The Perceptions of Kurdish EFL Learners Towards Using English Authentic Reading Materials in The Classroom

Beway Mahmood Saheb[1] & Atta Mostafa Hamamorad[2] & Hameed Hussein Hama-Said[3]

[1,2, &3] English Department, College of Basic Education, University of Halabja, Kurdistan Region, Iraq
Correspondence: Beway Mahmood Saheb, English Department, College of Basic Education, University of Halabja, Kurdistan Region, Iraq
Email: beway.saheb@gmail.com

Abstract: Recently, there has been a trend towards using more authentic reading materials in EFL classrooms. The current study investigates the perceptions of Kurdish EFL learners regarding utilising authentic reading materials in the classroom. The study was an attempt to discover participants' general attitudes towards adopting more authentic reading materials in their classrooms, and to see whether there was any significant difference between the attitudes of the participants. A total of 128 EFL learners participated in the study of which 52 were from Sulaimani Polytechnic University, and 76 from University of Halabja. A questionnaire consisting of 37 items was adopted to collect the data for the present study. Descriptive analysis was used to explore EFL learners' perceptions of English authentic materials, and t-test analysis was used to find out any significant differences between the Polytechnic University and Halabja University EFL learners. The results of the study revealed that Kurdish EFL learners have a positive attitude towards using more authentic reading materials in the classroom at both Universities. The participants also believed that authentic reading materials would introduce them to samples of natural language. They prefer reading more authentic materials and as a result of this, they can improve their language proficiency. Finally, the results also indicated that Sulaimani polytechnic university EFL students had a more responsive and positive attitude towards using authentic reading materials in their classrooms.

Keywords: EFL Learners, Kurdish Learners, Authentic Reading Materials, Reading Comprehension Skill

1. Introduction

Authenticity is a general concept which has been used in various fields such as philosophy, psychology, education etc. Authenticity as a philosophical term 'denotes the genuine, original, true state of human existence' ('Authenticity', 2021, para.1). The concept stems from the understanding that humans 'live or exist in an authentic way and that the genuine sense of self and its relationship with others' (ibid.). In the education context, according to Gilmore (2007), authentic materials have been used in foreign language learning and teaching since a long time ago. In the last three or four decades, 'the use of authentic materials has become common in classroom teaching' (Lee, 1995, p. 323). With the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), authenticity has become a new focus and been intensely debated in the field

of material design and language teaching (Buendgens-Kosten, 2014). According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), authentic materials are natural and unabridged.

Moreover, they are "designed to meet a communicative purpose, directed at people playing their roles in a normal social context" (Widdowson, 1978 as cited in Buendgens-Kosten, 2014, p.89). Furthermore, with the shift towards adopting CLT approaches in teaching English, authentic reading materials have received a great attention and become an indispensable component of CLT (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Cook (2008) also consolidates this notion and states that if EFL learners are not exposed to the diversity and richness of authentic materials, they are "handicapped" (p. 159). Similarly, Scrivener (2011) believes that simplified texts [written for pedagogical purposes] which are taught in the EFL class should be replaced by authentic reading texts since they do not completely reflect what is happening in the real world. The general aim is to know whether learners who learn English as a foreign language have a positive view about these types of texts. More specifically, this paper attempts to show the difference, if any, between the perceptions of the two different participating groups with regard to Authentic Reading Materials (ARM hereafter).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Authenticity

Authenticity is a general concept. In the broadest sense, authenticity means 'realness' or trueness to its origin' (Buendgens-Kosten, 2014, p. 457). In the field of language teaching and learning the word authenticity is used for ''texts (both written and spoken), learning material, tasks, cultural artefacts, multimedia products, forms of assessment, and even types of teachers and audience'' (ibid). In the context of education, according to Bialystok (2017), nowadays, there is a growing tendency towards the promotion of authenticity in the educational contexts, and the quest of authenticity is based on the "philosophical assumptions about the nature of truth, reality, ethics, and, ultimately, the aims of education''. More specifically, authenticity or "realism'' has become the focus for language materials and activities since the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching in the 1970s (Buendgens-Kosten, 2014, p. 457).

