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Some Libyan EFL University Students' Attitudes towards Using Authentic Materials for Reading Classes

Theory and Practice of Second Language Acquisition 3/1, 61-73

2017

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.



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Abstract

This study investigates the attitudes of 100 Libyan English foreign language (EFL) university students towards using authentic reading materials. The quantitative data of this study were collected through a close-ended questionnaire. The majority of the students believed that exposing foreign language (FL) learners to authentic materials has a positive impact on developing their reading skills and on enhancing their awareness about target language culture. However, they emphasized the importance of introducing these materials in small portions and the need for promoting teachers' and students' motivation and interest in these materials. Despite the challenges and the difficulties that may impede the process of introducing authentic study material in the FL classroom, it represents a valuable and useful resource for teachers in motivating students and developing their language proficiency.

Keywords: EFL, ELT, authentic materials, FL classroom

Background of the Study

Learning language for communication implies its purpose, that is, the ability to use L2 successfully in the outside world. Therefore, it is worth considering whether it is textbooks or authentic materials that better realize it.

The language learning materials used in the context of foreign language classrooms represents a fundamental tool for language learning development. The type of materials used can also have an obvious effect on enhancing learners' motivation, stimulating their interest and increasing their active participation in learning activities. For this reason, the materials should be carefully

selected to respond to learners' needs and interests. Therefore, foreign language pedagogy is increasingly focusing on the functional use of language and most of language programs are now designed on functional basis. Thus, the use of authentic materials becomes a standard practice nowadays. Accordingly, the task of instructors in language classrooms is to look for materials that closely reflect the language students will encounter outside the classroom. Although the artificial grammar practice, drills, exercises, and reading and listening texts found in common textbooks are necessary, students still need to be exposed to the same typical language used by native speakers. In this regard, Harmer (2001) believes that only authentic materials will 'genuinely' improve listening and reading skills.

Language learners' attitudes have been reported as an influential factor for developing language learning (Gardner, 1960; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Harmer, 2001; Otte, 2006; Soliman, 2013). Gardner and Lambert believed that mastering a second language is not only influenced by the mental competence or language skills but also on learners' attitudes and beliefs towards the target language. Positive attitudes can also improve the process of language learning by influencing the learners' behaviors and beliefs towards the language and can help in exploring their tendency to acquire that language. Devitt et al. (1988) referred to the widespread belief of linking the favorable attitude and the high level of motivation with second language learning success. Therefore, authentic materials with real-world language and contact with culture of the target language can make learning enjoyable and motivating. This suggests that understanding foreign language learners' attitudes towards the use of authentic materials is an essential step for a successful application of this practice in classrooms.

ELT in Libya

English language enjoys high status in Libya. In the Libyan educational system, it is a compulsory subject and students start learning it since grade five (age 10). The aim of teaching English is said to be developing students' communication skills. The English textbooks currently applied in elementary and secondary schools are decided by the Ministry of Education. They have been designed and published by the Garnet Publication in the UK in 1999. The content of these textbooks focuses on communication skills and is learner-centered as well as it includes a variety of authentic language materials, especially for reading classes (Phillips et al., 2002).

At the university level, English language continues to be a compulsory subject for all study disciplines. Although Libyan universities are centrally managed by the Ministry of Higher Education, these universities enjoy some autonomy in making decisions for setting their own plans and programmes. Teaching staff members also enjoy some degree of autonomy in designing their courses. For example, they are free to select or design the materials they teach. However, they have to follow a predetermined set of criteria and academic grading for assessing students. Faculties of Arts and Education have English departments with four-year study programs. Reading is taught as a subject in these departments and the instructors use a variety of authentic and non-authentic materials. A research was carried out by E. M. Soliman (2013) to investigate the attitudes and beliefs of Benghazi (Gareuness) university EFL teachers regarding the use of authentic reading materials. These teachers were found to be positive about using these materials and emphasized the need for applying authentic texts along with coursebooks as a tool for developing students' communicative competence.

