



Investigating Freshmen's Perceptions of Using Authentic Materials in Reading Classes at Sai Gon University

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Abstract

Authentic Materials, defined as resources created for native speakers, provide contextualized language exposure that traditional materials often lack. Especially when authentic materials are integrated into educational settings through classes. Therefore, exploring students' perceptions of using Authentic Materials in reading classes is a research topic of interest. This paper examines the perceptions and preferred types of Authentic Materials among first-year English Language students at Saigon University (SGU). A mixed-methods approach, combining questionnaires and interviews, was employed to collect data from 100 freshmen for the survey and 10 for the interviews. The findings revealed a generally positive view towards Authentic Materials, perceiving them as beneficial for increasing engagement, enhancing vocabulary, and improving reading comprehension. Moreover, magazines, novels, and short stories were the preferred genres of Authentic Materials. However, challenges related to Authentic Materials, such as difficulty in relevance to course content, were also highlighted. In conclusion, Authentic Materials are perceived as both engaging and educationally valuable, despite some implementation challenges. This study contributes to the understanding of material selection in EFL contexts, offering evidence-based insights that can inform curriculum design and classroom practices in higher education

Keywords: *Authentic Materials; freshmen; reading classes; perceptions.*

INTRODUCTION

The text discusses the importance of English as a global communication tool and its role in education, particularly in reading skills for learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL). English is taught from kindergarten through university, often as a compulsory subject. Reading is emphasized as a critical skill, but it can be challenging due to the mental processes involved, such as recall and reasoning (De Boer,

1964). Students often struggle with reading due to a lack of motivation, repetitive materials, and unfamiliar vocabulary, which can hinder comprehension (Ismael, 2021).

The choice of reading materials is crucial, and Authentic Materials - those used in real-life contexts—are highlighted as beneficial for engaging students and enhancing their language skills (Jacobson, Degener, and Purcell-Gates, 2003). Examples include newspapers, advertisements, and TV programs. Studies indicate that Authentic Materials positively impact learning, helping students connect with actual language and contexts (Rao, 2019; Namaziandost et al., 2021). However, while research has focused on high school levels, there is a lack of understanding regarding the use of Authentic Materials among university students, indicating a need for further exploration of their perceptions (Dambayana and Pratiwi, 2021). The current literature on Authentic Materials in the classroom primarily examines their benefits and challenges for high school students, particularly at the junior and senior levels. However, there is a notable gap in understanding university students' perspectives on Authentic Materials. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring English-major freshmen's perceptions of Authentic Materials in a university setting.

This research surveys first-year English Language students' perceptions of using Authentic Materials in Reading classes, contributing to both theoretical and practical knowledge. Theoretically, it synthesizes relevant frameworks related to students' perceptions of Authentic Materials in English reading classes. Practically, the findings can guide teachers, students, and researchers in using Authentic Materials to develop reading skills. For teachers, the results provide data to assess the incorporation of Authentic Materials into lessons, inspiring innovative learning activities tailored to students' needs. The research also helps students perceive the use of Authentic Materials in enhancing reading comprehension through exposure to real texts. Additionally, it serves as a reference for other researchers conducting similar studies, and it can be referenced or applied at the research institution or expanded to other educational institutions. Overall, the research advances theoretical understanding and offers practical applications beneficial to language education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Authentic Materials are defined as texts that expose learners to the real language used in their community. Shi and Nunan (2000) describe them as such, while Berardo (2006) emphasizes that they are “real-life texts, not written for pedagogic purposes”. Peacock (1997) adds that these materials serve specific social purposes within the language community, contrasting them with non-authentic texts meant solely for language learning. Harmer notes that authentic texts are “materials which are designed for native speakers,” highlighting their natural and practical nature. In summary, Authentic Materials are useful, interesting, and appropriate resources that exist in real life and can be adapted for language teaching.

