Opinions and Comments of Cram Schools’ Teachers’ and Students’ Preferences on Using Six Authentic Materials Activities in the Cram Schools in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

The study discusses the students’ preference on six types of authentic materials as an alternative assessment. Moreover, how teachers and students respond to authentic materials activities in the classroom and teachers’ comments and observations on using those materials will be studied. The six-month experimental investigation provides great insights and examines, by interviewing seven cram school teachers, how those authentic materials affect the cram school effectiveness. The purpose of this study is to examine (1) what the students’ preferences are on the six types of authentic materials designed by the researcher, and (2) what are the opinions or comments of cram schools’ teachers on using authentic materials?

The population sample consisted of seven teachers of seven cram schools in Taiwan and a total of 152 students who participated in this study. The findings of this study can help both cram school leaders and cram school educators to plan appropriate curriculum in improving cram school effectiveness and teaching quality.

Keywords: preference; authentic materials; observations; opinions; cram schools
Introduction

Learning English is popular, important, and is a trend in Taiwan because it is an international language. It can be used for traveling in the world, communicating in international business, and gaining knowledge of technology, and so forth. Therefore, many Taiwanese parents send their children to language cram schools to learn English in order to get a competitive educational advantage. According to Chen (1996), there are one million children who go to cram schools to learn English. In the 1990s, the numbers of students who attended exam-oriented cram schools increased.

The goal of cram schools is to help students get good grades on school textbook examinations. Students’ parents believe that, through strict discipline and peer group pressure, their children may be more diligent and more motivated to study harder and obtain higher levels of education. For students who get good grades on the academic tests, cram schools give rewards, such as scholarships, back-payment of tutoring fees, and other rewards. In general, many students and their parents believe that tutorial lessons were helpful to enhance daytime school lessons (Kwok, 2004).

The study concentrated on students’ preferences of authentic materials, the difficulties students might face when using authentic materials in learning English, and the opinions or comments of cram schools’ teachers and students on using authentic materials. The objective of the study was to find what types of authentic materials students preferred and were motivated to use in class from the six selected types of authentic materials. The last objective was to investigate any improvement from using authentic materials.

Authentic materials (either written or spoken) are items designed for native speakers of English to use in the classroom and they are not designed for language students per se (Caroline, 2005; Martinez, 2002; Harmer, 1983). In short, authentic materials are produced by “Native speakers for native speakers.” (Duquette, Dunnett & Papalia, 1987, p.481; Rogers, 1988, p.467)

Real authentic materials have not been edited and simplified or prepared for language teaching purposes. Therefore, teachers need to act as a guide to manage the language quantity and ensure the materials are comprehensible. When teachers consider using authentic materials, they need to focus on a topic, what materials are appropriate to fit students’ target language area, how these apply to the four skills, and how they meet students’ needs and interests. Moreover, teachers must learn how to identify authentic items for their “applicability and adaptability” for classroom use (Dumitrescu, 2000; Maingay, 1980; Rogers, 1988).

Chavez (1994) reported that the use of authentic texts “has become integral to communicative and proficiency-oriented foreign language teaching because of their essential contributions to the development for real-life linguistic.” (p.2) Dulay, Burt, and
Krashen (1982) defined authentic materials as “the natural communication task.” (p.247) However, there are many issues relating to authentic texts in the classroom, such as how to assess an authentic text’s difficulty and validity; how to grade texts and tasks; how to know if students are willing to face the difficulty with authentic texts, what the definition of authenticity itself, and what kinds of situations can be ranked as authentic.

In addition, the notion of "real life" in this context is itself dubious. As Bachman (1990) explained, when we consider the great variety of language use—“Different contexts, purposes, topics, participants—it is not clear how we might go about distinguishing ‘real life’ from ‘non- real life’ language use in any meaningful way, so that authenticity in terms of real life performance are problematic.”(p.9-10) Authenticity is defined as one of four types and a comparison of genuineness and authenticity will also be addressed as follows:

Four Types of Authenticity

1. Authenticity of the texts, which we may use as, input data for our learners. (What is authentic text?)
2. Authenticity of the learners’ own interpretation of such texts. (For whom is it authentic?)
3. Authenticity of the tasks conducive to language learning. (For what authentic purposes?)
4. Authenticity of the actual social situation of the language classroom (What is authentic to the social situation of the classroom?). (Breen, 1985, p. 61)