Review of Literature

This section focuses on the debate in the literature on using authentic reading materials in foreign language classrooms.

The Definition of Authentic Materials

There seems to be a lack of consensus about the definition of authenticity in the field of language education. Widdowson (1983, p. 30) believes that "authenticity is a term which creates confusion because of a basic ambiguity." Harmer (2001) described authentic texts as "materials which are designed for native speakers; they are real texts; designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language." Peacock (1997) defined authentic materials as materials that have been produced to fulfil some social purpose in the language community. Nunan (1999, p. 126) referred to authentic materials as "spoken or written language data that have been designed by native speakers for some real purpose of their own rather than using language produced and designed for the classroom." Gilmore (2007, p. 98) reported that this concept has been used to refer to the function of a task, the materials being used or the people taking part in the learning process, task or communicative act.

Examples of authentic materials are video clips, recordings of authentic interactions, songs, posters, TV commercials, extracts from television, radio and newspapers, tourist information brochures, signs, maps and charts, photographs and pictures, timetables and schedules (Peacock, 1997; Nunan, 1999). Sherman (2003) offers detailed explanation for how authentic videos can be used in the language classroom.

The successful use of these types of authentic materials depends on teachers' and learners' understanding of their role in the realization of authenticity. These roles were described by Van Lier (1996, p. 128) in the following manner: authenticity cannot be achieved through introducing authentic materials and tasks into classroom, rather, by considering it as a goal that teachers and students have to work towards, consciously and constantly. In other words, authenticity is the result of acts of authentication by students and their teacher.

Advantages of Authentic Materials

Using authentic language materials for language learning in the foreign language classroom has many advantages. According to Hyland (2003, p. 94) authenticity in a foreign language classroom will increase learner motivation and thus improve the learning results. In addition, Melvin and Stout (1987, p. 55) state that learners who work with authentic materials have an interest in the language because they know what it can enable them in the future. This can lower the degree of anxiety when learners face new situations in the target language (Moya, 2000). Nunan (1999, p. 27) suggested bringing the content and the subject matter to students' life and enabling them to make important connections between the classroom and the outside world. Authentic materials are considered by Peacock (1997, p. 45) as a bridge between the classroom and the real world. Exposing learners to real language which is rich in context and culture is another advantage of using authentic materials (Martinez, 2002, p. 67) and triggers the process of natural language acquisition (Hwang, 2005, p. 3). This opportunity cannot be provided through artificial texts in course-books as they are normally modified to meet the learner's current level (Tylor, 1994). Authentic materials provide language learners with models of target-like language use which can promote their ability for using the language in real life situations (Hyland, 2003, p. 94). Moreover, authentic books, articles, and newspapers contain a wide variety of text types and language styles which cannot be easily found in conventional teaching materials. This can encourage reading for pleasure especially if students are involved in selecting the authentic materials. Offering teachers the freedom to select samples of authentic materials to teach from can support a more creative approach to teaching (Peacock, 1997; Nunan, 1999; Gilmore, 2007).

Disadvantages of Authentic Materials

Using authentic materials in foreign contexts is not always a safe adventure. Therefore, careful consideration should be given to any possible challenges or drawbacks before introducing them into these contexts. For example, language used in the authentic texts can be too difficult for learners at lower levels. This may decrease their motivation and lead to poor learning. It is obvious that authenticating language lessons is a hard work for both teachers and students. Moreover, teachers may not be eager to use authentic materials as finding suitable selections and developing effective learning activities to meet the pedagogic purposes can be time-consuming. Creating the authentic tasks and activities for using the authentic materials in classrooms is more problematic (Van Lier, 1996, p. 126). Therefore, some teachers tend to ask students to apply specific tasks such as learning by heart with the authentic materials. Language learners' and teachers' different understandings of the term "authentic" is another issue for consideration. It is very likely that two language learners see the same task as either authentic or inauthentic. This can create confusion inside the language classroom around the materials and the tasks. Van Lier (1996, p. 128) points out that the teacher's own desire to make the learning more authentic might stimulate authenticity in the students as well. The vocabulary included in authentic texts may not be relevant to learners' immediate needs, which may decrease their interest in learning them (Hainess, 1995, p. 63) and the grammatical structures included in authentic texts can be too difficult and too demanding for the students (Peacock, 1997, p. 148). Moreover, the use of authentic recordings may involve the risk of exposing learners to different accents which can cause some confusion about pronunciation.

