

USE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS FOR EFL STUDENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

In Afghanistan, English language has the status of a foreign language and scant time and attention is given to the development of English language teaching. EFL students often struggle with grammar, vocabulary and with cultural references in source materials that are familiar to them. They tend to use traditional materials in teaching English language and do not use authentic materials. It is assumed that Afghan English teachers are unaware of authentic materials and their significance in teaching English. Therefore, the researcher has attempted to explore the use of authentic materials by the Afghan English teachers. This paper attempts to shed some light on to what extent those teachers are aware of what is meant by authentic materials, their advantages, disadvantages, selection, use and effect in the teaching of English as a foreign language. The theoretical framework and understanding developed helps facilitate a practical examination of the effect of using authentic materials.

Keywords: *Authentic Materials, EFL, attitudes and challenges*

Introduction:

Teaching a language is a process which is infinite and quite hard to deal effectively, particularly when the language is taught as a foreign language where the learners have little opportunities to use the target language outside the classroom. Thus, the main aim of learning a language other than L1 is to be able to benefit from using it in the real world, in real situations. To fulfill this aim, learners should be exposed to such a language that enables them to communicate effectively with the native speakers of that language. This in turn might not be achieved without adapting authentic materials in the process of training learners to be efficient users of the target language whether orally or in writing. Thus, Hyland (2003) states that one of the most important advantages of using authentic material is that it increases learners' motivation and reflect positively on the learning process. In other words, students learn the language better when teachers use authentic materials as a teaching aids. Authentic materials help motivate learners learn the language by making them feel that they are learning the real language (Guariento & Morley, 2001). Tomlinson (2012) states that in selecting materials, it is important to blend material collected from various local, target language culture, multicultural and universal

source. This will enhance more meaningful teaching learning culture and also reduce unnecessary culture hegemony. Thus, it is observed that material designers', in countries in which English or any other language is taught as a second or foreign language, concentration is on topics that reflect the culture of target language community.

It can be assumed that even the teachers and learners in such countries prefer using authentic materials and believe that they are more effective in learning and acquiring the target language. This assumption is supported by several research works that have been carried out during the past decades in many countries all over the world. However, Rogers and Medley (1988) argue that unedited authentic materials are too difficult to understand by learners. It is because authentic materials contain complex words and language features (Gilmore, 2007). According to Al Azri, and Al-Rashdi (2014), the use of authentic materials in EFL classes is not new, because teachers started using them in the 1970s because of the spread of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Hence, CLT advocates the use of authentic materials in the classroom, focusing on instructions based on real-life situation, utilizing authentic materials, while maximizing students' interaction in the classroom.

Therefore, the use of authentic materials (AMs) like, *New Interchange*, *Headway* and updated *American English File*, are reflected in the most popular EFL/ESL language courses and Universities. According to Yasa (2016), these books have been used since 2008 in most of the private Universities especially, Star Educational society and the American University in Afghanistan. In addition, the British Council through its branches all over the world has played a crucial role in the use of authentic resources like textbooks, audio and visual aids. Genhard (1996) believes that authentic materials "contextualize" the language learning. In addition, authentic materials help to bridge the gap between the language being taught in the classroom and the language used by real people in real situation in the real world. The other aspects of the AMs are presented in detail in a following section, i.e. literature review.

Literature review

Definition of authentic materials

It has been difficult for scholars to agree on a definition of the terms "authenticity", "authentic materials", and "authentic language use" in language teaching terms. There are varied and divergent definitions of authentic materials. Researchers and practitioners have provided different definitions on what can be classified as "authentic materials". According to Hector-Mason (2007), authentic materials are print, video, and audio materials students encounter in their daily lives, such as change-of address forms, job applications, menus, voice mail messages, radio programs, and videos. Authentic materials are not created specifically to be used in the classroom, but they make excellent learning tools for students precisely because they are authentic. Martinez (2002), defines authentic materials as the materials which are prepared for native speakers and not designed to be used for teaching purposes. Peacock (1997) defines authentic materials as the materials that have been produced to fulfill some social purposes in the language community. Jordan (1997) defines authentic texts as the ones which are not designed for pedagogical aims.