2.2 Authentic Reading Materials

Concerning authentic materials, in language teaching, authentic materials refer to materials such as texts, audios or videos which were not originally created for teaching and pedagogical purposes such as newspaper articles, TV programs, and news reports; these materials are considered authentic since they represent ''natural'' and ''realistic'' examples of the target language (Richards and Schmidt, 2010). Furthermore, with regard to authentic reading materials, a text is considered authentic if it is a real example of discourse, "designed to meet a communicative purpose, directed at people playing their roles in a normal social context'' (Widdowson, 1978:89 cited in Buendgens-Kosten, 2014). This type of material or language is different from the language which is used in the textbooks which does not represent a real example of the natural language (Gilmore, 2007).

2.3 Benefits of and Reasons for Adopting ARM in EFL Classroom

Various propositions have been put forward and a great number of studies have been conducted to indicate and investigate the benefits of adopting authentic materials in EFL learners' teaching context. Brantmeier (2008) emphasises that authentic materials should be considered as an indispensable element of teaching a foreign language, especially English, in language teaching curriculum. Also, Oguz and Bahar (2008) maintain that using authentic materials in the EFL classroom heightens the quality of teaching since these materials "connect the students to the social world and enable them to put their theoretical knowledge into practice, they open a way for positive transfer in learning" (p. 334).

On the other hand, authentic reading materials have also gained attention. Morton (1999) points out that authentic reading materials makes EFL learners search for and employ new strategies to deal with and understand these types of texts and this in turn, can enhance their target language writing proficiency and "master basic rhetorical devices" (p. 182). Furthermore, Ellis (1996) states that certain features found in authentic texts and audio materials such as sentence pattern, specific terminologies, organisational features, and jargon cannot be found in the texts and discourses designed and created for the foreign language learning purposes. Additionally, Hadley (2001, p. 97) notes that "use of real or simulated travel documents, hotel registration forms, biographical data sheets, train and plane schedules, authentic restaurant menus, labels, signs, newspapers, and magazines will acquaint students more directly with real language than will any set of contrived classroom materials used alone".

Authentic reading materials have also been proved to have a positive role in contextualising the foreign language and providing learners with real-life situations and experience. Verses to designed reading materials whose focus is on the meaning and content, authentic reading materials can provide learners with the context of every text (Gebhard, 1996). Authentic reading materials can also bridge the gap between inside and outside classroom contexts. They can decrease the gap that exists between the language adopted in the EFL classroom environment and that of the real world and thus, help learners transfer their obtained experience to real-life situations (Gilmore, 2007).

Furthermore, authentic reading materials occupy a significant position in enhancing EFL learners' linguistic competence and adopting them in EFL classroom can raise both learners' awareness of grammatical and lexical characteristics and stylistic features (Carter & Nunan, 2001). Moreover, they are, meant to increase EFL learners' motivation because these various types of texts appeal learners' interest and make reading more enjoyable in addition to giving the learners the feeling of using the real language in real-life situations (Kilickaya, 2004; Nuttall, 1996; Berardo, 2006).

Likewise, it has been confirmed that application of authentic reading materials can raise EFL learners' awareness of and familiarity with the target language culture. Besides, they can be regarded as a "window to culture" (Sherman, 2003, p. 12) or as an influential tool that can contribute to overcome impediments that confine effective target language learning (Kim, 2000). Furthermore, providing authentic reading materials aids EFL learners to develop their individual cultural understanding (McGinnis & Ke, 1992).

2.4 Previous Studies on Authentic Reading Materials

A number of studies have been conducted to test and find out the effects of using authentic reading materials on EFL students' linguistic and non-linguistic competences. Some studies found that using reading material in EFL learning classrooms created a positive attitude towards these materials. Furthermore, they could enrich EFL learners' knowledge of the target culture, improve their language skills, motivate them to read more and create a bridge between their classroom language and real-world language (Guo, 2012; Akbari & Razavi, 2016). Also, in his study on Taiwanese college students, Yu (2006) found that using authentic reading materials resulted in EFL learners' more familiarity with and better understanding of the context and the culture of English-speaking countries.