The Methodology

This study aimed to explore the attitudes of a hundred Libyan EFL university students' attitudes about using authentic materials in their reading classes. It was an attempt to answer the following research question: What are the attitudes of Libyan EFL university students about using authentic materials in their reading classes?

An attitudinal questionnaire was designed for collecting data for this purpose (see appendix). The questionnaire consists of 12 statements describing the advantages and disadvantages of using authentic materials for developing language learning. These statements were drawn from the literature (see 1, 3, and 4) and were written in a simple language. The participants were asked to

tick the option which matches their attitude from a scale including: strongly disagree, disagree, uncertain, agree, and strongly agree.

The sample of this study consists of a hundred Libyan EFL university students randomly selected from two English departments in two colleges of education in two universities (Tripoli University & Zawia University). They were mostly female (91%) with a similar social and cultural background. The data of this study were collected in April 2014. By this time, the researcher was lecturing in these two colleges and this helped in the process of contacting the participants. The hundred questionnaires were distributed by the researcher who offered some explanations to the participants and all the copies were returned complete.

Results

The results of this study are presented in Table 1. The figures represent the frequency in the participants' responses to each statement in the questionnaire. The responses to each item, that is, strongly disagree (SD), disagree (D), uncertain (U), agree (A), and strongly agree (SA), were calculated and presented in numbers. As the aim of the study is to find out the nature of the participants' responses (positive/negative), no variables were involved in this statistical analysis.

The responses (DA) and (D) were combined together and will be later referred to as negative attitudes whereas the responses (SA) and (A) were combined together referring to positive attitudes. The response (U) indicates the participant's uncertainty about the statement.

Table 1

Students' Responses to the Statements of the Questionnaire

No.	Statement	SD	D	U	A	SA
1.	Using authentic material develops learners' awareness of cultural aspects of the target language	0	0	2	32	66
2.	Using authentic materials enhances learners' motivation	34	27	8	18	13
3.	Using authentic materials increases the number of active vocabulary of the target language	4	5	12	37	42
4.	Using authentic materials is useful for developing aural language skills	0	2	18	48	32
5.	Using authentic materials develops listening comprehension skills	21	33	11	16	19

Table 1 continued

6.	Using authentic materials develops reading skills	14	38	7	31	10
7.	Using authentic materials develops writing proficiency	56	19	3	9	13
8.	The grammatical structures of authentic materials are complex for learners to cope with	4	12	22	28	34
9.	Using authentic materials develops learners' communication skills	9	22	17	22	30
10.	Authentic materials benefit students with advanced levels more than students with low levels	0	4	11	62	23
11.	Authentic materials are useful for developing target language pronunciation	23	19	8	22	28
12.	It is easy to find suitable authentic materials for different pedagogical purposes	24	56	8	6	6

