Using Authentic Materials in Teaching Reading Comprehension to EFL Learners

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Abstract   The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of authentic-based and non-authentic-based materials on improving reading comprehension of the Iranian intermediate EFL learners. To perform this study, 50 Iranian EFL learners studying English in Pooya Language Institute in Abadan were selected. They took part in a proficiency test (OPT) and 24 of them were randomly assigned into two homogeneous groups. Then, both groups were given a pre-test before the treatments to determine how well the subjects in reading comprehension. During a 12-session course, both groups were taught 12 passages selected by the researcher. The authentic group under treatment received authentic-based reading passages while the non-authentic group received non-authentic-based reading passages. Having finished the treatments, the learners in the both groups were given the post-test. Independent Samples *t*-test were used to compare the means of the pre-test and the post-test in both groups. The findings revealed that reading comprehension performance of both groups improved. Moreover, Independent Samples t-test showed that there was a significant difference between the two groups concerning reading comprehension.

Keywords   Authentic-Based Materials, Non-Authentic-Based Materials, Reading Comprehension

1. Introduction

In Iranian educational system, the EFL learners' reading achievements are poor. The learners have many problems in understanding the meaning some words in the text that they do not understand the meaning of the text. For that reason, they become demotivated to read an English text. According to the problem, the study is going to focus on the importance of authentic materials on the Iranian EFL learners' reading achievements. Over the past three decades, authentic-based materials were used in EFL classes as a result of the spread of the communicative approach (Mousavi, 2010).

Martinez (2002) defines authentic-based materials as the materials which are prepared for native speakers and not designed to be used for teaching purposes. Nuttall (1996) commented that authentic-based materials can be motivating because they are proof that the language is used for real-life purpose by real people. The difference is not in the language materials themselves but rather on their outcomes and their effectiveness. In this regard, "it has been traditionally supposed that the language presented to learners should be simplified in   some way for easy access

and acquisition, nowadays there are recommendations that the language presented should be authentic" (Widdowson, 1990, p. 67). In contrast, Miller (2003) state that non-authentic materials are those materials that are specially designed for learning purpose and the language used in them is artificial with well-formed sentence all the time which is useful for teaching grammar. Course book, textbook, and student work sheets are good instances of non-authentic materials.

Many studies (e.g., Marzban & Davaji, 2015) have focused on the authentic-based materials and their effects on different parts of English language which some of them are mentioned in the next section but to the best researcher's knowledge, no research studies have been worked on the comparison of authentic-based materials and non-authentic-based materials on reading comprehension. To fill the gap, the present study was going to explore the effect of authentic-based materials versus non-authentic-based materials on the Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension performance.

Reading skill may be significant in our country where English is taught as a foreign language because Iranian students need this skill to continue in their academic education. This important skill can be improved by the use of authentic-based and non-authentic-based materials but it is not clear which one of the materials will be more effective in developing reading comprehension. For that reason, the present study tried to reveal the effectiveness of

authentic materials in comparison of non-authentic materials in improving the Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension performance (Nuttall, 1996).

Most of reading materials in Iranian educational system are non-authentic-based materials which are designed for educational purposes (e.g., English course books for secondary schools and high schools). Possibly, it may prevent most of the EFL learners to be able to use the language communicatively (Mousavi, 2010). In order to overcome the problem, the researcher tried to disclose the advantages of authentic-based materials in improving the EFL learners to use language communicatively. EFL Learners often have difficulties learning English without appropriate learning materials. In practice, reading texts are designed either too difficult or too easy for the learners. Without appropriate reading texts that suit the learners, language learners cannot improve their performance in reading skill (Nuttall, 1998). Appropriate reading texts refer to those reading texts which are compatible with students' language proficiency.

This study would be beneficial to English teachers in Iranian educational context, especially private schools, who want to do some other ways to improve students' reading comprehension perform. For example, they can use authentic-based reading passages to enhance their learners' reading ability. In addition, the present study may be helpful to teachers to become aware of the effectiveness of authentic-based materials in comparison with those materials which are designed and compiled for educational purposes in improving of the learners' language proficiency in general and reading comprehension in particular.

Moreover, this study may be favorable to syllabus designers and materials developers to make use of the findings of the present study to prepare authentic-based reading materials to help the EFL learners' reading comprehension. They can use the original materials and select appropriate ones in designing reading comprehension passages for the learners. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of authentic-based materials in comparison with non-authentic-based materials on the Iranians intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension performance.

