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Authentic Materials for Learning English: A Study on EFL Students in Aceh¹

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Abstract

This study explores the students' opinions on the use of authentic materials and whether these materials motivate them in learning English in the classroom. Authentic materials have been claimed by many experts to give a positive impact on learners' interest to learn a foreign language (in the classroom). Therefore, this study was conducted to understand the responses of the sample students about the use of authentic texts in teaching-learning English, especially for university students in the EFL context, such as in Indonesia. The data was gathered from 50 first-year students of English. This research used a questionnaire proposed by Peacock (1997) to collect data on the use of authentic materials and motivation in the learning process. The questionnaire was distributed to the students. After analysing the data, it was found that the learners were mostly motivated by using authentic materials because they are exciting to be discussed in the class, interesting to learn and appealing to the learners. The findings in the present research appear to be similar to those from previous research studies who claim that when learners use authentic materials in the learning process, the overall class interest in learning a foreign language increases significantly.

Keywords: Authentic materials, motivation, teaching English, EFL students.

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1. INTRODUCTION

EFL teachers believe that authentic materials can motivate students (Peacock, 1997). Authentic materials can be interpreted as exposure to real language and its use in its own community (Kilickaya, 2004). In relation to learners' motivation, Dörnyei (2005) states that adequate motivation of the individual may uphold the long term goals of the second language learning process.

Prior studies have indicated that the influential roles of motivation, attitude and learning situation contribute to longer term attainment of the target language, especially L2 and FL (Dörnyei, 2005). Furthermore, Tremblay and Gardner (1995) agree that L2 achievement is related not only to language aptitude but also to motivation. Therefore, it is very important for students to be motivated in order to succeed in learning the target language. In the English Language Training (ELT) classroom, teachers play a significant role which may influence the students' motivation to learn English because they should create a "supportive and challenging learning environment, also facilitating the development of the learners' own motivational thinking, beyond simply identifying their original orientation" (McDonough & McDonough, 1997, p. 370). Therefore, teachers are motivators to the students in the ELT classroom.

Accordingly, the materials used and the activities conducted in the classroom should be varied and interesting in order to increase the students' motivation to learn English. Lightbown and Spada (2006) believe that varying activities, tasks and materials are able to increase students' motivation. The material should also cover all four language skills, namely the 'productive skills' of speaking and writing and the 'receptive skills' of reading and listening. Input and output are believed to be influential factors that should be received by those involved in L2 or FL learning. Ellis (2004) explains that the more input that the students receive, the more they will learn, and the faster. Following this, the use of authentic material is believed to be beneficial for learners for increasing their motivation so it needs to be considered by English teachers in the ELT classroom.

Considering the importance of authentic materials in assisting the students to increase their interest in learning a foreign language, therefore this paper examined the students' responses towards the use of authentic materials in the classroom. And so, the research question for this study is: What are the students' responses on the use of authentic texts in teaching-learning English?

The findings of this study is expected to provide useful information for both planners and lecturers at the university level in Indonesia, especially in providing the appropriate materials that can help achieve the English learning goals for EFL students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 English in Indonesia

In Indonesia, English is treated as a foreign language. In primary schools, English has been introduced as a local content subject and not as a compulsory subject. According to the policy of the Minister of Education and Culture of Republic of Indonesia No. 0487/4/1992 and No. 060/U/1993 focusing on the basic curriculum,

English – as one of the local content subjects at primary school beside Arabic – may be started at grade four (Wijayati, 2008). The Indonesian government believes that students at this grade, with age usually nine to ten years old, will already have the ability to speak Indonesian well. While in middle and senior high school, English is a compulsory language to learn. According to Smith (1991, p. 41), English in Indonesia functions as:

- a tool for research and development of modern knowledge, culture, and technology,
- a tool for international relations,
- a tool for practical needs, e.g. for use in tourism, trade, diplomacy, and military affairs,
- a linguistic resource to enrich Indonesians.

