

The Importance Of Authentic Reading Materials In The Development Of Reading Skills Of Grade Ten Students In The Government Schools Of The Sultanate Of Oman

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Abstract: This research intends to examine the importance of using authentic reading materials in teaching English in the schools of the Sultanate of Oman in general and in developing the reading skills of Grade Ten Students.

Index Terms: Authentic, Authenticity, Reading Materials, Belief, Basic Education.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Research topic

"When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well." (Palmer, A teacher is a human being and he is more likely, for one reason or another, to reflect his own beliefs on his teaching performance and style. Undoubtedly, such personal and academic beliefs would have a hand in the choice of teaching methods and approaches and in preferring one instructional materials to another and they also may result in some misconduct, e.g. sticking to traditional and out fashioned methods and classroom procedures. I am not suggesting teachers change any beliefs. What I am suggesting is that, because a teacher's beliefs strongly influence students' development, it is imperative for teachers to examine what those beliefs are. Are they based on solid foundations? What, if any, alternatives would be in the best interest of both the teacher and the students? It is imperative to recognize that teachers are interpreting the same events in different ways. They unconsciously assign different meanings to the event in order to support their prior beliefs. Most of the teachers we have encountered over our long teaching experience were taught traditionally and are teaching English using the same structurally based approaches. They believe that these approaches are based on a solid foundation, and if the teaching materials are based on beliefs similar to their own, they will notice ways in which they work, otherwise they will abandon them. Since using authentic reading materials is not compatible with structurally traditionally based approaches, those teachers see that they are not worthy bringing into classroom preferring to stick literally to the reading texts found in textbooks. If they believe it is a waste of time, they will notice evidence supporting that belief. However, analysis of students' results and performance has always shown that they are severely weak at reading. Poor reading skills exist almost in all grades, but it is apparently clear in Grade 10. This study is an attempt to explore teachers' beliefs on using authentic reading materials inside the classroom to see to what extent such beliefs are reflected negatively or positively on the development of Grade 10 students' reading skills.

Hypothesis

Using authentic reading materials in the classroom can help and support grade 10 students develop better reading skills.

Special terms defined

"Belief", away from the different senses the word belief could be used, we will simply define the way in which I intend to use the term. Drawing on the work of Dilts (1999), we will define beliefs as judgments and evaluations that we make about ourselves, about others, and about the world around us. Beliefs are generalizations about things such as causality or the meaning of specific actions". Here are a few examples of belief statements made in the educational environment:

- A quiet classroom is conducive to learning.
- Studying longer will improve a student's score on the test.
- Grades encourage students to work harder.
- Authentic reading materials help students develop better reading skills.

"Grade 10 students" in the context of this study refer to the students in the second cycle of the Basic Education school system. They have been studying English for almost ten years. For students of this age, motivation and interest are key consideration in the learning process. It is also used throughout the study to refer to the grade 10 students from the general education school." Authentic" refers in this study to material designed for native speakers of English used in the classroom in a way similar to the one it was designed for. For example, a radio news report brought into the class so students discuss the report on pollution in the city where learners live. The term "teacher" here refers to the person in charge of teaching the target groups or any other concerned teacher.

Literature review

There are many references to authentic material in the ELT literature. Debates are still raging on why it should or should not be included in lessons, and how it is to be used or best exploited. Reading the literature, it is clear that those authors who support the use of authentic material have in common one idea: "exposure". In other words, the benefit students get from being exposed to the language in authentic materials. Peacock (1997) defines authentic materials as materials that have been produced to fulfill some social purpose in the language community. On his part, Widdowson (1990)

differentiates between "authentic" and "genuine material. He believes that Authentic would be material designed for native speakers of English used in the classroom in a way similar to the one it was designed for. For example, a radio news report brought into the class so students discuss the report on pollution in the city where learners live. Most of the time, though, this material is used in a genuine way, in other words, not in the way it was intended, but in a somewhat artificial way. For example, news article where the paragraphs are cut up and jumbled so students have to put them back together in the correct order. Teachers who hold positive beliefs towards using authentic material in the classroom, even when not done in an authentic situation, argue that Textbooks often do not display incidental English while authentic reading could be useful for many reasons, amongst which are:

