

Teachers' Perceptions on Authentic Materials in Language Teaching in Kuwait

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Abstract

This research paper was conducted to find out the effects of authentic materials on students learning at elementary level. This study provides basic and comprehensive information to assist teachers in developing effective communication among teachers and students. It was carried out during fall semester 2013. The researcher used qualitative method approach in which simultaneously collected data using a non-participant observation, artifacts, and face-to-face interview. The objectives of the study were to determine the teachers' perceptions towards the use of one or many types of authentic materials in teaching English as a foreign language, their effective way in integrating the English language skills, and to determine whether the use of authentic materials is more effective than traditional methods of teaching. The results of data show that the authentic materials are a good and useful tool for learning a second language toward examination purposes because they lead the learner into drawing out language from their own knowledge and personal experiences through exposure to, immersion to the stimuli presented before them.

Keywords: Authentic material, ESL/ EFL, teacher preparation, Listening/Viewing Materials, Visual Materials, Printed Materials, Realia, elementary stage.

1. Introduction

Teacher preparation programs of the past focused on preparing professionals to disseminate content knowledge to their students. However, in the world of language teaching whether it is a second or foreign language, where what there is to know, is growing exponentially every day; teachers need to learn how to give their students opportunities to acquire information, and how to present it to their students. In second or foreign language learning environment using authentic material is an essential teaching strategy in the English as Second/ Foreign Language (SL/ FL) classroom. The usage of authentic materials facilitates learning and instruction. Therefore, the usage and the value of these materials provide confidence to language teachers and enhance the learning of second/ foreign languages.

2. Statement of the problem

Memorizing language forms and words is a very ineffective strategy for learning a target language (English). In Kuwait public schools where English is officially stated and taught as a foreign language is not considered an easy language to be learned. This difficulty arises because learning literacy in a second/ foreign language (English) at the same time when first graders are learning the forms of their first language (Arabic), always poses many language and cultural obstacles. Thus, since literacy in English as a second/ foreign language has become an important issue into the English EFL classroom, it becomes the foremost task for the teachers to devise lessons creatively and innovatively in order to engage students' interest in literary learning and how to read and write in this target language.

In EFL classroom, students often encounter problems in reading and understanding the components of the language in the assigned texts. It has been proven that Kuwaiti school students do not feel motivated to read words, sentences or even texts due to lack of language proficiency and inadequate supply of teaching materials (Al Darwish, 2006). In Kuwait, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is often taught ineffectively. The system for teaching English as a foreign language in Kuwaiti public schools involves 12 years in which students have to learn English from elementary school (5 years) to middle school (3 years) followed by high school (4 years). Throughout English as a foreign language education, the English teachers seldom use authentic material in the classroom due to the fact the Kuwaiti Ministry of Education supplies the schools with some materials based on the English language curriculum of a certain stage. In addition, the author being a previous student graduate from the same system, found that learning experience consisted largely of memorizing English words and grammar forms. This could be done very quickly, but students could forget what was learned about English language very quick. Therefore, English language has always been one of the most critical issues in education in Kuwait. In some cases, students' lack of academic achievement at the university level stems not from lack of intelligence, but rather from poor mastery of the English language. Therefore, the importance of the English language then and now is reflected in the fact that over half of the scientific periodicals and books in the Kuwaiti public libraries and in Kuwait University today are written in English (Al Darwish, 2006).

Furthermore, Kuwait University uses English as a medium of instruction in the Colleges of Medicine, Technology, Engineering and Applied Science. Therefore, English is considered one of the main subjects taught

in the public schools in Kuwait and once students graduate from high school I, they are forced to get a high score on the university entrance examination. As a consequence, many students stop studying English because of the entrance exam pressure, and the frustration they go through with learning a second language. Under these circumstances, the author feels that using authentic material can improve ESL/EFL students' interest in learning a second language specially at an age where they have to learn their first language, (Arabic). The author believes that if teachers use a variety of authentic material in the ESL/EFL classroom, it can help students to strengthen and reinforce what they have learned and trigger students' motivation in reading and writing in the target language.

3. Aim of the study

This research paper is intended to analyze elementary school teachers' perceptions on the use of one or many types of authentic materials as a motivational tool in cultivating students' interest in reading and writing in the target language, (English). This study attempts to answer the following research questions.

3.1 Research Questions

1. What are teachers' perceptions towards the use of one or many types of authentic materials in teaching English as a foreign language? Why?
2. How can the use of authentic material be integrated in teaching English as a foreign language?

4. Authentic Material

To get beyond the limitations of a text or any other specially developed instructional sources which are known as created materials, many EFL/ESL teachers adapt or become accustomed to authentic materials and media. But what actually are authentic materials, and what types of authentic materials are available to EFL teachers? Basically, authentic materials include anything that used as a part of communication. There are four types of authentic materials, EFL/ESL teachers have used such as: .

