Beyond the Textbook: The Role of Authentic Materials in Vocabulary Development in ELT

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Abstract

This article examines the use of authentic materials as a means to enhance vocabulary learning in English Language Teaching (ELT). Materials that are not specifically designed for teaching a language but can still be used for teaching, as they are based on real-life situations and provide more practical experience, are called authentic materials. Examples include newspapers, advertisements, films, TV shows and magazines. The article emphasises the benefits of using authentic materials to teach vocabulary, including the provision of rich and varied language input and the promotion of engagement and motivation. It also discusses some challenges that may arise when using authentic materials, such as the need for careful selection and adaptation of materials to suit learners' needs and interests. Additionally, the article offers some practical suggestions and techniques for incorporating authentic materials into vocabulary teaching and learning, including pre-teaching activities, post-reading comprehension activities and task-based activities. The article concludes by arguing that the use of authentic materials in vocabulary teaching can contribute to more effective and enjoyable learning experiences for English language learners.

Keywords

Authentic materials, vocabulary acquisition, language proficiency, real-life contexts, learner engagement, multimedia resources

Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) has become a vital component of

education, due to the fact that English has emerged as the primary international language of communication. Learning a new language can be a daunting task for many students, especially when it comes to vocabulary acquisition. According to the Education First (EF) English Proficiency Index (EPI) 2025, India ranks 74th out of 123 countries surveyed, indicating a 'low proficiency' level (EF English Proficiency Index, 2025, p. 9). The learners ranging between 18-20 years fall under the low proficiency level compared to other age groups which have moderate proficiency level (EF English Proficiency Index, 2025, p. 13).

While low proficiency may be influenced by multiple factors, limited vocabulary knowledge can be considered as one of the contributing factors. Therefore, strengthening vocabulary learning may help improve overall English language proficiency in the Indian context. Safarovich (2022) notes: "Vocabulary of a language is just like bricks of a high building. Despite quite small pieces, they are vital to the great structure" (ibid., p. 236). Sarifa (2013) defines vocabulary as the understanding of words and their definitions while Safarovich (2022) such as, Using demonstrations and showing pictures, teaching words in the context, reading the word and etc.","container-title":"Zenodo","DOI":"10.5281/zenodo.6964243","journalAbbreviation":"Talqin va tadqiqotlar","language":"en","page":"pp. 236-238","title":"Teaching English Vocabulary Effectively and Efficiently","author":[{"family":"Safarovich","given":"Berdiyev Nurali"}],"issued":{"date-parts":[["2022",7,25]]}}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"} states that an expansive vocabulary is essential for conveying ideas effectively and for proficiently using both receptive (listening and reading) and productive (speaking and writing) language skills.

In a traditional approach to vocabulary learning, learners may be given a list of words to memorise and then be tested on their ability to recall the definitions of those words. They may also be asked to complete vocabulary exercises that involve matching words with definitions or filling in the blanks with the correct words. This approach to vocabulary learning has some limitations. It can be boring and tedious, and learners may struggle to retain the words they have memorized if they do not understand how the words are used in context. Moreover, traditional methods do not necessarily provide learners with exposure to authentic language or opportunities to practise using the words in

meaningful ways. It is important to change with the changing times and by incorporating more communicative and context-based approaches to vocabulary learning, such as using authentic materials or engaging in communicative activities, will actually help learners to acquire new words in a more meaningful and effective way.

Sadam (2020) notes that authentic materials have been integral to language teaching, gaining prominence with the advent of the communicative language teaching approach in the 1970s. Marpaung and Situmeang (2020) mentions that authentic materials refer to real-life items or situations relevant to students' lives, which teachers incorporate into the classroom. So, the utilisation of authentic materials in English language learning enables students to develop familiarity with the target language, particularly in terms of expanding their vocabulary. For the theoretical framework, constructivism and task-based language teaching (TBLT) are taken into consideration

This paper aims to examine the use of authentic materials as a means to enhance vocabulary learning in English Language Teaching (ELT). It argues for the benefits of using authentic materials followed by techniques for incorporating authentic materials into vocabulary teaching. It also discusses strategies to deal with challenges that may arise when using authentic materials. This article also discusses case studies which have reported significant changes among the students after using authentic materials. The article concludes by mentioning that authentic material can contribute to more effective learning experiences for English language learners.

Theoretical Background

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) was first developed in the 1980s by N. S. Prabhu. TBLT is an approach that focuses on the use of meaningful and authentic language tasks to promote language learning. It is based on the idea that language learning occurs most effectively when learners are engaged in tasks that require them to use the language in a purposeful way. The tasks are designed to be *authentic*: meaning that they resemble real-world language use situations (Rodríguez-Bonces & Rodríguez-Bonces, 2010). One way that TBLT can be applied to vocabulary learning via authentic materials is through the use of *task cycles*. A task cycle involves a series of interconnected tasks that are designed to promote language learning. A TBLT task could

involve students using an editorial column from a newspaper (authentic material) to prepare arguments and hold a class debate on the topic.