Martinez highlighted several advantages of using Authentic Materials in language learning. Firstly, they expose students to real language, allowing interaction with genuine content, which fosters a sense of learning in the target language. Secondly, these materials align closely with learners' real-world needs, promoting active engagement, higher-order thinking, and access to expert-level information. Thirdly, Authentic Materials enhance learner motivation; students are more interested when engaging with topics that resonate with them. Fourthly, the variety of Authentic Materials, such as books, articles, and newspapers, provides a broader range of text types and language styles compared to traditional textbooks, aiding vocabulary expansion and memory retention. Lastly, they offer authentic cultural insights, enabling learners to gain real-world information and intrinsic educational values.

Disadvantages mentioned by several writers are:

1. According to Richards, Authentic Materials may present challenges due to their complex language, unnecessary vocabulary, and difficult sentence structures. So, the teacher should spend more time preparing to choose suitable authentic material to instruct the students in the classroom, such as considering the level of difficulty of the text with the students' level or ability.
2. Martinez (2002) notes that Authentic Materials can be too culturally biased, requiring learners to have a good understanding of the cultural background. Additionally, complex language structures can make it difficult for lower-level learners to decode the texts.
3. The biggest issue with Authentic Materials is that if the wrong type of text is selected, it may contain irrelevant vocabulary and complex structures, leading to difficulties for learners. This can have a negative impact, discouraging learners rather than motivating them.

This is a comparison made by some teachers; it is between a recording of natural speech among native speakers and a recording made for English language learners.

Table 1. The Difference between authentic and non-authentic materials
(In Hedge, 2000q A, p. 42)

Authentic language	Non-authentic language
Variation in the speed of delivery often fast	Slaw space with little variation
Natural intonation	Exaggerated intonation pattern
Natural features of connected speeches: elisions	Carefully articulate pronunciation
Variety of accents	Received pronunciation
Any grammatical structures natural to the topic	Regularly repeated structures
Colloquial language	More formal language
Incomplete utterances	Complete utterances
Restricting in longer more complex sentences	Grammatically correct sentence
Speakers interrupt or speak at the same time	Speakers take careful turns
Speakers use ellipsis (i.e. miss out parts of sentences)	Ellipsis infrequent
Background noise present	Background noise absent

Authentic Materials are of the following types:

- + An advertisement is a picture and/or set of words used to persuade people to buy a product or use a service and to inform readers about a job that is available.
- + An announcement is an important or official statement that informs people about something.
- + A magazine is a kind of periodical written publication which contains articles, advertising, and a variety of content.
- + A memo is an internal document that is short; the function is to remind someone about a single topic or necessary information.
- + A newspaper article is a piece of writing about current issues that consists of a particular topic, for example, education, politics, finance, entertainment, cultures, etc. In this study, the writer will use newspapers as a source of news item material.
- + A letter is a written message from one party to another that contains information.

Reading has been defined in several ways by experts. Brown (2004) emphasizes that it is an active process of interpreting meaning, where readers utilize prior knowledge to

construct understanding, highlighting its interactive nature. Cortina and Elder describe reading as “a form of thinking,” suggesting that the brain engages in activities like associating knowledge with text. Alderson (2000) adds that reading can be an enjoyable and immersive activity. Perspectives on reading vary; some see it as recognizing written words, while others view it to teach pronunciation and practice speaking. Ultimately, reading aims not only at word recognition but also at grasping the author's intended message.

Reading is an essential daily activity with three main purposes: survival, learning, and pleasure. Reading for survival involves responding to environmental cues, such as street signs and advertisements, and requires immediate action based on daily demands. In contrast, reading for learning is goal-oriented, typically occurring in educational settings. Lastly, reading for pleasure is voluntary and lacks specific objectives (citation intact).