"English can be fun or boring. It depends on what you read" is a very short statement by one of the thirty-seven participants who took part in a mixed method study conducted by Wikstrom (2016, p. 29) in Sweden. This research aimed at answering three questions, and one of them was to find out the attitudes of Swedish EFL upper elementary students towards the use of authentic reading materials.

Despite the fact that these learners preferred to read textbooks when they were learning English in school, they also asserted the usefulness of authentic reading materials. Furthermore, they had a positive experience with these types of texts.

Abdulhussein (2014) conducted a quantitative study investigating Iraqi Arab EFL learners' attitudes towards using authentic reading materials in which 85 students participated. The findings indicated that the learners had a positive attitude towards these materials, and this study recommended the use of authentic reading materials in EFL context. Similarly, Al Musallam (2009) investigated the attitudes and beliefs of 144 Saudi EFL female learners and found out that they also had a positive perception towards authentic reading materials, and they believed in the use of these types of texts in reading classes. Therefore, the researcher recommended the incorporation of authentic reading materials into EFL Saudi curriculum.

Considering what was mentioned above, it can be perceived that ARM can develop learners' linguistic and non-linguistic abilities. Moreover, ARMs increase EFL learners' motivation and cultural awareness, provide a good exposure to real language, and support a more creative teaching approach in the EFL classroom.

The present research seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are Kurdish EFL learners' general perceptions of using English authentic reading materials in the classroom?
    *   What are EFL learners' opinions about reading in English?
    *   What are EFL learners' opinions about the current reading textbooks used in their classes?
    *   What are EFL learners' opinions about using authentic reading materials such as newspapers, magazines, etc.?
2. Concerning EFL learners' perception of using English authentic reading materials, is there any significant difference between EFL learners at both Sulaimani Polytechnic University and Halabja University?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and Setting

The present study was conducted at two public universities in the Kurdistan region of Iraq: University of Halabja and Sulaimani Polytechnic University. The population of the study included two groups of EFL learners from both Universities. The first group of participants were 76 students (male and female) from the University of Halabja at the English Department. Their major is English Language Teaching. At the university, they study English, linguistics and English literature. In the first two years of their study program, the core modules are mainly listening, speaking, reading, and writing in order to gain competence in language skills and be able to understand other subject matters they study in the last two years of their education. The second group of participants were 52 (male and female) students from three departments of College of Informatics (IT, Database, Networking) at Sulaimani Polytechnic University. Although their major is not English, English is one of their core modules and they study English for academic purposes. The reason for selecting two groups of students was to discover whether there were any significant differences between their perceptions concerning the importance of English authentic reading materials.

3.2 The Instrument

The present study adopted a quantitative research method. A questionnaire was adopted from Enas Ibrahim Al-Musallam (2009) who conducted her study in Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire consisted of 37 statements with a number of items about background information of the participants. The questionnaire was divided into three parts: the opinion of participants on reading in English in general, authentic reading materials, and their preference regarding types of authentic reading materials. Each of the main items was measured based on a Likert scale (5: strongly agree, 4: agree, 3: neutral, 2: disagree, and 1: strongly disagree).

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to administering the questionnaire, a certain date and time was set, and participants were requested to be present on time. The first group of participants who were students from the English department of University of Halabja were gathered in a lecture room of the English department. The participants were thanked for their presence and cooperation in advance and meanwhile, were requested to provide honest and reliable answers to the statements. Then, the purpose of the research was explained, and the participants were assured regarding ethical considerations and that the responses and information they provide, would only be used for this research purpose. Consequently, the hard copies of the questionnaire were distributed on the participants. A sufficient amount of time was given to fill out the questionnaire items while the researchers were available to provide any explanations if needed. Finally, the filled-out questionnaires were collected and kept by the researchers so that their data would be analysed later. As for the second group of participants who were students from college of Informatics of Sulaimani Polytechnic University, the same steps and procedures were taken.

