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THE EFFECT OF TEACHING VOCABULARY THROUGH AUTHENTIC MATERIALS ON EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Authentic materials, meaning texts and recordings produced for real communicative purposes rather than for teaching, are widely recommended for EFL classrooms, yet their value for vocabulary learning is less clear than their reputation suggests. This article reviews research on how teaching vocabulary through authentic materials affects EFL learners. A narrative review was conducted, and its findings were organised into four themes: how authenticity is defined, the lexical demands of authentic texts, evidence on vocabulary gains from reading and viewing, and effects on motivation and classroom practice. The evidence indicates that authentic materials can yield measurable vocabulary gains and heightened learner interest, but that gains depend on the share of known words in a text, the recurrence of target words and the tasks that accompany the input. Unmodified texts demand a large vocabulary, which makes unsupported use unsuitable for lower-level learners. A principled approach is outlined that combines careful text selection, pre-teaching of a few key words, repeated encounters and production tasks. The limits of existing studies, many of them short, small-scale or non-experimental, are discussed, and directions for rigorous classroom research are proposed.

Keywords

authentic materials, vocabulary learning, EFL, incidental learning, lexical coverage, text selection

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Introduction

Language teaching has long wrestled with the distance between the language of the classroom and the language of the world outside it. Coursebook texts are written to display target structures and vocabulary at a suitable level, and they tend to be tidy: sentences are complete, new words are few and often repeated, and the topic rarely strays from the unit theme. Texts produced for genuine communication, such as news reports, advertisements, timetables, song lyrics, interviews, films and social-media posts, behave differently. They are untidy, dense with unfamiliar words and shaped by purposes that have nothing to do with teaching. Such material is called authentic, and since the rise of communicative approaches it has found advocates who expect it to prepare learners for real use of English (Gilmore, 2007; Guariento & Morley, 2001). Vocabulary is where the tension is felt most sharply. On one side stands a promise: authentic texts expose learners to words in natural contexts, with real collocations and repeated encounters, which is how a large vocabulary is eventually built. On the other side stands a difficulty: a text that has not been simplified makes heavy demands on the reader's word knowledge, and a learner who understands too little may learn little (Hu & Nation, 2000; Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010). In settings where exposure to English outside the lesson is limited, as in many schools in Uzbekistan, the stakes of every text a teacher selects are higher still. Teachers must decide how much authenticity a class can bear and how to turn raw texts into vocabulary lessons.

Published work bearing on this decision is scattered across discussions of materials design, studies of lexical coverage, experiments on incidental learning from reading and viewing, and surveys of learner motivation. To the author's knowledge, few accounts connect these strands for the practitioner. This article brings

them together in a narrative review and asks four questions:

1. What is meant by authenticity and authentic materials in EFL teaching?
2. What vocabulary demands do authentic texts place on learners?
3. What does the evidence show about vocabulary gains and motivation when
4. Which classroom principles follow from the answers to the first three questions?

Methodology

Selection of sources. Sources were identified through publisher platforms, university repositories and the reference lists of recent vocabulary studies, using combinations of the terms *authentic materials*, *authenticity*, *EFL vocabulary*, *incidental vocabulary learning*, *lexical coverage*, *extensive reading*, *extensive viewing* and *learner motivation*. A source was kept when it met three conditions: it addressed authenticity or authentic materials, or the lexical demands of, and vocabulary learning from, authentic input; it offered empirical evidence, a review or a developed theoretical argument; and it appeared in a peer-reviewed journal or with an established academic press. Nineteen sources satisfied these conditions, published between 1997 and 2018.

Analysis. Each source was read with the four research questions in mind and its claims were sorted into the themes reported in the next section. Because the studies differ widely in design, experiments with comparison groups were treated as stronger evidence than single-group studies, and both were treated as stronger than studies based only on learners' opinions. Where findings conflicted, the conflict was recorded and left standing. Statistical pooling was not attempted, since participants, materials and outcome measures vary from study to study.

Results

The sources fall into five themes: the meaning of authenticity, the vocabulary demands of authentic texts, vocabulary gains from reading and viewing, the conditions that shape those gains, and learners' motivation and responses.