Constructivism is a learning theory that emphasises the active role of the learner in the learning process. Jean Piaget is considered the father of the constructivist view of learning. It is based on the idea that learners construct knowledge through their experiences and interactions with the environment (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). In language teaching, a constructivist approach emphasises the importance of providing learners with authentic and meaningful language tasks that allow them to engage with the language in a way that is relevant to their own interests and experiences. In the context of vocabulary learning via authentic materials, constructivism emphasises the importance of learners engaging with the materials and actively constructing meaning from them. This perspective suggests that learners should not simply be given lists of vocabulary words to memorise, but should be engaged in activities that require them to use the words in context and make connections between the words, their own experiences and knowledge.

Gebhard (2006) identified authentic materials spanning various forms of media as enriching language learning across different skills. For instance, listening-viewing materials (such as TV commercials, cartoons, and documentaries) aid in developing listening proficiency, pronunciation, and cultural understanding); visual materials (including slides, paintings, and magazine pictures) ignite learners' imagination and curiosity; print materials (like newspaper articles, menus, and brochures) enhance reading skills and vocabulary acquisition. Each category offers unique opportunities for engagement and skill development in the language learning process.

Literature Review: Advantages of Using Authentic Materials

Authentic materials offer significant advantages in language learning because these are drawn from real life, such as TV advertisements, newspapers, or online media helping learners improve all the skills be it listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Yadav (2021) writes that when selecting authentic materials for language learning, eight factors should be considered: relevance, interest, cultural appropriateness, practicality, cognitive demands, language level, quality, and versatility. To ensure effective use, the materials should be suitable

for learners' needs, adaptable for various classroom activities and at an appropriate language level. By carefully considering these factors, teachers can choose authentic materials that are beneficial for language acquisition. Incorporating authentic materials into lessons motivates and captivates students, making the language learning experience engaging and compelling (Sadam, 2020). Their relevance makes lessons more memorable while also helping to simplify complex ideas.

Authentic materials help to boost confidence among the students in classroom participation and also improves their academic performance. Ahmed (2017) states that students can easily connect with familiar materials, express themselves confidently and expand their vocabulary through detailed explanations. Teachers may not need to provide additional context for students to understand and accept the materials.

The use of authentic materials enhances critical thinking abilities in learners, as they are required to analyse and interpret the language and culture presented within the materials. Every class has both slow learners and fast learners and authentic materials are more beneficial for slow learners as they help them understand concepts in a better manner.

Srinivas Rao (2019) states that authentic materials act as "mediating artifact for contextualising English Language Learning" (p. 3). They offer a broad range of text genres and language styles that are not typically available in traditional teaching materials. Further, authentic materials are easily accessible for all (Azri & Al-Rashdi, 2014). Successfully understanding and using authentic materials can give learners a sense of achievement and accomplishment. As such, authentic materials can inspire learners to be creative with the language and to develop their own style of expression.

Research findings reinforce these benefits. Gilmore (2019) notes that even texts not originally designed for teaching can be pedagogically useful if they provide opportunities for engagement. Ghanbari, Esmaili, Shamsaddini (2015) in their research on the Effect of Using Authentic Materials on Iranian EFL Learners' Vocabulary Learning observed a significant change in the experimental group compared to control group. A quasi-experimental design was used in the study. The experimental group was taught using *New Straits Times* (an online newspaper), while the control group was taught vocabulary through a textbook. A pre-test was conducted for both groups to assess their initial vocabulary

knowledge, followed by a post-test after the intervention. Independent-samples t-tests and paired-samples t-tests were used to compare the pre-test and post-test scores both between and within the groups. The statistical analysis revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the post-test. The mean score of the experimental group was 17.58, whereas the control group had a mean score of 16.33, indicating a statistically significant difference between the two groups.

Rahul (2018) in his descriptive and analytical study of the role of newspapers in learning English language among countries like India and Libya concluded that newspapers can help students learn new words through crossword puzzles and games. Most of the students suggested that newspapers should be used as a classroom material as it is an excellent tool.

Fathiyousefabad and Farnoudkia's (2020) study proved that to enhance English language acquisition, incorporating advertisements into the classroom can be beneficial. This approach can teach students that language learning is about more than just knowing the text; it also requires understanding its context and being able to respond appropriately. The study employed a quasi-experimental design to examine the effects of TV advertisements on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension. Paired t-tests and two-sample t-tests were used for analysis. The experimental group showed significant improvement in vocabulary, with mean scores increasing from 80.39 (pre-test) to 85.26 (post-test), while the control group showed minimal change (80.09 to 80.43). Similarly, in listening comprehension, the experimental group improved from 71.61 to 76.70, whereas the control group showed minimal progress (73.96 to 74.78). This confirmed that improvements in the experimental group were statistically significant, while those in the control group were not. No significant gender differences were found in either vocabulary or listening gains. The statistical analysis showed that the learners' performance significantly improved in both areas as a result of exposure to the TV ads.

