

# Exploring the Effects of Authentic Materials on EFL Students' Reading Proficiency

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## Abstract

## Original Research Article

English is not only an indispensable language but also very useful tools for people's life. There are four skills of English learning: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and reading play an important role in English learning. In Taiwan, most teachers used academic materials such as textbook in EFL classroom. It could be difficult for students since textbook usually with many formal vocabulary words. Unlike academic materials, authentic materials are close to real life, and they make students understand easily. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to investigate whether authentic materials affect students' learning motivation, and improve EFL students' reading ability. The study applied quantitative and qualitative research method. The participants were 100 EFL students in the Department of Applied English in Taiwan. The result of this study indicated that authentic materials can improve EFL students' reading ability and intrinsic learning motivation. The implication of this study will provide the information for students to know which authentic materials can improve their English reading ability. Teachers can also use appropriate materials in EFL classroom to increase students learning motivation.

**Keywords:** English Learning, EFL Students, Reading Ability, Authentic Materials, Learning Motivation, Academic Materials, Taiwan, Language Skills, Applied English, Classroom Instruction.

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## INTRODUCTION

In Taiwan, most teachers used academic materials such as textbook in EFL classroom (Shi, 2009). Textbooks include many formal vocabulary words which make students feel difficult in reading comprehension and it is also practical to real life. Unlike academic materials, authentic materials can make learners to learn a language which apply in people's real life. Hadley (2001) mentioned that EFL learning program should make students apply their knowledge to addressed event of daily life. It is also much closer to people's daily life. Dunkel (1995) indicated that authentic materials could present the nature form of language (as cited from Hsu, 2006). It means that authentic materials are exposure to real language which used in its own place. Moreover, Stevick (1978) mentioned that people usually learn better, when they use the materials that are near to their lives, they usually learn better (as cite from Hsu, 2006).

Shi (2009) and Hsu (2006) indicated that elementary school students prefer to use authentic materials in reading and writing class. Their learning motivation was also increased. Most researches investigate the effect of authentic materials on elementary school students and high school students.

Relatively few studies focus on the EFL university. However, English is very important for EFL university students since they are going to graduate and find a new job or they could need English ability in their work. Using a good way to make them increase learning motivation and improve English reading ability is necessary. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate that whether authentic materials can improve EFL university students' learning motivation and reading ability.

## Research Questions

1. Do authentic materials improve students' English reading ability?

## Significant of the Study

The significant of the study was to provide information for students to understand which authentic materials are good for their English learning. Teachers can choose the appropriate authentic material in the EFL classroom, and make their teaching more interesting and easy to understand. It also can make the bookman of textbook adjust their content to catch

more attention from students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter contained five sections: Reading ability, reading difficulties, definition of authentic materials, learning motivation and international and domestic review relevant studies.

### Reading Ability

Reading ability will affect the result of learning. In He's (2008) study, reading is a process to search and construct meaning. C. D. Mercer and A. R. Mercer (2001) mentioned that reading can divide two parts, word recognition and comprehension. Word recognition contained seven parts, shape analysis, contextual analysis, sight words, phonological analysis, syllable analysis, structural analysis, and application of using dictionary. Moreover, reading comprehension includes five parts, vocabulary development, context understanding, understanding of evaluate or critical, appreciation of the understanding, and ratiocination of understanding. Lerner (2003) indicated that word recognition is the base of reading, but people not good at reading comprehension by word identification.

Richards and Schmidt (2002) indicated that reading comprehension is the process to understand the contents (as cited from Lin, 2009). According to Zhu's (2011) study, the helpful strategies and materials can make learners get idea of the context, and then they could understand what they read. So reading comprehension is not only to search the meaning but also to realize what strategies are applied. Reading with different strategies could lead different influence of reading comprehension. Students can enhance their reading comprehension. Hirsch (2003) asserted that there are three indispensable elements of reading comprehension: fluency, breadth of vocabulary, and domain knowledge (as cited from Lin, 2009).

Law and Eckes (2000) indicated that even though students were good at oral and listening skills, they could not be the best since they lack of reading comprehension to enlarge their background knowledge. In addition, if readers understand each word, they would not really understand the meaning of the text. Readers should not only learn to reading but also read to learning (as cited from Chen, 2008).