Gilmore (2007) surveys the many senses in which the word *authentic* has been used in language teaching and identifies eight, which attach to the texts themselves, to the participants in communication, to the social or cultural situation, to the purposes of the communicative act, and to combinations of these. In everyday classroom usage the narrowest sense prevails: a text is authentic when it was produced for a real audience and a real purpose rather than for teaching. Guariento and Morley (2001) observe that agreement on the usefulness of authentic materials is broad, whereas agreement on the stage at which to introduce them is not, and that discussion has centred on texts while neglecting tasks. They distinguish four schools of thought on task authenticity: authenticity through a genuine purpose, through real-world targets, through classroom interaction and through learner engagement. A text may therefore be authentic while its task is not, and the reverse can also occur. Tomlinson's (2012) review of materials development treats evaluation, adaptation and exploitation of materials as linked processes and counts exposure to authentic language use among the principles of good materials. Nation (2006) calculated that learners need roughly 8,000 to 9,000 word families to read written texts independently (a figure reported by Pellicer-Sánchez & Schmitt, 2010). Spoken material appears lighter: in a corpus of 318 movies, Webb and Rodgers (2009) found that 3,000 word families gave 95% coverage and 6,000 families gave 98%. Coverage figures matter because comprehension depends on them. Hu and Nation (2000) estimated that readers need to know about 98% of the running words in a fiction text for adequate unassisted comprehension. Laufer and Ravenhorst-Kalovski (2010) proposed two thresholds, an optimal one of 8,000 word families yielding 98% coverage and a minimal one of 4,000–5,000 families yielding 95%. Schmitt, Jiang and Grabe (2011), working with 661 participants from eight countries, found a roughly linear relationship between the percentage of vocabulary known and the degree of comprehension, with no sudden threshold, and judged 98% a reasonable target for readers of academic texts. Taken together, these studies imply that an unmodified written text lies within reach only of learners whose vocabulary is already large, while films and television programmes appear to ask less of the lexicon. Pellicer-Sánchez and Schmitt (2010) asked relatively advanced EFL readers to read the unmodified novel *Things Fall Apart*. Earlier studies with graded or simplified texts had reported

only modest gains, yet after more than ten encounters the readers could recognise the meaning of 84% of the target words and their spelling in 76%, and could recall meaning for 55% and word class for 63%. For viewing, Peters and Webb (2018) tested Dutch-speaking EFL learners after a single full-length television programme. Incidental learning appeared at the levels of meaning recall and meaning recognition, and it varied with how often a word occurred, how much of it the learner already knew and whether it was a cognate. Repetition across episodes offers a promising route: Rodgers and Webb (2011) found that episodes from one series contained fewer word families than unrelated programmes and that lower-frequency families recurred more often within a series, which suggests that watching related programmes can multiply encounters. A classroom comparison comes from Ghanbari, Esmaili and Shamsaddini (2015). In their study, 66 elementary-level Iranian EFL learners aged 17 to 20 met the same vocabulary over a month, in three one-hour sessions a week, either through the textbook or through an English-language online newspaper. Both groups improved, but the newspaper group outperformed the textbook group significantly. Evidence on the conditions of learning comes largely from research outside the authentic-materials literature, yet it bears directly on it. Hulstijn and Laufer (2001) found that composing text with target words produced better retention than reading with gap-filling, which in turn beat reading alone, in line with the involvement load hypothesis (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001), which rates tasks by the need, search and evaluation they require. Schmitt (2008), surveying instructed second-language vocabulary learning, concluded that engagement with words is central to acquisition. The viewing and reading studies above add two further conditions: a word's frequency of occurrence and the learner's prior knowledge of it (Peters & Webb, 2018; Pellicer-Sánchez & Schmitt, 2010). Peacock (1997) examined the effect of authentic materials on the motivation of EFL learners and reported a positive influence, evident in classroom behaviour and in learners' own accounts. Gilmore (2011) followed two groups of Japanese university students over ten months. One group worked with textbooks; the other worked with authentic materials, among them films, documentaries, television comedies, songs, novels and newspaper articles, accompanied by awareness-raising tasks. The authentic-materials group outperformed the textbook group on several measures of communicative competence and expressed a preference for the authentic materials, which the students found more interesting, varied and challenging. Berardo (2006) likewise describes authentic materials as motivating, since understanding them brings a sense of achievement, and offers three criteria for choosing texts: suitability of content, exploitability and readability.

Discussion

The four research questions can now be answered together. Authenticity is a property of text, task and purpose rather than of text alone; authentic input is demanding; it does produce vocabulary gains and heightened interest; and the size of the gains depends on conditions that a teacher can influence. Read side by side, the studies point to three conditions that decide whether authentic input turns into vocabulary: coverage, recurrence and task. Coverage governs whether a text can be understood at all. Where too many words are unknown, meanings cannot be inferred from context, an inference that follows from the coverage research (Hu & Nation, 2000; Schmitt et al., 2011) although the reviewed studies did not test it directly. Recurrence governs whether understood words are met often enough to stay: the readers in Pellicer-Sánchez and Schmitt's (2010) study needed more than ten encounters to reach their recognition levels, and Peters and Webb (2018) found frequency to be one of the variables shaping gains. The task governs the depth of processing that learners invest, and the findings on composition and involvement load (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001) suggest that exposure alone is not enough. This account helps to explain why results differ across studies. Advanced readers of a novel and elementary learners working with newspaper texts stand at opposite ends of the coverage scale; a single television programme and a month of newspaper lessons differ in recurrence; and the studies differ in what learners were asked to do with the input. Treating authentic materials as a single treatment hides these differences.

