The Impact of Locally Written Authentic Material in the Teaching of Reading for First-Year Students

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Abstract

This study aimed at examining the effects of locally written authentic reading materials (LARM) on first-year students at a university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, on their reading comprehension. Thirty-seven first-year students of two English classes took part in the survey. To collect data, a questionnaire adapted from Nuket Gunduz, Deniz Ozcan, Huseyin Uzunboylu (2017) and open-ended questions were delivered to the students at the end of the course. The results revealed that this type of authentic material had positive effects on this group of students. In addition, the findings suggested that traditional textbooks should be supplemented with this type of authentic material. Locally written authentic reading materials in this paper were defined as newspapers and magazines written by local authors, not by native English speakers. This study concluded that this type of authentic material would make positive contributions to the learning of English in higher education in Vietnamese context.

Keywords: locally written materials, benefits, EFL context, student perspectives, improvement of reading comprehension.

Introduction

After Vietnam’s open-door policy, doi moi, came into existence in 1986, the Vietnamese Government decided to change its political direction and attracted foreign investments. As one of the subsequent results of this policy, Vietnam implemented a market-oriented economic policy and cooperated with all countries regardless of their political differences. Therefore, more and more international businesses and organizations have come to Vietnam to set up their companies and branches, creating a need for Vietnamese students to use English fluently and confidently in real-life communication. However, many EFL lecturers and employers observed that Vietnamese students can still demonstrate communicative competence in real-life situations. For example, in a conference named “New trends in language teaching in the era of the 4th Industrial Revolution” held by The Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City on 14 December 2018, many university English lecturers stated that a majority of students could not use English well at work (Ha, 2018). In the conference “Improving the quality of human resources in the electronics field Vietnam-Japan” in 2016, Ms. Nguyen Thi Kieu Van-Head of the Department of Human Resources of Panasonic Vietnam-reported that although the levels of English proficiency of Vietnamese students were much better than before, they were only good at reading and understanding documents and most students were weak at communication and writing skills (Nguyen, 2016).
Many researchers also raised concerns about the low English proficiency levels among a majority of Vietnamese students (Tran, 2006; Nunan, 2003; Stephen, Doughty, Gray, Hopcroft, & Silvera, 2006). Thus, efforts have been made to solve this problem at both macro and micro levels.

At the macro level, in 2008, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education approved a 10-year National Plan named “Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Formal Educational System in the Period of 2008-2020” (Vietnamese Government, 2008) and one of the goals of this national project was “to renovate thoroughly the tasks of teaching and learning foreign language within national education system … by the year 2020 most Vietnamese youth whoever graduate from vocational schools, colleges and universities gain the capacity to use a foreign language independently … This will enable them to further their chance to study and work in an integrated and multi-cultural environment with a variety of languages” (“Goal”). Moreover, the Government has also been carrying out a lot of projects, such as Projects 322, 911, VCP’s Project 165, to provide opportunities for professionals and teachers to study in English-speaking countries.

Meanwhile, at the micro-level in the classroom, teachers have been making every effort to enhance the English proficiency among students, from the adoption of a variety of teaching theories and approaches to the choice of textbooks, making use of technology, empowering students in the classroom and bringing real life into the classroom (Dang, 2010; Nguyen, 2010; Pham, 2007; Phan, 2018; Sullivan, 2000; Trinh & Mai, 2019). However, not much research has been conducted to explore the effects of locally written magazines and newspapers on students’ language learning. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine how locally written articles might impact university students’ reading comprehension and what these students think when they learn English articles written by local authors. To do so, the following research questions were investigated:

1. To what extent are locally written authentic reading materials beneficial to Vietnamese university learners of English with the proficiency range from lower intermediate to upper-intermediate?
2. What are their views about this type of material?

It can be said that the notion of authentic materials used in English language classrooms has gained considerable attention in the literature. Hutchinson & Waters (1987) made a distinction between the text itself and the context for which the text was originally written and believed that it was the latter that formed the true authenticity of the text. What can be inferred from this distinction is that only learners who are familiar with the context for which the texts were written can thoroughly understand them. For example, when a teacher in Vietnam adopts articles written in the UK or the US newspapers/magazines to teach in the English class, these articles are inauthentic because they were not written in Vietnamese context. Therefore, when students are exposed to these types of texts, they may be hindered from fully understanding them.