Techniques for Incorporating Authentic Material to Teach Vocabulary

Pre-teaching Vocabulary: Pre-teaching vocabulary is a strategy used to introduce and teach new words or phrases to language learners before they engage in a reading or listening activity. Pre-teaching vocabulary can be done through a variety of activities: Sarifa (2013) suggested

various activities that can be used to help learners learn new words, such as flashcards, word puzzles, reading comprehension activities, solving word riddles etc. The activities depend on the level and needs of the learners. The key is to make the vocabulary introduction engaging and meaningful so that learners can connect the new words with their prior knowledge and experience.

Post-Teaching Vocabulary: Learners can be provided with activities that encourage them to reflect on the text, such as discussion questions, summarising or writing a response. Post-teaching vocabulary activities are thus designed to help learners consolidate and deepen their understanding of the new words or phrases they have been introduced to in a reading or listening activity.

Task-based Activities: Design activities that require learners to use the language they have acquired to complete a task such as role-plays, vocabulary games, problem-solving activities, or presentations. This can help learners develop their language skills and improve their ability to communicate effectively in real-life situations.

Use of Technology and Multimedia Resources: Use audio, video and interactive materials to provide learners with a variety of input and opportunities to practise language skills in context. Marpaung and Situmeang (2020) showed that multimedia tools like PowerPoint aid in faster vocabulary learning, longer retention and deeper comprehension for students.

Scaffold the Tasks and Activities: Provide support and guidance to help learners engage with the materials effectively, breaking down complex tasks into manageable steps and providing feedback and correction. Berardo (2006) comments that pedagogical support provided by the teacher enhances students' confidence and comfort in working with authentic materials.

Encouraging Learners to Use Language in Context: Safarovich (2022) noted that vocabulary should be taught in a contextual manner as learning words in isolation is often ineffective. To fully comprehend the meaning of a word or phrase, students must also understand the linguistic setting in which it is used. Creating a compelling, believable and relevant context is crucial for effective vocabulary instruction as it not only captures learners' attention but also naturally produces the target vocabulary. Tests are often crafted for ease of administration

or grading rather than prioritising the skills essential for students' future endeavours (Gilmore, 2019). It is very important for the teacher to differentiate tasks and material according to the need and level of learners, providing additional support as necessary.

Classroom Activity: Vocabulary Using TED Talks/Podcasts: The teacher can have students watch a short TED Talk. Learners can identify unfamiliar words or phrases, guess meanings from context in pairs or small groups and then share their interpretations with the class. Finally, students use the new vocabulary to write a short summary or answer comprehension questions related to the talk. This activity reinforces vocabulary learning while also improving listening, comprehension, and contextual understanding.

Strategies to Deal with Challenges that May Arise When Using Authentic Materials

Level of Difficulty: One challenge in using authentic materials is that they may be too difficult for some learners to understand. Albiladi (2018) delves into the utilisation of written authentic materials in ESL reading classes, exploring both the advantages and obstacles associated with their implementation. He highlighted that the key challenge reported by participants was text difficulty. Many participants expressed that some articles surpassed their proficiency levels, indicating a need for materials tailored to learners' abilities. This was on account of the lack of vocabulary of learners. To overcome this challenge, teachers can provide scaffolding, such as pre-teaching vocabulary, summarising the content. They can also choose materials that are more accessible or modify them to make them more comprehensible.

Availability and Adaptation: Another challenge is that finding and adapting authentic materials can be time-consuming and require expertise. To overcome this challenge, teachers can collaborate with other educators or use online resources to find and adapt materials. They can also create their own materials or use materials that have already been adapted for language learners. For example, when teaching language through advertisement taglines to students from rural or vernacular backgrounds, the teacher can first ask them to translate the tagline into L1 and then guide them to reframe it in English.

Relevance and Interest: Some learners may find authentic materials

irrelevant or uninteresting which can lead to disengagement. To overcome this challenge, teachers can choose materials that are relevant to learners' interests or needs. They can also involve learners in the selection process or provide opportunities for learners to bring in their own materials.

Assessment: Finally, assessing learners' performance with authentic materials can be challenging as there are often multiple ways to interpret and respond to them. To overcome this challenge, teachers can provide clear criteria for assessment and offer multiple assessment options, such as written responses, oral presentations or multimedia projects.

Overall, using authentic materials can provide many benefits for language learners but it also requires careful planning and adaptation. By addressing the challenges of difficulty, availability and adaptation, relevance and interest, and assessment, teachers can create a more engaging and effective learning experience for their students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the use of authentic materials for vocabulary learning in English language teaching can provide a range of benefits for learners. By exposing learners to rich, meaningful contexts for language learning, teachers can help them to develop their vocabulary knowledge and skills in ways that align with the principles of constructivism and task-based language teaching. However, teachers must also be mindful of the potential challenges associated with the use of authentic materials, such as the need for appropriate scaffolding and pre-teaching of vocabulary. By carefully planning and implementing activities that use authentic materials, teachers can provide learners with engaging and effective opportunities to develop their vocabulary in English.

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