### Reading Difficulties

Different people could have different reading difficulties. Barbara, Jack, and David (2002) mentioned that most students have difficulties of word recognition and reading comprehension. According to Chen's study (2010), poor readers have some characteristics. They have difficulties to understand the meaning and sentence structure and they misuse prior knowledge to read the text. As for good reader, they are good at understanding the meaning of word and structure of complicated sentence. They also use prior knowledge to understand the text. Barbara, Jack, and David (2002) indicated that people who had difficulties with the

word recognition and reading comprehension. They could have problems with the vocabulary, sentence structure, and meaning. Hwan (2005) mentioned that some non-authentic materials like novels and poems have highly stylistic writings to make special aesthetic effects. Sometimes, it would make students have difficulties in reading it.

Reading difficulties are the type of learning disabilities. Wolf and Bowes (2000) project the Double-Dfict Hypothesis, which reading disabilities can be divided rapid automatized naming speed, phonological awareness, and mixed. Rapid automatized naming speed means that when people saw an object, they will recall many memories of they had learned, and speak the name of this subject.

In physiology, Berkhan (1881) indicated that reading difficulties is the type of reading disability which named dyslexia. It means that people have difficulties with phonological awareness, phonological decoding, orthographic coding, and auditory short-term memory.

### Definition of Authentic Materials

Unlike academic materials, authentic materials can make learners to learn a language which used in people's life. It is much closer to people's daily life. Authentic materials are variety, such as newspaper, magazine, picture reader, films, song, and so on. The definitions of authentic materials were materials which designed for English native speaker (Hwang, 2005; Martinez, 2002; Harmer, 1991, as cite from Su, 2007). Authentic materials are exposure to real language which used in its own place. Dunkel (1995) said that authentic materials are the materials which can present natural language with naturally occurring coherence and cohesion (as cited from Hsu, 2006). Harmer (1991) gave the definition to authentic materials, using the real text as material and the text is designed for the speaker of language (as cited in the Internet TESL Journal, 2004).

The purpose of authentic materials is not for language teaching (Nunan, 1989; Kessler, 1997; Rogers, 1988; Young, 1993; as cited form Su, 2007). Authentic materials had communicate and social purpose. It gave direct evidence of language learning for students, and it focus on communication. Stevick(1978) said that when people use the materials that is near to their lives, they usually learn better. According to Herron and Seay (1991), authentic materials not only can improve students' learning but also make students interest in learning (as cited from Hsu, 2006). In Hsu's (2006) study, using authentic materials can make the positive atmosphere that students' background knowledge and language ability could be improved. Kilickaya (2004) indicated that using authentic materials has many advantages. On learning motivation, authentic materials have a positive effect. They presented the real cultural information and real language. They are also closer to learners' needs, and make the teaching more creative (Philips & Shettlesworth 1978; Clarke 1989; Peacock 1997, as cited in Richards, 2001). According to Garret's (1991) study, language teachers choose authentic materials could support their teaching based on learners' needs, and also let L2 readers gain more reading expertise (as cited from Bell, 2005). Shi (2009) declared that

using some authentic materials in the class can increase learning motivation because students are very interested in using authentic materials to learn English. And it also improved reading ability of children.

## METHODOLOGY

Mixed-method research approach was applied in this study. This questionnaire of this study aimed to investigate the effect of authentic materials on EFL students' reading ability and learning motivation. In addition, the interview question was to investigate the EFL students' perspective toward using authentic materials.

### Populations

The participants were 100 EFL students who were from the Department of Applied English in a private university which located in southern Taiwan. The subjects of this study were 50 freshmen and 50 sophomores. The interviewees were 15 students. They were chosen from those 100 participants.