Comparison of Genuineness and Authenticity

Taylor (1994) specified that many people are confused by the definitions of “genuineness” and “authenticity.” The confusion generates debate, and people complain there are no genuine questions, no genuine communication, and no real use of language. Therefore, Widdowson (1979) defined that “Genuineness is a characteristic of the passage itself and is an absolute quality. Authenticity is a characteristic of the relationship between the passage and the reader and it has to do with appropriate response.” (p. 80) In short, “Authenticity is a matter of the receiver’s relationship to the material.” (Widdowson, 1978, p. 79-81)

“Authentic” and “authenticity” have been applied to most aspects of second language teaching:
1. Language.
2. Language teaching activities.
3. Text (materials and lessons).
4. Student/teacher interactions
5. Student involvement in activities. (Byrd & Reid, 1995, p.1)

Furthermore, the difficulties faced by teachers and students, and the suggestions may provide further reference to those who are interested in using different teaching methods in English classes in cram schools.

The findings can help determine if there is a need to add authentic materials into cram schools and as a guide for increasing the effectiveness of teaching English. In addition, the findings can be useful data for educators or researchers in follow-up studies to determine which types of authentic materials students prefer, and what could be added to future textbooks. It is hoped this study will help cram school children, teachers, and educators in Taiwan by providing insight and useful suggestions for cram school English classes.

**METHODOLOGY**

Questionnaires were used for both teachers and students in order to know their attitudes toward those authentic materials. Six different types of authentic materials (songs, stories, ads, self-readings, menus, and children’s letters) were selected from the authentic sources and designed by the researcher for this experiment. Each material can be used one time a week, adding in to the regular curriculum for 30 minutes. Six types of materials need to take a term and be added into the curriculum every week. Teachers rotated the six authentic materials two times in the three-month test. Another two rotations of authentic materials were done in the six month test. The purpose of this study is to examine (1) what students’ preferences are on the six types of authentic materials designed by the researcher, and (2) what are the opinions or comments of cram schools’ teachers on using authentic materials?

The population in this study was limited because of the cram schools’ culture. (Some cram schools have their own curriculum). Therefore, a total of seven different cram schools’ owners volunteered to participate in this research. Seven Chinese English teachers participated by doing the experiment for six months. The targeted sample for the study was the students in different cram schools. There were 95 students from different levels in the control group and 57 students were randomly assigned in the experiment group from different cram schools in Taiwan.

**Research Limitations**

1. Authentic materials are difficult to define; therefore, it is also difficult to select the proper materials for the experiment to fit all the levels of students.
2. Six types of authentic materials (songs, stories, ads, self-readings, menus, and children’s letters) do not represent all authentic materials. There are many good sources of authentic materials that can be used in cram schools. However, because of cram school environmental limitations, use of TV, videos or computers is inconvenient.

3. There was difficulty gaining access to cram schools and finding teachers to do the experiment for six months (long experiment time) in crams schools.

4. Six months is a long period of time to keep the same students in the same class. In order to make more profit, the cram school owners might combine students from different classes into a larger class; therefore, many teachers doing the experiment may have to quit half way, especially at the beginning of the summer vacation.

5. The population in this study was limited because of the cram schools’ culture. (Some cram schools have their own curriculum).

Results and discussion

Table 1 shows that the result of teachers’ evaluations of the usefulness of the six authentic materials is, in order, self-reading (mean=2.88), songs (mean=2.71), menus (mean=2.63), ads (mean=2.5), stories of listening exercises (mean=2), and children’s letters (mean=1.86). In this study, teachers indicated that self-study is the best authentic material to use in the cram schools. Songs and menus were also useful in class.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-reading</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>.641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Songs</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>1.113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Menus</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>.744</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisements</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>.548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories of listening exercises</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>.756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s letters</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>.900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The result of students’ evaluations was different from teachers’ evaluations on these six authentic materials. According to Table 2, students preferred menus, ads, and self-reading. Both teachers and students chose the same two materials (menus and self-reading) in the top three authentic materials list. Furthermore, students did not really
enjoy songs as teachers did. One material that, surprisingly, all students enjoyed was menus.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Menus</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>.812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisements</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>1.287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reading</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>1.127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Songs</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>1.124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Letters</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>1.216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories of listening exercises</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>1.191</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Opinions and Comments of Cram Schools’ Teachers by Using Authentic Materials

**Teachers’ Observations and Comments for the Menu Activity**

“Students were interested in knowing foods and they want to know the ingredients of each dish. Moreover, students were motivated to know the currency exchange from US dollars to NT dollars. Students wanted to learn the food on the menus in both English and Chinese and had the willingness to learn how to order food. They even asked to make food and taste food together.”

“Students are really excited about learning menus; I don’t really know why. Students felt interesting and enjoyed the class.”

