

## **AUTHENTIC MATERIALS FOR TEACHING WRITING: A CRITICAL LOOK**

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### **Abstract**

Teaching writing is not easy. Writing teachers often face problems with what kind of materials suitable for the students. This paper is intended to describe 1) the theoretical relationship between Content-Based Instruction and authentic materials that can be used by language teachers to teach writing in the classroom, 2) the previous studies of authentic materials used for teaching writing, 3) the type of authentic materials which can be used for teaching writing, and 4) the advantages and disadvantages of using authentic materials for teaching writing. The method used was qualitative research focused on content analysis. The instrument used was mainly human instrument and documentation. The result of the extensive review of literature shows that 1) one of the main feature of content-based instruction is the use of authentic materials for teaching; 2) most studies in the area of authentic materials for teaching writing shows the effectiveness of authentic materials for teaching procedure texts, descriptive texts and essay writing; 3) the type of authentic materials used for teaching writing is categorized based on how it is transmitted, namely audio, visual, and printed material materials; 4) aside from having its advantages, authentic materials also give challenges for the teacher to use it for classroom teaching, among others are practicality, comprehensibility and appropriateness.

**Keywords:** authentic material, challenge, content-based, instruction, writing

### **INTRODUCTION**

The use of instructional material in language teaching is very important as it helps the teacher to reach the instructional goals. Within Indonesian context, most teachers would prefer to use textbooks for their teaching. Some important roles of textbooks are it is efficient, provides instructional standard, offers structure and syllabus for a program, has variety learning resources, and has quality maintenance (Richards, 2001). Yet, aside from its advantages, textbooks also have some weaknesses. Among other, textbooks contain inauthenticity in terms of language use, content, and students' need as well as reducing the teacher's skill to create their

own teaching materials (Richards, 2001). This does not mean to say that the use of textbooks in the language classroom is bad, but it surely gives messages that creating instructional materials which is authentic and suitable with the students' need is indeed necessary.

Some important requirements for designing and developing instructional materials for language learning are the writer's knowledge and understanding on the language and its use, the focus of the materials, and the activities that accompany them (Richards, 2006). Taken into the context of teaching writing in Indonesian context, finding suitable materials in the classroom is quite a challenge. Writing is a

skill that requires not only linguistic competence but also practical knowledge how to put the ideas on to the paper. When writing itself is not easy, let alone teaching this skill to other people. Writing teachers/lecturers often have problems in the topic selection for writing activity (Setyowati, Sukmawa, & Latief, 2018). They further state that if the topic chosen for writing activity is not interesting, the students would have little to write on the paper. Therefore, one way to overcome this problem is probably to present challenging topics for the students and selecting materials which are as close as possible to the day to day life and relate to the students' personal life.

The use of authentic materials for language classroom is typical. As stated by Gilmore (2007) it has been started hundred years ago for the teaching of a language. Thus, the term of authentic material is not something new. But, when it comes to a definition, some people might have different opinion about it. There is no fixed definition of authentic materials. Peacock (1997) defines authentic materials that are not produced and created to reach the goal of language learning. While Tamo (2009) defines authentic materials as materials which involve the natural use of the language for communication in the native speaker context. Similarly, Kilickaya (2004) states that authentic materials are materials which are naturally written or spoken for communication based on particular context of the native speaker. Meanwhile, Gilmore (2007) states that authenticity may be situated in the text, the participants, or the social and cultural communication as well as the communicative act purposes, or the combination between these. Thus, Gilmore (2007) states that definition of authentic materials depends on the source of the text and context of its production.

This paper is intended to describe 1) the theoretical relationship between Content-

Based Instruction and authentic materials that can be used by language teachers to teach writing in the classroom, 2) the previous studies of authentic materials used for teaching writing, 3) the type of authentic materials which can be used for teaching writing, and 4) the advantages and disadvantages of using authentic materials for teaching writing.