Authentic materials and their types

Likewise, Laniro (2007) recommends two broad categories of authentic materials beneficial for ESL/EFL students such as print and auditory. Print materials include utility bills, packing slips, order forms, ATM screens/receipts, web sites, street signs, coupons, traffic tickets,

greeting cards, calendars, report cards, TV guides, food labels, magazines, newspapers etc. Whereas auditory materials include phone messages, radio broadcasts, podcasts, e-books, movies, videos and DVDs, television programs etc. Genhard (1996) classifies authentic materials into three categories as follows:

- Authentic listening materials, such as radio news, cartoons, songs, etc.
- Authentic visual materials, such as street signs, magazines and newspapers pictures, post cards, etc.
- Authentic printed materials, such as sports reports, newspapers, restaurant menus, train tickets, etc.

Having presented the various definitions and its types of "authentic materials" it is noticed that they share almost three views:

- Authentic materials are the dominance of a native speaker.
- Authentic materials are not mainly designed for pedagogical purposes.
- Authentic materials resemble real life.

As the term "authentic" is closely related to the notion of "authenticity", it is valid to account for what is meant by "authenticity" and what are its types. According to Grellet (1981), "Authenticity means that nothing of the original text is changed and layout is retained. ...Exercises must be meaningful and correspond as often as possible to what one is expected to do with the text". "Authenticity" is taken as being synonymous with genuineness, realness, truthfulness, validity, reliability... of materials" Tatsuki (2006). As there are different views regarding the notion of "authenticity", there are also different views regarding types of authenticity. Jordan (2012) views authenticity from four angles- authenticity of: language input, task, event, and learner experience.

Michael Breen (1985, as cited in Pinner, 2015); Breen (1985), categorizes four types of authenticity, language teachers are constantly involved with and summarizes them as follows:

- Authenticity of the texts, which include use of input data for learners.
- Authenticity of the learners' own interpretations of such texts.
- Authenticity of tasks conducive to language learning.
- Authenticity of the actual social situation of the language classroom.

Characteristics of authentic materials

Likewise, mountainous research works have tackled the divergent definition of "authenticity, its types" in the prior section. This section presents the characteristic of authentic materials. According to Ahmed (2017), "All good, authentic material has got the characteristics of having the language input and skill development; positive impression in learner's mind; useful information to deal with language; an easy familiarity; a thought provoking insight; a remedy and improvement in the deficiencies of the learning outcome; and a sense of security and confidence to the language teachers. In other words:

- materials should achieve impact;
- materials should help learners to feel at ease;
- materials should help learners to develop confidence;
- learners should perceive learning materials as relevant and useful;
- materials should require and facilitate learner self-investment;
- learners must be ready to acquire the being taught;
- learners' attention should be drawn to linguistic features of the input;

- materials should provide learners with opportunities to use the target language to achieve communicative purposes, through meaningful, realistic interaction;
- materials should be attentive that learners differ in learning styles;
- materials should deliberate that learners differ in affective attitudes;
- materials should permit a silent period at the begging of instruction;
- aesthetic and emotional involvement which stimulates both right and left brain activities;
- Materials should not rely too much on controlled practice; materials should provide opportunities for outcome feedback, Tomlinson (1998).