On the other hand, to analyse the obtained data, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was adopted. Prior to administering the T-test, both Shapiro-Wilk's normality test and Skewness and Kurtosis test were carried out to ensure the normal distribution of the gathered data. Then, an independent-sample

T-test as well as descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviation were used to compare and demonstrate any existing differences in perceptions of both groups of the participants i. e., effect size, regarding using authentic reading materials in EFL class. The effect size resembles the relationship, which exists between variables, or the difference, which can be found between groups (Creswell, 2009). The analyses included the results of each group for the three different components of the questionnaire as well as the overall result of each group. The total obtained results were compared to P value 0.05; however, in certain cases, the P value was violated but since the utilised population sample variance was unknown and it was larger than 30 i.e., n > 30 and, therefore; "t" distribution was close to normal.

Table 1: Results of Shapiro-Wilk's Normality Test

dependent variable	University	Shapiro-Wilk	df	P
General opinion regarding reading in English	Halabja	0.85	76	0.0001
	Sulaimani	0.97	52	0.14
Authentic Reading Materials (ARM)	Halabja	0.95	76	0.01
	Sulaimani	0.96	52	0.05
Preference regarding types of ARM	Halabja	0.97	76	0.05
	Sulaimani	0.97	52	0.16
Attitudes (Total)	Halabja	0.97	76	0.06
	Sulaimani	0.98	52	0.43

As it can be seen in Table 1, the assumption of normality was violated in some parts of the data. However, considering that the sample size is greater than 30 in each group, the violation of normality assumption can be neglected.

4. Results

After collecting the data and analysing them using descriptive statistics, the results are presented below:

To answer the first fourth research questions, descriptive statistics was run. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Results of Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Halabja University				Poly-technique University			
	M	SD	Skew	Kurt	M	SD	Skew	Kurt
General opinion regarding reading in English	14.76	2.79	-1.57	2.90	15.50	1.78	0.17	0.08
Authentic reading materials	26.09	5.82	-0.58	-0.36	28.48	5.06	-0.72	0.35
preference regarding types of Authentic reading materials	27.53	4.86	-0.32	1.35	27.88	5.84	-0.24	0.71
Attitudes (Total)	124.49	16.54	-1.11	2.34	132.23	15.13	-0.13	-0.19

Concerning the first research question 'What is Kurdish EFL learners' general perception of using English authentic reading materials in the classroom?', as shown in Table 2, in general, Kurdish EFL learners had a high perception of using English authentic reading materials in the classroom (M= 256.72, SD=31.67).

With respect to the first research sub-question 'What are EFL learners' opinions about reading in English? It can be seen in Table 2 that the opinions of EFL learners were positive about reading in English (M=30.26, SD=4.57).

As far as the second research sub-question 'What are EFL learners' opinions about the current use of authentic reading materials in their classes?' is concerned, the results of the Table 2 shows that EFL learners had positive opinions in this respect. (M=54.57, SD=10.88).

About the third research sub-question 'What are EFL learners' opinions about using authentic reading materials such as newspapers and magazines? It can be observed in Table 2 that EFL learners' opinions about using authentic reading materials such as newspapers and magazines were also positive (M=55.41, SD=10.70).

Second Research Question

To answer the second research question 'Concerning EFL learners' perception of using English authentic reading materials, is there any significant difference between EFL learners at Sulaimani Polytechnic University and Halabja University?', an independent samples t-test was run the results of which are shown in Table 3. However, before running inferential statistics, the normality of the data distribution was checked using Shapiro-Wilk's test. (See Data collection and analysis section above)

Table 3: Results of Independent Samples T-test for the Comparison of Learners of Sulaimani Polytechnic University and Halabja University concerning general perceptions

	Halabja University		Poly-technique University		df	t	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
Attitudes	124.49	16.54	132.23	15.13	126	2.69	0.01

As it can be seen in Table 3, there was a significant difference (t (126) =2.69, p<.05) between EFL learners' perception of using English authentic reading materials at Sulaimani Polytechnic University and Halabja University. To be more specific, the Polytechnic University students had more positive perceptions.

Table 4: Results of Independent Samples T-test for the Comparison of Learners of Sulaimani Polytechnic University and Halabja University concerning general opinion regarding reading in English

	Halabja University		Poly-technique University		df	t	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
General opinion regarding reading in English	14.76	2.79	15.50	1.78	126	1.68	0.09

As it is shown in table 4, the mean score of University of Halabja learners regarding "general opinion about reading in English" was seen to be 14.76 while that of Sulaimani Polytechnic University was observed to be 15.50 which shows a higher mean score for Sulaimani Polytechnic University learners. As for the Standard Deviation for both groups, the one of Halabja University learners is seen to be 2.79 whereas that of Sulaimani Polytechnic University learners is 1.78. This is an indicator of the fact that Sulaimani Polytechnic University learners were more homogeneous in the aforementioned variable.