2. Background

Reading is one of the most critical skills in second language learning. According to Nuttall (1998), reading has been described as the most studied and the least understood process in education. As Nunan (2001) claims, this is due to several reasons, including the influence of comprehension-based approaches to the development of language, the role of applied linguists, and the development of computer-based language corpora. Developing reading comprehension ability is an important aspect in acquisition of a language. Thus, reading is important in several ways. Primarily, reading is a tool of learning (Koda, 2005).

Furthermore, reading refines the readers' thinking development which depends on language. And finally, reading develops creativity. The knowledge that people acquire through reading retains in the brain becomes the basis of their creative action (Grellet, 1996).

The role of reading comprehension ability has long been neglected, but currently, it is again receiving attention in the language teaching curriculum. Reading has been the focus of varied and versatile research, e.g., the acquisition of vocabulary in terms of frequency and saliency reading processes, strategies, the nature of reading difficulties and abilities in second language learning (Alderson, 1984), the role of metacognitive awareness in second language reading or the way in which learners organize their learning (Carrell, 1989), and the role of L1 as compared to L2 in reading at different proficiency levels (Carrell, 1991). This skill is generally considered to be of a highly individual nature; that is, no two readers approach or process a written text in exactly the same way. Nevertheless, there are general factors that have an impact on reading comprehension. Much work has been done to increase our understanding of the influences of factors such as strategy choices and background knowledge on second language reading comprehension (Grabe & Stoller, 2002).

Skimming is defined as to look at a text or a chapter quickly in order to get a general opinion on the contents. It requires a greater degree of reading and word recognition skills as it includes a more thorough understanding of the text (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). It is the specific speed-reading technique, which enables you to cover a vast amount of material very quickly. It is one of the tools you can use to read more in less time. It refers to looking only for the general or main ideas, and works best with non-fiction material. Nuttall (1996) has defined skimming as glancing rapidly through a text to determine its gist, for instance in order to decide whether a research paper is relevant to our own work or to keep ourselves superficially informed about matter that are not of great importance to us. With skimming, your overall understanding is reduced because you do not read everything. You read only what is important to your purpose. Skimming takes place while reading and allows you to look for details in addition to the main ideas. Many people think that skimming is a random process placing the eyes where ever they fall. However, to skim efficiently, there has to be a structure but you do not read everything.

Scanning is another beneficial tool for speeding up your reading. Unlike skimming, when scanning, you look only for a specific fact or piece of information without reading everything. According to Nuttall (1996), scanning is glancing rapidly through a text either to search for a specific piece of information (e.g. a name, a date) or to get an initial impression of whether the text is suitable for given purpose.

2.1. Authentic Materials

Nunan (1988) defines authentic materials as the materials

which have been produced for purposes other than to teach language. Jordan (1997) defines authentic texts as the ones which are not designed for pedagogical aims. Wallace (1998) defines authentic texts as "real-life texts, not written for pedagogic processes" (p. 145). Jacobson, Degener, and Purcell-Gates (2003) sees authentic materials as printed materials, which are used in classrooms in the same way they would be used in real life. Stubbs (1996) defines authentic texts as actual, attested, and such that they have real authentic instances of use. According to Carter and Nunan (2001) authentic materials are "ordinary texts not produced specifically for language teaching purposes" (p. 68).

Authentic materials are texts produced by native speakers for a non-pedagogical purpose (Bacon & Finnemann, 1990). Since they are not designed for pedagogical purpose, commonly, they do not come from a course book. They are not systematically developed in stages for language learners. However, nowadays, there are many experts who prefer to use authentic materials in teaching and learning English, both written and spoken as an alternative material.

A material is authentic when it contains authentic text. According to Tomlinson (1984), an authentic text is a text which is not written or spoken for language teaching purposes. A newspaper article, a rock song, a novel, a radio interview and traditionally fairy story are examples of authentic texts. Nunan (2001) also defines authentic materials as spoken or written language data that have been produced in the course of genuine communication, and not specifically written for purposes of language teaching. Genhard (1996) sees authentic materials as a way to contextualize language learning. It means that authentic materials are also effective in providing the students with the context of every text. When they normally study the pedagogical materials, they tend to focus more on content and meaning rather than the context. On the other hand, authentic materials provide rich source of context in language instead of the language which are only provided by the teacher. Herrington and Oliver (2000) suggested a new pedagogical term, called authentic learning. This term is directly related to the students' real life and prepares them to face and deal with real world situations. According to Herod (2002), authentic learning materials and activities are designed to imitate the real world situations.

