Attitude of Students and Instructors
toward Authentic Materials
in Selected Adult TESL Programs

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Abstract
The purpose of this study is to examine English as a Second Language (ESL) students’ and ESL instructors’ attitudes toward authentic materials which included resources and activities (Kilickaya, 2004). The findings indicated that both ESL instructors and ESL students had positive attitudes toward authentic materials of discussions and newspapers. ESL students indicated that Internet, discussions, newspapers, telephone, and computer programs were the most important authentic materials in learning English. ESL instructors indicated that discussions, newspapers, maps, stories (printed), and food were the most used authentic materials in ESL class. The results of this study provide important information to help instructors plan appropriate curricula.
INTRODUCTION

The English as a Second Language (ESL) population has grown tremendously in the United States during the last 15 years. The ESL target population is highly concentrated in California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, and New York. ESL services are in the greatest demand among those seeking adult education. For example, 51% of ESL students received adult education instructional services during 1992. A national study demonstrated that from 1980 to 1992 there was a 268% increase of ESL students receiving adult education services. These data revealed that ESL students are highly motivated to participate in adult education and that the demands for ESL instruction tend to exceed the capacity of the adult education service system (Fitzgerald, 1995).

The current adult ESL population is primarily Hispanic (69%) and Asian (19%). Adult education students in ESL programs are 98% foreign born and 72% speak Spanish at home. Only 13% of students who speak English well at the time of enrollment, and 73% of students are initially placed at the beginning level. In addition, 36% of ESL students are employed at the time of enrollment in adult education. Approximately two of every three adult education programs provide ESL services and most of these programs offer ESL through the public school systems (Fitzgerald, 1995).

Benefits of ESL Programs

Sixty percent of ESL students self-report that after exiting a six-month program they feel their basic English skills have improved. ESL students complete 120 hours of instruction and then participate in the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) reading test. AEA standardized achievement tests indicate an average gain of 5 scale-score points on CASAS. This assessment provides objective evidence that ESL instruction has improved the ESL students’ reading skills (Fitzgerald, 1995; CASAS, 2007).

According to Fitzgerald (1995), ESL programs help students build English literacy skills and develop comprehension of simple English text; both tools for finding or holding a job. Approximately 35% of the ESL students benefit from adult education to enhance employability. For example, ESL students experience a 6% net increase in employment six months after program exit. This is primarily related to ESL participation. ESL adult students benefit more from program participation than do adult basic education (ABE)/adult secondary education (ASE) students. ESL adult students improve their job performances and obtain better jobs (35%).
ESL Instructors

ESL instructors may lessen ESL students’ burdens of adopting a new culture, making a transition and finding ways to retain their own cultures by designing good instructional approaches and assessment strategies, which can successfully assist adult ESL students at different levels (Fitzgerald, 1995; Watkins, 2006).

ESL instructors should be mindful of the difficulties involved in designing a curriculum for students with different languages and cultures. It is the ESL instructors’ challenge and duty to draw cross-cultural comparisons between native and adopted cultures. ESL instructors need to help ESL students understand larger cultural expectations; ESL students need to retain a sense of identity based on their own backgrounds. Even though ESL instructors should promote understanding of the U.S. culture, this does not mean that ESL students should ignore their native cultures. ESL instructors may create a sense of unity in diversity and this is the true value of the U.S. culture (Watkins, 2006).

Adult ESL Students

For most immigrants, the United States offers opportunities for them to reach goals which are unavailable in their own countries. Learning English enables ESL students to explore opportunities. The ESL adult education programs provide guidance during adults’ linguistic and cultural transitions. Some adult ESL students want to learn English to become good role models for their bilingual and bicultural children. These adult ESL students are often driven by intense self-discipline and a sense of duty to themselves and their families (Watkins, 2006).

Other adult students participate in ESL programs to improve their English skills and knowledge of American culture or to promote their chance to reach their dreams. Without English, many immigrants can only get physically intensive jobs such as housekeeping, food service, and construction work. ESL students not only need to learn English and add the U.S. culture to their families’ customs, but also they need to prepare for better opportunities. ESL students need to learn how to function as bicultural individuals. Adult ESL students believe that ESL programs are a way to promote their chance and to improve their English skills, which can lead them to better economic, educational, and social opportunities. Adult ESL students know the importance of English skills, and this is often the reason they sign up for the ESL programs (Watkins, 2006).

