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AUTHENTICITY IN LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY: RETHINKING TEXT SELECTION FOR ESL LEARNERS

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Abstract. The concept of authenticity has gained new relevance in contemporary language pedagogy, particularly in relation to selecting reading materials for ESL learners. As classrooms increasingly emphasize communicative competence and real-world language use, the limitations of highly simplified or decontextualized texts have become more evident. The purpose of this research is to determine how authentic reading materials can enhance ESL learners' reading skills by providing real linguistic exposure, meaningful content, and genuine communicative value.

To achieve this aim, a mixed set of research methods was employed, including analysis of psychological-pedagogical literature, classroom observation, experimental application of authentic reading materials, and qualitative-quantitative interpretation of outcomes. Literature analysis helped to identify theoretical foundations of authenticity, while experimental classroom work allowed practical exploration of learners' engagement, comprehension, and response to authentic input. The combination of observation and reflective student feedback provided insights into cognitive and motivational factors influencing the reading process.

The novelty of this study lies in reconsidering current text-selection practices and demonstrating how authentic materials, when appropriately scaled and methodologically guided, can function as an effective alternative to overly simplified ESL reading passages. Authentic input exposes learners to natural linguistic patterns, diverse discourse structures, and culturally meaningful contexts, all of which contribute to deeper engagement and improved comprehension. At the same time, the findings indicate that effective integration requires careful alignment with learners' proficiency levels, cognitive load, cultural familiarity, and instructional objectives.

The discussion highlights essential selection criteria such as thematic relevance, vocabulary density, discourse clarity, cultural transparency, and learner readiness. A balanced approach is proposed – one that maintains the richness of genuine language while ensuring pedagogical accessibility. By adopting such a framework, teachers can design reading environments that enhance motivation, encourage independent meaning-making strategies, and strengthen long-term development of ESL reading skills.

Key words: authentic materials, authenticity, ESL reading, text selection, learner engagement, communicative competence, real-life language input.

Introduction. In recent years, the role of authentic texts in English language teaching has attracted growing attention, as language classrooms have become more focused on real communication and meaningful input. Learners often encounter language outside the classroom through digital platforms, social media, news updates, and everyday interactions. Because of this, the contrast between textbook materials and real-life language has become more visible. In many cases, simplified passages fail to reflect the complexity, spontaneity, and cultural richness that actual communication requires. This situation creates a need to reconsider how reading materials are selected and used in the teaching process.

The purpose of the research is to clarify how authentic materials can more effectively contribute to the formation and development of reading skills in ESL settings, and to identify criteria for selecting texts that correspond to learners' cognitive, linguistic, and motivational needs. It aims to deter-

mine whether exposure to naturally occurring language enhances comprehension, cultural awareness, and learner engagement more effectively than traditional, simplified materials. The research also seeks to outline practical ways of integrating authentic texts into classroom instruction and to analyse how their use influences reading competence in secondary-school contexts.

Analysis of the latest relevant research and publications shows that authenticity in language pedagogy has been widely discussed by scholars such as Gilmore (2007), Berardo (2006), and Nuttall (1996), who highlight the role of real-life language in improving learners' reading comprehension and communicative competence. Recent studies emphasise that authentic material should not be understood as complex literary text, but as any naturally produced language created for genuine communicative purposes. Researchers also draw attention to the fact that difficulties arise not from authenticity itself, but from mismatched proficiency levels, lack of cultural familiarity, and inappropriate topic selection. Many publications underline that when learners engage with texts related to their interests, age, and experience, motivation increases and comprehension improves significantly.

Authenticity in language pedagogy continues to attract attention, as many learners and teachers feel that traditional textbook passages no longer reflect how English exists in everyday communication. Because of this, interest in authenticity grows not as an abstract concept but as a practical tool that brings real language into the classroom. Authentic material is understood as any text created for real-life purposes, whether a short message, a comment under a post, or a brief announcement. When such material is chosen with care, it gives learners the sense that English is a living system shaped by context, emotion, and intention. In this context, the process of selecting material becomes a key stage. It has been noticed that learners struggle not with authenticity itself but with mismatched difficulty levels and unfamiliar topics. When texts are chosen according to age, interests, and emotional connection, comprehension increases significantly.