Authentic Materials, as defined by Umicrova (2020), include print materials, audio, and videos that students encounter in daily life, such as job applications and menus. Familiarity with these materials can spark students' interest in seeking further information (Bredinstein et al., 2012, cited in Holmes, 2020). Ianiro (2007, cited in Mahendra, Nitiasih, and Saputra, 2018) emphasizes that these resources are not limited to classroom use; they can serve as diverse learning tools. Despite debates over their complexity, Authentic Materials are beneficial for enhancing students' English reading skills (Ahmed et al., 2021; Khusniyah, 2021). Ameen and Kamal argue that such materials improve students' ability to apply classroom knowledge to real-world contexts, where they must navigate genuine language in various documents. Students should be encouraged to select Authentic Materials that interest them (Al Nabhani & Al Azri, 2015).

The text emphasizes the importance of using Authentic Materials in teaching, highlighting that their effectiveness depends on numerous factors. Firmansyah (2015) notes that students' attitudes are influenced more by delivery methods than by the authenticity of materials. Familiarity with the topic and its difficulty level also affect students' perceptions. Oguz & Bahar (2008) argue that materials should be engaging and sourced from multiple resources to boost motivation and performance. They further assert that Authentic Materials help students better understand and apply foreign languages in real-life contexts. Supporting this, Allehyani, Burnapp, & Wilson (2017) found that such materials reflect real-world English usage in the UK and USA. While Authentic Materials can enhance reading skills, they must align with students' needs, and educators should employ diverse strategies to ensure engagement and motivation. If students find the materials uninteresting, their authenticity becomes irrelevant.

Many investigations focus on the use of Authentic Materials in EFL reading classes. A study by Laba (2014) explored the authenticity of texts at the ESL center of Kent State University, gathering insights from ESL/EFL students and instructors. The findings indicated that instructors viewed Authentic Materials as beneficial for improving reading skills and vocabulary acquisition. Survey results showed that students are interested in using Authentic Materials, particularly internet-based texts, and most believe these materials aid in learning new vocabulary, idioms, slang, and everyday language.

A qualitative study involving 20 EFL students explored the impact of Authentic Materials on reading comprehension, focusing on motivation, target language culture, and vocabulary development through interviews. Results indicated significant improvements in students' reading motivation, cultural awareness, and vocabulary (Kozhevnikova, 2014). Another study utilized a questionnaire and observation to examine the link between authentic texts and enhanced communicative abilities, revealing that students can easily

access Authentic Materials and feel more confident in their language skills (Ciornei & Dina, 2015).

Many studies have shown that using authentic materials can improve students' reading skills, motivation, and overall language learning. However, most of these studies have focused on high school students or advanced learners. There is still limited research on how university students, especially first-year English majors, perceive using authentic materials in their reading classes. This is an important group to study because they are at the beginning of their university journey and are starting to read more academic English texts. In addition, while some studies have looked at students' general attitudes toward authentic materials, not many have explored which specific types of authentic materials students actually prefer, such as news articles, blogs, social media posts, or short stories. These preferences are important because they can help teachers choose materials that students find more interesting and useful.

This gap in the literature indicates a need for further investigation into the perceptions and preferences of first-year English-majored students at Sai Gon University. This study aims to fill that gap and provide useful information for teachers when planning lessons and selecting reading materials that match students' needs and interests.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to gather comprehensive data through questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative research involved surveys to collect opinions and behaviours from a sample or the entire population, while qualitative methods focused on in-depth exploration of specific cases.

The study was conducted in the Foreign Language Education (FLE) Department at Sai Gon University (SGU), where English is the medium of instruction for two specialized majors. The department has over 2,000 students and focuses on training bachelor's degrees in pedagogy to produce high-quality English teachers for high schools and middle schools across the Southern region and the entire country. Additionally, it trains graduates in languages to provide skilled personnel for various sectors.