4.1 Authentic Listening/Viewing Materials

silent films, TV commercials, quiz shows, cartoons, movies, professionally audio taped short stories and novels, children's songs, and home video;

4.2 Authentic Visual Materials

slides, photographs, paintings, drawings by children, calendar pictures, pictures from travel, postcard pictures, and wordless picture books;

4.3 Authentic Printed Materials

cartoons, advertisements, short stories, and children's songs; restaurant menus; Wide street signs; postcards; currency; cereal boxes; candy wrap; world and city maps; calendars; comic books; greeting cards; business cards; grocery coupons; bus, plane, train, and taxi schedules; and

4.4 Realia Used in EFL/ESL Classrooms

dolls, puppets, currency, key rings, scissors, folded paper, toothpaste, toothbrushes, combs, stuffed and toy animals, wall clocks, balloons, walkie-talkies, candles, fly swatters, string, thread, chewing gum, glue, rulers, paper clips, rubber bands, trays, aprons, plastic forks and spoons, dishes, glasses, bowls, umbrellas, wallets, purses, balls, phones, fishing reels, furniture, people, cars, bug collections, play money, stones, plants, sand, clay, ink, sticks, jars, coffee cans, chalk, credit cards, hats, etc.

Obviously, EFL/ESL teachers have access to a great number of authentic materials and media. However, as with commercial produced materials, using authentic materials and media has disadvantages and advantages, but one need to know which one is more preferable to be used in the ESL/EFL classroom.

5. Literature Review

We live in a world dominated by visual messages and electronic gadgets. Because of information in the form of words and picture clues are displayed in most public places, in the home, and on television, children realize that there is a close association between visual information and the spoken word and as a result, young children learn much about the written word long before they have formal reading and writing activities at school (Tchudi & Mitchell, 1989). This is because humans have an ability to form a "mental" picture of the item to be learned before making a judgment (Bowen, 1982). Children therefore grow up expecting to receive constant visual support where communication is concerned (Vale, 1999). Actually, part of the process of learning to read involves using these visual clues to support the written form, and for this reason if we look through most popular stories for young children, we find out they are beautifully illustrated. Indeed,

illustrations and the use of authentic materials in all its types are extremely important in the teaching of a second/ foreign language to younger learners (Vale, 1999). Therefore, there is extensive support placed in the value of authentic materials to enhance the learning of foreign languages. However, with the amount of time devoted to using these materials in the S/ FL classroom, research is necessary to show how authentic materials enhance the language learning process (Canning, 2000). Likewise, a study shows that information given to children visually and verbally is symbolized differently in memory (Cronin and Myers (1997). There are a number of benefits in using authentic materials in teaching English language. For example, teachers can use authentic material to support understanding when the children are listening, put across the meaning of vocabulary, provide visual focus to prompt speaking or writing, provide a visual link between first language and English, and provide ways around communication barriers (Rea & Mercuri, 2006).

Additionally, children and adults comprehend to authentic materials differently. For example, when a child is listening to items through authentic listening material, they use the phonemic coding for understanding; whereas, adults use the structure representation (Morra, 1989). Moreover, people can construct a mental representation of the semantic meaning of a story based on either audio or visual information alone (Morra, 1989). Therefore, visual cues are important, since they either facilitate or distract from understanding.

Furthermore, when teachers use authentic visual or printed materials, the visual symbols integrate itself into the skill areas of the target language. For instance, the reading skill begins with recognizing and knowing that letters are symbols and they stand for a sound; and when put together with other "letters/symbols", they form meaning through recognizable words. Then, words become visual symbols and clues, which can aid in the written communication. Thus, reading is usually defined as extraction of meaning from text (Gibson and Levin 1975). This proves the use of authentic visual or printed materials act as 'vehicles' that can be used to enrich and enhance the act of reading (Bellver, 1989).

Moreover, the criteria for using authentic materials are mainly focused on comprehension and recall (Watson et al, 2010). This can be carried out when teachers incorporate authentic visual materials in teaching which enables authentic communication between students and literary texts (Vethamani, 2009). Consequently, it allows the students to have full concentration on the texts which leads to their understandability of the story and flow of the texts. In addition, when non-native teachers use the voice clips from native speakers for the target language in teaching vocabulary through songs is vital because it could help students to understand the pronunciation, the meaning and the message of the songs better.