ESL students present interest in continuing their education and 24% of the ESL adult students who lack a high school diploma have reenrolled in English language instruction courses (Fitzgerald, 1995). English is considered the language of opportunity for ESL adult students, a key to accessing the latest technology in the
world. In order to compete in this society, ESL adult students require English written and spoken communication skills (Moya, 2000).

Research Problem

Gower (2004) stated that textbook simplification might create less than ideal conditions since the language is often altered; this can cause meaningful communication and important context to be lost in teaching examples. The process of simplification may make learning more difficult. Often, language does not work because of the risk of problems related to practical values. In other words, the practical value is lost and content may not be useful to students. Stiff formal English language may not apply to a real-language situation.

Moya (2000) stated that when learning English, students involved in real-time speech and conversation direct to the language in native speaker of the language. The real language is not always grammatically correct and is sometimes imprecise or faltering. It may include many hesitations, improvisations, and fillers. Therefore, research is needed on how to select materials and best utilize these materials for ESL adult students to develop English proficiency.

According to Byrnes and Cortez (1992), ESL instructors often struggle with handling the diversity of each student’s needs in their classes. If educators have positive attitudes toward ESL students in their classes, then educators increase their chances of being effective when teaching ESL students. ESL instructors often do not have positive attitudes toward the ESL students in their classes because they feel unprepared to deal with students from different countries. They do not have specific training in successful strategies for teaching ESL classes. Consequently, ESL students are not taught based on their needs, but rather taught based on what the ESL instructors are able to teach. For the purpose of this study, authentic materials need to be addressed in order to provide important information for ESL instructors to design a better curriculum. The descriptions, advantages, and disadvantages of using authentic materials are addressed as follows:

Descriptions of Authentic Materials

There were slightly different definitions of authentic materials in literature. Authentic materials (either written or spoken) were items designed for native speakers of English and were not designed for language students per se (Hwang, 2005; Martinez, 2002; Harmer, 1991). Authentic materials were produced by “native speakers for native speakers” (Duquette, Dunnett & Papalia, 1987, p.481; Rogers, 1988, p.467).

Authentic materials conveyed a real language; a real speaker or writer produced authentic text to convey a real message (Morrow, 1997). Authentic materials were not
simplified and were not provided for the purpose of language teaching (Nunan, 1989; Kessler, 1997; Rogers, 1988; Young, 1993). Filice and Sturino (2002) stated that authentic materials were unmodified and genuine materials which held students’ interests. They fulfilled a social purpose in the community and had a communicative purpose. Bearman and Trant (1998) defined authentic as “unaltered from the original” (p.2). Kilickaya (2004) gave a common definition of authentic materials as “exposure to real language and use in its own community” (p.1). Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) defined authentic materials as “the natural communication task” (p.247).

Advantages of Using Authentic Materials

The advantages of using authentic materials included:

1. Authentic materials provided exposure to real language and related more closely to students’ needs. Students were exposed to real world intercultural discourse (Kilickaya, 2004; Martinez, 2002; Morrison, 1989; Peacock, 1997).

2. Incidental or improper English often was not included in textbooks and the same piece of material could be used in a different way if the task was different (Dumitrescu, 2000; Martinez, 2002).

3. In the English language, changes could be reflected in the materials so that students and instructors both understood the changes (Martinez, 2002).

4. Authentic materials could be used for practicing mini-skills, such as scanning, or micro-skills of listening, including listening to news reports, and identifying the names of people or countries. (Martinez, 2002; Peacock, 1997).

5. Authentic materials included a wide variety of text types and language styles not easily found in traditional teaching materials (Martinez, 2002; Peacock, 1997).

6. Authentic materials contained topics of interest to students and encouraged reading for pleasure, and they were practical and real because they provided valid linguistic data (Dumitrescu, 2000; Martinez, 2002; Peacock, 1997).

7. Authentic materials had an intrinsic educational value and kept students informed about what was happening in the world (Martinez, 2002; Peacock, 1997; Sanderson, 1999).

8. Authentic materials provided an opportunity to transmit information and foster communication and understanding across culture (Gebhard, 1996).