**Teachers’ Observations and Comments for the Activity of Student Self-study**

“This is the first time students read so many books; most of the students just saw the pictures instead of reading the texts. One month later, I asked students to write down the words they did not know for which they had to consult the dictionary and assigned them as homework. After that, they really read the books. Three books really matched the reading section in my textbook. So, we read the story and had a good time. In the beginning they did show their interests but several weeks later, I could see they lost interest of these books.”

**Teachers’ Observations and Comments on the Stories for Listening Exercise**

“Most of the students found the stories were hard to understand. However, children like to hear stories; they quite expected me to explain the stories to them. It was a time when they were all so quiet and concentrating on listening. Students loved the stories. It also required students’ imagination to know what happened in the stories. Sometimes, the stories were too long and students lost interest at the end.”

“If the stories on the listening exercise could be accompanied by some colorful pictures, that would be better. The pace of the stories was too fast, but the voices (sound effects) of
the stories were interesting, and students liked to imitate the sounds. Three months later students’ had better response, and I found this exercise assisted their listening ability; moreover, explanations were needed. ”

**Teachers’ Observations and Comments on Songs**

“Interest in songs seemed to be less and less as students got older." I found it interesting that boys did not like songs but girls had an interest in songs. Some songs were easy and with vivid melody and the students loved them, too. So, we sang them together happily.”

“Students felt the songs were interesting, fun, and vivid, and they asked to listen more times, and they wanted to know more about the songs, and they required listening to the songs before the class started.”

**Teachers’ Observations and Comments for the Advertisement Activity**

“At the first month, although students did not understand the meaning of the content too well, they enjoyed the teacher’s explanation on the ads a lot. I found five months later that students read the advertisements which downloaded from the websites; students were more familiar with how a webpage introduces products, and they were able to find the information and answer the questions easily. ”

“The first time I used the advertisement in class, students were curious about the products on the Internet and wanted to see the real products. For the longer advertisements, students had no patience to read the whole article, but they were interested in the toys which were shown on the ads. The handouts of the ads would be better shown in color pictures, I think it would be helpful to gain more students’ attention. Students liked the game to look up the vocabulary, but they didn’t like to read.”

**Teachers’ Observations and Comments on the Children’s Letters**

“It is good for students to learn how to write a letter, although the letters are a bit difficult, but for the good students, they could still understand the main ideas of the letters. Children’s letters were boring for the children. Some of the letters were difficult for the students to understand, and I spent quite a lot of time to explain what the letters were about. One of children’s letters was talking about Christians and God. I loved it myself, even though the students were not Christians, but after I explained, they all enjoyed it. ”

“It is helpful to let students know how to write a letter and the syntax. Students also found the letters were interesting. After one month, some students would use the Internet to search for some information on their own, even though they could not understand the entire context. But the parents of the students felt their learning motivations were increasing. Students felt interested and liked to read the children’s letters because something similar happened at their ages, and there were things related to their daily lives.
The vocabulary in the letters was difficult for their level; sometimes they did not want to read the letters because they were difficult.”

Conclusion

The purpose of using authentic materials was developing practical language skills (Saito, 1994). The finding of this study, incorporated with the result of some empirical studies, has shown that good authentic materials can enhance a teacher’s teaching ability and motivate students’ learning, resulting in positive gains by learners (Shrum & Glisa, 1994). Wolfe (1993) posited that knowledgeable teachers who knew how to integrate new technologies and evaluate, develop, and use teaching materials into textbook oriented classrooms for the 21st century were needed. Moreover, instructors need to carefully select materials in order to keep students’ interest high (Young, 1993).

Filice and Sturino (2002) found that authentic materials reflect, “the interests and the needs of the language learners; then learning becomes meaningful, worthwhile, and enjoyable.” (p.62) However, Joiner, Adkins, and Eykyn (1989) suggested that it is not necessary for students to use authentic materials every day. Researchers discovered that typically they use one activity of authentic material for about 15-20 minutes per week. Teachers need to pay serious consideration to the fact that generally, it takes three to five years to develop students’ oral proficiency and four to seven years to reach academic English proficiency (FAQs on SLA, 2006). Therefore, it is a daunting task for both teachers and learners.

In conclusion, the result showed that students preferred menus, ads, and self-reading as authentic materials; teachers might consider adding these materials into their curriculums. Teachers’ observations and comments from this study are also valuable to other cram school teachers. It is meaningful to research the topic on authentic materials because this is not only beneficial to students, but also helps teachers to know that a balanced curriculum on authentic materials is required.
References


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