Braine (2005) claim that the teaching-learning of English in Indonesia has been considered as far from satisfactory. This is an impact from the lack of exposure to English communication, the poor attitude of students to learn English and the lack of highly competent English teachers. Motivation is also considered one of the factors related to this issue (Dardjowidjojo, 1996, as cited in Kam & Wong, 2003, p. 9). For example, in 2000, the average score for English in the middle school students' final examinations was 5, on a scale of 0 to 10 (Braine, 2005).

In informal contexts, English has been introduced since kindergarten and elementary school, especially for those living in urban areas in the country. On the other hand, rural areas introduce English with lots of limitations due to lack of well qualified English teachers and inadequate facilities such text books and authentic resource books, lack of language laboratories or equipment like recorders and VCD players, etc. Moreover, only a small number of English courses are available in the rural areas.

2.2 Authentic Materials

The use of authentic materials in the ELT classroom seems to have a positive effect on students' motivation. Authentic materials are likely to be more interesting than artificial ones, such as course books – which are intentionally created for language learning purposes, since the materials may promote the real language used by an English community itself. Little and Singleton (1991) say that authentic materials are more enjoyable for learners, who consequently feel more motivated as they are brought closer to the target language culture. The students may also feel that they learn the real language, which is exactly the language they need to interact and communicate with in the real world.

The concept of using authentic materials in the teaching processes has now become popular. Through authentic materials, learners get exposure to 'real' English, not an artificial one. And it is believed that this will increase students' motivation in learning the language as they will learn from something that is exactly the same as that which native speakers will learn from (Morton, 1999). Apart from what the theorists have said about the complex context of authentic materials, various researches have presented some reasons for teachers to use authentic materials in their classrooms:

- authentic materials increase learners' motivation and create an enjoyable teaching learning environment (Peacock, 1997; Kilickaya, 2004).

- authentic materials provide a bridge between the classroom and the real world, so language learners are closely exposed to the target language and the target community (Wong, Kwok & Choi, 1995; Martinez, 2002; Morrison, 1989).
- authentic materials contain various text types and language styles (Peacock, 1997; Martinez, 2002).
- authentic materials offer essential support in designing curriculum for a specific group of learners (Wong, Kwok & Choi, 1995; Peacock, 1997).
- authentic materials are available which are suitable for every level of language learner (Guariento & Morley, 2001; Karpova, 1999).

Authentic texts should be materials that are not taken from second language learners, it must be materials that are used by native speakers in their daily life, for example, articles from newspapers, poems, American pop songs, some English advertisements, and so on (Peacock, 1997). Oguz and Bahar (2008) add that in order to have effective authentic materials in teaching the language, there are several factors that have to be considered, for example the learners' needs, interests, age, language levels, expectations and language goals.

Gower (2004) states that artificial text simplification might generate less than ideal conditions since the language is often altered; this can cause meaningful communication and significant framework to be lost in teaching examples. The process of simplification may make learning more difficult. Therefore formal English language learning often does not apply to a daily authentic language situation. Language learners need to get exposure to authentic materials in order to know how the real language out there is used. It is expected that through the use of authentic materials, learners' interest in learning English will be increased.

To increase the quality of education for students, creativity and effectiveness in teaching-learning strategies should be used. One way to fulfil this need is using authentic materials in the class (Oguz & Bahar, 2008). Wong, Kwok and Choi (1995) define authentic materials as materials that were taken from the real world without being prepared for teaching and learning English purposes. These materials can be written and audio visual materials from various sources, including original textbooks in English for other subjects.

Peacock (1997) says that many authors have claimed that authentic materials are intrinsically more interesting and stimulating compared to non-authentic materials in learning a foreign language. However Guariento and Morley (2001) have argued that authentic materials are not suitable for all language learners, particularly for students in lower levels, as they may create de-motivation, confusion and frustration. Wong, Kwok and Choi (1995) also note that authentic materials can be distinguished by three points: the genuineness of time, location and people. These three factors give the students familiarity with the materials and the ability to relate the context with their own experiences and knowledge.

3. METHODS

A group of 50 students was selected as the sample for this research. The students were from first year at the university. The aim of the study was to find out the

motivational change in learning English involving using authentic materials versus using non-authentic materials.