The questionnaire comprised three parts. The first part collected demographic information with three items. The second part included two questions with 22 statements, using a four-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) to assess students' perceptions of authentic texts in reading classes and their preferred types of Authentic Materials. This section was partly adapted from Tsai (2012). The third part featured three open-ended questions, adapted from Al-Musallam (2009), exploring additional preferred Authentic Materials, suggestions for using English texts to enhance reading comprehension, and reasons for supporting the use of Authentic Materials in classes.

To provide a deeper understanding of students' perception of Authentic Material in reading classes, the interview was developed and conducted with a group of 10 students randomly selected from those who had agreed in advance to participate in follow-up interviews for the purpose of the study. The students were asked four questions, which apart from one-way questions (yes/no) elicit more information.

The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms, with responses collected over a week. It was initially trialled with some students to assess internal consistency and reliability before being sent to 100 first-year ELT students at SGU. Participants were encouraged to engage actively by selecting responses and providing insights through optional

open-ended questions. The collected data were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), employing descriptive statistics to calculate means and standard deviations, and presented in tables and charts. Open-ended responses were grouped manually.

Interview sessions were held with ten randomly selected students from the 100 who completed the questionnaires. These face-to-face interviews, conducted at Saigon University and recorded using an app, aimed to confirm questionnaire findings and deepen understanding of their experiences. Each interview lasted about 7-10 minutes. The recordings were transcribed and analysed to draw final conclusions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaire result

The questionnaire was divided into three parts: teachers' application of Authentic Materials, students' perception of the authentic material in reading classes, and the preferred types of Authentic Materials.

1. The teachers' application of Authentic Materials in reading classes at Sai Gon University.

Figure 1 below shows the teachers' application of Authentic Materials in reading classes. Almost all teachers utilized Authentic Materials in reading classes, which may suggest that authentic material might become more common in teaching language and provide a more engaging and relevant learning experience for students.

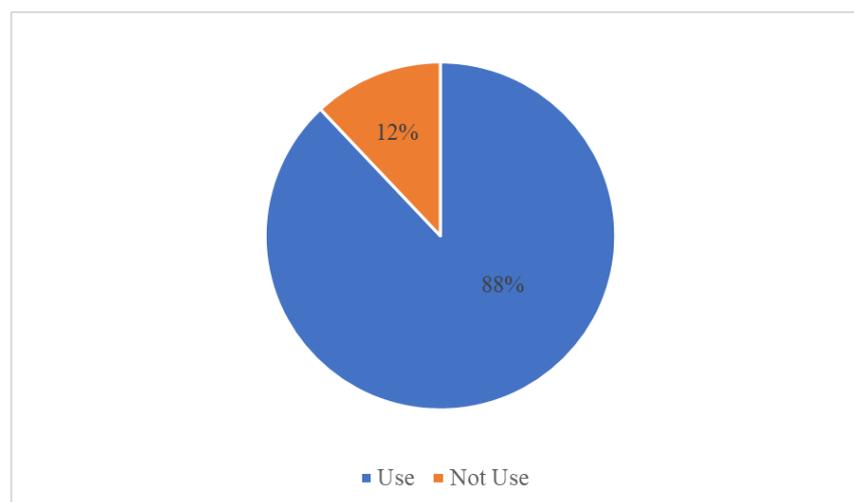


Figure 1. The teachers' application of the use of authentic materials in reading classes

2. First-year students' perceptions on Authentic Materials and Textbooks in reading classes.

Students' perceptions of using Authentic Materials in reading classes are shown in the table below (Table 2).

The questionnaire indicated that freshmen students' perceptions of using authentic texts in reading classes are positive. The highest mean was 3.58, with the standard deviation was 0.31, showing that most respondents strongly agree that the content of authentic text can be understood if the sentences used are simple. This result may be due to the accessibility of authentic text when it uses simpler sentence structures. This information can be useful for

teachers and material developers who want to create authentic reading materials that are appropriate for various levels of learners.