Some other scholars agreed that textbooks did not prepare students for their real-life language use. According to Nunan, “learners who only ever encounter texts such as this frequently have difficulty understanding the language and the texts that are used by speakers and writers authentically in the real world” (2013, p. 72). Moreover, when textbooks are used a lot, they can have negative effects on the classroom as they hamper teachers’ creativity (Block, 1991, as cited in Rubdy, 2014; Prabhu, 1988), they may nurture the teacher-centered role model (Hutchinson and Torres, 1994, cited in Rubdy, 2014). Meanwhile, authentic
materials will provide students with opportunities to use the language as it is used in their real-life (Gilmore, 2007; Hwang, 2005).

Indeed, it is reasonable to argue that the classroom should provide students with opportunities to use real language through chosen authentic learning materials and tasks that reflect what is naturally happening in the current society, given the fact that the classroom is a small society and its activities should reflect those in the real society outside. Clarke (as cited in Mishan 2005, p. 17) believed that “the notion of authenticity itself has become increasingly relative, being increasingly related to specific learner needs and less and less concerned with the ‘authentic’ nature of the input materials themselves”. All these factors suggest authentic materials still need a deeper evaluation on how they contribute to students’ language learning as should the teachers want their students to adapt what they have learnt to the real life, both the materials and classroom activities must be relevant to the learners’ contexts.

In some ESL contexts, scholars reported positive results in the students’ English learning when using the materials or classroom activities that were meaningful and relevant to their backgrounds. For example, Arshavskaya (2020) utilized a variety of reading genres to teach an academic writing course for students coming from different cultural backgrounds at a public U.S university and found that relevant personal life experience and culture in reading passages may influence students’ motivations and interests in learning writing skill. Similarly, Balgos (2020) asserted that performing real-life and meaningful tasks in improvisational theater activities would enable students to feel more confident and motivated to communicate in English.

In EFL contexts, there was evidence that authentic materials did support students in their language learning. For example, in a study to investigate the effects of authentic materials on listening comprehension of lower intermediate Iranian learners, Karimi and Dowlatabadi (2014) concluded that the listening comprehension of the students seemed to improve after studying with authentic materials and the researchers suggested authentic materials should be used in foreign language classrooms. In the context of Taiwan, Hwang (2005) claimed that the authentic materials she used with her students improved their communication skills and empowered them. However, in the EFL context of Vietnam, there is still a gap in research into the use of authentic materials in language teaching, especially, not much research was conducted in the use of locally written English newspapers or magazines to teach English at higher education level. Thus, the current study aimed to contribute to a better understanding of how the use of a locally written English magazine affects university students’ reading comprehension.

**Methods**

**Participants**

This study was conducted in two English reading classes at a university in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. In this context, English is the compulsory subject of the 4-year Bachelor course. Thirty-seven first-year students, 10 of them were male students (M=10), and 27 of the participants were female (F=27), took part in the survey voluntarily. The majority of the participants (75.68%) were 18 years old, and the remaining 24.32% were 19. Although placement test was not done as part of this study, 14.30% of the students claimed that their proficiency level was lower intermediate and the level of the rest (85.70%) was upper-intermediate.
Instruments and Data Sets

The Likert-scale questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect the quantitative data, and as suggested by Dornyei and Csizer (2012), it can inform the researcher about people’s feelings about the process of learning a language in general and a foreign language in particular. Therefore, this paper aimed to elicit the students’ perspectives on the influence of locally written authentic reading materials on improving their reading comprehension. Thus, a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire with the overall Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.92 was adapted from Gunduz, Ozcan, Uzunboylu (2017) (See Appendix A). Some of the sub-themes (sub-themes 10, 23, 26, and 29) in the original questionnaire were rephrased to make it clearer and more specific for the participants to answer. As this is a small-scale research paper, the sub-themes were clustered into three themes presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Themes emerging from the questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Attitudes toward reading comprehension learning</td>
<td>2, 8, 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The comparison between learning reading comprehension with LARM and textbooks</td>
<td>1, 3, 4, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Improvement of skills</td>
<td>21, 23, 26, 27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The open-ended questions. In addition to the Likert-scale questionnaire, ten open-ended questions (See Appendix C) were devised to elicit more authentic, honest and richer responses from the participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018; Johnson & Christensen, 2014). These questions were not formed a part of the final analysis of the questionnaire. Rather, this instrument was intended to get more qualitative perspectives from the participants and to validate the results from the Likert-scale questionnaire. By this way, the researcher could understand more about what the participants perceive after learning reading with LARM.