9. Authentic materials included resources and activities that instructors used in class. Authentic materials contextualized language learning and were a valuable source of language input (Kilickaya, 2004; Kramsch, 1989;
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10. Authentic materials were applicable and adaptable for classroom use (Chase, 2002).

11. Authentic materials were realistic, ready-to-use, relevant, and triggered the process of natural language acquisition for students (Hwang, 2005).

12. Authentic materials increased students’ comprehension skills and oral and written language performance. They significantly enlivened the ESL class, exposed students to cultural features, and generated a deeper understanding and interest in the topic (Kelly, Kelly, Offner, & Vorland, 2002).


14. Authentic materials had a positive effect on increasing students’ motivation and made learning more enjoyable (Karpova, 1999; Katchen, 1993).

15. Authentic materials provided valuable support (creative approach to teaching) and could be used for a specially designed curriculum. They were a bridge between the classroom and the real world (Peacock, 1997).


17. Authentic materials provided close contact with language, built up paralinguistic features, introduced life-like scenarios into the classroom, and could be used for all levels (Karpova, 1999).

18. Authentic materials “(a) give the students the opportunity to practice English, (b) help the students gain confidence in their English ability, (c) expose the students to cultural differences and customs, and (d) help the students develop their ability to find pertinent information quickly” (Kelly, Kelly, Offner, & Vorland, 2002, p.12).

Numerous authors have used the idea of “exposure” to support the use of authentic materials in lessons because those materials benefited students by exposing them to the language (Martinez, 2002; Morrison, 1989). Dumitrescu (2000) noted that authentic materials could be applied to multiple tasks. In other words, they were flexible, easily adapted to learning objectives, and were not bound by textbook format limitations. Using authentic materials as teaching tools in ESL classes was effective and efficient because adult students directly addressed their critical needs. Authentic materials offered real language, rich in context and culturally significant. They provided clues for comprehension. ESL students liked authentic materials because these materials had high interest values and there were three layers of learning
embedded within them—language learning, cultural insights, and practical application (Taylor, 1994; Joiner, Adkins & Eykyn, 1989). Young (1993) found that elementary students preferred authentic materials, and authentic materials helped kindergarten students increase vocabulary and encouraged and stimulated language production.

Disadvantages of Using Authentic Materials

Researchers have reported disadvantages of authentic materials, including:

1. Authentic materials might be too culturally based for students to understand and they could force readers to focus on the code. The vocabulary might not fit the student’s immediate needs and students might lack skills required to manage the vast amount of information ((Martinez, 2002; Peacock, 1997).

2. Authentic materials often contained difficult language, unneeded vocabulary, grammar, and too many structures, so the lower level students might have a hard time decoding the texts. Students might be less motivated (Martinez, 2002; Peacock, 1997; Byrd, 1997).

3. The preparation of the materials could be time consuming if special preparation was needed; the investment of time might not be feasible or realistic (Martinez, 2002; Peacock, 1997).

4. Interpreters recorded on the listening materials might have many different accents. The materials could become outdated easily and the designs were more complex (Martinez, 2002; Peacock, 1997).

5. The wide range of contents and topics were not accompanied by textual aids, so they might be too challenging and discourage some students. The materials could be used in the older age group, but for the younger age group they might be irrelevant, inaccurate, or inappropriate because of the unfamiliar words, phrases, and idioms (Dumitrescu, 2000).

6. No matter how authentic the conditions or realistic the cases that instructors used in a learning environment, they still could not be the same as a work environment (Herrington, Oliver & Reeves, 2003).

7. Some students criticized the authentic environment as non-academic, non-rigorous, and time wasting to efficient learning. Sometimes even the materials instructors worked so hard to prepare just did not work well. Some instructors found that they had difficulty finding suitable authentic materials and created their own communicative activities. Some people thought authentic texts were made to seem “real” and might be edited and changed for language purpose (Chase, 2002; Eynon, 2000; Haigh, Lennon & Thyen, 1994; Katchen, 1993; Kilickaya, 2004; Petraglia, 1998; Ring, 1986; Rogers, 1988;
When authentic materials were compared to textbook-based materials, authentic materials required longer time frames and the designs were more complex. Many instructors did not use authentic materials because the investment of time was not realistic or feasible in their teaching situations (Dumitrescu, 2000). Many lower-level students felt anxious and frustrated when they faced unfamiliar materials. However, beginners might look at general themes, such as introductions or illustrations. It was not necessary for them to understand all of the text. Building confidence in real situations was more important. Students still learned from a text and also benefited from real-life language use. Students should not panic or be discouraged if they did not understand everything from the authentic materials (Joiner et al, 1989; Maingay, 1980; Shepherd, 2006).