#### Instruments

The questionnaires included 33 questions, and it divided in three parts. The first part was 8 questions which about the personal information of participants. The second part has 13 questions that it is the perspective of authentic materials and

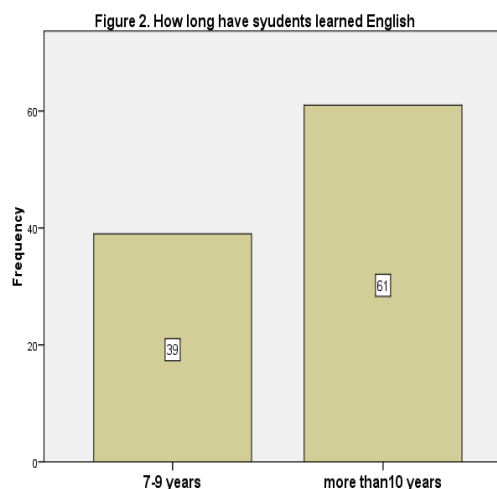
the effect of authentic materials on reading ability. The 5-points Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strong agree) would apply in this questionnaire.

First, the researcher made an appointment with class teachers. Second, the researcher distributed the questionnaire by herself. Before distributing the questionnaire, the researcher would explain the content and significant of this questionnaire, what authentic materials are, and asked volunteers for the interview. Then, the participants needed to spend 10 minutes to finish the questionnaire. The participants of this study were 50 freshmen and 50 sophomores.

## RESULT

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether authentic materials will improve EFL students' reading ability. Originally, the researcher distributed 65 questionnaires to freshman and 65 questionnaires to sophomores. However, only 50 questionnaires of freshman and 50 questionnaires of sophomore are valid, and 30 are unvalid. The returning rate is about 76%.

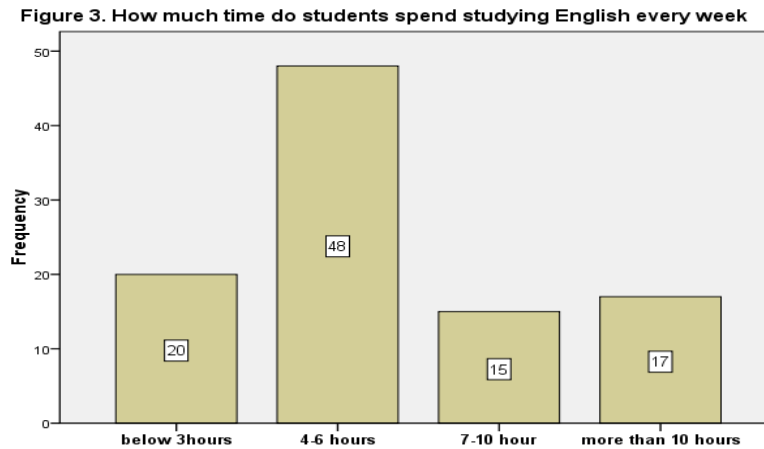
The first part of this questionnaire is about individual background information. In this research, there are 33 male students and 67 female students (see Figure 1).



There are 39% students had learned English for 7 to 9 years, and 61% students had learned English more than 10 years. It indicated that most of the participants had learned English more than 10 years. In other words, they start learning English about age 9 or even before 9 (see Figure 2).

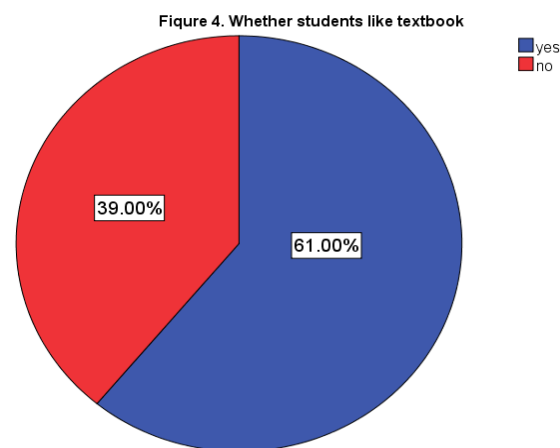
The Figure 3 shown that how much time do students spend

studying English every week. There were 20% students spend below three hours studying English every week, 48% students spent 4 to 7 hours, 15% students spent 8 to 10 hours, and 17% students spent more than 10 hours. Most students spend 4 to 6 hours studying English every week, almost one hour a day.



