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USING AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN EFL CLASSROOMS: ENHANCING ADVANCED LEARNERS' ENGAGEMENT AND LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

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Abstract. This study investigates the use of authentic materials in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, focusing on advanced learners. Authentic materials, such as news articles, podcasts, academic journals, and TED Talks, expose learners to real-world language, idiomatic expressions, and cultural context. A qualitative research design was employed, involving classroom observations, student journals, and semi-structured interviews over a 12-week period. Findings indicate that authentic materials enhance engagement, reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and critical thinking. Challenges include occasional difficulty with specialized vocabulary, highlighting the importance of scaffolding strategies. The study concludes that authentic materials are effective tools for advanced EFL instruction and recommends careful selection and integration to optimize learning outcomes.

Keywords: authentic materials, EFL, advanced learners, language competence, classroom engagement.

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Introduction. The use of authentic materials in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom has long been recognized as an effective approach for enhancing learners' language competence and motivation (Gilmore, 2007; Berardo, 2006). Authentic materials are defined as texts, audio, or visual content produced for real-life communication rather than pedagogical purposes (Breen, 1985; Guariento & Morley, 2001). Exposure to authentic materials provides learners with natural language input, idiomatic expressions, and cultural insights, bridging the gap between classroom learning and real-world language use (Lee, 1995; Kim, 2000).

Despite their pedagogical benefits, challenges exist in selecting and integrating authentic materials appropriately for advanced learners. Research indicates that authentic materials can improve reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and pragmatic competence when aligned with learners' proficiency and learning objectives (Baniabdelrahman, 2006; Peacock, 1997). This study examines how authentic materials influence engagement, comprehension, and language performance in advanced EFL learners.

Within this context, the Foreign Languages department of the Tashkent branch of MGIMO, places strong emphasis on the extensive use of authentic materials across all Bachelor's and Master's programs. Authentic resources—including international legal texts, treaties, case studies, corporate reports, financial documents, specialized media articles, and discipline-specific textbooks—are systematically incorporated into the ESP curriculum. This approach ensures that students engage with language as it functions in real professional environments, thereby enhancing both linguistic proficiency and subject-matter literacy. The integration of authentic materials supports the development of analytical skills, intercultural competence, and practical

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communication abilities, which are essential for Tashkent-MGIMO students preparing for professional roles in international, governmental, and corporate contexts. As a result, authentic materials serve as a bridge between academic instruction and the demands of real-world professional communication, reinforcing the relevance and effectiveness of ESP teaching at Tashkent-MGIMO.

Methods. A qualitative research design was employed to explore the effects of authentic materials on advanced EFL learners' engagement and language outcomes. Participants included 30 students enrolled in an upper-intermediate and advanced English course. Lessons incorporated authentic materials such as textbooks (Face-to Face, upper-intermediate and advanced level), news articles, podcasts, and TED Talks over a 14-week period. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Observations documented student interaction with materials, participation in discussions, and use of the target language. Student journals provided insights into perceived difficulty, cultural content, and engagement. Interviews explored students' attitudes toward authentic materials and their perceived impact on language development.

Results. Analysis revealed that the use of authentic materials significantly increased learners' motivation and overall engagement in the ESP classroom. Students consistently reported that working with real-world content—such as newspaper articles, case studies, legal documents, and business reports—made lessons more meaningful, stimulating, and directly relevant to both their academic goals and personal experiences. Many emphasized that authentic resources helped them better understand how English functions in professional contexts, which, in turn, strengthened their sense of purpose and confidence in learning the language.

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In terms of linguistic development, integrating authentic materials led to notable improvements in comprehension skills. Learners demonstrated increased ability to interpret idiomatic expressions, comprehend complex sentence structures, and decode subject-specific terminology that is often absent from traditional GE-oriented textbooks. Exposure to naturally occurring language also enhanced students' ability to infer meaning from context, recognize discourse patterns, and understand pragmatic nuances typical of professional communication.

Classroom discussions showed a marked increase in critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and meaningful communicative interaction. Students participated more actively, formulated arguments with greater precision, and engaged in deeper comparative analysis of cultural perspectives reflected in authentic texts. They demonstrated heightened willingness to express opinions, challenge ideas, and collaborate in problem-solving tasks—behaviors that were less frequent when working with simplified or artificially constructed materials. As a result, the classroom environment became more dynamic, interactive, and reflective of real-world communicative demands.

Despite these benefits, the use of authentic materials also presented certain challenges. Learners initially struggled with highly specialized vocabulary, dense informational structure, and unfamiliar professional contexts. These difficulties highlighted the need for careful scaffolding strategies, such as pre-teaching key terminology, providing guided reading tasks, and gradually increasing text complexity. With appropriate instructional support, however, students were able to overcome these obstacles and develop greater independence and confidence in handling authentic texts.

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Overall, the findings indicate that authentic materials not only enhance linguistic and communicative competence but also promote higher-order thinking, learner autonomy, and professional readiness—outcomes that are particularly valuable within ESP programs preparing students for specialized academic and career paths.

Discussion. The findings of this study support and extend existing research emphasizing the pedagogical value of authentic materials in advanced EFL and ESP classrooms (Gilmore, 2007; Peacock, 1997). The results indicate that authentic input provides learners with rich exposure to naturally occurring language, thereby facilitating more robust linguistic development. Such exposure promotes not only lexical and syntactic growth but also pragmatic competence, enabling students to navigate the subtleties of tone, style, and discourse patterns characteristic of real-world communication. These outcomes corroborate earlier arguments that authentic materials encourage deeper cultural awareness, increased motivation, and greater learner autonomy (Lee, 1995; Kim, 2000).

A notable contribution of the present study is its emphasis on the cognitive and affective impact of authentic materials within an ESP context. Learners' heightened engagement, critical thinking, and meaningful participation in classroom discussions suggest that authentic resources provide an essential bridge between language instruction and disciplinary knowledge. In ESP settings—particularly in fields such as International Law, Business Information—this connection is crucial, as students must acquire not only linguistic proficiency but also the ability to interpret and respond to specialised texts. Authentic materials thus function as both linguistic and professional training tools, helping learners internalize disciplinary conventions and communicative expectations.

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However, the study also highlights several challenges associated with authentic materials. In line with Breen (1985) and Nunan (1997) the complexity of real-world texts can initially overwhelm learners, particularly when such texts contain dense information, idiomatic expressions, or specialised terminology. These findings underscore the need for teachers to engage in thoughtful material selection that balances cognitive demand with contextual relevance. To optimize learning outcomes, instructors should employ scaffolding techniques such as pre-teaching key vocabulary, offering guided comprehension tasks, modeling analytical strategies, and using structured discussion prompts to support students' processing of complex content. Such pedagogical interventions not only facilitate comprehension but also promote learner confidence and independence over time.

The implications of the study extend to curriculum design and instructional practice. By strategically integrating authentic materials, educators can create dynamic, interactive learning environments that closely mirror the linguistic and communicative realities of academic and professional settings. This alignment enhances learners' readiness to participate effectively in English-mediated contexts, whether in higher education, international work environments, or cross-cultural communication situations (Cory, 2009; Martinez, 2002).

Finally, the study opens avenues for further research. Given the increasing digitalization of education, future investigations could explore the affordances of digital and multimedia authentic materials—such as podcasts, interactive data visualizations, online news platforms, and professional webinars—particularly within online and blended learning environments. Such an inquiry would provide valuable insight into how evolving technological tools can expand the range and impact of authenticity in language education.

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