Some researchers thought the activity from the authentic materials provided situations that reflected the nature of real problems that students experienced within realistic situations. In using authentic materials, it was not necessary to involve students in exactly the same tasks and to expect students to perform as well as an expert would do (Bennett, Harper & Hedberg, 2002). According to Saito (1994), some Japanese language instructors argued that the ideal of using authentic materials in Japanese elementary schools was unrealistic because of the complex writing system. Other language instructors argued that instructors should not underestimate students’ potential for comprehending authentic materials (Saito, 1994; Young, 1993).

Research Design

The research design for this study was to survey ESL instructors on the frequency of usage of authentic materials. This study also investigated the ESL students’ perceived importance of authentic materials. This study provides important information to recognize if authentic materials need to be emphasized in the regular curriculum in ESL adult programs.

Sample

The sample population in this study included ESL students and ESL instructors from two ESL programs. These were the Jefferson County Public Schools Adult and Continuing Education (JCPSACE) ESL program in Kentucky and the Floyd County Adult Learning Center ESL program in Indiana. In order to achieve the research objectives, two ESL programs in Kentucky and Indiana, 21 adult ESL instructors, and 131 adult students were invited to participate in the research study as purposive samples. There were 108 ESL students and 18 ESL instructors from JCPSACE ESL program in Kentucky. Twenty-three ESL students and three ESL instructors from
Floyd County ESL program in Indiana.

**ESL Students’ Attitudes toward the Perceived Importance of Authentic Materials**

ESL students’ perceived importance of authentic materials include: Internet, talks/discussions, newspapers, telephone, computer programs, street signs, radio weather reports, money, maps, and TV programs. Conversely, the least motivating of authentic materials are recipes, songs, advertisements, pamphlets/brochures, coupons, catalogs, paintings/artworks, photographs/slides, bus schedules, cartoons/comic books, and puppets. Analysis of data indicates that ESL students are motivated to learn how to speak, how to listen, how to read, and how to research information through the Internet. The data also indicate that 35 items out of 55 items are almost equally important for ESL students in learning English. In other words, ESL students like to learn with different types of materials.

The least important learning skills from authentic materials in order of importance for the ESL students are (1) recipes and songs, (2) ads, (3) pamphlets/brochures, (4) coupons, (5) catalogs, (6) paintings/artworks, (7) photographs/slides, (8) bus schedules, (9) cartoons/comic books, and (10) puppets. These materials are not the preferred authentic materials for students to learn English. These data indicate that ESL students do not like puppets, cartoons, and paintings for learning English because these materials only imitate human roles and cannot help students function in society, and they have more pictures than context.

Adult ESL Students do not like to use songs and recipes to learn English because the lyrics of songs are not used in their conversations. These findings disagree with Register (2001) who noted that music could be an excellent tool for language learning because it is comprehensible, enjoyable, and meaningful. Songs may be helpful for young learners but not for ESL adult students. These data indicate that ESL students have little motivation in learning songs compared with other skills.

**ESL Instructors’ Most and Least Frequently Used Authentic Materials**

The most highly used authentic materials in order of frequency by ESL instructors in ESL classes are talks/discussions, newspapers, maps, stories (printed), food, money, bank checks, application forms, Internet, want ads, magazines, advertisements, and quizzes. The least used authentic materials are CD-ROM programs, catalogs, TV programs, telephone, paintings/artworks, diaries, radio news broadcasts, radio weather reports, radio commercials, cartoons/comic books, and puppets.

Both ESL instructors and ESL students concur that the most important authentic materials are talks/discussions and newspapers. In addition, authentic materials such
as cartoons and puppets are not perceived as important for learning English.