There were 61% students like textbook which used in the class, and 39% students do not like (see Figure 4). From the

data, it indicated that most of students like textbook, but still 39% students dislike textbook.



Next, there were 35% students read English newspaper once a week, 21% students twice a week, and 3% students more than three times, and 41% students do not read English newspaper in daily life. It indicated that over half of participants had the habit of reading English newspaper (see Figure 5). Then, there were 28% students read English

magazine once a week, 13% students twice a week, and 12% students more than three times, and 47% students do not read English magazine in daily life (see Figure 6). According to Figure 5 and Figure 6, and compare those two authentic materials, it can find that students like English newspaper better than English magazine.

Figure 5. How often do students read English newspaper in daily life

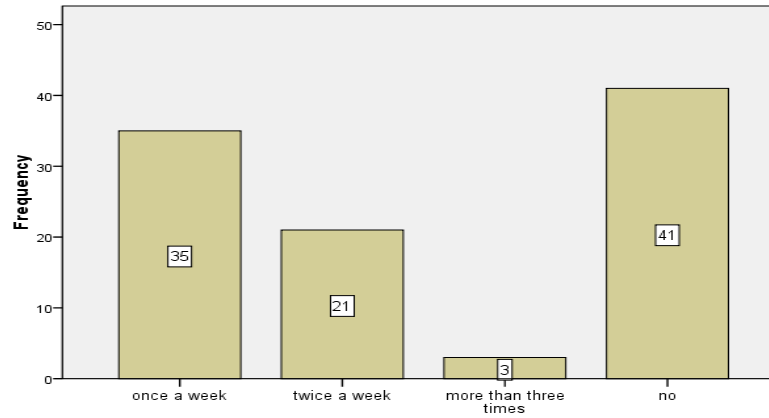
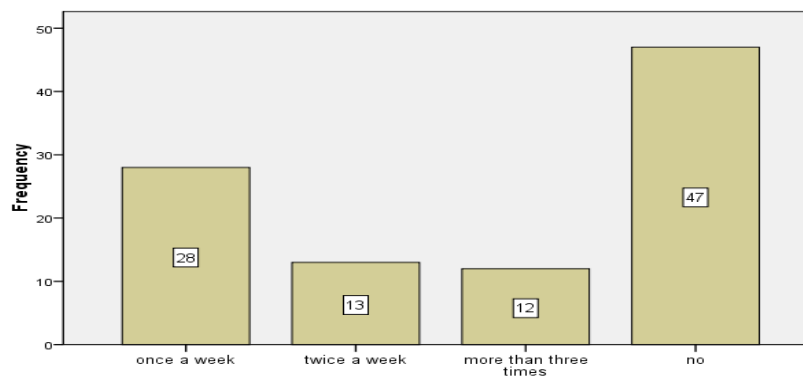


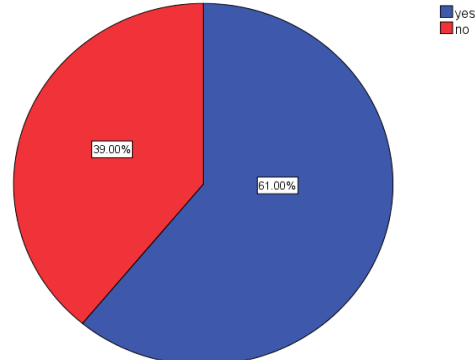
Figure 6. How often do students read English magazine in daily life



At the last question of this part, the Figure 7 shown that over half of the participants, about 61% students had used

other reading materials to learn English.

Figure 7. Do students use other reading materials to learn English



*Hypothesis 1: Authentic materials can improve students' English reading ability.*

In item 2 ( $M=4.21$ ,  $SD=.80$ ), there are 85% students though that using authentic materials make English class more interesting. In item 4 ( $M=3.25$ ,  $SD=.96$ ), item 5 ( $M=3.14$ ,  $SD=1.05$ ), and item 6 ( $M=3.17$ ,  $SD=.87$ ), it implicated that the

sentence structure, vocabulary, and grammar in authentic materials would be difficult than academic materials. However, in item 3 ( $M=4.04$ ,  $SD=.79$ ), there are 78% students though that using authentic materials make English learning

easier.

