reading using authentic materials was straightforward and interesting, and the learners were more active in the reading class.

The learners agreed that the materials could be utilized as extra in-class materials and after-class reading homework. However, the idea of using authentic materials for homework had a lower degree of agreement and the responses were less consistent. This can be reasonable because authentic materials were usually difficult which required learners to check the dictionary many times to decode the story [22]. Without the help of the teacher, the learners might feel this use at home was overwhelming for them. This finding should be taken into account when teachers face the dilemma of whether to give authentic materials as homework or not.

According to Day [22], authentic material used for learning might cause problems like intelligibility and should not be used in the English language teaching classroom. The learners in this survey, however, believed that the use of authentic materials for reading comprehension was necessary. The likelihood is that this is due to the age of most respondents, who were 19 and over. This age group is believed to concern themselves with affairs that are happening in reality so they might favor the use of non-artificial reading texts. The survey indicated that there was strong agreement on the roles of authentic material use for reading comprehension. The learners highly agreed that the inclusion of authentic materials had a positive role in reading classes. This overall result confirmed the results of earlier studies of Guo [2], Albiladi [32], and AbdulHussein [37], which revealed that the learners had positive attitudes towards authentic material utilization.

The findings implied that authentic materials played an indispensable role in the reading comprehension class. The implication seemed to be in agreement with Tomlinson and Masuhara [4], who opined that exposure to non-artificial texts can motivate learners, facilitate them to improve their communicative competence, and provoke positive attitudes towards English language learning.

3. Conclusion

The study concluded that EFL learners had positive perceptions of the roles of the use of authentic materials for reading comprehension. This inclusion in reading classes can play an important role in language development, cultural awareness, and motivation.

Shedding light on EFL learners' perceptions of the use of the roles of authentic materials for reading comprehension, the study brings several implications for teachers, learners, and material designers. The implications are as follows:

Raising awareness for teachers

For teachers, it would be necessary to consider the implementation of authentic materials in the IELTS reading class in order to bring benefits to the classroom, learners, and teachers themselves because the advantages of these materials are certain. Suitable authentic materials

selected can suit learners' language competence, and fulfil their interests and background [34]. Therefore, it is of the essence for teachers to improve the effectiveness of reading classes by attaching authentic materials to their lessons. Moreover, teachers should be more concerned about the values of their teaching which do not just lie in teaching language but in creating an engaging and comfortable classroom environment, introducing culture, and arousing learners' motivation by means of materials. When it comes to assigning homework, they should carefully select appropriate types of authentic materials for the corresponding level of learners, which ensures no difficulties for their intelligibility.

Raising awareness for learners

For learners, it is important to improve reading comprehension skills by reading various types of materials, not only pedagogical books but also texts found in real life. These texts should be read not only within the class but also outside the classroom [32]. Learners should create the habit of reading newspapers, books, stories, and other types of authentic sources because they were proven to have positive influences on learners' reading skills.

Raising awareness for material designers

For material designers, the positive perceptions of authentic material use collected in this study imply that the introduction of real-life based-texts is essential in learning and teaching materials. The books will be more efficacious if there is the inclusion of authentic reading texts. Learners would demand some texts that can help them to alleviate the gap between inside and outside the classroom. Besides that, the chosen texts should have the underlying emergence of cultural elements to facilitate learners to improve their knowledge of culture and activate their interests. And the culture in authentic materials should not be limited to only one aspect, but many [3].

The study was carried out with some inevitable limitations. Firstly, the study was conducted with a small sample size, which was quite limited to generalize the findings. Secondly, only two instruments (questionnaire; interview) were employed to collect data. Therefore, it is recommended that further research should involve more participants from different contexts. Additionally, a quasi-experimental study using pretest-posttest should be conducted. Texts from other types of sources such as novels, journals, or magazines should be chosen to teach. This could provide learners the exposure to a wider range of topics and content.

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