The locally written authentic reading material (LARM). The Saigon Times magazine was used for two reasons: firstly, it is written and edited solely by a group of local writers and secondly, it is the “leading English-language daily newspaper published by the Vietnam News Agency” (Vietnam newspapers and news sites, n.d). The publication year of the magazines was 2018. The following table describes the issues and the articles chosen as well as the treatment period:

Table 2
Number of magazine issues chosen to teach reading comprehension skill

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues of the magazine</th>
<th>Articles</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Treatment period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1401</td>
<td>New VAS mega campuses turn education mission into reality</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>2.5 periods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1401</td>
<td>From Khaisilk and Mumuso</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>2.5 periods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The reading course lasted for six weeks, the class ran two days a week, and students studied 2.5 periods a day. Totally, students studied 30 periods for this reading course. In total, students studied seven articles in 17.5 periods, which is more than half of the official periods required by the Faculty.

**Procedure**

In order to achieve the purpose, this research adopted a descriptive method approach, combining a quantitative Likert-scale questionnaire and qualitative open-ended survey questions to collect data. By its nature, this triangular technique allowed the researcher to fully explore and explain the investigated phenomenon from different angles (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

A questionnaire and open-ended survey questions were used in this study as data collection instruments. First, the questionnaire was delivered, and second, a follow-up online survey was conducted concerning the answered questionnaire. The questionnaire was delivered to students on the last day of the reading course so that they could have an overall reflection on the use of the LARM. General instructions for completing the questionnaire were provided and any difficult vocabulary and expressions were clarified before the researcher left the classroom to ensure that students have a “free” environment to do the survey.

To check the validation and reliability of the open-ended questions, the researcher conducted an interview with an expert in the field of EFL prior to the main study. A pilot study was conducted on ten students who were not included in the data analysis to identify and resolve any ambiguity in the questions. The researcher went over the questions with the students to check if all questions were clear and whether the sequence of the questions was logically arranged. They were also asked to check if there were any difficult vocabulary, expressions, and misleading wording. Finally, the participants would inform the researcher about the length and the relevance of the questions. After considering all feedback, the researcher modified the questions and sent them to the participants via email. Although this type of survey poses some limitations, the following two reasons are contextually appropriate to adopt the survey via email:

- Time constraints: As students had to take other classes after finishing the researcher’s class, it was rather inconvenient for them to stay for an official interview with the teacher.
- The relationship between teachers and students in Vietnam is in a very respectful manner, affected by Confucian philosophy; therefore, the researcher was afraid that a face-to-face conversation would yield more positive responses; hence it may negatively affect the obtained results. The researcher believed that the students would have more freedom to
answer the questions when they stayed away from the teacher, and it would make it more comfortable for the interviewees to express their opinions.

Based on the local context, this type of survey may be considered as a way to increase the reliability of the survey answers.

**Data Analyses**

All collected data were analysed using the software Microsoft Excel, 2013 version, to statistically count the frequency and percentage of each category.

**Results and Discussion**

It should be noted that the percentage of the responses ranges from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1) and the researcher rounded the answers to the nearest tenth. Three themes emerged from the results and were summarized in the following tables:

Table 3

The relationship between LARM and the attitudes toward reading comprehension learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>5%</th>
<th>4%</th>
<th>3%</th>
<th>2%</th>
<th>1%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Reading LARM facilitates learning</td>
<td>43.24</td>
<td>35.14</td>
<td>16.21</td>
<td>5.41</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. LARM motivates me to use the language</td>
<td>35.14</td>
<td>32.43</td>
<td>32.43</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Studying with LARM gives confidence to use the target language</td>
<td>27.03</td>
<td>45.95</td>
<td>27.03</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Generally speaking, the use of this type of material showed positive results in its relationship with students’ attitudes toward reading comprehension learning. As can be seen, 43.24% of respondents believed that the material showed its effectiveness in facilitating their language learning. Likewise, the results of the survey yielded a fair balance in the percentage of those who strongly agreed, and those who agreed with the statement that LARM motivates students to use the language learnt (sub-theme 8) with about 35.14% and 32.43%, respectively. Moreover, after having studied this authentic material, 45.95% of survey respondents said that they were confident to use the target language (Table 3).