Furthermore, Ur stated that the more sensory modes in which mental representation is stored, the more likely they will be remembered (1996). Also, the use of authentic visual and printed materials such as graphics, illustrations, pictures, audio, and video in the foreign language classroom helps students to comprehend and facilitate students' understanding of the concepts occurred in the assigned texts (Pillai, 2010). Pillai added that learning the target language through films puts struggling readers at less of a disadvantage. It was found out that the use of films help students to visualize clearly the cultural aspects found in the countries of the target language and the visual cues found in videos were informative and enhanced comprehension in general, but did not necessarily stimulate the understanding of a text

Nevertheless, authentic materials often contain difficult language and unneeded vocabulary items, which can be pointless disturbance for teachers and learners. Since they have not been simplified or written to any lexical or linguistic guidelines, and are not built around the specific grade level syllabus, they often contain language that may be beyond the learners' abilities (Richards, 2002). In addition, teachers have to be prepared to spend a considerable amount of time locating suitable sources for materials and developing activities and exercises to accompany the materials.

6. Procedure

This study was carried out during fall semester 2013. The researcher used qualitative method approach in which simultaneously collected data using a non- participant observation, artifacts, and face-to face interview. This variety of sources of information helped to maintain a healthy distance from the subject matter, in order to capture as objective an understanding of the usage of the authentic material in the English-teaching process as possible.

The observation participants consisted of 64 English language teachers from six public elementary schools where each school located within the six school districts in Kuwait. The background of these teachers ranged from novice to experienced teachers in the area of English language teaching. Forty of the participants are Kuwaiti nationality and a graduate of the College of Basic Education; where as the other twenty four come from Arab and other nationalities. From each of the six school districts two English language teachers provided one individual interview with the researcher in the school, lasting about half an hour a total of twelve teachers for six hours.

Through comparison of these data collected in the same way for all sixty four teachers, the researcher was able to clarify distinctions between their usage of the authentic materials and attitudes in an objective way. However,

in sharing the experiences and opinions of these teachers, the researcher was able to get into their minds in another, more personal way. No two English teachers are alike, although they share many of the same ideas and concerns. The observation mainly concentrated on what authentic material items were used to carry out the lesson and was marked according to the following scale: (3) always, (2) rarely, (1) never for each teacher.

7. Data Analysis & Results

The analysis of the results showed that the majority (95%) of the teachers were in agreement that the use of authentic materials is relevant and enjoyable. This was probably because the use of authentic material makes it easy for the students to understand the vocabulary items in the new lesson and easier for the English language teachers to deliver their lessons without the translation into the first language. The preliminary data of the study revealed that 65% of the participants were using flash cards and pictures in their classrooms with their own voice for explanation, and 100% were using the white board as in the traditional way. Only 20% of the participants who did not believe in authentic visual materials were using the cassettes; where as 70% rarely were using the cassettes.

Furthermore, non of the participants where using the computer because it was difficult for some teachers and needs special training on certain software; as well as, it takes more time for lesson preparation, and not always available in classes.

As one of the teachers mentioned "there are a lot of disadvantages for using authentic materials inside EFL classroom such as it takes time and effort to locate authentic materials, difficult to make authentic materials and media comprehensible to the students, and some students will not accept authentic materials and media as being a valuable learning source because they consider them as entertainment but view learning as a serious enterprise.

Based on the observation, students who listened in sound only conditions were not like the students who were exposed to the use of video and sound conditions. The use of video and sound in delivering the topic of the lesson was more consistent in the student's perception of the vocabulary items, and the passages whether they were easy or difficult form a pattern. The researcher observed that when the short stories, passages, songs or any type of utterances were backed up by an action and/or body language were considered easier to understand by students. Less lively scenes, which involved relatively long stretches of conversation, were labeled as more difficult.

One of the interviewed teachers also commented that: "*Videos and pictures attracts students attention, gives reality to the lesson, and enriches students' knowledge of the target language because students are able to see what is exactly happening in the topic of the day and they don't really rely on listening where they might lose their concentration*".

Another teacher's comment and also based on the evaluation of a short test at the end of the lesson was that "*It is also interesting to point out that students in the sound-only environment were less successful in maintaining the interest and concentration in listening; also their score would be less than if the lesson was explained both auditory and visually*".

Throughout the teachers' observation, the researcher discovered that by using authentic materials can not only develop students' literacy abilities, but also can develop their oral ability. Canning-Wilson (2000) claims that the use of illustrations, visuals, pictures, cartoons, charts, graphs, colors, music, or anything else used can promote the learner by helping to clarify the message, provided the audible or visual works in a positive way to enhance or supplement the language point, and at the same time, the images contextualized in video or the sound heard from a native speaker can help to reinforce the language, provided the learner can see immediate meaning in terms of vocabulary recognition in the first language.