Table 1 shows that the participants' attitudes towards the statements of the questionnaire vary considerably from one statement to another. The majority of the participants (98) were positive about the importance of using authentic materials for developing language learners' understanding of the aspects of target language culture. As many as 61 of the respondents were not positive about enhancing learners' motivation as a result of being exposed to authentic materials, whereas 31 were positive and eight students were not certain. The attitudes of 79 students were positive about using authentic materials for developing learners' active vocabulary of the target language. Nine participants did not agree on this statement and 12 of them were not certain. Eighty students believed that learners' aural skills can be developed through exposure to authentic materials, while eight of them were not certain about this notion and only two disagreed about it. Fifty-four students did not agree that using authentic materials develops learners' listening comprehension abilities, whereas 35 of them agreed. Only eight students were not sure about this notion. Fifty-two students did not think that using authentic materials develops reading skills, whereas 41 of them thought that they do. Seven of the participants were not certain about this idea. Seventy-five students believed that using authentic materials has no a significant impact on developing writing proficiency, whereas 22 of them believed it has. Only two students were undecided. Regarding the complexity of the grammatical structures used in authentic materials, 62 students agreed on this statement, whereas 16 of them think they are not difficult for learners to cope with. Surprisingly 22 students were not certain about their attitude towards this issue. The students hold different attitudes about the impact of using authentic materials on developing communication skills, as 52 of them agreed with this statement, whereas 31 others did not. Seventeen students were not sure about this issue. The majority of the students (85) believe that advanced

students can benefit more from authentic materials than those with low level command of English. Only four students did not agree with this idea and 11 of them were uncertain about it. Fifty students believe that target language pronunciation can be developed through exposure to authentic materials, whereas 42 did not believe so. Only eight students were undecided. As many as 80% of the students believe in the difficulty in finding suitable authentic materials for different pedagogical purposes, whereas 12 of them think it is easy to find proper materials for achieving different purposes. Only eight students were not sure about this issue.

Discussion

This study focuses on exploring the attitudes of 100 Libyan university students towards using authentic materials. Investigating learners' attitudes is a significant factor in developing language learning (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). The results indicated that the participants hold positive and negative attitudes according to their estimation of the advantages and disadvantages of using authentic materials for developing FL learning.

The confusion about the term "authenticity" makes it difficult to identify the attitudes of language learners about using authentic materials in FL classrooms. For example, is it only enough to expose learners to authentic texts to achieve authenticity or is it also important to present these materials in authentic tasks? Guariento and Morley (2001, p. 349) suggested that the learning tasks should also be authentic. Hyland (2003, p. 94) argues that it might be difficult to fulfill the original communicative purpose as materials are still used in a classroom environment. Nevertheless, the appropriate use of authentic materials is useful even within an inauthentic situation. This confusion makes the participants uncertain about many aspects of authentic materials and their usefulness for developing students' language proficiency. Their attitudes were positive for some advantages of using authentic materials, negative and uncertain about some others.

Using authentic materials develops language learner's awareness about cultural aspects of the target language. Sherman (2003, p. 12) explains that "authentic material is so important for language learning" that he considers it as "a window into culture." The language and style used in these materials offer the opportunity to understand how the language is used by its native speakers in terms of style, pronunciation, structures, and expressions. Therefore, language learners' understanding of target language culture should be enhanced through exposing them to authentic texts and materials. This exposure can promote

learners' awareness about using the target language in its real contexts which cannot be provided through simplified texts. It can also increase learners' active vocabulary of the target language and develop their listening language skills (Miller, 2005). Reading skills and listening comprehension abilities can be also improved by means of authentic materials (Maxiam, 2002; Otte, 2006).

The participants were not positive about the idea of introducing authentic materials for lower levels foreign language learners. They might think about the complexity of the structures and vocabulary used in these materials which make it hard for learners to cope with. They might also think about the native speaker's accent used for recorded materials which might not be easily understood by beginners. It may be more useful if lower levels learners are exposed to simplified materials with non-native teacher provided that he/she has a high level of language proficiency. Guariento and Morley (2001) recommended using authentic materials at the upper-intermediate level. However, Maxiam (2002) reported that their sample members were able to benefit from authentic texts irregardless of their level. Exposing lower level learners to authentic materials may result in decreasing their motivation due to the difficulty they may encounter in dealing with these study resources.