2.2. Using Authentic Materials

Akbari and Razavi (2016) tried to investigate Iranian EFL teachers' attitudes and beliefs regarding the use of authentic materials at high school level in Iran according to communicative language principles, focusing on both reading and listening skills. Fifty-seven female and male English teachers, who teach in high schools and took apart in teacher training course (TTC) with CLT framework, completed a survey questionnaire for the purpose of this study. Marzban and Davaji (2015) were the other researchers in the field of study who conducted a research

study to investigate the effect of authentic texts on motivation and reading comprehension of EFL students at intermediate level of proficiency. After administration the research, they concluded that "reading authentic texts has positive effect on the reading comprehension of intermediate students. Conducting the motivation questionnaire on the authentic group showed positive changes on four domains of motivation (p. 85). Likewise, Habouti, Mohammad, Mahmoodi and Ziaei (2015) investigated the effect of authentic listening materials on EFL learners' listening comprehension. The results showed that there were significant differences among EFL learners in relation to their listening comprehension ability since the authentic materials were while learning. With regard to the main intention of the present research, the following questions will be made:

RQ1. Do authentic-based materials have any effect on improving the Iranians intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension performance?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

To fulfill the objectives of this study, 50 Iranian female EFL learners who majored in English as a foreign language in Pooya language school of Abadan were selected. All of the participants were Persian native speakers in the age ranging from 18 to 40 years old. Among the population, 24 EFL learners who got the band score of OQPT were considered as the intermediate learners since their scores were between 30 and 45. The homogenized learners were divided into two experimental groups (i.e., authentic-based and non-authentic-based groups) based on non-random convenience sampling method. Each group consists of 12 intermediate language learners (n=12).

3.2. Instrumentation

Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT): OQPT was given to participants to find out their homogeneity level. It is a placement test for homogenizing the whole population of the study as intermediate EFL learners. OQPT helps language teachers quickly measure the learners' general language ability so they can place him or her into the appropriate level class for a language course.

Pre-test of Reading Comprehension Test: A test of reading comprehension was a teacher-made test designed based on the teaching materials. This test consists of four reading comprehension passages. Each passage consists of five items. It included 20 multiple-choice items. This test consisted of four reading comprehension passages. Each passage consists of five items. The participants of both groups were taken the modified pre-test. This test was given to participants to find out their performances in reading comprehension before the treatment. The participants of both groups were taken the pre-test. The reliability index

was reported after a pilot study on seven students through KR- 21 formula as (r=.85).

Post-test of Reading Comprehension Test: In order to understand about the learners' ability in reading comprehension performance after the treatment, a post-test of reading comprehension was prepared and administrated. The modified pre-test was used as the post-test which included the same content but there were different item structures. Since the items were modified to avoid reminding of the students, its reliability index was calculated again. After a pilot study on seven students through KR- 21 formula as (r=.93).

3.3. Materials

In the present study, two main materials were used to achieve the purpose of this research. With regard to authentic materials the passages were selected from the Web site: www.teaching.net, they were a group of online authentic texts (12 texts) derived from the internet that should be presented to authentic group to measure their influence on reading comprehension. They were selected based on the level of the EFL learners. Regarding non-authentic materials, 12 reading comprehension texts were selected from Top Notch 2 (Longman Series).

3.4. Procedure

The first step in the current study was to homogenize the learners into intermediate level. Accordingly, 50 EFL learners were given the OQPT. 24 learners were selected to take part in the study as two experimental groups (authentic and non-authentic groups). The second step in this research was to measure the learners' performances in reading comprehension before the treatment. The pre-test of reading comprehension was administrated to all participants of the study. The test of reading comprehension was prepared from the teaching materials including four reading passages and 20 multiple-choice questions. It focused on reading skills including skimming, scanning, vocabulary, and the main ideas. After administration of the pre-test, both experimental groups (authentic, www.teaching.net and non-authentic, Top Notch 2) received the treatments. The third step in this study was to administrate the treatments. The whole instruction for both experimental groups take place in 12 sessions and each session lasted for 60 minutes.

With regards to authentic group, the learners received the online authentic texts. Each session, one authentic text was taught to the authentic group. In the class, the language teachers and the learners were active participants in learning process. Before reading, the teacher provided the learners with background knowledge and warm up activities. In practice, language learners were given the title of the text and asked them to discuss on it as a whole class. The researcher tried to activate and stimulate the EFL learners' schemata related to the reading text and encourage the EFL learners to read the passage. For example, the learners were given a picture related to the topic of the text. Then they

were asked to express their opinions, agreements and disagreements. Students were asked pre-reading questions to get prepared for the text and the topic as brainstorming activity. Then, with the cooperation of the learners, the unknown and difficult words were defined before reading and they read the text to answer the pre-reading question and then match the words and phrases that they are connected to.