In item 10 ( $M=4.14$ ,  $SD=.80$ ), there were 85% students agree with that authentic materials can improve their English reading ability because of the content. If adding authentic materials in the class, it can enhance what students acquire in the class. In item 8 ( $M=4.15$ ,  $SD=.77$ ), there are 83% agree and strongly agree with that adding authentic materials can enhance what they learn in the class. In addition, in item 7 ( $M=4.17$ ,  $SD=.89$ ), there are 81% of students agree with that authentic materials can make them to learn something that cannot acquire during the class. In item 9 ( $M=4.32$ ,  $SD=.75$ ),

over half of the students though that can learn new word from authentic materials, 90% students agree with that.

Finally, in item 1 ( $M=4.03$ ,  $SD=.83$ ), it indicated that 88% agree with that using authentic materials in the class is appropriate. Moreover, in item 12 ( $M=4.20$ ,  $SD=.85$ ), there are 82% students prefer to authentic materials than academic materials. In item 13 ( $M=4.26$ ,  $SD=.74$ ), there are 84% students, over the half of the students will use authentic materials to improve their English learning. According to those items, it indicated that authentic materials can improve students' reading ability.

Table 1: The third part of questionnaire-authentic materials and reading ability

Survey Items	Result						
	SD 1	D 2	N 3	A 4	SA 5	mean	Std. Deviation
1. authentic materials- appropriate.	1%	3%	18%	48%	30%	4.03	.83
2. authentic materials- class more interesting.	1%	2%	12%	45%	40%	4.21	.80
3. authentic materials- English learning easier.	1%	1%	20%	49%	29%	4.04	.79
4. authentic materials- sentence structure easier.	1%	21%	43%	22%	13%	3.25	.96
5. authentic materials - vocabulary easier.	4%	25%	36%	23%	12%	3.14	1.05
6. authentic materials- grammar easier.	2%	21%	39%	34%	4%	3.17	.87
7. authentic materials- learned what I cannot acquire during the class.	0%	7%	12%	38%	43%	4.17	.89
8. authentic materials- enhance what I learn	1%	1%	15%	49%	34%	4.14	.77
9. authentic materials- learned some new English words	1%	1%	8%	45%	45%	4.32	.75
10. authentic materials content improved English ability.	1%	3%	11%	51%	34%	4.14	.80
11. authentic materials- use real life English.	1%	0%	9%	42%	48%	4.36	.73
12. prefer to authentic materials than academic materials.	2%	0%	16%	40%	42%	4.20	.85
13. use authentic materials to improve English learning.	0%	1%	15%	41%	43%	4.26	.74
Total Mean: 3.95							
Code: Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neutral (N), Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA),							

For the qualitative part, according to the data of interview, most students dislike the textbook due to the content was too boring and not very useful in daily life. They could have problems of vocabulary parts because some vocabularies were too difficult to them. For example, the participant#14 said that "Some content were too boring such as...how to give a good speech, linguistic, and literature...that would make me fall asleep easily". However, there are over half of interviewees think their reading ability was improved after them using authentic materials. The obvious part of their

improvement is their vocabulary size was increased because authentic materials can provide many useful words, and then they can apply them to daily life. For example, the participant #9 said that "I think my vocabulary size was improved because I can learn a lot of vocabularies from that. (Thinking) Hmm...I think it also makes me understand the meaning of article easily and read the article quickly, so my reading comprehension ability was also improved". In addition, all over the interviewees think that using authentic materials was appropriate.



## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether authentic materials affect EFL students reading ability.

First, authentic materials can improve students' reading ability. According to the data of result, students think that using authentic materials can give students chances to learn the real life English, acquire some new English words, and enhance what they learn in the class. Most students prefer to the authentic materials because the content of authentic materials were very interesting, closer to daily life, and easy to understand. When they face to the difficulties of the interesting materials, they will try to find the answer voluntary. The answer which they had found will be impressing to them. And then, students reading ability was improved. This result fits to Stevick's (1978) study, which mentioned that when people use the materials which were near to their lives, they usually learn better (as cited from Hsu, 2006).

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