A questionnaire was used to gather data for this research. This questionnaire had 5 closed-ended questions, and a Likert scale. The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect the opinions of the sample students about the use of authentic texts in teaching-learning English EFL.

The authentic text chosen for this study was entitled “*Dubai Skyscraper World’s Tallest*”. It is taken from <http://news.bbc.co.uk>. It describes one of the greatest buildings in the world, which is in Dubai. While the non-authentic or teaching text was taken from a Workbook - *Grammar Dimensions: Form, Meaning, and Use - 4*. The non-authentic article also tells about a well-known shopping centre in the world. The length of each story was almost the same, about 250 words.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Respondents’ Responses to Each Statement in the Questionnaire

4.1.1. Statement 1

For statement 1, most students ticked “agree,” where 68% agreed that “authentic texts are interesting.” Another 16% chose “strongly agree.” This is followed by 8% who went with “disagree” and the same amount for “neither agree nor disagree”. Lastly 4% selected “strongly disagree” that “*authentic materials are interesting to be used in class to learn English*”.

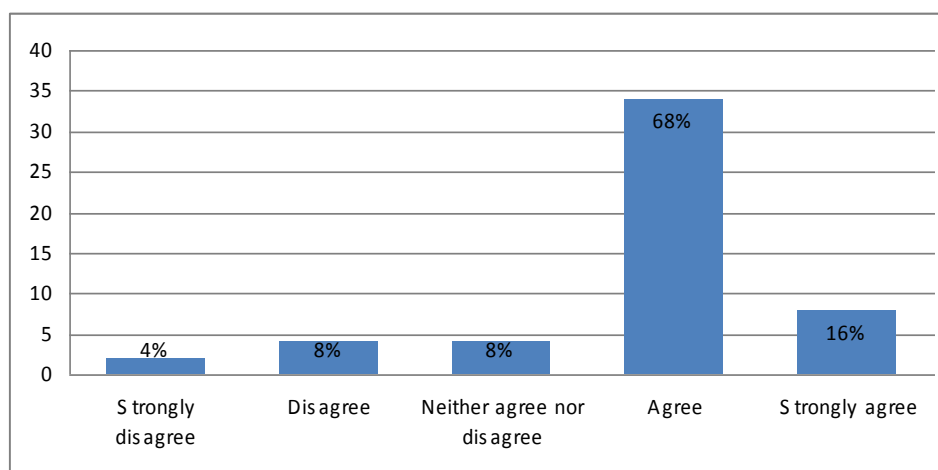


Figure 1. “Authentic texts are interesting”.

4.1.2 Statement 2

For statement 2, 56% chose to “agree” that “*authentic texts are very enjoyable to read.*” This was followed by 16% who “strongly agree” with the statement and another

20% that “neither agree nor disagree.” The percentage of respondents who chose to “disagree” was 8%, while none chose “strongly disagree” to this assertion.

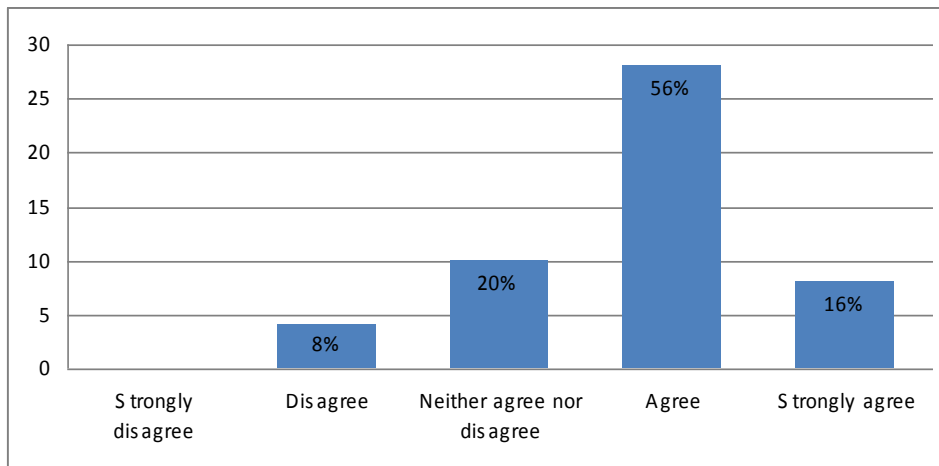


Figure 2. “Authentic texts are very enjoyable to read”.