Table 4

The comparison between learning reading comprehension with LARM and Textbook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>5%</th>
<th>4%</th>
<th>3%</th>
<th>2%</th>
<th>1%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. LARM texts do not have any function on learning the language</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>8.11</td>
<td>35.14</td>
<td>54.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Authentic reading materials are easier to understand</td>
<td>29.73</td>
<td>32.43</td>
<td>32.43</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. LARM makes the</td>
<td>29.73</td>
<td>59.46</td>
<td>10.81</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
language more meaningful
10. LARM is more important than the traditional reading materials in learning reading

Of those surveyed, quite a lot of respondents were satisfied with the meaningful functions that this authentic material brought to them when about 89% of the student sample disagreed with sub-theme 3 and 59% agreed with sub-theme 4. However, when asked if this LARM was easy to understand or not, there was a balance in the percentage of those who agreed and those showed their neutral point of view, with 32.43%. Interestingly, as reflected in Table 4, 43.24 percent of respondents chose the neutral option to compare LARM with traditional reading materials (sub-theme 10).

Table 5

Improvement of other skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>5%</th>
<th>4%</th>
<th>3%</th>
<th>2%</th>
<th>1%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21. My communication has improved with LARM</td>
<td>21.62</td>
<td>27.03</td>
<td>43.24</td>
<td>8.11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Formal language samples in LARM improved my language use</td>
<td>35.13</td>
<td>37.84</td>
<td>27.03</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. My vocabulary and reading skills have improved with LARM</td>
<td>40.54</td>
<td>43.24</td>
<td>13.51</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. I am more aware of the writing patterns with the LARM</td>
<td>16.21</td>
<td>37.84</td>
<td>35.14</td>
<td>8.11</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As reflected in Table 5, although about 48% of the respondents agreed that LARM improved their communication (sub-theme 21), nearly the same amount (43%) of those surveyed chose the neutral option. It could also be observed that a majority of those taking part in the survey showed the agreement that their language use (sub-theme 23), vocabulary (sub-theme 26), and writing skill (sub-theme 27) were improved by about 72%, 83%, and 53%, respectively.

The above findings revealed tentative perspectives of students on learning reading comprehension with locally written authentic reading materials within an EFL context where textbooks are the traditional teaching materials, which focus more on transmitting knowledge and placing more value on explicit learning (Tomlinson, 2005). Thus, it is beneficial to know and understand the voices of these first-year students.

With respect to the first research question, the results demonstrated two benefits. The first one is the affective dimension that LARM brought about to the students, with 78%, 67%, and 72% of those surveyed agreeing that LARM facilitated, motivated their learning, and improved their confidence, respectively. Answers from the online survey questions highlighted that it was the familiar and rich content of the magazine that motivated their learning:

The local magazine’s content used in the reading lesson will provoke eager and curiosity of learners, I believe. (F)
Consequently, I think local magazines should be used in teaching and learning because of their comprehensive use, they help students feel comfortable and find more things in studying English. (F)

I think the most important elements in them are attraction and closeness to life. (M)

Advantages: a mix of information and facts with pictures and colours collected from a wide range of sources, which motivate the student’s reading skills. (F)

In the reading lesson, the content of the local magazine (The Saigon Times) is more interesting, more useful than that in the student books. It stimulates students to read actively. (F)