Also, authentic materials and media "can reinforce for students the direct relation between the language classroom and the outside world by offering a way to contextualize language learning. This process happens when lessons are centered on comprehending a paragraph, a menu, a TV weather report, a documentary, or anything that is used in the real world, students tend to focus more on content and meaning than on language. This offers students a valuable source of language input, as students can be exposed to more than just the language presented by the teacher and the text.

In fact, a study by Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) demonstrates that to learn a new word in context (without instruction), students need to be exposed to the word at least six times before they have enough experience with the word to ascertain and remember its meaning; however, by using the audio visual, animated videos and films, graphic pictures and other visual aids could help the students to visualize the texts clearly because the use of authentic materials help the students to cope with vocabulary items embedded in the texts.

Some teachers use authentic materials to get beyond the limitations of a text. To do this, they begin with an idea in a text and, based on their understanding of students' needs and interests, locate authentic materials, as well as create additional activities that make use of them.

The pictures, flash cards and realia allowed the student to interpret the vocabulary items to first language without the teacher's translation in which that might not otherwise be obtained with just a textual prompt. Here is an

example of how one teacher did this. While engaged in a textbook activity students in a functional English class expressed interest in learning what are the type of food Kuwaiti people serve in restaurants during the fasting month of Ramadan. So the teacher pulled together pictures of food items from magazines, and she had students in groups study a photocopy of an authentic menu (which a restaurant manager courteously gave her) and match the pictures of the food items to some of those listed in the menu. He then had them create their own menus, including pictures of food items they cut out of magazines. The students next wrote the name of the food items, and they practiced the pronunciation of each item and took turns presenting them in front of the class. The teacher also had students imitate being in a restaurant through the use of realia (e.g., plastic eating utensils and food order checks) and role-play cards.

At the most basic level of instruction, video is a form of communication and it can be achieved without the help of language, since we often interact by gesture, eye contact and facial expression to convey a message. It can be argued that language found in videos could help nonnative speakers understand stress patterns. Videos allow the learner to see body rhythm and speech rhythm in second language discourse through the use of authentic language and speed of speech in various situations. One teacher illustrated that "Video can give students realistic models to imitate for role-play; can increase awareness of other cultures by teaching appropriateness and suitability; can strengthen audio/visual linguistic perceptions simultaneously; can widen the classroom repertoire and range of activities; Another teacher added, "when the visual or video is a poor reproduction; when the picture is too far away from the text illustration; when the video has irrelevant captioning; when the video or visual offers too much information related or unrelated to the picture; and when the video or visual is poorly edited, we should avoid these materials because they are ineffective in the learning process".

On the contrary, some teachers didn't include any type of these authentic materials because they thought they were required to follow a particular text and to use prescribed lesson plans. As one teacher mentioned "*I am forced to teach from the book*" and added "*let the textbook do the teaching*". Another teacher commented that under the pressures of everyday teaching, it is easy to simply follow the textbook step-by-step, without giving much thought to the consequences this approach has on the students. Three teachers in three different schools revealed that EFL teachers are required to follow a particular text, and they find that the administration's policy is stringent. Sometimes, actual lesson plans are handed to teachers, and supervisors make sure they are following the provided materials. When this happens, teachers can feel helpless in the face of being creative with materials and media. Unfortunately, some teachers give in under the pressure and simply follow the prescribed lessons.

8. Conclusion

Teachers believe in presenting students with a richness and variety of resources and materials not to dazzle or confuse them, but rather to make the most of our potential as teachers for engaging students with language. The use of authentic materials can create a lot of interest and make teaching-learning process more effective when these are coupled with good public speaking skills. No doubt, speaking style and stage presence of teachers are personal talents but these can be refined with much practice and experience and by using the authentic materials aids quite often while teaching. Therefore, the usage of authentic listening and viewing materials offer foreign and second language learners a chance to improve their ability to understand comprehensible input and that is because academic listening tasks are often tested rather than taught. Though we use all our senses to learn, it appears that seeing is the sense where most of our learning comes from. Although authentic materials come in different types, but through this research paper it tells us that the most effective way to clarify and bring understanding to what is being taught is to actually show the children. It is evident that the use of authentic material increases the learners' chances for improving and developing their language abilities and it allows teachers to ask both display and referential questions. Therefore, in this instance, it can be concluded that visuals positively affected that learning strategies and writing capabilities of nonnative speakers of English.

The Authentic visuals materials permit strategies to organize knowledge into semantic or associative clusters. In testing and teaching situations pictures items can be developed to test whether the students understand the syntax or structure of the target language. Students can see immediate meaning in terms of vocabulary recognition provided the item exists in the first language. Pictures can help testers and teachers to identify or manipulate structures, vocabulary, functions, situations and skills. The findings from this study can be attributed to the fact that authentic materials offer contextual support and/or helps learners to visualize words as well as meanings.

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