



THE IMPORTANCE OF USING AUTHENTIC MATERIALS TO DEVELOP READING COMPREHENSION

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Annotation

This article emphasizes the importance of Authentic materials on teaching English during the lesson. Using authentic materials during the lesson give several opportunities to achieve success on learning foreign language. Authentic materials are crucial sources of information to develop learner's interest and motivation if they are used appropriately during lessons. Opinions which are used in this article will be useful for the teachers and students who are used authentic materials during the lesson.

Keywords: Authentic materials, vocabulary, reading a text, authentic texts, reading strategies, language community, communicative activities.

Introduction

Authentic materials support literary comprehension and analysis because it fulfills its natural function as a language, instead of introducing language as artificial and discrete elements. The Input Hypothesis Theory states that authentic materials are more comprehensible, and therefore have a greater communicative value compared to simplified or independent texts. Within the realm of academic language use, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) suggests that teachers should introduce language that is context related through authentic materials, and not simplified language. Through authentic materials, learners are also able to demonstrate the ability to use the knowledge of phonics cues and reading strategies. In a research done by Aftab, 100 second grade learners were divided into a literature based group, and commercial phonics based group. The learners' comprehension of reading materials and strategies were examined using miscue analysis procedures by Goodman, Watson, and Burke (1987). Learners were audiotaped reading aloud, and data were derived from these read aloud sessions to determine the miscue percentages and retelling ability of learners. Before the study was conducted, learners were told to read in a manner that was consistent to when they were reading alone. Recalling materials were two part: learners were first asked to recall without interruption, and then according to questions



provided by the teacher. The aim of the study was to examine learner's proficiency regarding the integration of language cues (syntactic, semantic, phonics, and so on), reading strategies (prediction, self correction) and comprehension (analysis of cohesion and logical sequencing).

The results indicated that learners in the literature based classroom used multiple cues to comprehend the texts, learned phonics within a meaningful context and focused on constructing meaning through reading strategies, corrections and recalls when immersed in a literacy rich environment. In contrast, the study found that learners in the commercial based program, which emphasized systematic and explicit phonic instruction, did not show significantly better performance compared to the literature based group; in fact, these learners were statistically less willing to take risks, accepting instead to read meaningless texts. These learners also read controlled texts and answered questions with a single correct answer instead of multiple divergent answers. In comparison, learners in the literature based program were interacting with the text, immersed in rich discussion and attempted to make sense of the text, occasionally focusing on graphophonic cues but not relying solely on this reading component. These learners were able to process both the surface and deeper aspects of language, and were thus able to grasp text and word level meaning, allowing them to develop into independent readers. Provides Natural Language. Through literature based instruction, students are exposed to a broader range of grammatical constructs that are generally used in natural discourse and provide real examples, including normal redundancy that present learners with familiar language chunks used. Because of the authentic nature of these learning materials, students are exposed to a vocabulary that is both rich and natural. In a study by Ivey and Broaddus, the researchers noted in a research log (dated April 26, 2004) the progress of one student which, in his participation with this study, not only read fluently, but comprehend the material well. Each sentence he read was concluded with the meaning of the last word. The study found how important repeated exposure is toward building learner fluency and vocabulary, using words in multiple contexts, but without the monotony of drills. When producing their own independent writing, learners can reflect the variety of literary features acquired through authentic materials. Authentic materials also contain a large number of cohesive devices that increase the cogency of these texts, making them easier to decode and comprehend compared to simplified or stand alone texts. A cohesive tie, which is a natural part of authentic discourse, is a vital tool used in processing information and building reading



comprehension skills in L2 learners. In a study by Oller (2005), the researcher advocates the use of “pi” bootstrapping a hypothesis which suggest that comprehension and acquisition of the ability to refer to content material and construct highly complex target form are essential in learning a new language. This theory proves the validity of authentic materials used in L2 acquisition, through providing different sentence structures to subjects, who identified certain sentences through logical sequencing, thus increasing comprehensibility. “...Measures of priming effects, reading times, coherent rating and retention all confirm the prediction of the pi – bootstrapping hypothesis: The more coherent the storyline, (language) is processed more fluently and remembered better than less well connected sequence”.