## **METHOD**

This research uses qualitative approach focusing on content analysis design. Content analysis design is considered appropriate since the main purpose of the study is to conduct a library research in relation to the type of authentic materials suitable for higher education, more specifically in Senior High school level and university level. The library research was conducted through reading research reports in the internet, thesis, dissertation, and other type of relevant document. The instrument used was mainly human instrument and documentation. The data collection took four months from February to May 2019 which employed several steps; finding articles or research reports in relation to authentic materials for teaching writing, reading and comprehending the reports, classifying the data based on its category, and making conclusion. The researcher focused on the methodology of the previous research to find out what and how the authentic materials were presented in classroom context for teaching writing.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Content-Based Instruction and Authentic Materials for Teaching Writing**

Some teachers might wonder about the connection between content-based instruction and authentic materials. But, before looking at the connection from theoretical relationship, understanding the definition of authentic materials would offer great to find the connection between content-based

instruction and authentic materials, if any. To begin with, until now, no clear consensus has been made to define what it meant by authentic materials. As stated previously, experts say different thing about the definition of authentic materials.

1. *“ordinary texts not produced specifically for language teaching purposes* (Tomlinson, 2001: 68)
2. *“real language, produced by real speakers or writers for real audiences and designed to convey real messages of some sort”* (Maroko, 2010:5)
3. *“authentic materials are materials that we can use with the students in the classroom and that have not been changed in any way for ESL students”* (Tamo, 2009: 75)
4. *“exposure to real language and its use in its own community”*. (Kilickaya, 2004)
5. *“a text is authentic or not (within these terms) by referring to the source of the discourse and the context of its production”* (Gilmore, 2007)

Looking at the definitions, there are three important key words that can be used to interpret the meaning of authentic materials, namely *natural*, *in context*, and *native speaker*. When these keywords are combined and interpreted, authentic materials can be defined as the language used by the native speaker either in written or oral communication which is used in context.

After understanding the definition of authentic materials, the next question that comes to mind is what type of instruction that might use authentic materials as using and providing the students with materials that connect to the real world is necessary. As stated by Shih (2006) it is important to adopt instruction that triggers critical thinking, researching, as well as writing skills for academic writing which put forward writing from personal experience through content-

based instruction. Content-based instruction has the characteristics of communicative approach which is popular in second/foreign language teaching (Leaver & Stryker, 1989). One of the most important feature of content-based instruction is its utilization of authentic materials for teaching (Leaver & Stryker, 1989). The authentic materials present topics which are happening in the real world and offer the language used in real context (Moglen, 2014). In sum, because content-based instruction requires authenticity, authentic materials come into play in the instruction. It can be inferred that a challenging topic for students to write might come from daily texts/readings of the real world which can be related to their personal experience.

#### **Previous Studies on Authentic Materials**

The use of authentic materials in language teaching has attracted many attentions from many researchers, teachers/lecturers and practitioners. The debate whether to use authentic materials or artificial/simplified materials for language classroom has been going on for some time between researchers and language learning theorists (Crossley, Louwse, McCarthy, & McNamara, 2007). These researchers provide arguments and evidence to decide which materials which are considered beneficial for language learners seen from linguistic point of view. Crossley et al. (2007) use Coh-Matrix computational tool to investigates the linguistic structures differences between sampled simplified texts from seven ESL textbooks and some authentic reading texts. Coh-Matrix computational tool was, then, used to analyze seven linguistic metrics. Among others are polysemy & hypernymy, connectives & logical operators, causal cohesion, density of major parts of speech, word information & frequency, lexical coreference, and syntactic complexity. The result of their study shows that authentic texts

have better ability to show the relationship between cause-and-effect comprehension, to develop ideas and plot lines, to employ variety and natural use of lexical items and syntactical structures, and to use more abstract words and low-frequency words. Meanwhile, the artificial texts/simplified texts use strong cohesion, clear language, high-frequency words which can make reading faster, unnatural language, too many use of noun phrases and qualifiers, more simple constructions, short and unnatural syntax. In the end, the researchers conclude that simplified/artificial materials give more benefits to beginner as the texts use more repetitions and high frequency words which help comprehension, while authentic materials give more benefit to intermediate or advance learners as the language use is more natural because of the syntactical complexity and low-frequency words. If to choose which to use in the classroom, Crossley et al. (2007) would prefer to use authentic materials than the simplified materials with the exclusion of beginner students.