Table 2. Students' perception on the authentic materials and textbooks in reading classes

No.	Statement	Mean	S.d	Order
1	Using an authentic text as the primary material helps increase my interest in English.	3.31	0.28	9
2	An authentic text helps more than a regular reading textbook in increasing my interest in English.	3.27	0.27	11
3	I am interested in reading authentic material because I can find unfamiliar words.	3.42	0.29	6
4	I am interested in reading authentic material because I can know how native speakers use words and sentences.	3.54	0.31	3
5	I am interested in reading authentic texts if I know and like the topic of the text.	3.55	0.31	2
6	I can understand the content of authentic texts using the vocabulary I know.	3.41	0.29	7
7	I can understand the content of authentic texts by discovering unfamiliar words' meanings.	3.52	0.3	5
8	I could understand the content of authentic text if the sentences used are simple.	3.58	0.31	1
9	I feel that authentic texts can help me to improve my reading comprehension.	3.54	0.31	3
10	I read authentic texts outside of class by adjusting the topics that I like so that I can understand the contents of the text.	3.34	0.28	8
11	I read authentic text if the content of the text is not too long.	2.95	0.24	15
12	I am interested in reading authentic texts only from outside the classroom because I can choose which text I want to read myself.	3.1	0.26	13
13	An authentic text is more suitable for the use as an outside material than the primary material.	3.01	0.25	14
14	I am not interested in reading authentic texts if the material is monotonous, which makes me bored.	3.13	0.26	12
15	An authentic text helps more than a regular reading textbook in improving my English.	3.28	0.27	10

3. Freshmen students' preferences on the Authentic Materials in reading classes.

Figure 3 below shows the students' preferences on the Authentic Materials as perceived by the informants, from most to least preferred, were as follows: short stories, internet stories, magazines, novels, newspapers, brochures, and poems. Short stories were the most chosen authentic resources, with 90% of students. This finding would suggest that short stories are generally shorter and less complex than novels or other forms of literature, making them suitable for various students' levels. In contrast to poetry, it often uses more complicated language, symbolism, and imagery, which is considered challenging for students.

The study revealed that most students were supportive of the use of Authentic Materials in reading classes. It is believed that authentic texts could engage students' attention, expose learners to culture, reflect real-life language, and develop critical skills. The students also suggested using Authentic Materials more frequently, combining them with traditional textbooks, and incorporating group activities to enhance the learning experience. Overall, the results may suggest a positive perception of Authentic Materials among SGU students.

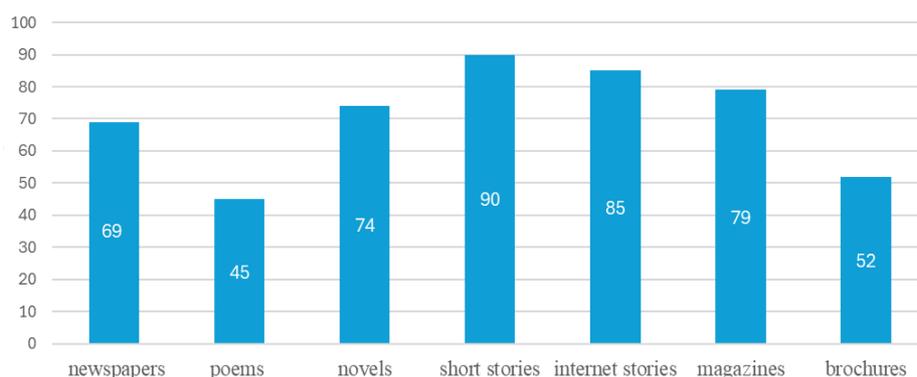


Figure 3. Students' preference on types of Authentic Materials

Interview result

Firstly, after transcribing the data and determining the code, the next step is to categorize the code that has been collected. The following table (Table 4) explains in detail the students' perception of Authentic Materials. When the students were asked about their opinion on using Authentic Materials in the reading class, almost all interviews express a positive perception of them. However, they also face some difficulties when reading Authentic Materials.