This finding goes in line with Day’s study (1994, as cited in Chodkiewicz, 2016) when he suggested factors such as “topic, cultural suitability, political appropriateness, and even text appearance” (p. 8) be a source of interest and motivation for learners. Meanwhile, according to Dudley-Evans and St. John (as cited in Tevdovska (n.d), p. 58), to stimulate and motivate students, “materials need to be challenging yet achievable; to offer new ideas and information whilst being grounded in the learners’ experience and knowledge; to encourage fun and creativity.” Little, Devitt, and Singleton (1989, p. 26, cited in Peacock, 1997, p. 144) added that learners who studied with authentic materials would feel enjoyable and motivated because they brought them closer to the culture of the target language. However, one significant difference in this study was that the LARM itself raised the students’ motivation and interests, not the tasks or materials from other sources as in previous studies (see, for example, Adam et al. 2010; Berardo 2006; Chodkiewicz 2016).

Interestingly, in the present study, about one-third of the participants showed their uncertainties about whether LARM motivates them to use the language, and no participants disagreed with that aspect. The disparity in views of motivation in this finding may stem from the fact that in Vietnam, the pervasive language teaching methodology at the high school level is Grammar - Translation, and textbooks serve as a compulsory means of teaching and learning to prepare students for tests. Having been familiar with step-by-step guidance from the teachers and the textbooks, students may feel frustrated and demotivated when they are exposed to authentic materials in the first year. The results of the survey will further illustrate this issue. Two participants lamented that:

From my experience, the magazine left me no remarkable impression. (M)

Reading the Saigon Times is more challenging as the articles are so descriptive that I easily get distracted from the main point. (M)

Other students pointed out how the writing genre and freestyle of the magazine influenced their reading comprehension:

Passages in The Saigon Times are hard to read and some main ideas are hard to understand. (F)

Reading passages are more difficult because I have to focus too much on new words and dogmatic information or attitude. (F)

There are no instructions for reading-improvement process. (F)

It’s a little boring and sleepy. (F)
Maybe not academic enough in the university environment. (F)

Those in authentic materials are hard to define what they really are since there are more freedom in a local magazine. The content is varied, there are many new words I don’t know. (M)

The above difference in views in the current study suggests more longitudinal research be carried out to measure the degree of motivation when students are exposed to different types of locally written English magazines and newspapers.

The second benefit is the improvement of vocabulary, writing skills, and language use. The survey found a strong correspondence between sub-theme 26, sub-theme 27, and sub-theme 23. Accordingly, because the students’ vocabulary was improved with LARM (sub-theme 26), they could understand different genres of writing (sub-theme 27) and improve their language use (sub-theme 23). This finding lends support to and consolidates previous studies. For example, Nation (1993) believed that there is an inter-relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language use: second language learners need a certain amount of vocabulary size to develop skill in language use, and when language use has been developed, it broadens and increases the vocabulary size. Similarly, Guo (2012) claimed that there is a positive relationship between extensive reading and students’ vocabulary development when students study with authentic materials. Some students in this study also confirmed that the LARM could really improve their vocabulary, both formally and informally:

The Saigon Times magazine has topics familiar with students. They can help them expand vocabulary. (F)

Studying reading with authentic materials provides students with official academic information and different opinions, good grammar and excellent vocabulary. (M)

Working in different types of passages gives students the ability to quickly know how to read when it comes to one of those types. Also reading local magazines can provide students with some more useful vocabulary related to a specific topic of an article. (F)

I like talking to foreigners in common sayings which is less rigid than using vocabulary from textbooks, so studying reading with the local magazine can help me improve that aspect. Maybe the other students would feel the same way like I do. (F)

Besides, it is noticeable to see from the comments of the students that their writing and speaking were improved after they studied with LARM:

I think it’s the writing style. It helps me a lot in understanding information and improving writing skill. (M)

Students can get accustomed to how passages are actually written in daily life. (F)

After reading the local magazine, my language use had many changes:

- Communication: use grammar correctly, listen to English and speak English more fluently
- Vocabulary: Widen the vocabulary
- Writing: Use new grammar, write and use vocabulary more smoothly. (F)
Students get to know how they make a sentence when writing an article for informative as well as entertainment purposes. (F)

I think there are maybe two advantages: upgrading our vocabulary outside the class and giving us the exact context when to use the right words. We are able to know:
1. How to write in an academic way
2. How to use the right word in different contexts
3. Collocations
4. How to analyze charts in general (F)

This finding also implies that articles in LARM can help students to appropriately convey their ideas about issues typical in the local context. And as mentioned earlier in this study, such an ability is essential to Vietnamese students to further their chances to work and study in multi-cultural environments.