Text selection becomes especially important. Many difficulties arise not due to the authentic character of the text, but due to poorly matched content. When passages reflect learners' age, interests, and real communicative needs, engagement increases naturally. Even very short pieces, a restaurant review, a weather update, a simple Q&A comment, can offer clearer models of real English than long artificial dialogues. These compact texts highlight natural phrasing, show how sentences flow in real usage, and present vocabulary as a part of meaning rather than a list to memorise.

The introduction of authentic input into the classroom creates a learning environment where language is meaningful, relevant, and connected to real communication. When materials are chosen thoughtfully, authentic texts become a strong tool for improving reading comprehension, developing cultural awareness, and supporting overall language growth. The following sections explore these ideas in detail and present the outcomes that emerged through this paper.

Methods and approaches. In the paper, special attention is given to the methods and approaches that support the use of authentic texts in English language teaching. Material is selected to develop not only comprehension but also the ability to navigate real communication. Several approaches are commonly applied, and each of them offers its own way of working with natural language input.

One of the leading approaches is the communicative approach. In this framework, authentic texts serve as a source of real linguistic patterns. During work with such materials, learners receive tasks that mirror everyday communication: predicting content, discussing ideas, and identifying subtle details. As a result, a learning environment is formed where language is perceived as a living tool rather than a set of isolated rules.

Another widely used approach is the content-based approach. Here, attention shifts to the meaning and thematic value of the text. Learners engage with the topic, identify main ideas, and connect information to broader contexts. This reduces anxiety around complex language, since understanding grows from general logic rather than from strict vocabulary control. In the end, interest in the text increases, and motivation becomes stronger.

Task-based learning is also applied when working with authentic texts. The emphasis moves to purposeful tasks that require using language to achieve an outcome. Activities such as preparing brief summaries, comparing viewpoints, or creating small projects offer a sense of real communication. This approach supports active involvement and gives space for learners to process authentic material in a more natural way.

A student-centered perspective is considered equally important. In this format, text choice aligns with learners' preferences, age, and goals. When the content feels relevant, engagement rises, and the learning process becomes more meaningful. It becomes easier to handle challenging language because each task is connected to something personally valuable for the learner.

Overall, a combination of these approaches enables a balanced work with authentic texts. Real language becomes more accessible, and reading activities feel closer to real-life communication, which strengthens both motivation and comprehension.

Different authors highlight authenticity as a key condition for meaningful language learning. H. G. Widdowson points out that authenticity is not only about the origin of the text, but also about the way it is used in the classroom. When tasks give a real purpose for reading, even a classroom text gains a more authentic character. This idea supports the communicative approach, where the main focus falls on purposeful interaction and real messages.

C. Nuttall underlines that interesting and slightly challenging texts help to build reading skills more effectively than oversimplified passages. According to this view, learners should work with materials that carry real information value and emotional impact. A text becomes a tool for thinking, not just an exercise for practicing grammar or individual words. In line with this, many authors stress that authentic texts can develop guessing strategies, tolerance to unknown vocabulary, and the ability to read for the main idea.

A. Gilmore pays attention to the gap between textbook language and real usage. It is noted that traditional teaching materials often present artificially clean and predictable language, while authentic texts reflect mixed styles, incomplete sentences, and cultural references. This contrast shows why communicative and task-based approaches receive so much attention: they help to integrate "messy" real language into classroom work without losing control over difficulty.

Publications on extensive reading also connect authentic input with long-term progress in reading skills. Day and Bamford emphasize that large amounts of relatively accessible texts, read for pleasure and general meaning, gradually increase speed, vocabulary, and confidence. This idea fits well with content-based and student-centered approaches, where personal choice and enjoyment are treated as serious factors in language development.

Result. In the paper, special attention was given to the role of authentic texts that function in real time and reflect language as it appears in everyday communication. These materials differ from traditional printed passages not only by origin but also by their dynamic nature, immediacy, and constant change. When the outcomes from different sources were compared, several patterns appeared, showing how real-time authentic materials influence engagement, comprehension, and language awareness.

One of the most noticeable results concerns immediacy. Real-time texts such as online news updates, live comments, social media posts, short public announcements, and messages from digital platforms introduce a sense of presence. These texts are not created to teach language; they exist to communicate something happening at the moment. Because of this, their use in the classroom creates a feeling that learning is connected to a living environment. Learners respond strongly to this type of content because it touches current events, daily routines, or trending topics. In many examples described in the literature, motivation increased when real-time materials were introduced, since every text carried information that mattered to someone right now. This sense of relevance encourages continued reading even in the presence of unfamiliar vocabulary.