- Students are exposed to real discourse, as in videos of interviews with famous people where intermediate students listen for gist.
- Authentic materials keep students informed about what is happening in the world, so they have an intrinsic educational value. As teachers, we are educators working within the school system, so education and general development are part of our responsibilities (Sanderson, 1999).
- They can produce a sense of achievement, e.g., a brochure on England given to students to plan a four-day visit.
- The same piece of material can be used under different circumstances if the task is different.
- Language change is reflected in the materials so that students and teachers can keep abreast of such changes.
- Reading texts are ideal to teach/practise mini-skills such as scanning, e.g. students are given a news article and asked to look for specific information (numbers, percentages, etc.). The teacher can have students practice some of the micro-skills mentioned by Richards (1983), e.g. students listen to news reports to identify the names of countries, famous people, etc.
- Books, articles, newspapers with a wide variety of text types, language styles not easily found in conventional teaching materials.
- They can encourage reading for pleasure because they are likely to contain topics of interest to learners, especially if students are given the chance to have a say about the topics or kinds of authentic materials to be used in class.

On the other side, those holding negative beliefs against using authentic materials inside the classroom may claim that:

- They may be too culturally biased, so may cause some type of cross-cultural communication breakdown.
- The vocabulary might not be relevant to the student's immediate needs and above their levels; Hatch and Brown (1995) argue that vocabulary is the list of words that speakers of a particular language use. Words in this context means not only single items, e.g. " dog " but also string of words which together form one lexical item, e.g. idioms such as " keep someone on his toe" or common expressions such as " once upon a time".
- Too many structures are mixed so lower levels have a hard time decoding the texts.

- Special preparation is necessary which can be time and effort consuming.
- With listening: too many different accents that are really too difficult to follow.

Actually the most commonly used authentic reading materials perhaps are; newspapers, TV programs, menus, magazines, the internet, movies, songs, brochures, comics, literature (novels, poems and short stories), and so forth. A relevant example of involving using authentic magazine advertisements is the following: Students are set in groups of 3-4 and get some four adverts. They are to imagine they are working for an advertising agency and compare the ads taking into account the texts and the photographs. Students are to decide on which the best is and which the worst is. Then they re-design the worst ad, including the text. Ads with short texts might be used with slow learners, while those containing more complex texts are for intermediate or shinning students.

Methods and Techniques

Research Method

We agree with Mouly (1970) that social phenomena are as subject to scientific investigation and determination as are the phenomena of the physical world, yet I stress the importance of considering the human aspects and the rights of the participants as human beings. Since variables cannot so readily be isolated, and because the learners' behavior and outcomes are relatively unpredictable, it is difficult to carry out a true experiment inside the classroom. Therefore, we would use a method approaching a true experimental design, namely the quasi-experimental method. It is what Campbell and Stanely (1963) refer to as " the who and to whom of measurement "but lack control over" the when and to whom of exposure "or the randomization of exposures essential if true experimentation is to take place. I use the posttest-only design with nonequalivant groups; it can be diagrammatically depicted in the following way:

Group 1 X 0

Group 2 0

Where group one stands for the "Grade10 students to be taught using authentic reading materials "and group 2 stands for "Grade 10 students to be taught using no authentic reading materials ". X refers to the experimental treatment, in this context " teaching reading using authentic reading materials ", and 0 refers to the measurement of the dependent variable, here " the reading tests to be administrated on the two groups ". The dashed line separating the parallel rows in the diagram indicates that the experimental and control groups have not been equated by randomization.

Data Collection Techniques

Sampling and participant

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) believe that the quality of a piece of research is not only affected by the appropriateness of methodology and instrumentation but also by the suitability of the sampling strategy that has been adopted. Gay (1992) defines sampling as "The process of selecting a number of

individuals for a study in such a way that the individuals represent the larger group from which they are selected ". The target population of this study is supposed to be all learners in grade 10 in both General and Basic schools all over the sultanate of Oman. However, this is not possible because it is time, money and effort consuming. Therefore, accessible or available population will be used instead. Bailey (1978) believes that experienced researchers start with the total population and work down to the sample. By contrast, less experienced researchers often work from the bottom up. In doing so they determine the minimum number of respondents needed to conduct the research. However, we prefer to use the bottom up method in this study. There will be two groups: group 1, a Basic education class of 30 pupils and group 2, another basic education class of 30 pupils. Group 1 will study reading using authentic reading materials such as menus, magazines, and commercials ads. Group 2 will be chosen from general education classes that study reading using only the non-authentic reading found in textbooks and syllabus. The intention here is not to use random sampling, as we believe that it would be unethical (depriving one of the basic classes from being taught through authenticity). Therefore, we use a purposive sampling (getting group 2 from General education class that already does not study via authenticity). Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) argue that in purposive sampling, researchers handpick the cases to be included in the sample based on their judgment of their typicality and their satisfaction of their specific needs.