4.1.3 Statement 3

For this statement, “authentic texts are exciting to discuss in class”, 48% of participants gave a very positive response, 44% for “agree”, and 8% “disagree” about this topic.

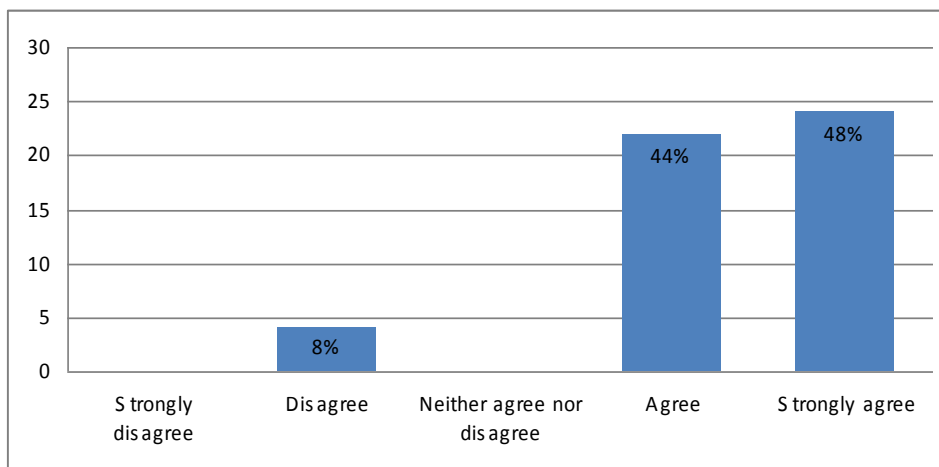


Figure 3. “Authentic texts are exciting to discuss in class”.

4.1.4 Statement 4

The response for the statement “authentic texts are appealing to me” in statement 4 mostly received a positive response, with 64% of the respondents agreeing with it. This was followed by 20% who chose “neither agree nor disagree” and another 16% chose “strongly agree” with this assertion. No respondents chose “strongly disagree” or “disagree.”

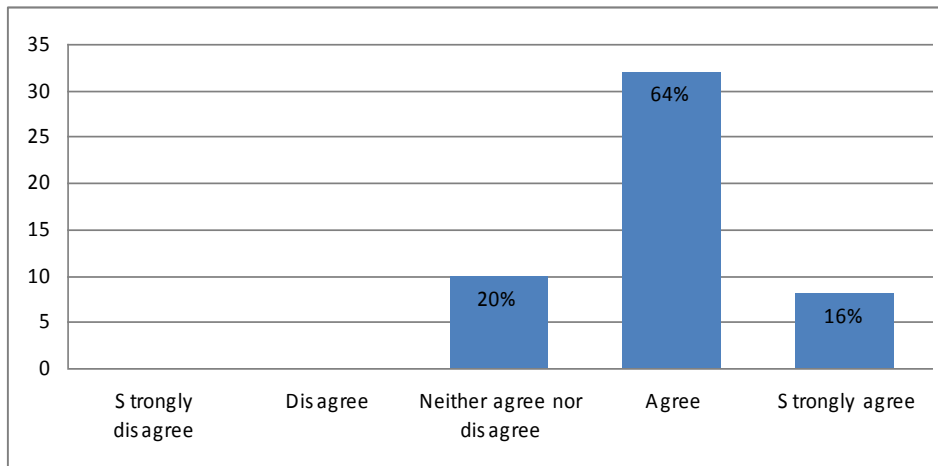


Figure 4. “Authentic texts are appealing to me”.

4.1.5 Statement 5

The last statement, number 5, is “it is easy for me to absorb the content of authentic texts.” Most respondents, 40% “strongly agree” with it. Another 32% chose “agree”, while 28% preferred “neither to agree nor disagree.” None chose “strongly disagree” or “disagree” for this statement.