Effect of authentic materials

The importance and effect of "authentic materials" has gained noticeable attention. Sherman (2003) mentions that the importance of authentic materials resides in the fact that "it is a window into culture." Gilmore (2007) and Sherman (2003) believe that authentic materials have a strong positive effect on motivation. As Zohoorian (2014) investigates Iranian English for Academic Purpose students' lack of motivational achievement in reading skills and finds that authentic context has positive effects on motivational level, reading motivation, and reading achievement. Thanajaro (2000) and Otte (2006), conclude that authentic materials have a positive effect on learners' motivation and encourage them to learn better. Otte (2006) studied the effect of aural authentic texts on listening comprehension skills of a number of students involved in a study at a university in USA. He noticed that authentic materials while motivating students developed the students listening comprehension skills. Also Gilmore (2007) stated that, the effects of using authentic materials compared to textbooks materials on developing communicative competence of the learners during one year experiment. He concluded that the students who received the authentic input had significantly improvements of different types of competence. He stated that the result was attributed to the fact that authentic input allowed learners focus on a wider range of features than is normally possible...and that this noticing had beneficial effects on learner's development of communicative competence. Harmer (1994) states that authentic material has positive effects on learners, in that it:

- helps learners to produce better language;
- helps learners to acquire the language faster;
- makes learners more confident to deal with real life situations,

Furthermore, (Philips and Shettls Worth, 1978; Clarke 1989; Peacock 1997, cited in Richards, 2001) regard authentic material as useful in language teaching, for the following reasons:

- exposes learners to real language;
- it is more related to learners' needs;
- it has positive effect on learners' motivation;
- brings cultural information to the students' attention;

Dumitrescu (2000) finds some positive experience and her comment about using authentic material is quite comprehensive. Furthermore, Mishan (2005) lists the advantages of adapting culturally appropriate materials as follows:

- Learners can automatically make relationship with materials because of familiarity,
- They can express themselves at ease,
- They can develop new vocabulary through further explanation or description,
- Teacher may not have to provide extra information for the acceptability of the materials,
- They feel encouraged to relate their personal experience with the materials,

In a second/foreign language setting, authentic texts have the following advantages: provide the best sources of rich and varied comprehensible input for language learners (Mishan, 2005, Richards, 2001); generate students' motivation and interest (Cook, 1981, Richards, 2001); enable learners to communicate and interact socially in the target language environment, thus having an integrative learning value (Cook, 1981); (Ahmed, 2017) cited in Hyland (2003) states that one of the most important advantages of using authentic materials is that it increases learners' motivation and reflects positively on the learning process.

Peacock (1997) cited in Richards (2001), mentions several reasons for using authentic materials in the classroom as follows:

- prepare learners for real life,
- meet learners' needs,
- affect learners' motivation positively,
- encourage teachers to adopt effective teaching methods and
- present authentic information about culture.

Tran-Thanh (2017), believes that when selecting teaching resources the following questions may possibly help if satisfactorily answered in the choosing-process:

- (a) was the material created for a real purpose of communication?
- (b) Is the material correct in terms of lexical resource and grammar?
- (c) Does the material appropriately serve the teaching purpose?
- (d) Should any modification be required?

Dumitrescu (2000) emphasizes that three basic aspects should be kept in mind in selecting a material – linguistic, conceptual and cultural. Tomlinson (2012) states that in selecting materials, it is important to create a good blending of materials collecting from various sources such as: local, target language culture, multicultural and universal contexts which will enhance more meaningful teaching learning culture and also reduce unnecessary cultural hegemony. In addition, McGrath (2002) states, there are eight criteria to be considered when choosing appropriate authentic text. These are:

- relevance to course book and learners' needs,
- topic interest,
- cultural fitness,
- logistical considerations
- cognitive demands,
- linguistic demands,
- quality and exploitability

Understanding the Problem

The researcher observed that teachers in Afghanistan are not native speakers. Besides, they tend to use traditional materials in teaching English language and do not use authentic materials. Thus, students learn English for 9 years at school level. However, a majority of them fail to communicate in English effectively both in speaking and writing. Therefore, teachers who get their MA or PhD from Britain, USA and India in English should try to bring some changes for the development and improvement of curriculum and teaching materials towards communicative approaches and promote the use of authentic materials for EFL class. Furthermore, they have to resolve the current problems such as teacher-centered class rather than

student-centered class, usage rather than use, accuracy rather than fluency, teachers are authorities figure, and students are merely passives.