Table 5: Results of Independent Samples T-test for the Comparison of Learners of Sulaimani Polytechnic University and Halabja University concerning the use of authentic reading materials

	Halabja University		Poly-technique University		df	t	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
Authentic Reading Materials	26.09	5.82	28.48	5.06	126	2.40	0.02

As it can be seen in table 5, the mean score of Sulaimani Polytechnic University learners regarding authentic English reading materials was 28.48 which was higher than that of University of Halabja participants who scored 26.09. Moreover, the Standard Deviation for Sulaimani Polytechnic University learners was recorded at 5.06; however, the same statistical value for learners from Halabja University reached 5.82.

Table 6: Results of Independent Samples T-test for the Comparison of Learners of Sulaimani Polytechnic University and Halabja University concerning the preference regarding types of Authentic reading materials

	Halabja University		Poly-technique University		df	t	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
preference regarding types of Authentic reading materials	27.53	4.86	27.88	5.84	126	0.38	0.71

As the results in table 6 denote, Kurdish EFL learners of both Halabja and Sulaimani Polytechnic Universities demonstrated a positive attitude towards different types of authentic materials mentioned in the questionnaire respectively (M= 27.53, SD=4.86) and (M=27.88, SD= 5.84); however, the learners from Sulaimani polytechnic university were slightly more positive about and had a greater preference for reading various authentic materials.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The main aim of this study was to investigate the perceptions of Kurdish EFL learners towards authentic reading materials. Concerning the first research question which focused on the Kurdish EFL learners'

perceptions at both Halabja and Sulaimani polytechnic universities about authentic reading materials, they generally showed a positive attitude in this regard. On the other hand, EFL learners of both universities had also a positive perception about reading in English in general and believed that reading greatly contributes to learning English language and this is in line with Noor (2011)'s notion which considers reading as one of the most prominent elements in language learning. It can, furthermore, provide EFL learners with a comprehensible input which includes linguistic and cultural elements and thus, increases their cultural and linguistic awareness of the target language. The Kurdish EFL learners also confirmed the importance of reading and the influence it has on other skills of the English language. Reading can develop learners' writing skill through increasing their mastery of textual characteristics of the written language and grammatical structures (Miriam et al., 2003). Moreover, reading can positively affect vocabulary knowledge and consequently, speaking and listening skills by leading to incidental vocabulary acquisition (Lechmann, 2007) and vocabulary growth (Nunan, 1995) since vocabulary is regarded as a crucial component for both skills.

The combination of mean scores of EFL learners from both institutions in table 2 indicates that there is a positive perception towards the use of authentic reading materials. This is generally in line with Barzani et. al. (2022) who investigated EFL learners' attitudes towards the authentic materials including reading in the Iraqi Kurdistan context. The idea of supporting ARM by the Kurdish EFL students; moreover, comes from the fact that ARM can assist in bridging the gap between the need of the learners who aim at gaining communicative competence and the rich content of any ARM pieces of text which facilitates foreign language learning. In addition, AbdulHussein (2014) who conducted a very similar study in the Iraqi province of Misan populated by Arabs, found that Iraqi Arab EFL learners view ARM positively. Furthermore, the studies mentioned earlier reported a great tendency towards the incorporation of ARM in parallel with educational language textbooks or simplified reading materials. The participants of the present study confirm what the previous studies have found that EFL learners prefer using various ARM such as newspaper articles, magazines, and more importantly short stories. These are nowadays available online and EFL learners can easily access them and develop their language proficiency.

Another aim of the research paper was to discover whether there was any significant difference between the perceptions of two groups of participants from two public universities. According to the results of the study, the two groups of participants were positive about using English reading materials in the class. The Kurdish EFL learners from Sulaimani Polytechnic University were more positive and showed more interest in these types of reading materials ((M= 256.72, SD=31.67).

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