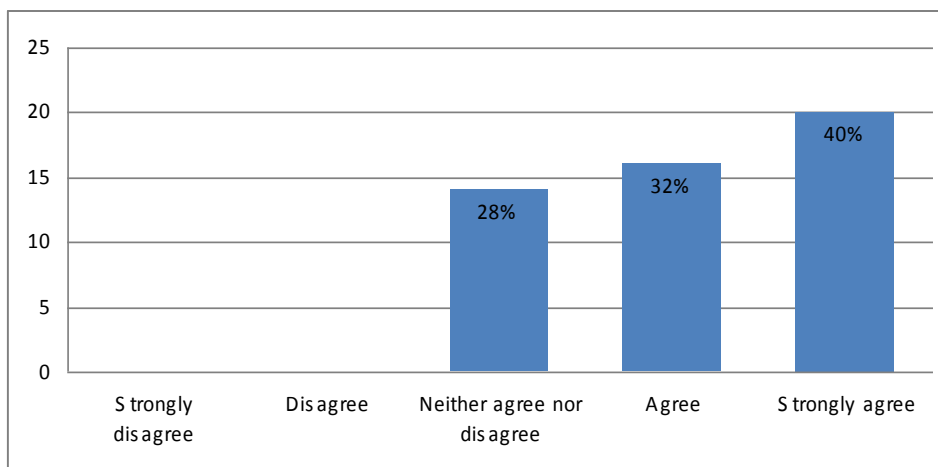


Figure 5. “It is easy for me to absorb the content of authentic text”.

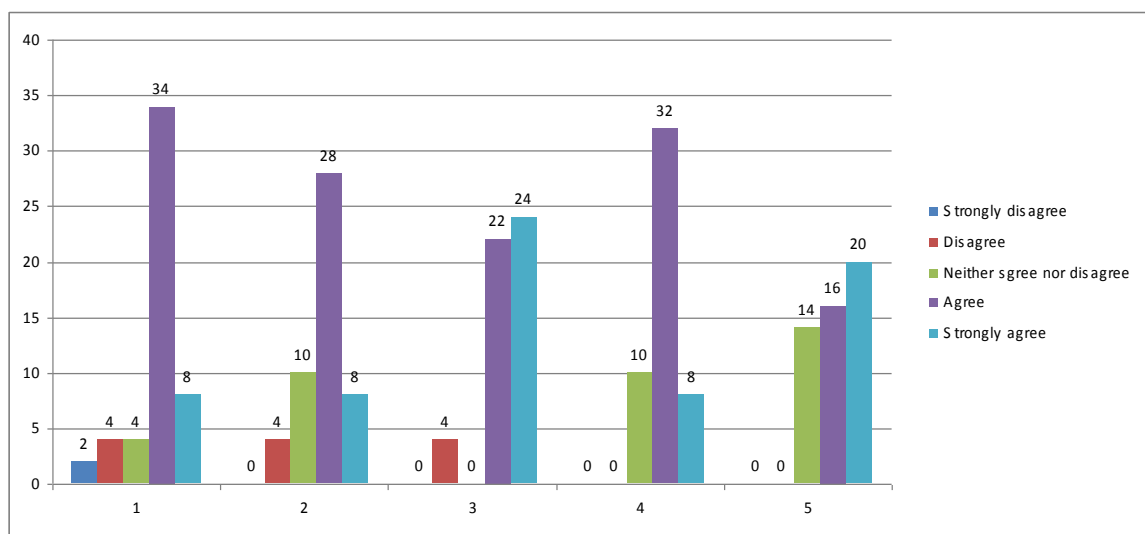
4.2 The Mean Score for Each Statement

To provide a general description of the data analysis above, the mean score (\bar{x}) for each statement in the questionnaire was calculated. The mean score for each statement is set out below.

Table 1. Mean scores for each statement in the questionnaire.

Score>>	No of participants					
	1	2	3	4	5	(\bar{x})
Statement Number						
1	2	4	4	32	8	3.960 = 4
2	0	4	10	28	8	3.800 = 4
3	0	4	0	22	24	4.320 = 4
4	0	0	10	32	8	3.960 = 4
5	0	0	14	16	20	4.120 = 4

The mean score for each statement was then ranked based on the highest score to the lowest score in order to make it easy to determine the interest of the learners in using authentic materials for learning English.