The differences on highest perceived importance and most frequently used authentic materials from both ESL students and ESL instructors include, the ESL students indicate Internet, telephone, computer programs, and street signs are important. The ESL instructors, however, indicate maps, stories, food, and money are important for them to use in classes. The differences from least important materials and least used materials include, ESL students indicate paintings/artworks, photographs/slides, and bus schedules are not important. In contrast, for ESL instructors, diaries, radio news broadcasts, radio weather reports, and radio commercials are not important for learning English.

The data indicate that ESL instructors do not like to use electronic equipment as a teaching tool in class, such as Internet, radio, telephone, computer, and television. The results of this study concur with Wiriyachitra’s (2002); instructors seldom used audio-visual aids in language class. ESL students, however, prefer these types of materials in learning English. ESL Instructors like to use maps, stories, food, and money; ESL students, however, do not choose these items as important for them. For the least important authentic materials, the results demonstrate that ESL students and ESL instructors have different attitudes toward authentic materials.

Negative attitudes also exist between ESL students’ importance and ESL instructors’ usage of materials. The data indicate that ESL students want to use different types of materials, ESL instructors, however, use their own favored materials in class. There are positive and negative attitudes in the relationships between ESL students’ perceived importance and ESL instructor’s frequency of utilization of authentic materials in adult ESL classes.

Krashen (2004) found that comic books, novels, or popular literature can be used in the target language to help L2 students improve grammar and writing skills. The findings in this study demonstrate that comic books are one of the two least important items on the adult ESL students perceived importance lists. ESL instructors seldom use them in class.

Implications

Implications for ESL Instructors

ESL instructors should consider ESL students’ motivations for learning, ESL students choose (a) Internet, talks/discussions, and newspapers are the most important authentic materials, (b) ESL students like to learn with different types of materials. Therefore, ESL instructors should pay attention to the most important and least important materials and use a variety of authentic materials. In this way, ESL instructors can design a better curriculum for ESL students and ESL students will
learn the target language.

ESL instructors need to keep a positive relationship between themselves and ESL students in class by using important materials and avoiding the least important materials. Both ESL students and ESL instructors agree talks/discussions and newspapers are important authentic materials. Therefore, ESL instructors should continue teaching these materials.

Both ESL students and ESL instructors agree cartoons/comic books and puppets are least important authentic materials. These materials should be used less in class. ESL students prefer Internet, telephone, computer programs, and street signs, therefore, ESL instructors may want to consider using these materials more in class.

When ESL instructors use authentic materials, instructors need to focus on a topic with materials appropriate to students’ target language area that applied to the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and meet students’ needs and interests (Shepherd, 2006). When choosing authentic materials, ESL instructors can consider how many skills these materials include from the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). The more skills the authentic materials embrace, the more valuable authentic materials are. ESL instructors should select authentic materials using this principle.

Conclusions

The data illustrate that ESL students prefer using the Internet in learning English. The result supports the importance of the Internet because it has an essential role and increases students’ opportunities to interact with other foreigners. The Internet allows communication without limits of physical distances between students and improves their comprehension and promotes their intrinsic motivation to learn (Blake, 1997; Hare, 1998; Lafer, 1997). The Internet includes three important skills from which ESL students choose the most important textbook-based skills (speaking, listening, and reading). This may be another reason why ESL students prefer using the Internet more than other authentic materials.

Internet, computer, and telephone are necessary technologies for social benefits such as e-mailing classmates and reading the news or shopping from the Internet, chatting with family and friends, or calling for help. These technologies allow students to research a variety of information and to improve their quality of lives. Therefore, the results may indicate that authentic materials need to be helpful and connect with their daily lives.

Internet, talks/discussions, newspapers, telephone, computer, street signs, radio weather reports, money maps, and TV programs are all connected with their daily lives. These materials all require speaking, listening, and reading skills. In contrast,
puppets, cartoons, paintings, and photographs are not necessarily important for their lives and these materials may not engage speaking, listening, and reading skills. The results may indicate that authentic materials need to be connected with their daily lives, be involved with the basic skills (speaking, listening, and reading) and help students function in society.

The rhythms of songs may be too fast; or students may not understand the meaning of the songs and cannot follow the pace. These reasons may discourage students’ motivation. ESL students do not like to use recipes because they like to cook their own countries’ food instead of following the recipes for cooking American food. In addition, the vocabulary on the recipes is limited to the names of food.