These findings suggest that teachers should take into consideration the potential benefits and challenges of using Authentic Materials and adapt their teaching to fit the students' needs.

Secondly, although the informants give a positive perception on Authentic Materials, the frequency of using Authentic Materials outside the classes is not often because the language and words are unfamiliar. [6] Authentic Materials are used depending on the subject and rarely used outside the classes. Some of my teachers integrate Authentic Materials with their teaching content to make it easier for us to understand and access the lesson. In addition, some informants use authentic material regularly if the text interests them or helps them to improve their reading skills. For example, the preparation of some subjects at school or tests. [1] I use Authentic Materials regularly, especially since I am preparing for the IELTS exam. They provide real-world context and help me practice listening, reading, and speaking skills more effectively. [2] For most of the subjects, I use Authentic Materials, but for some books that I couldn't find online or bookstores, I have to find a pdf file to print it out. About the news and others, I read them once a week. [3] I usually use Authentic Materials a lot, specifically in reading and writing.

Thirdly, based on students' responses in the interviews, the researcher found that newspapers, magazines, internet stories, and short stories are the preferred types of Authentic Materials that the students enjoy in reading classes. [8] I enjoy reading newspapers because they provide a lot of useful information around the world. [7] Some types of Authentic Materials that can be enjoyable and useful in reading classes include Newspapers and Magazine, Websites and Blogs. [10] Internet stories help me become more active and interested in reading if they easily understand and motivate me to study, learn about that issue, and easily learn speaking or writing class. These findings indicate that students may value Authentic Materials that are informative, engaging, and accessible. The interviewees

appreciate materials that can help them learn about the world and improve their language skills.

Table 4: Categorize the code that has been collected.

	Category	Code
Students' perception of the use of Authentic Materials in reading classes	Positive perceptions	[1], [3], [6] Authentic Materials help to remember the lesson content and expand the vocabulary.
		[4], [8], [9] Authentic Materials increase learners' interest, engagement in reading activities, and make their learning process more exciting and meaningful.
		[5], [6] Authentic Materials expose students to real-world language, diverse cultures.
		[10] Authentic Materials can improve students' reading skills such as speed reading and finding the main idea.
	Negative perceptions	[2] Authentic Materials have limited accessibility especially in digital formats. [7] Some Authentic Materials are too long to consume.

CONCLUSION

This research determined the students' perception on using Authentic Materials in reading classes. The results indicated that most students had positive perceptions of using Authentic Materials in reading classes. It was believed that using Authentic Materials in reading classes helps increase students' interest, remember the lesson content, and expand vocabulary, expose them to real-world language and diverse cultures, and improve student's reading skills. However, there are also few participants who had difficulties using Authentic Materials because of their long content, unfamiliar vocabulary, and lack of accessibility. In addition, short stories, internet stories, magazines, and newspapers are the types of Authentic Materials the participants prefer to use in reading classes. Moreover, the respondents also recommended other types such as journals or research papers, comics, and biographies which can be applied in reading classes in the future.

Based on the students' positive perception of using authentic texts in reading classes, it is recommended that teachers should integrate Authentic Materials with different genres more frequently into their reading classes. Besides that, to overcome the difficulties faced by a few students, the teachers can use scaffolding techniques such as pre-teaching vocabulary and offering background information. Additionally, the teacher may take careful consideration in choosing Authentic Materials that fit students' levels so that teachers can optimize the learning experience and help students develop their reading skills effectively.

Limitations of this study should be noted, including the fact that our samples consisted of only freshmen, which may limit the generalizability of our findings. Moreover, in the data collection part, there were some incomplete and incomprehensive answers from the participants, which may be difficult to determine the participants' intended meaning.

These results suggest that future research should investigate larger and more diverse samples of participants to ensure the generalizability of the findings. This would involve considering factors such as age, language proficiency, and cultural background. Future research could also explore the effectiveness of using Authentic Materials on students' reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, etc.

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