They were firstly supposed to read the first paragraph and identified the main idea and its supporting details. Later, they were asked to do the same thing for the next other paragraphs. Then, they were expected to use the contextual clues: the other words in the phrase on the page to determine the meaning of unknown words and the pairs wrote the meanings of these words on the next line of their sheet of paper. Later, they were given a vocabulary exercise. Later, they read the text again to re-insert the paragraphs into conversations in the text. The language learners were engaged in completing different kinds of tasks such as pair work task. The learners performed the task in pairs. After that, they used the words and phrases from the whole article to complete definitions. They reported what they do during this stage to share their findings with the class. At the end of a lesson, they were given a short explanation on relative clauses by taking example sentences from the text and then they were given a short exercise on this grammar point. After reading, texts were discussed by the teacher and the learners in the class.

Regarding to non-authentic group, the learners received the non- authentic texts from the English course book. Each session, one non-authentic text was taught to the non-authentic group. It should be noted that method of teaching in both groups were the same and the materials are different because the researcher was going to know the effect of the materials on reading comprehension. In other words, with regard to the non-authentic group, everything was similar to that of the authentic group, except that there were differing reading passages. Finally, the forth step in the present study was to measure the EFL learners' performances in reading comprehension after the treatment.

3.5. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics was used for investigating the pre-test and the post-test of authentic and non-authentic groups was used. Furthermore, the Independent Samples *t*-tests were applied for descriptive and inferential statistics. In order to realize how effective the two types of approaches were, the mean scores of the post-test of the two experimental groups were compared with those of the pre-test.

4. Results

Descriptive statistics of the pre-test including their means is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.   Descriptive Statistics (Pre-test)

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Authentic	12	10.08	2.50	.72
Non-authentic	12	10.58	1.44	.41

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the two groups, authentic and non-authentic before using treatment.

Table 2.   Independent Samples Test (Pre-test)

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	-.599	22	.555	-.50	.83
Equal variances not assumed	-.599	17.5	.557	-.50	.83

The difference between the groups is not significant at (p<.05). This showed that the groups were homogenous before the research period at the pre-test.

Table 3.   Descriptive Statistics (Post-test)

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Authentic	12	14.83	3.35	.96
Non-authentic	12	10.75	1.48	.42

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the two groups of authentic and non-authentic after the treatment. The result shows that the mean of authentic group in the post-test is higher than the mean of non-authentic one.

Table 4.   Independent Samples Test (Post-test)

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	3.857	22	.001	4.08	1.05
Equal variances not assumed	3.857	15.1	.002	4.08	1.05

Table 4 indicates that the difference between the groups is significant at (p<.05). It reveals that authentic group performed better in post-test in comparison with the pre-test stage. On the other hand, non-authentic group did not perform better in post-test in comparison with the pre-test stage.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1 Discussion

The research question asks whether authentic-based materials improve the Iranians intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension performance. One of the main aims of this study was to find out the effectiveness of authentic-based materials on the EFL learners' reading comprehensions performance. To answer this research question, the results obtained from the pre-test and the post-test of the authentic group was compared. Results showed that the means of the authentic group in the post-test stage was higher than the pre-test stage. In other words, the performance of the participants in authentic group was improved in terms of reading comprehension. Thus, the first hypothesis of this study was rejected and authentic-based materials did have significant effect on

improving the Iranians intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension performance.

Considering the results obtained from the analysis of the related data, it can be argued that the authentic-based materials used in teaching reading in our setting were effective in the authentic group. The authentic reading comprehension passages were interesting for the language learners. After reading authentic texts, students became more motivated to read about their own favorite topics and new things. Social reasons for reading, is another domain of motivation which had an increase. It affirms the fact that readers not only read the texts for themselves, but also have motivation to deliver the new information they got from the texts to other people. Here, the focus of reading is on the content in which readers make an interaction with the text, and not on the linguistic features of the text. Last but not least, language learners worked in groups in the authentic group through, sharing opinions could perform effectively in reading comprehending.

The results obtained from the pre-test and the post-test of the non-authentic group was compared. Results showed that the difference between the pre-test and the post-test of non-authentic-based group was not significant. Generally speaking, non-authentic group did not perform better in post-test in comparison with the pre-test stage. Accordingly,

the second hypothesis of this study was confirmed and non-authentic-based materials did not have significant effect on improving the Iranians intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension performance. In comparison with authentic-based materials, non-authentic materials were not attractive for the learners to read them comprehensively. Finally, since both the groups were in the same language institute, probably they were in touch and informed each other about the materials to be covered in the following sessions and this may possibly has reduced the effect of treatment on the non-authentic group.