Increases Student Motivation to Learn

Learners are more motivated to read and learn when language is used in an authentic setting, because they see the importance of learning the language that helps meet their social needs, and to succeed academically (Snow, Met and Genesee, 1989). Especially for English Language Learners (ELLs).

The Importance of Motivation

Why spend time on finding out which texts to use in the classroom? Why not present your students with a text that you find suitable and make them read it with the intention of discussing it afterwards? Certain writers claim that there is a difference between reading a text and being engaged in the reading of a text. It is claimed that if a student is motivated in the reading of a text, the student is a better learner. Furthermore, a motivated reader will “activate prior knowledge to construct new understanding”. It is also claimed that the development of literacy (obtained from reading texts) and motivated students is “a reciprocal relationship...”; the better you get at understanding the texts you read, the more motivated you will become. This will encourage you to engage in the reading of more texts with an increasing difficulty level. Reading leads to a better textual understanding which in turn inspires you to read further. So the trick should be to get the students interested in texts to get them motivated in the process of working with texts within and outside the classroom language skills need to be introduced alongside academic content, in order to ensure the achievement of fluency before learners lose interest or slip into resignation. Literature based instruction not only helps familiarize learners with the subject matter, but more importantly, allows



them to use English to communicate the content matter. Students' motivation level increases when they see the language in which they are learning reflected in daily conversation between family, friends and in school. The practice of using literature based instruction in the classroom has received favorable response: Educators agree that teaching a language using authentic materials is academically sound. Authentic material supports increased comprehension of texts through the use of authentic language input, and fulfills social and academic purpose. However, the authenticity of the materials might not serve the needs of students if the materials, which represent realistic communication, ignore or do not reflect the issues of the learners' culture. Teaching a second language might require more than just authentic materials in addressing the educational needs of immigrant language learners; incorporating culturally relevant materials will be an additional aspect within authentic materials that might be necessary to increase student achievement and participation. Culturally Relevant Materials. Culturally relevant texts contain the aspect of cultural diversity and shared experiences set by its characters that reflect the lives and identities of its readers. Because language and cultural identity are inseparable, opportunities for learners to explore bilingual and bicultural identities in reading materials are crucial for literary success. In the book *Teaching through Culture*, the author, Webster defines culturally relevant literature as text that reflects an accurate and respectful representation of the learners themselves.

This reflection encourages and fosters reading engagement. It highlights important cultural, historical and political contexts for reading comprehension, and draws on learner's funds of knowledge based on prior knowledge, life experience and linguistic practices of learners and their communities. Benefits of Culturally Relevant Materials. There are many benefits to using culturally relevant materials in the classroom, and these benefits are discussed below. Culturally relevant materials promote learning relevancy, learning enjoyment and help learners activate prior knowledge when interacting with reading materials. Promote Learning Relevancy. Culturally relevant authentic materials address the issue of learning relevancy. As opposed to the conventional method of learning English, where students memorize grammatical structures and vocabulary definitions, readers who find their own life experience reflected in authentic, learning materials receive affirmation of themselves and their culture. They develop a sense of self worth, which in turn establishes their desire to learn the language in which the text was written. Young learners whose culture and



beliefs are excluded from books and literature learn that they have no part as valued members of a society (Bishop, 1987). The National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning released a study entitled the Pacific Northwest Indian Reading and Language Development Program. It was created to develop a culturally relevant reading curriculum for first through third grade learners. The teachers had transcribed oral stories told by Native American students and used these stories as reading texts. Researchers observed that there was an increase in students' oral language production and language complexity when compared to the study's baseline. Data and observations collected throughout the academic year revealed that gains were most noticeable within the group of learners who, through pre test scores, were identified as "non verbal". The benefits of using culturally relevant materials also extend into the home environment of the learners, where parents viewed the materials as useful and relevant, thus increasing language related activities in the home. This supports Butterfield (1983)'s claim that culturally appropriate curriculum for American Indian students does affect students' language learning, as learners receive support both in school and at home. In another formative experiment investigating literacy engagement among Latino youth by Ivey and Broaddus (2007), the researchers used the Language Experience Approach (LEA) to study seventh and eighth grade immigrant students in a diverse urban school setting, who are classified as Level I emergent readers and writers. Students in Level I cannot read or comprehend first grade level English comfortably. The students were exposed to both self selected and teacher directed reading. The researchers observed the range and diverse texts that students selected, many of which reflected the students' home cultures. There were also some bilingual picture books and some simple, basic English only books. The students' self selected choices support the claim that when left on their own, children generally choose literature that is familiar and reflects their own home culture (Rudman, 1984). Over time, the researchers and teacher modified the reading lesson's text by creating different categories of text materials based on the students' preference. The researchers then assessed student comprehension, language development and engagement through classroom observations, student interviews, teacher researcher debriefing sessions, students' reading and writing products, reading logs and researchers' notes, and reflections on time spent in reading activities with individual students. The study concluded that selecting appropriate reading materials is important to increase reading engagement. The types of engaging materials varied according to each student's