The majority of the students did not think that using authentic materials can result in developing their writing proficiency. However, such an exposure will have a positive impact on developing their writing skills and understanding of the different writing styles and registers. Morton (1999, p. 182) claimed that "students need to learn the register (through exposure to authentic reading texts) that is appropriate for their own essays. For this, there is no substitute for authentic academic texts which can develop students' ability to master basic rhetorical devices." Carter and Nunan (2001) emphasized the importance of authentic materials for raising learners' awareness of grammatical, lexical and, most importantly, stylistic features. Only by applying authentic materials, FL learners can learn more about how the target language is used for different genres and functions.

Although there is a widespread belief in the literature about the positive impact of using authentic materials on enhancing learners' motivation to learning (Krashen, 1982; Sherman, 2003; Gilmore, 2007), the majority of the participants were not positive about this issue. This could be attributed to their accountability for the difficulty they may encounter in dealing with study resources. Their failure to understand complex structures and expressions used in authentic texts may increase their anxiety and decrease their motivation and interest in these materials. It can be also attributed to their thinking of the target language culture as strange and biased. Unless teachers succeed in enhancing learners' motivation towards the target language, introducing authentic materials into foreign language classrooms may not be a successful practice.

Conclusion

Using authentic materials has a positive impact on developing language learning. It develops language learners' awareness of the cultural aspects of the target language. It enhances learners' motivation and develops their reading and comprehension skills. Unlike simplified language materials, authentic materials offer the opportunity for understanding how the target language is used by its native speakers in real life situations. This can prepare language learners for coping with similar situations and can reduce their anxiety for using the language in these situations communicatively.

As learners may develop negative attitudes towards the culture of the target language because they consider it strange, it is important to increase their awareness that learning this culture does not mean accepting it. It is also important to introduce authentic materials in small portions in order to account for the difficulty students may encounter in coping with them.

The participants of this study were generally positive about using authentic materials for language learning. Therefore, and despite the challenges and difficulties may be associated with using them in Libyan university English classes, it is recommended to be introduced into these classes as it can have a positive impact on developing students' language proficiency. It represents a valuable resource for language teachers in providing useful input for their students.

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**Die Einstellung der libyschen Studenten
zur Benutzung des authentischen Materials im Unterricht
in Erfassung des geschriebenen Textes**

Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Studie konzentriert sich auf die Einstellung der libyschen Studenten der englischen Philologie zur Anwendung des authentischen Materials im Unterricht. Quantitative Daten wurden mittels eines Mehrfachauswahlfragebogens gewonnen. Die meisten Befragten sind der Meinung, dass sich die Arbeit am authentischen Material auf die Entwicklung der Lesensfähigkeit in der Fremdsprache bei den diese Fremdsprache Lernenden positiv auswirkt und dass sie zur Erweiterung deren Kenntnisse in der Zielsprachekultur beiträgt. Diese Studenten betonten auch, es sei von Bedeutung, dass dieses Material in kleinen Mengen eingeführt und die Motivation und das Interesse am authentischen Material sowohl bei den Studierenden als auch bei den Lehrern verstärkt werden sollten.

Trotz aller Herausforderungen und Probleme, welche die Einführung des authentischen Materials im Fremdsprachenunterricht erschweren könnten, ist es ein wertvolles und nützliches Werkzeug für Lehrer, die ihre Studenten noch mehr motivieren und deren sprachliche Gewandtheit vervollkommen möchten.

Students' Responses to the Statements of the Questionnaire

No.	Statement	SD	D	U	A	SA
1.	Using authentic material develops learners' awareness of cultural aspects of the target language					
2.	Using authentic materials enhances learners' motivation					
3.	Using authentic materials increases the number of active vocabulary of the target language					
4.	Using authentic materials is useful for developing aural language skills					
5.	Using authentic materials develops listening comprehension skills					
6.	Using authentic materials develops reading skills					
7.	Using authentic materials develops writing proficiency					
8.	The grammatical structures of authentic materials are complex for learners to cope with					
9.	Using authentic materials develops learners' communication skills					
10.	Authentic materials benefit students with advanced levels more than students with low levels					
11.	Authentic materials are useful for developing target language pronunciation					
12.	It is easy to find suitable authentic materials for different pedagogical purposes					