In sum, the result of this question matches with Aftab and Salahuddin (2015) who conducted a research which investigated the effects of utilizing authentic texts instead of the traditionally used passages on the Grades VI and VII students in an Asian ESL context. The results revealed that the use of non-authentic reading texts cannot help language learners to improve their reading comprehension abilities especially the high achievers and the average learners studying in private sector schools. In view of that, it is suggested that second language programs should incorporate authentic reading material at least to some extent. Obtained results revealed that there was no difference between the groups in the pre-test stage. In other words, the groups were homogenous before the research period at the pre-test. On the other hand, there was significant difference between the groups in the post-test stage. That is, the difference between the groups was significant at the post-test. Therefore, the third hypothesis was rejected and there was significant difference between authentic-based materials and non-authentic-based materials in improving the Iranians intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension.

The obtained results of the current study agree with Barekat and Nobakhti (2014) who compared the effects of authentic-based materials and non-authentic-based materials on improving the learners' different parts second/foreign language learning. Like the findings of the present study, they concluded that there was significant difference between authentic-based materials and non-authentic-based materials in improving language skills. In other words, teaching authentic-based materials in comparison with non-authentic-based materials have better effects on enhancing learners' ability in L2 learning. The area of teaching reading is very important particularly in the present condition of requirement of English in Iran where English is taught as a foreign language; so, change from teaching non-authentic based materials to authentic based materials is required to make sure learners' engagement in teaching reading process. Moreover, in teaching reading comprehension, language teachers should select material of appropriate interest level. Learners perform better with authentic-based materials. Language teachers should select materials which are comprehensible. If learners are exposed to reading materials that are so difficult as to be incomprehensible, they will be disheartening. Finally, teachers are recommended to use topics and authentic-based reading materials which are interesting for students.

5.2. Conclusions

The main purpose of this research was to explore the effect of authentic-based materials in comparison with non-authentic-based materials on the Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension performance. The research questions inquired whether authentic-based materials and non-authentic-based materials had any significant effect on improving reading comprehension of the Iranian EFL learners. The data analysis and the results of this research revealed authentic group acted noticeably on the improvement of reading comprehension of the learners. On the other hand, non-authentic group did not perform positively in post-test in comparison with the pre-test stage. Therefore, the first null hypothesis was rejected and the second one was confirmed. It should be noted that the mean score of authentic group was more than the mean score of non-authentic in the post-test stage. Based on the results, teaching authentic-based materials were more effective than teaching non-authentic-based materials in improving the learners' reading ability. In other words, the third research null hypothesis was rejected and there was significant difference between authentic-based materials and non-authentic-based materials in improving the Iranians intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension.

These research findings, present the following implications for EFL learners, teachers, curriculum developers and material designer in case of dealing with language learning, teaching, and developing EFL materials. Language studies in the domain of using the authentic-based materials are well advised to take implications presented in this study into thoughtful account. According to the findings of this study, it is suggested that EFL learners use authentic-based reading materials to improve their L2 reading learning and rely less on non-authentic-based materials. One of the main goals of language teaching and learning is to develop language learners' abilities in communicative skills. Thus, using authentic-based materials may help learners to achieve the purpose. In addition, learners are recommended to get familiar with speaking, writing and listening authentic materials in order to benefit from their advantages. Finally, it is also suggested that learners gain some knowledge concerning concepts such as authentic-based and non-authentic based materials.

Material developers should cooperate with both teachers and students in order to plan and produce extra training curriculum. Cooperating with teachers, they need to decide what teaching materials they might develop. The findings of the present study may be beneficial for materials developers in developing and preparing syllabi that are more adaptable with those authentic-based materials which help language learners to use language communicatively. Material developers should produce materials that teachers will use throughout their classes. That is, the materials they produce should be in line with students' need (authentic-based

materials) and they should be appealing to students' interests.

The findings of the current study underline the need for further investigations concerning authentic-based materials in the fields of teaching English as foreign/second language. The current study was conducted on Iranian intermediate EFL learners, so its results cannot and should not be generalized to all language learners at different levels in various educational contexts. Hence, future research could focus on learners with different levels (e.g., elementary, upper-elementary, upper-intermediate, advanced and upper-advanced).Further research is suggested to use larger samples of both female and male participants to be able to generalize the findings to all EFL learners. Future researchers need to spend a longer time than the time spent in this study. Only one type of instrument (i.e., the tests) was used in this study; however, some other research instruments such as interview, questionnaires, observation, analysis of authentic texts, or journals could be integrated into the study. Other skills of the language such as speaking, writing and listening were not investigated. Possibly, applying these teaching methods may be useful to improve other main and sub-skills of the language. In view of that, future research could investigate the effect of authentic-based materials on improving oral and productive skills.

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