motivation to learn and their life experience. However, one aspect remains the same: L2 learners “need to be exposed to a wider range of culturally relevant materials that both resonate with their own experience and are comprehensible to them as they develop their knowledge of a new language”. This conclusion mirrors that of Freeman’s research results. The researcher compared a group of ESL students’ ability to recall both native and target culture based books that were read during the study. She found that students were able to produce better information recall with culturally relevant material compared to that of the target culture’s story. This finding suggests that there is a strong correlation between the introduction of culturally relevant materials from a learner’s home country and higher learning outcomes, compared to introducing learning materials from a foreign culture. Promotes Learning Enjoyment. Culturally relevant educational materials also focus on the issue of learning enjoyment, which is connected to the issue of student motivation and persistency in language acquisition. Lightbrown and Spada conducted a study on elementary ESL students in Quebec, and found that students rated stimulating and entertaining materials as higher in enjoyment value. The long term effect, as noted by Lightbrown and Spada was that this favorable disposition resulted in a significant increase in the probability of the English language being used after class and outside the academic sphere. Similarly, students who enjoy the process of learning will be less likely to suffer mental exhaustion and more inclined to embrace learning a second language if they are being taught with materials that they can enjoy, which is authentic and culturally relevant. In another study done by Green, Puerto Rican students in their final semester of an intermediate English as a Second Language (ESL) course were given a course related questionnaire that described 17 probable activities in an ESL classroom. They were asked to rate these questions on a five point scale, denoting the students’ perception of an activity’s effectiveness and enjoyment.

The results revealed that, with only one exception, communicative activities were rated as more enjoyable and pleasant compared to non communicative ones like grammar rules and language forms. Data from the questionnaire showed that there is a moderate to high positive correlation between enjoyment and effectiveness in all cases; however, learners also acknowledged the effectiveness of some less enjoyable, non communicative activities. Nonetheless, enjoyment will ensure a continual effort and commitment to learning, regardless of the success or struggle in which learners face,



because achievement is not the motivational drive in conditioning this behavior, but enjoyment is.

Activates Prior Knowledge. Culturally relevant books have the potential to engage and to activate students' prior knowledge about familiar experiences. As they tap into the learners' funds of knowledge, their affective filter is lowered. This is because beginner language learners do not have to be concerned about establishing background knowledge in the subject matter. This decreases a learner's level of anxiousness, and also allows learners more freedom to focus on language forms. In addition to culturally relevant book, students might be introduced to books that depict their home and family life. This practice of introducing culturally relevant books can be seen in African American literature, whereby books that tell of the African American history and culture, written by its own people, have been incorporated as a part of the curriculum to enhance not only the students' learning experience, but also to cater to the learner's need and desire of being culturally relevant and historically sound. In knowing that their cultural history is not overlooked or forgotten, African Americans are able to reflect and reconnect to their past, but more importantly, they are able to highlight their progression to the current post Civil Rights generation, who thirst for a reflection of themselves in literature. By extending the same practice to other cultural groups, language learners can continue expanding their expertise in their native language while developing reading and writing skills in their second language. Current literature and research regarding the use of authentic and culturally relevant materials predict better learning outcomes in language learners.

He stresses that even students seem to recognize that authentic texts can help them bridge the gap between what they already know and what they need to know in order to continue to improve in the EFL classroom, a language learning method referred to as noticing. Furthermore, the use of authentic texts in EFL provides sociocultural benefits, especially in mixed age groups where older students can help younger ones. In line with this, some researchers point out that discussions around authentic texts can lead students to social growth, where they become resources for each other. As an added bonus, authentic texts are also considered suitable for all grade levels.



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