**Figure 6.** Mean score tabulation of each statement in the questionnaire.

The results show that the respondents' most significant motivation to use authentic materials in learning English as a FL in statement 3, where 46 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "*authentic materials are exciting to discuss in class*". Again for the second sources of motivation, 40 respondents agree or strongly agree with both statement 1 that "*authentic materials are interesting to learn*" and statement 4 that "*authentic materials are appealing to me.*"

The third motivation is from 36 respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with statement 2 "*authentic texts are very enjoyable to read.*" and with statement 5 "*it is easy for me to absorb the content of authentic materials.*"

4.3 Discussion

The findings show that authentic materials are appealing to the learners. It seems that the students found the authentic materials more attractive than artificial materials. If various interesting activities are performed in the classroom which is appropriate to the students' needs, and likely to be engaged in and enjoyed by the students, it is expected the students' motivation will increase.

The findings in the present research are similar to those from Peacock (1997) who claimed that when learners used authentic materials for learning, overall class interest increased significantly. Moreover, the interest in learning English, especially in the long term, is highly essential. As Dörnyei (2005) states that the most important goal in learning English is to be able to use it in the long term, not only in the short term, such as learning English only for the sake of passing an exam. Moreover, the recent situation and condition in Indonesia relating to a greater amount of foreign people working in the country, particularly in Aceh, may lead to an increasing number of students who would want to practice their English.

Moreover, the findings from the present study undoubtedly have pedagogical implications for the students, particularly in terms of developing appropriate classroom activities, which will fall in with statement 5 “*it is easy for me to absorb the content of authentic materials.*” As Peacock (1997) says, authentic materials contain topics of interest to students and encourage reading for pleasure, and they are practical and real because they use valid linguistics. And Peacock (1997) believes that the levels of learners in task behaviour, concentration, and participation in the target activity may increase if their teachers use appropriate authentic materials in their classrooms. Nonetheless, Kam and Wong (2003, p. 8) argue that the learning of English in Indonesia has been considered less of a success. It appears that other factors influence the success of students in learning English in Indonesia beside the motivator factor is the material used in the classroom or teaching methodology used by teacher). Darjowidjojo (1996), as cited in Kam and Wong (2003, p. 8) believes that the lack of students motivation, poor attitude of students to learning English, and a shortage of teachers adequately competent in the language lead to such a low ability in English of students in Indonesia. Additionally, Tan (2005:55) also explains that the reasons behind declining English standards among students are likely to be a shortcoming in the teaching and learning methods. Therefore, teachers are urged to use appropriate authentic materials when teaching in the classroom. Because at the university levels in Indonesia, the lecturers have freedom to select their own materials, since autonomy in that is given to the institutions of higher education by the Ministry of Education, as long as they fulfil the government’s general nation-strengthening guidelines (see Bradford, 2007). Therefore, the institutions are able to develop their own curricula to meet their students’ needs, and to provide relevant, motivating lessons. In this respect, using appropriate authentic materials and promoting activities which are interesting may well enhance the learning environment and assist the students’ interest to learn English.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The main purpose of this study was studying the students’ responses towards the use authentic materials for learning English as a foreign language. The findings show that authentic materials are more interesting to the learners in learning English in the classroom. Therefore, it is suggested that teachers use authentic classroom materials, besides artificial materials, and to mimic authentic activities which can be useful for the students.

Although the present study has indicated that authentic materials are motivating to the students to learn English, it is clear that the study has a number of limitations.

Firstly, the study employed a small sample, which was only a limited number of respondents from the English Education Department at Syiah Kuala University. Additionally, the results of this study may not be generalized to other students learning English in other programs or departments offered by Syiah Kuala University or other universities in Aceh, Indonesia. Hence, a bigger sample may be useful for future research. The study also only covered a small area of motivation, since it only focused on 5 statements about the use of authentic materials in the questionnaire given to the learners. Thus, a consideration of a larger area of students' motivation to learn English in other provinces in Indonesia may be extended as the future research to be carried out by other researchers.

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