According to the data, 83.2% of ESL students are 18 to 40 years old and 43.5% of students have been in the U.S. less than one year. In addition, 25.2% of ESL students are here for work and 30.5% of students are here for education. The economics of being new to the country and/or being a student may indicate that ESL students need money. Therefore, financial concerns may be the reasons they are not interested in using coupons or looking at the catalogs or advertisements.

Advertisements, pamphlets, coupons, and catalogs contain pictures of merchandise and numbers rather than language use context; therefore, these materials may be the items which ESL students discard rather than use to learn a language. Bus schedules may not be important because they have more numbers than words or ESL students may have their own transportations. Paintings/artworks also have more pictures than word descriptions. Therefore, these materials are not necessary for ESL students to consider using in class.

These findings support recent research that indicates that ESL students are not interested in learning knowledge that is not relevant to their daily lives. Therefore, ESL instructors should choose authentic materials that hold great interest, have a social purpose in community, and have a communicative purpose (Filice & Sturino, 2002).

ESL instructors use talks/discussions often in class because instructors believe that ESL students interact with others through talks/discussions. Talks/discussions are good authentic materials that involve speaking and listening skills. The results concur with Hwang’s (2005) study that language classrooms should have 70% exposure to speaking activities for students to stimulate their language acquisitions and 30% instructors’ explanations. This division of student-oriented activities and teacher-oriented demonstrations is a better way of learning. Therefore, students should talk more in class, and ESL instructors should talk less; this is the best environment for learning English.

The Internet encompasses speaking, listening, and reading skills and
talks/discussions. Newspapers, maps, stories (printed), money, bank checks, application forms, want ads, magazines, advertisements, and quizzes require only reading skills. The data may interpret authentic materials, which engage the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading, and speaking) are considered as more constructive and valuable authentic materials. ESL instructors choose CD-ROM programs, TV programs, and the telephone as least frequently used materials. Since they involved at least two skills, these materials may be the suggested items for ESL instructors to consider using more often in class.

CD-ROM programs, TV, telephone, paintings/artworks are less convenient to access and use in class than newspapers, maps, and food. They also require equipment to function. This may be the reason why ESL instructors do not use these items often in class. In addition, ESL instructors do not like to use radio programs because the conversation in news or weather reports is fast paced. Since 43.5% of ESL students have been in the United States less than one year, and 70.2% of students enrolled in the ESL programs less than one year, their listening ability may be not yet ready for radio programs. In addition, cartoons and puppets are not necessary to use in class for improving students' English. These items may be great items for young learners, but not for adult ESL students.

The data demonstrate that ESL instructors prefer to use talks/discussions, newspapers, maps, and food in class as authentic materials. The reason why instructors use these types of authentic materials may be the convenience of accessing them and the usability in class. In contrast, authentic materials such as Internet, telephone, TV, and computer programs motivate students to learn, but are not often used in class. This may be because the ESL programs do not have computers, TVs, or video facilities in classrooms.

The findings in this study concur with Wood (1999) that movies can be a motivational tool in learning English because sound effects, pictures, and emotion can evoke comprehensible language input to students. The data demonstrate that 80% of ESL students indicate movies are important for them to learn English, but only 23.8% of instructors use movies in class. In addition, Saito (1994) stated that TV could be an excellent tool to teach language and culture. Manning (1988) reported that computer and video could help students learn foreign language and improve their pronunciation and intonation. Miller (2003) concluded the Internet is a popular source of authentic materials in English learning. All these researchers highly recommend these authentic materials in teaching a target language. The findings support that ESL students regard TV programs, computer programs, videos, and Internet as important. ESL instructors, however, do not often use these items in class.

ESL instructors should be aware that ESL students like to use a variety of
authentic materials should be relevant to their needs. Since the Internet is the most important authentic material for ESL students, ESL instructors may use it in class or assign homework from the Internet so students can use it to learn English.

Even though the class time is limited, ESL instructors have the choice of selecting materials for their ESL students. While textbook-based curriculum can be the main teaching materials, instructors can add different types of authentic materials to make learning more effective, interesting, and productive. ESL Instructors can balance ESL students’ perceived importance of authentic and the frequency of utilization of authentic materials in adult ESL classes. In this way, a positive relationship may be created between instructors and students.
References


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