Research in general has shown that authentic materials is beneficial for both the students and the teacher (Azri, Al-Rashdi, Hamed, Azri, & Al-Rashdi, 2014). Within Indonesian context, the use of authentic materials for teaching writing has been researched extensively. Firstly, Styati (2016) investigated the effect of authentic materials on students' ability for paragraph writing. The subjects of her research were the second semester students of English department in a College of Teacher Training and Education in Madiun, Indonesia. In her study, she used You Tube videos and picture series as the authentic materials. Through the use of quasi experimental design, she found out that pictures was more effective to improve the students' ability in writing than You Tube videos. Another experimental study was also done by Sundana (2018). He investigated the effectiveness of authentic

materials for teaching writing in university level. He divided the students into two groups; the experimental group and the control group. In the experimental group, the students were given authentic materials for writing descriptive texts in which the materials were taken from internet, namely from <https://www.booksie.com>, <http://www.imdb.com>, and *Readers' Digest* Magazines, while the control group did not. The result of his study shows that authentic materials are proven to be effective to improve the students' ability in writing descriptive text.

Secondly, Arifa (2018) also conducted an experimental study to find out the effect of authentic materials on the students' ability in writing procedure text in senior high school level. Her subjects were 10<sup>th</sup> year students of an Islamic State high school in Palangkaraya, Indonesia by taking two classes in which each consisted 30 students. The experimental group was taught by using authentic materials in procedure text, while the control group was taught with non-authentic materials. The result of the study shows that the experimental group shows better performance in making procedure texts as compared to the control group. It was concluded that the use of authentic material is effective to improve the students' ability in making procedure text.

Thirdly, Setyowati & Sukmawan (2018), conducted a qualitative study through content analysis design investigating the use of authentic materials for essay writing. In their study, the students were asked to write a four paragraph essay to analyze the intrinsic elements of the short stories they read. The result of the study shows that the students agree that prose analysis in the form of essay help them to understand the story better and help them to write better. They learn both the literary aspects of a fiction during analysis, as well as writing aspects, such as making introductory paragraph, making thesis

statement and developing the body of the essay by giving details and examples.

In conclusion, review of related studies within Indonesian context shows that most studies in the area of authentic materials for teaching writing shows the effectiveness of authentic materials for teaching procedure texts, descriptive texts and essay writing.

Mariani (1997) state that challenge and

matters in the classroom as they offer active engagement. In his opinion, text difficulty and task design should be manage in such away so that they promote learners' autonomy. He suggests that any language teachers should be skillful enough to match challenge and support to offer more active engagement in the classroom.

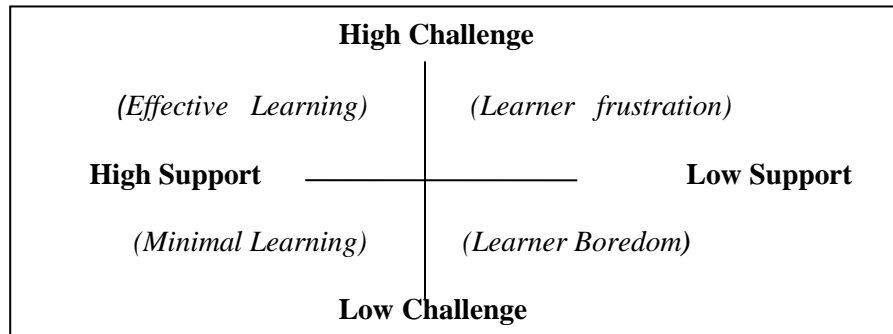


Figure 1. Language classroom learning Consequences of variance support and challenge (Gilmore, 2007)

Figure 1 shows the consequences of variances between text and task difficulty to the learners. If the text and the text are manageable for the learners, learning would be effective, but if the text and the task design are too difficult for the learners to accomplish, they might get frustrated which result in ineffective learning. Figure 1 shows the importance of providing instructional materials which both offer challenge and support for the students to accomplish the task. In relation to the authentic materials, it can be interpreted that the language teacher, more specifically the writing teacher, should consider the suitable authentic materials for writing instruction in which these materials are appropriate for the students in terms of the difficulty level and appropriateness so that they provide both challenge and support for learning to write instruction.