However, the finding also showed that 27% of those surveyed felt uncertain about their ability to use the target language after studying with LARM. Following are some reasons from the follow-up survey:

I don’t recognize clearly how I have changed and am changing. But I believe it happens in my communication skill and writing skill. (F)

Actually, not many changes, but my word usage did change a bit. My vocabulary was widened and I could use some of the words to describe exactly what I want. (F)

One possible explanation is that reading passages in textbooks with which students have studied at high school level may not have provided them with vocabulary for real-life usage and they may not have had enough chances to learn writing or speaking from reading passages. If this assumption is right, it would seem that high school teachers may not focus on communicative teaching method. Clearly, this deserves a further investigation for future studies.

The second research question was set out to examine the first-year university students’ viewpoints on their study with locally written authentic reading materials. In this matter, data in the present study showed that 62% of the participants believed it was easy to understand articles written in LARM (sub-theme 1), while about 32% of those surveyed showed their uncertainty about this issue and following are the reasons:

There may be some fields that are quite new, political or need some basic knowledge to understand such as finance. (M)

It may involve topics that I’ve never been aware of, which may become a little difficult to understand completely. (F)

It has no level for specific readers. (F)

The disadvantage is it may not give enough practice exercises and the reading lessons from authentic materials may not provide the exact same skills as the textbooks may provide. (F)
This material (The Saigon Times) does not have any academic questions or something like that for student to comprehend. (M)

It may be assumed that although the articles were carefully chosen for the reading lessons, there was no doubt that some of them contained complex concepts or unfamiliar language which first-year students would not be able to handle. Another explanation for this could lie in the fact that many students had not been familiar with reading authentic newspapers or magazines before entering university. Therefore, it is recommended that the English teacher should consult either the students or the Faculty staff about the mainstream subjects that students have learnt to make a more relevant and appropriate choice of readings.

Surprisingly, the participants in this study appreciated the two functions of LARM, which are supporting the learning of the language and making the language more meaningful (sub-themes 3 and 4). They received the same percentage of agreement of 89%. This student talked about the richness of vocabulary and different genres of writing that LARM brought to her:

I think it is suitable for teaching and learning because it brings about the practical way of teach-and-learn process with practical knowledge, interesting stories and moreover, great grammar and structure of the sentences. (F)

Another student emphasized the practical aspect of LARM to both the learning and teaching of the language:

The local magazine objectives are extremely practical and help not only students but also lecturers in teaching and learning because it brings practical information for the students, enables lecturers to get examples for their lectures easily. Besides, lecturers can use the information to smooth their lectures. (F)

In the following comments, the students talked about the content:

The content is very interesting and informative. It can help students have more attraction and interests in reading. (F)

In my opinion, the objectives of the Saigon Times magazine are clear, appropriate and understandable. Using the Saigon Times in teaching and learning will help students not only achieve knowledge but also practice critical thinking. (F)

Studying reading with authentic materials provides students with official academic information and different opinions. (F)

These findings from the qualitative data are in good consistent with previous studies in which researchers have asserted the influence of the socio-cultural context on the learners’ reading comprehension (see, for example, Anderson, 2003; Cunningsworth, 1995; Sweet & Snow, 2003). In the context of teaching and learning English in Vietnam, other scholars have also figured out that traditional textbooks fail to provide familiar local context to support the students’ comprehension of the text. For example, Nguyen (2018) concluded that the “textbooks were limited to the provision of cultural knowledge related to English-speaking countries rather than students’ local and international target cultures ... lack culturally appropriate topics and Vietnamese content.” Interestingly, regarding the comparison between LARM and traditional textbooks, roughly 32% gave priority to LARM. Meanwhile, about 43% of the participants were not sure that LARM was more important than traditional textbooks in learning reading (sub-theme 10). To put it better, this disparity in views showed that there was no clear preference for the teaching material, but the teacher could use textbooks and supplement them with
authentic materials. This finding from the students’ perspectives is somewhat similar to what previous research found in the context of Vietnam. The researchers found that the students in their studies disapproved of the use of the assigned textbooks. For example, in a study conducted at HUTECH University by Nguyen, Fehring & Warren (2015), the teachers said that the university assigned the textbooks and lessons and the teachers asked for more freedom to choose the right books for their classes. Similarly, Trinh & Mai (2018) concluded that “within the Vietnamese context … teachers utilized various kinds of textbooks, among which some of them were used officially while others were employed as supplementary materials.” (“Inappropriate English teaching and learning materials”, para. 1) and confirmed that these textbooks focused on developing linguistic competence rather than on communicative competence. In her study, Phan (2018) also asserted that teachers needed to add more questions to the existing questions in textbooks and included more activities besides tasks in the textbooks to improve communicative competence. In general, this finding significantly suggests that students need more authentic English resources along with traditional textbooks to be more familiar with the authentic use of the language in real life.