Because coverage is decisive, text selection is the teacher's first and most consequential act. Berardo's (2006) criteria of content suitability, exploitability and readability can be sharpened with a vocabulary profile: placing a candidate text in a lexical profiling tool shows what share of its words lies within the learners' known

vocabulary, and the 95–98% range from the coverage studies offers a benchmark. Since the minimal threshold proposed by Laufer and Ravenhorst-Kalovski (2010) is 4,000–5,000 word families, few unsimplified texts will reach that range for learners at the A2–B1 level. Two responses are open to the teacher. The first is to choose texts whose language is naturally compact: signs, menus, timetables, short advertisements, captions and headlines carry little running text and a great deal of context. The second is to leave the text untouched and adjust the task, which follows Guariento and Morley's (2001) shift of attention from the authenticity of texts to the authenticity of tasks. Learners may be asked to find a price, a departure time or the main complaint in a review instead of understanding every word. Both responses keep the text genuine while holding the load within reach. The reviewed evidence supports, though it has not tested as a package, a sequence of four steps. The first step is to select a text and check its coverage and exploitability. The second is to teach, before reading or viewing, a small set of key words that the text repeats and that learners are likely to need again; this raises the coverage of the particular text and adds an encounter, a rationale drawn from the coverage studies. The third step directs learners to work on meaning first, through tasks tied to a genuine purpose, and then to notice selected words and phrases, which brings in the engagement that Schmitt (2008) identifies as central to learning. The fourth consolidates: learners use the target words in speech or writing, since composition produced the strongest retention in Hulstijn and Laufer (2001), and they meet the words again through related texts, because related programmes recycle lower-frequency vocabulary (Rodgers & Webb, 2011). Webb and Nation (2017) discuss repetition, retrieval and varied use among the conditions that support vocabulary learning, and the final step puts all three to work.

The motivational findings are encouraging but need careful reading. Peacock's (1997) learners and Gilmore's (2011) students responded well to authentic input, and Gilmore's group even valued the challenge it posed. Readability nonetheless appears among Berardo's (2006) three selection criteria for a reason: input far beyond a learner's reach is unlikely to feel rewarding. The two observations can be reconciled if challenge is treated as a feature of the task, which can be graded, rather than of the text, which cannot. Gilmore's students also worked with awareness-raising tasks, so their reactions cannot be credited to the materials alone. Motivation, in addition, is not vocabulary: the motivational studies reviewed here were not designed to measure word learning, and heightened interest should be regarded as a favourable condition, not as evidence of acquisition. Several limits temper these conclusions. The review rests on the author's selection of sources and cannot claim to be exhaustive. The studies it draws on involve different populations, from Dutch-speaking EFL learners to young adults in Iran and undergraduates in Japan, and young adolescents in Central Asian schools are not among them. Some studies lasted a month or less and relied on tests given soon after instruction, so durability is unknown, while those that report motivation depend partly on self-report. Authenticity itself is defined differently from one study to the next (Gilmore, 2007), so the materials called authentic in one report may not match those in another. Carefully designed classroom experiments with comparison groups, delayed post-tests and vocabulary-specific measures would settle many of these uncertainties.

Conclusion

Authentic materials can strengthen vocabulary teaching, but their effect is conditional rather than automatic. The reviewed research indicates that learners gain words from authentic reading and viewing and usually respond with interest; the size of the gain, however, depends on how much of a text learners already know, how often target words recur and what learners do with the input. Three messages follow for teachers. Treat selection as a vocabulary decision, and check the proportion of known words before a text enters the lesson. Spend preparation time on a few key words and on tasks with a real purpose, not on simplifying the text. Plan return visits to the same words through related materials and through learners' own speech and writing. For research, the priority is to test these ideas where they matter most: in classes of young adolescents with limited out-of-school exposure to English, using comparison groups, vocabulary-specific measures and delayed post-tests. Studies that vary one condition at a time, such as the presence of pre-teaching or the type of follow-up task, would show which elements of the proposed sequence carry the weight.

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