### **Type of Authentic Materials for Teaching Writing**

Research has shown that in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, the use of technology in the classroom is inevitable. The access of

internet is easy and inexpensive. It does not need big PC or computer to surf in the internet as gadget and smart phone are already sufficient. Therefore, teachers with easy internet access and support of electricity, tend to use technology to help reach the learning objectives. However, some printed instructional media are still used in the classroom for the sake of its availability. Based on research, there are many materials that teacher can use for teaching writing. It can be printed materials, such as fictions (Setyowati & Sukmawan, 2018), picture series (Styati, 2016), or web-based materials, such as You Tube videos (Styati, 2016), websites (Sundana, 2018).

In terms of how the materials are transmitted, the authentic materials are divided into three broad categories, namely audio, visual, and printed materials (Maroko, 2010). Furthermore, Sundana (2018) also states that the authentic materials can also in the form of newspaper, magazines, and internet articles. As stated by Benavent & Penamaria (2011), with such an advancement of technology nowadays, teachers tend to

take the authentic materials from the internet. Thus, it can be concluded that basically there are two broad category of authentic materials for teaching writing, namely the printed materials and the web-based materials. The printed materials may in the form of printed magazines, printed newspaper, printed itinerary, invitation, letters, printed literary works such as collection of short stories, novels, poems, and play, and other printed texts or documents. The second type of authentic materials is the digital one or the web-based materials, such as pictures, You Tube, movie clips, electronic books, novels, short stories, poems, and web-based application, like booksie.com, storybird.com, and many more.

### **Supports for Authentic Materials**

As authentic materials have gained its popularity in language teaching, there should be reasons why authentic materials are widely used in classroom context. Based on the review of literature, there are several aspects preferred by writing teachers/lecturers on the use of authentic materials. Among others, they are real and motivating.

#### *Authenticity*

Authentic means real and original which lead to a definition that authentic materials are those materials which are not simplified and not specifically created for language teaching. Khaniya (2010:18) define authentic materials as “the degree of congruence between the language of a learning material and the features of target language use”. He further states that without the presentation of authentic materials in the classroom, it is difficult to predict how the students performs the language they learn in the classroom to the actual life outside the classroom.

Based on the research conducted by Crossley et al (2007) the naturalness of authentic materials lay in the syntactical

complexity and low-frequency words used in the texts. With sufficient practice given to the students, authentic materials can give more benefits for language learners as compared to the simplified/artificial materials. Similarly, Tomlinson (2012) gives the characteristics of ideal materials for English Language Teaching (ELT). Among others, ELT materials should contain authentic use of the language which have authentic input features. He argues that using authentic materials help the students to acquire the language effectively. Therefore, he believes that simplifying the authentic texts for learning purposes is not necessary.

#### *Motivating*

Authentic materials are said to be interesting and motivating if used in the classroom. It is like bringing the real world into the classroom. Day (2004) calls this the ‘affect’ reason. Teachers/lecturers and researchers who have used authentic materials often claim that authentic materials are engaging, motivating and interesting. The second common reason is authentic materials prepare students to face the real world outside the classroom. It is motivating for the students because it provides real language, real culture and a variety of genre used by the professional community (Benavent & Penamaria, 2011).

For foreign language learners, the use of authentic materials for learning a target language is indeed motivating. With the lack of exposure to the target language, the use of authentic materials minimizes the bridge between the artificial world (what they learn in the classroom) and the real world (what they find outside the classroom). One of the example of authentic materials that can be used for language teaching is the use of short stories. The use of short stories in the language classroom is like killing two birds with one stone, in the sense that short stories can be used to teach all four skills at the same

time, listening, reading, speaking and writing (Erkaya, 2005). The use of short stories, if they are carefully chosen, give motivational benefit because they triggers the students' curiosity about what's coming next (the plot), cultural value, and moral value.

### **Challenges on the Use of Authentic Materials for Teaching Writing**

The use of authentic materials in the classroom is highly appreciated. This lead to a common perception that non-authentic materials / simplified materials are 'terrible' (Day, 2004). Yet, no matter how we value them in the classroom teaching, there are always problems in implementing the authentic materials. Richards (2006) argues that the use of authentic materials in teaching materials is unrealistic. He even states in a strong argument that authentic materials is a 'myth' (Richards, 2006;11). One of the stand out challenge is the language problems and at what level it should be given, which then results in the appropriateness problem.