Conclusion

In summary, the key findings of this research paper reveal that the use of locally written authentic reading materials (LARM) shows their positive effects on improving the students’ reading comprehension. For example, they improve students’ vocabulary and motivate them to study reading skills. Moreover, students felt confident when dealing with real-life language. A majority of students also believed that a combination of traditional textbooks and local magazines would benefit them. To the knowledge of the author, no previous researchers have discussed the use of LARM to teach reading skill in the Vietnamese context. Therefore, this research paper has filled this gap in the literature.

Notwithstanding this result, the present study has some limitations. First, this study is limited in its scope with a limited number of first-year students. A larger group of participants would have yielded a richer development of the sub-themes. Second, although justification has been made when the researcher chose the method of online survey with open-ended questions, replicating this research with individual face-to-face interviews would strengthen the results of this study. Third, the author only focused on the reading skill and used The Saigon Time Magazine. Should further study be done at other universities, other types of magazines may be considered as sources based on their suitability with the students.

As noted earlier, the notion of authentic material and authenticity is multi-dimensional in the literature and applicability, the author of this paper does not intend to propose a new way of teaching reading skill, rather, he would like to stress that the locally written authentic reading material can be considered as an alternative and supplementary one to teach English at higher level in Vietnam. Finally, the author would like to suggest that further studies in other contexts should be carried out to investigate further into this application and its impacts on students’ learning.

References


Appendices

Appendix A: Questionnaire

Dear students,

I am conducting a research on the use of authentic materials for the reading classes at the higher education level. Authentic materials are materials designed for the native speakers of English for actual communicative needs. Meanwhile, artificial materials are the ones designed for textbook use and for classroom teaching and learning. Authentic materials are used in the language classroom in a way to motivate the learners to learn English.

Please give your valued opinions through filling in the questionnaire. I guarantee you that the given data will be treated as confidential and used for research purpose only. Thank you in advance for your time and cooperation.

Truong Doan Man
MA in TESOL
USSH University

Section A: Personal Information
1. Name: __________________________
2. Class: __________________________
3. Institution: ______________________

Section B: Instruction
Each of the items has 5 points scale where 1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly agree. Tick the appropriate number for your opinion about each statement.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Strongly agree-5</th>
<th>Agree-4</th>
<th>Neutral-3</th>
<th>Disagree-2</th>
<th>Strongly disagree-1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. LARM is easier to understand.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reading LARM facilitates learning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. LARM texts do not have any function on learning the language.
4. LARM makes the language more meaningful.
5. I became more reluctant to use the language after studying with LARM.
6. LARM is better than authentic ones.
8. LARM motivates me to use the language.
9. Studying with LARM gives confidence to use the target language.
10. LARM is more important than the traditional reading materials.
26. My vocabulary and reading skills have improved with LARM.

Table 2
Use of the target language for real-life situations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Strongly agree-5</th>
<th>Agree-4</th>
<th>Neutral-3</th>
<th>Disagree-2</th>
<th>Strongly disagree-1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19. LARM relevant to real life.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. I have learnt how to deal with real-life situations with LARM.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. My communication has improved with LARM.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. LARM brings real life into the classroom.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Formal language samples in the LARM improved my language use.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. I get stuck when I have to communicate in real-life situations.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. I can easily find my way in the natural environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of the target language.
27. I am more aware of the writing patterns with the LARM.