The researcher's personal view is that despite of some negative effects and disadvantages of authentic materials they are of a great value if they are carefully and properly selected and implemented. Exposing students to AMs is proved to motivate them to acquire the target language which provides them with confidence to practice it and enables them to use it in real situations outside classroom. In the context of Afghan students, there is an immense need to raise consciousness of the vital role of using AMs among both lectures and students.

In addition, obstacles that may hinder use of authentic materials should be overcome. This includes taking into account students' needs, background, learners' style/strategy and attitudes and culture towards English language. For authentic materials to be effective in the context of Afghan students, it is essential to change the traditional methods of teaching such as, grammar translation methods and lecture method to be replaced by students-centered and interactive methods. The structural approach which is almost dominant should be substituted by the communicative approach that emphasizes language use rather than mastery of language structures. Students should be engaged in activities/ tasks and trained to work in pair or groups rather than being only passive. Thus, much attention should be paid to the neglected skills, i.e. listening and speaking using relevant and suitable authentic materials, conducting in-services training and workshops on the importance and recent trends of AMs. How to select/design them and use them in classroom is crucial for Afghan English teachers.

As for this study, the researcher took all the previous challenges into consideration in the process of transaction. In selecting reading passages, the language should not be too much complicated and emphasis should be on the teaching reading skills, such as skimming and scanning, comprehension and critical reading. In selecting speaking topics, the emphasize is on language functions such as greeting, introducing, asking for, giving information, requesting, ordering and giving direction etc. In teaching such topics, students have to work in pairs, work in groups and participate in role-play activities. A little attention is to be paid to grammar as it is considered a subordinate that can be incorporated within the various skills.

Relevance of the topic in education

As mentioned in the literature review, there is an ongoing debate regarding the use of authentic materials in teaching and learning a language as a second or foreign one. The use of authentic materials in the language classroom has been widely considered to be beneficial to the language learners in different aspects. Akbari&Razavi (2016), explored the attitudes of teachers toward using authentic materials in EFL classroom in Iran. This study was conducted in TED (Tabadkan English Department one of the zones of Mashad, Iran). The results revealed that all of the teachers had positive attitudes toward providing authentic materials in EFL classes, regardless of the nationality, teaching experience and academic degree. On the other hand, Akdenzi (2015) explored the attitude of 12th grade students toward using AMs in Turkey. This study was conducted in ("Bucak high school students in Turkey") and the results revealed that the scores of the experimental group were found to be significantly higher than those of the control group according to the post-test. In addition, some more empirical studies were conducted by Thanajarso (2000) and Otte (2006), concluded that authentic materials have positive effect on learners' motivation and encourage them learn better.

Relevance of the topic for a nation like Afghanistan

According to Azami (2009), Afghanistan is a multi-lingual and a multi-ethnic country. The number of languages, dialects, and accents in the country has not been precisely accounted. It is stated that Afghanistan is a nation that loves its religion and culture more than anything else. Therefore, people need a well-structured English language curriculum based on the philosophy of social reconstruction and global interaction. Majority of the people who learn English for short-term-goals as being able to speak English efficiently could have opportunities of getting jobs with very high salaries. Others consider English language as a symbol of prestige and modernity. English language is taught as a foreign language at school level as well as universities and you can rarely find a native speaker or someone to speak to in English except at the American University of Afghanistan where the majority of the professors are foreigners. However, it is exclusive because its fees are very high. English has never been used as the medium of instruction. At school level, teachers are obliged to teach fixed textbooks prepared by the national committee and students have to follow what has been given to them. Grammar Translation Method is widely used and teachers are supposed to explain everything in the native language of the students.