#### *Language Problems*

Some people might argue that authentic materials are more interesting and motivating for language learners when it is used in the classroom. However, some studies show different finding. Peacock (1997) conducted a study to find out how authentic materials relate to the students' motivation. He used EFL students in their beginner level and used observation sheets and self-report questionnaire as the instruments of his study. He found an interesting result in his research in which students reported that artificial materials were more interesting as compared to the authentic materials.

It is true that authentic materials, both spoken and written, provide real language use and context. However, its selection and use often offer problems for the teachers (Khaniya, 2010). As stated by Richard (in Khaniya, 2010) authentic materials often

written in difficult language both in vocabulary and language structures. This argument is further strengthened by other expert. Day (2004) argues the problems in using authentic materials for language teaching, namely comprehensibility and appropriateness. In Day 's argument (2004), the most serious problem with authentic materials is the appropriateness in terms of the language, variety of the target language, and appropriateness in tasks, activities, and exercises. He strongly suggests that if should authentic materials be used in the classroom, the concept of *appropriateness* should be the main focus of consideration.

#### *"For What Level" Problems*

Because of the language problems that teachers often encounter in the use of authentic materials, the next question which often emerge is for what level of students should we use the authentic materials in the classroom? Richards (2006) argue that the use of authentic materials for teaching materials is not always necessary. It is based on his arguments that finding and selecting authentic materials suitable for low learners or at the beginner level. Based on the study conducted by Crossley et al. (2007) in relation to the linguistic feature between authentic materials and simplified materials, it was found out that the linguistic features as found in authentic materials are not suitable for beginning level of students because of the syntactical complexity and low-frequency words, even though these are the features that make the authentic materials natural. They argue that simplified/ materials benefit the beginner more because these type of materials, which are often found in textbooks, use high-frequency words and a lot of repetition which facilitate comprehension.

Similarly, Khaniya (2010) argues that authentic materials might not be suitable for lower level of students. Guariento & Morley (2001) state that the use authentic materials

for lower level of students might cause demotivation and frustration as their language competence is not adequately acquired. They further argues that that the use of authentic materials will mostly appropriate for intermediate level of students. The argument behind this is that the intermediate students have acquire sufficient vocabulary and the syntactical structures of the target language. Similar opinion is also given by Beresova (2015). She states that authentic material is mostly suitable for advanced students.

Then there might come the next question. Does it mean that low lever of students cannot use authentic materials? The answer to this question is it depends. It depends on what type of authentic materials are given to the low-level of students. As argued by Khaniya (2010), it is better to give the low-level of students the authentic materials in the form of popular and traditional songs as they offer non-threatening atmosphere. Unfortunately, these researchers (Crossley et al., 2007; Guariento & Morley, 2001; Khaniya, 2010) do not give clear definition of 'beginner' or 'low level' of students. These words are relative in its meaning because a student who is just able to spell and write a word is a beginner similar to a student who newly learn to write a simple sentence. In short, the intermediate level and high intermediate level of students are mostly appropriate to be given reading text-types authentic materials, while the low level of students do not.

## **CONCLUSION**

The use of authentic materials has its own place in the language classroom. Despite of the weaknesses of the authentic materials when they are used in the classroom, the advantages outweigh its weaknesses. It is true that using authentic materials in the classroom, specifically for teaching writing,

provides challenges for the teacher to find, select, prepare, and design activities that matches with the teaching objectives. Yes, it is not easy. Yet, it should not discourage teachers to try. When the students gradually acquire better language competence, teachers are encouraged to use authentic materials whenever possible in the language classroom with always to bear in mind the appropriateness level problem. The use of authentic materials would help the students to acquire the language better and sharpen their critical thinking ability.

Some suggestions are addressed to the future researchers. Further research needs to be conducted to find out the effectiveness of authentic materials for teaching writing in university level. When the information between the effectiveness of authentic materials versus textbook materials are sufficient, more information needs to be gathered in relation to what type of authentic materials offer better writing achievement to the learner. Further research also needs to be conducted to find out whether the effect of using authentic materials in the language class shows differences across gender and language competence. All in all, it is important for language teacher to gather information as much as possible to investigate the use authentic materials for learning a language, both in first and second/foreign language context. After all, the long term goal of any learning is to help the students to function well in the society and real life context so that they are beneficial to others.

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