Instrumentation

Two short tests would be administrated to test the participants reading skills. One of the tests would be administrated to decide on the reading level of the sampling group and the other one will be administrated immediately after teaching the assigned reading units to decide on the effectiveness of using authentic reading materials inside the classroom. It must be noted that the tests used to measure the pupil's reading skills are similar to the kind of activities they are familiar with in their course books. The two tests would be marked out of ten then we will depend mainly on comparing the mean score of the two groups to decide on which group performs better.

Reliability of Measurement

Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) define reliability as "a synonym for consistency and replicability over time, over instruments and over group of respondents. It is concerned with precision and accuracy ".It is clear from this definition that reliability refers to the consistency and stability of measure. A test is considered reliable if we get the same results repeatedly, e.g. if we administrate a test to the same group of examinees on successive days with no intervening instructions in the area tested, then each time the results or the examinees scores should be approximately the same or close to the same scores on both administrations. William (2006) claims that it is not possible to calculate reliability exactly, instead we have to estimate it. We tried as hard as possible to consider the reliability quality of the assigned tests: the pupils are familiar with the test items and we think that the tests are neither too easy nor too much challenging. Therefore, we hope that these tests will not be contaminated by any other unexpected reliability threat.

Validity of Measurement

Anastasi and Urbina (1997) define validity as "the degree to which the test actually measures what it supports to measure." An effective test will ensure adequate face, content and construct validity. We think that the major threat to my measure validity is the selection of the groups. Because the two groups are not randomly constructed, there maybe differences between the groups which could influence the final results, i.e. the first group which belongs to the Basic education system may excel the second group belonging to the General education system in their vocabulary power due to the fact that the Basic education curriculums are more challenging and demanding than the General education ones. Anyhow, this is just an expectation that could be confirmed or denied only after administrating the first replacement tests and analyzing the results and outcomes.

Data Analysis Procedures

This study is to be carried out by the end of the first semester. I will start first by submitting the permission application to the two target schools administrations and by informing the participants' parents of the nature of the study so as to obtain somehow of ethics clearance. This step could take the first two weeks of September. Then we should have the list of all the participants from both the Basic school and the General one by the end of the same month. During the next two months: February and March, the children with the help of their teachers , who should be informed and consulted in advance about the study, would start studying the target reading courses. Immediately after finishing the course on 15 April, the second assigned test would be administrated. On comparing the mean of the scores on both tests for the two groups, we think we can get a good indicator of their reading development. In doing so, we could investigate my hypothesis that using authentic reading materials in the classroom can help and support grade 10 students develop better reading skills.

Ethical Issues

Cavan (1977) defines ethics as "a matter of principled sensitivity to the rights of others ".He argues that the respect of human dignity and nature is more important than the pursuit of truth, even if, in the extreme case, such respect leaves one ignorant of human nature. Crotty and Michael (1995) indicate that there are two definitions of ethics one of which relates to the morality, the right and wrong of certain behavior and the other to rules of conduct' recognized in respect of a particular class of human actions. That is to say 'proper' ways of behaving for members of a profession or other group-glorified etiquette. I really agree with both Fraenkel and Wallen (1990) who summarize the whole issue in one question as they claim that the basic ethical question for all researchers to consider is, "Will any physical or psychological harm com to anyone as a result of my research?"For example, such harm could be embodied in the betrayal of confidentiality when making secret information available for others. Dealing with students, this adds an ethical aspect to this study. We should take into account the effects of my study on the participants and we should ensure that it would not cause them or their families any harm. That is why we will not start the study unless we receive a letter of approval from both the administration of the school and the participants' parents. Moreover, we intent to

discuss the issue with the target grade 10 students themselves. The main reason standing beyond choosing the second group from a General school is an ethical one. That is simply because if we choose it from the Basic school, it will be deprived from being taught through authenticity while in fact they have to be exposed to authentic and real tasks as it is stated in the Basic education curriculum.

Significance of the Proposed Research

Anticipated uses to be made of the research This research is an attempt to find out to what extent using authentic reading materials inside the classroom could support and promote students' reading skills. It depends mainly on two classes each of 30 pupils in grade 10 in basic and general schools. If the research hypothesis, using authentic reading materials in the classroom can help and support grade 10 students develop better reading skills, this would encourage teachers to pay much more attention to teaching authentic reading.

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