In addition, a recent article published by, Noori, (2018) “communicative language teaching in EFL context exploring Afghan EFL lectures’ perceived challenges in implementing CLT”. He cites (Darmal, 2009; Noori, 2017 Somaiya, 2017) prevalent teaching method used in Afghan Universities is grammar-translation method. Thus, often students graduate from school, many of them can not engage even in a simple conversation (Somaiya, 2017). Likewise, Afghan Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) promotes student-centered learning and the use of CLT in classroom, but according to Somaiya(2017), still, EFL teachers in universities employ the traditional language teaching methods. In addition, in classrooms teachers are the authority figures, and the class relies only on learning from the textbook. The classes are exam-oriented as in the exam merely reading and writing class are tested while speaking and listening skills are overlooked (Noori, 2017).

In spite of that, Alimyar Z. (2015) states that the major problems and challenges, which are faced toward English language teaching in Afghanistan, are:

- Lack of expert/proficient instructors
- Keeping students passive
- Lack of awareness of new methods and develop methodology to teach English language
- Old version of text books
- Lack of standard curriculum/syllabus
- Lack of text books, audio-visual and lack of learning language materials
- Learners are more comfortable to speak with their mother tongue rather than speaking English.

Having reviewed teachers' perception on using authentic materials in language teaching, it is found that studies have been conducted in several countries. However, the researcher could not find any study or article regarding use of authentic materials in Afghanistan or perception of Afghan teachers on using them, other than one article which is recently published by Noori (2018).

Therefore, it can be assumed that most of the teachers of both school level and university level are not aware of the importance of authentic materials and do not use them in the EFL

classrooms. To the best of the researcher's knowledge; there is no research that tackled this issue in Afghanistan.

Research objectives

- 1- To explore to what extent the Afghan teachers are aware of the notion of authentic materials.
- 2- To find out whether the Afghan students are exposed to authentic materials while learning English.
- 3- To investigate to what extent do the materials used in teaching English reflect authenticity.

Research questions

- I. Are the Afghan teachers aware of the notion of authentic materials and their use in teaching English?
- II. Are the Afghan students exposed to authentic materials while learning English?
- III. To what extent do the materials used in teaching English reflect authenticity?

Research design and methodology

This is an exploratory study to find out the use of authentic materials in teaching English in Afghan context. In addition, it aims at raising the awareness of the Afghan English teachers towards the importance and positive effect of using authentic materials, their types, how to select and grade them and the obstacles that hinder their use. Data were collected through reviewing and analyzing of text books used in schools and the syllabus of English language department at Kabul University in addition to classroom observation.

The findings

- At school level, the textbooks used in teaching English, i.e. "English for Afghanistan", are prepared by "the national committee of compiling, research and editing". They rarely present authentic materials.
- There are two supervising committees. None of them includes any native speaker.
- The textbooks adapt multi-skill-syllabus that integrates reading, writing, pronunciation, vocabulary and listening and mostly ignoring speaking skill.
- The textbooks are accompanied with audio prepared by national individuals and do not reflect native speakers' pronunciation.
- The pictures and names reflect the Afghan culture rather than the American or British culture. In other words, they cannot be considered authentic materials.
- At college/university level, teachers/lecturers design their course syllabus or adapt someone else's. In spite of that, they lack authenticity and need to be revised and renewed.
- A majority of Afghan teachers are unaware of the notion of authentic materials, their importance, types, effective use and effects.
- The Afghan students are not exposed to authentic materials and are taught using traditional textbooks.

Recommendations

- A course on authentic materials should be taught to the student-teachers at colleges of education while qualifying them to be teachers of English language.

- In-service trainings, workshops and conferences should be held to equip teachers in the field with all required information regarding all the aspects of authentic materials.
- All the stake holders should make use of the findings of this research work, and the other similar ones, to bring a change in the pedagogical policy.
- The Afghan students should be aware of the importance of using authentic materials and their role in enhancing language competence.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the use of authentic materials in teaching English at both school level as well as university level in Afghanistan. In addition, it aimed to account for the various aspects of authentic materials including definition, importance, selection, advantages and disadvantages of authentic materials to raise the awareness the Afghan English teachers and policy makers to such notions. It presented a review of the previous related studies with especial focus on those dealing with the effect of using authentic materials. Finally, the findings and recommendations were stated.

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