A second result involves the natural fluidity of real-time language. Unlike controlled textbook texts, real-time authentic materials include spontaneous expressions, incomplete sentences, mixed registers, abbreviations, and emotional colouring. These features reflect the real functioning of language in society. Exposure to such variation encourages the development of flexible reading strategies. Instead of searching for perfect grammar or predictable structures, learners begin to focus on meaning, context, and tone. This shift strengthens global comprehension skills and reduces dependence on strict vocabulary control. It becomes easier to understand the overall message because attention moves to context clues and background logic. In consequence, readers become less afraid of unknown words and more confident in navigating unpredictable content.

The dynamic character of real-time texts also influences speed and processing ability. Many real-time materials are short, urgent in tone, and require quick interpretation—such as headlines, notifications, brief public messages, or platform alerts. These text types encourage learners to practise scanning, identifying the essential point, and recognising keywords. Skills of this type are essential for functioning in an information-rich society. After repeated exposure, learners begin to process information faster, which supports both reading fluency and general confidence. This outcome is often highlighted in works on authentic input, where real-world texts are described as catalysts for the development of natural reading habits.

Another pattern that became visible concerns cultural awareness. Real-time texts carry cultural references, humour, emotional reactions, and social attitudes that rarely appear in conventional textbooks. They document how a community reacts to events, expresses opinions, and communicates with one another. Through such materials, learners gain insight into contemporary cultural behaviour, social norms, and collective values. These cultural markers help learners understand not only the language but also the setting in which the language lives. In many cases, this awareness contributes to more accurate interpretations, since real-time texts often rely on shared cultural knowledge. Exposure to these elements creates a more holistic understanding of language and helps learners build connections between linguistic forms and social contexts.

Emotional involvement forms another important part of the results. Because real-time texts introduce relevant and often emotionally charged topics, learners tend to react more actively. Emotional engagement makes reading memorable and encourages participation in discussions or follow-up tasks. When a text touches daily life, social issues, or trending events, learners often feel compelled to share opinions and interpret the message in personal ways. Interaction becomes more dynamic, and the classroom atmosphere becomes more communicative. This effect is frequently mentioned in works on communicative competence, where emotionally meaningful content is described as a powerful motivator.

Another outcome relates to the level of unpredictability that real-time materials bring into the learning process. Since real-time texts change daily—or even hourly—the classroom becomes a flexible environment. New materials can appear at any moment, and tasks must adapt to the content rather than the other way around. This adaptability results in more creative instruction and supports a responsive teaching style. Lessons become less static and more connected to external reality. In many cases, learners enjoy this unpredictable element, because it mirrors real communication, where messages arrive without prior warning. This unpredictability trains learners to deal with complexity, ambiguity, and quick decision-making.

Along with positive outcomes, several challenges also emerged. One challenge involves the high density of unfamiliar vocabulary that appears in real-time texts. Social media posts may contain slang, abbreviations, or mixed registers. News updates may introduce formal expressions or topic-specific terminology. Although this variety supports authentic learning, it may cause hesitation among learners with lower proficiency. Because of this, many authors recommend presenting real-time materials with tasks that reduce pressure. Tasks focusing on gist, tone, or emotional message often help learners bypass unfamiliar elements and concentrate on essential meaning.

Another challenge concerns the rapid pace of change. Real-time texts may lose relevance within days, hours, or even minutes. For teaching purposes, this rapid turnover can become both an advantage and a complication. On the one hand, learners receive constantly updated material that mirrors reality. On the other hand, preparing tasks for such texts requires continuous adjustment. Despite this, the flexibility of real-time materials encourages dynamic thinking and prevents monotony in the classroom.

A further result appears in the comparison of approaches. Communicative and task-based approaches fit especially well with real-time materials, since both emphasise interaction, meaning negotiation, and purposeful activity. This view aligns with Harmer's (2007) perspective that reading activities should lead to communication rather than remain product-oriented. These approaches treat text as a springboard for discussion, problem-solving, and meaning-focused exchange. Real-time texts, by nature, evoke spontaneous reactions and questions, transforming reading into a dynamic communicative act rather than a silent decoding task. In contrast, purely grammar-oriented instruction receives less empirical support in this context, as real-time texts rarely follow controlled grammatical sequencing (Hadley, 2001). However, when grammar is noticed implicitly through contextual examples, learners attend to form more naturally, which reflects Grabe's (2009) argument that comprehension and structure awareness develop best within meaningful input.