Appendix B: The results of the survey

Table 1

The relevance of the used authentic materials regarding students’ needs on understanding and using the target language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Strongly agree-5</th>
<th>Agree-4</th>
<th>Neutral-3</th>
<th>Disagree-2</th>
<th>Strongly disagree-1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. LARM is easier to understand.</td>
<td>29.72973</td>
<td>32.43243243</td>
<td>32.432432</td>
<td>2.702702703</td>
<td>2.702702707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reading LARM facilitates learning.</td>
<td>43.243243</td>
<td>35.13513514</td>
<td>16.216216</td>
<td>5.405405405</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. LARM texts do not have any function on learning the language.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.702702703</td>
<td>8.1081081</td>
<td>35.13513514</td>
<td>54.0540545</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. LARM makes the language more meaningful.</td>
<td>29.72973</td>
<td>59.45945946</td>
<td>10.810811</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I became more reluctant to use the language after studying with LARM.</td>
<td>5.4054054</td>
<td>10.81081081</td>
<td>29.72973</td>
<td>37.83783784</td>
<td>16.2162169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. LARM is better than authentic ones.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.702702703</td>
<td>48.648649</td>
<td>37.83783784</td>
<td>10.8108111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. LARM motivates me to use the language.</td>
<td>35.135135</td>
<td>32.43243243</td>
<td>32.432432</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Studying with LARM gives confidence to use the target language.</td>
<td>27.027027</td>
<td>45.94594595</td>
<td>27.027027</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. LARM is more important than the traditional reading materials.</td>
<td>10.810811</td>
<td>21.62162162</td>
<td>43.243243</td>
<td>21.62162162</td>
<td>2.702702707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. My vocabulary and reading skills have improved with LARM.</td>
<td>40.540541</td>
<td>43.24324324</td>
<td>13.513514</td>
<td>2.702702703</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

Use of the target language for real-life situations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Strongly agree - 5</th>
<th>Agree - 4</th>
<th>Neutral - 3</th>
<th>Disagree - 2</th>
<th>Strongly disagree - 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19. LARM relevant to real life.</td>
<td>51.351351</td>
<td>35.13513514</td>
<td>13.51351351</td>
<td>5.40540541</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
20. I have learnt how to deal with real-life situations with LARM.
21. My communication has improved with LARM.
22. LARM brings real life into the classroom.
23. Formal language samples in the LARM improved my language use.
24. I get stuck when I have to communicate in real-life situations.
25. I can easily find my way in the natural environment of the target language.
26. I am more aware of the writing patterns with the LARM.

Appendix C: The open-ended question

Age: ______________
Gender: __________________
How long have you been studying English: _________________
What is your current level of English?
- Beginner
- Lower intermediate
- Upper intermediate
- Advanced

1. What do you think are the most important elements in a textbook of English and the local magazine (The Saigon Times)?

2. What do you think about the local magazine (The Saigon Times) objectives? How suitable are they in teaching and learning?

3. What do you think about the content of the local magazine (The Saigon Times) used in the reading lesson? How useful are they in teaching and learning?

4. How do you compare the reading passages in the textbooks and those in the authentic materials (The Saigon Times)? Which one is more difficult to understand and why?

5. In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of studying reading with authentic material (The Saigon Times)?

6. What kinds of knowledge do you think the authentic materials (The Saigon Times) can develop for students?
7. How effective are tasks and activities used with local magazine (The Saigon Times)? To what extent are they based on your students' needs?

8. What is your attitude toward the teaching method using authentic materials (The Saigon Times)? How suitable is it to students?

9. What changes (such as communication, vocabulary and writing) are there in your language use after you study reading with local magazine (The Saigon Times)? What do you think is your classmates' attitude toward the authentic materials (The Saigon Times)?

10. Would you prefer to study with local magazine or with traditional textbooks? What are you recommendations about teaching materials to be used at our Faculty?

About the Author

First name and last name of Author: Man Doan Truong. The author is an English lecturer at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities. His research interests include teaching methodology and internationalization of higher education.
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Declaration of Possible Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.