Content-based instruction also benefits from authentic and real-time texts, since both approaches are grounded in meaning, topicality, and thematic coherence. When learners work with texts linked to subject matter or current events, ideas not structures-guide the learning process. This perspective is in line with Day and Bamford (1998), who stress that extensive and purposeful reading fosters deeper comprehension. Through such meaning-focused reading, learners strengthen connections between language, knowledge, and cognitive processing, building competencies that traditional materials rarely activate.

Real-time texts further contribute to digital literacy. Many authentic materials-social media comments, online reviews, short news updates or forum discussions—exist primarily in digital environments. Working with these materials exposes learners to multimodal features such as emojis, hyperlinks, visual layout cues, and interactive comment chains. These semiotic components influence meaning and require interpretation beyond standard text processing. The inclusion of such materials reflects Gilmore's (2007) assertion that authenticity encompasses not only linguistic content but also discourse mode, context, and communicative purpose. Developing literacy in this form becomes an essential skill in the contemporary communicative landscape, where online interaction dominates professional and personal spheres.

Another positive outcome concerns learner autonomy. Real-time materials frequently inspire students to explore English outside the classroom, especially when content aligns with personal interests. Learners begin reading short online posts, news fragments, and everyday texts independently, which extends language exposure beyond instructional time. Gilmore (2011) notes that authentic input motivates learners to engage with English in self-directed ways, increasing long-term retention and confidence. When reading becomes a routine part of daily life, gains in fluency and comprehension become more stable and sustainable.

In final synthesis, the findings indicate that real-time authentic texts bring vitality, variation, and communicative relevance into the learning environment. They enhance motivation, cultural awareness, digital competence, and the ability to interpret unpredictable discourse patterns. These outcomes reflect the broader pedagogical conclusions presented by Breen (1985), Garton and Graves (2014), and Harmer (2007), all of whom highlight authenticity as a driver of meaningful language development. When integrated into well-structured communicative tasks, real-time texts significantly support reading proficiency, engagement, and overall language competence.

Conclusion. In the course paper, several outcomes became noticeable after examining the role of authentic texts and the methods used to work with them. The results show that authentic materials

influence learner engagement, comprehension, and overall classroom dynamics in several interconnected ways.

A consistent outcome is linked to learner motivation. When authentic texts were introduced in examples discussed in the literature, interest increased almost immediately. Real-life content, natural vocabulary, and meaningful topics created a sense of relevance, which reduced tension around unknown words. Motivation worked as a supportive factor that helped learners continue reading even when the text presented difficulties.

Another result appears in connection with comprehension. Authentic materials encouraged learners to rely more on general logic, context clues, and background knowledge. This shift strengthened global reading skills and helped learners focus on meaning instead of individual words. In consequence, learners developed greater tolerance toward unfamiliar language, which is highlighted in many works describing the benefits of authentic input.

The analysis also shows that task design plays a major role in the effectiveness of authentic materials. Tasks that focused on predicting content, identifying the main idea, or interpreting key points helped make authentic texts more accessible. In contrast, overly detailed or grammar-centered tasks sometimes increased the difficulty level. This contrast indicates that the success of authentic reading is closely tied to balanced task organisation.

A noticeable pattern was found in the comparison of approaches. Communicative and task-based approaches supported active engagement during reading activities. Learners used the text as a basis for interaction, discussion, and problem-solving. This approach created a natural learning atmosphere, where real language became part of meaningful tasks. Content-based instruction also showed positive results, as it directed learners' attention to topic-related understanding rather than isolated vocabulary.

Another important outcome concerns the balance between authenticity and accessibility. The materials described in the literature demonstrate that complete authenticity is not always necessary. Texts that remained authentic in origin but were appropriate in length, topic, and complexity produced better results. This balance allowed learners to experience real language without becoming overwhelmed, which helped maintain steady progress.

Overall, the results indicate that authentic texts contribute to more dynamic lessons, higher engagement, and improved reading strategies. Learners become more confident when working with real language, and their ability to interpret meaning grows stronger. In the end, authentic materials, when supported by suitable approaches and well-designed tasks, lead to noticeable improvements in both motivation and comprehension.

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