
Feature Article

The Use of Authentic Materials and Its Potential Impact on Sustained Learning

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Previous studies have shown the benefits of using authentic materials (AMs) in language education. However, the connection between AMs in formal education and language learning autonomy thereafter is not established. This preliminary study investigates potential links between AMs and sustained self-learning. In-depth interviews were conducted with 14 Japanese participants. These participants had learned language using AMs at college and had at least three years of post-college work experience. They reported that learning a language using AMs gave them positive study habits, confidence, and motivation for studying the language independently. Furthermore, they reported it was valuable for learning the language, understanding the world, and offering career insights. The preliminary study ends by inviting further investigation and suggesting that, if the connection between AMs and sustained self-learning can be conclusively established, AMs should be considered for greater inclusion in tertiary language education.

先行研究では、言語教育においてオーセンティック・マテリアル (Authentic Materials: AMs) を使用することによる教育的効果が示唆されている。しかし、大学等の英語教育におけるAMsの活用が、学習者が卒業後において自律的かつ持続的な言語学習にどのように寄与するのかについて、十分な検証が行われていない。本研究は、AMsと持続的な自己学習との潜在的関連を明らかにすることを目的とした予備的調査である。調査対象は、大学でAMsを用いた英語学習を経験し、卒業後3年以上の就労経験を有する日本語母語話者14名である。詳細な面接

によって得られたデータを分析した結果、AMsを活用した学習経験は、学習者に肯定的な学習習慣や自信、そして自律的に学習を継続する動機付けをもたらしたと報告された。さらに、言語能力の向上にとどまらず、国際的視野の拡大やキャリアに関する洞察を得る上でも有益であったことが示された。本研究は、AMsが学習者の持続的な自己学習を促す可能性を示唆する予備的知見を提示したものである。今後、AMsの効果がより明確に実証されれば、高等教育の言語教育におけるAMsの活用を一層推進する意義があると考えられる。

Authentic materials (AMs) are real-life texts, audio, or video used for language learning that are not originally intended as such. Using AMs in language learning boosts language gains, student motivation, general knowledge, and cultural awareness (Richards, 2001). Furthermore, AMs narrow the gap between inauthentic constructs in the language classroom and real-world language use. It has been established that AMs promote autonomy and independent learning (Yoneda & Valvona, 2019). However, it remains unclear whether they encourage self-learning post-formal education. This preliminary study attempts to bridge this research gap by examining the potential link between using AMs in college language education and post-college learning autonomy.

There is general agreement on the definition of AMs (Kramsch, 1993; Richards, 2001; Richards & Schmidt, 2002; Tomlinson, 2012). Materials that have “authenticity” are those “produced for purposes of communication [and] not for purposes of language teaching” (Nunan, 2004, p. 49). To be considered authentic, or what Widdowson (1978) distinguishes as having “genuineness,” (p. 80) the material should not be modified for the classroom (McGrath, 2002). Indeed, “no concessions are made to foreign speakers” (Harmer, 2015, p. 306). The materials should be used the same way in the classroom as in real life (Jacobson et al., 2003). It has been argued that AMs relate exclusively to native speakers (Bacon & Finnemann, 1990). However, Zyzik and Polio (2017) state that AMs are “often, but not always, provided by native speakers for native speakers” (p. 1).

Using AMs increases communicative competency (Gilmore, 2011; Guariento & Morley, 2001; McGrath, 2002; Weyers, 1999). Their use can also increase student motivation, access to cultural information, and exposure

to real language (Richards, 2001; Yoneda & Valvona, 2021). Exposure to real language contrasts with the inauthenticity of textbooks written for the language classroom (Widdowson, 1978). Moreover, using AMs can meet learners' needs and encourage creativity in teaching (Richards, 2001; Yoneda & Valvona, 2021).

AMs serve to bridge the gap between the language classroom (Day, 2003) and the real world (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Yoneda & Valvona, 2021). These materials contain cultural and contextual information for students (Spelleri, 2002). Students' cultural awareness, empathy, sensitivity, inquisitiveness, and positivity increase when using AMs (Garcia, 1991; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004). In their research about teachers' perspectives of AMs, Yoneda and Valvona (2021) confirm gains in student motivation, enhanced awareness of the world outside the classroom, bridging between the classroom and the real world, and enhanced creativity in teacher approaches. In addition, Yoneda and Valvona (2019) found that AMs improve students' general knowledge beyond their language ability. AMs also encourage students to learn more independently (Yoneda & Valvona, 2019) when they connect to their personal lives.

As stated above, AMs make no concessions for language learners by simplifying the material. However, this increases the possibility that the AM content will be difficult for learners (Richards, 2001). In particular, such materials could have complicated or unfamiliar vocabulary, grammar, and colloquialisms. This could demotivate some students (Gilmore, 2007; Guariento & Morley, 2001), particularly if such AMs are unrealistically difficult. Consequently, Yoneda and Valvona (2019) emphasize the importance of the material's relevance to students.

A further burden is placed on teachers when incorporating AMs into lesson plans (Kilickaya, 2004). Coursebooks tend not to include a lot of AMs. Hence, teachers face the time-consuming work of selecting suitable AMs and developing appropriate activities (Bell & Gower, 1998; Crystal & Davy, 1975; Hughes & McCarthy, 1998; Kuo, 1993). Teachers typically believe that incorporating AMs into coursebooks is important (Yoneda & Valvona, 2019), but this burden makes their use more complicated in reality.

Something is not necessarily good for language learning simply because it is authentic. Selecting appropriate, relevant, and engaging material is crucial to success. Furthermore, as Buendgens-Kosten (2014) points out, native speakers are often emphasized as the source of AMs. This risks undermining the image of English teachers who are non-native speakers. It may also cause students to overlook that English is a *lingua franca* spoken globally. Therefore, selecting appropriate AMs is paramount but also complex and multifaceted.

In summary, the literature generally agrees on the benefits of AMs. Yet, research on whether they encourage sustained learning in post-formal education remains lacking. Therefore, the research question for this study is as follows:

Does the use of AM in formal education have the potential to contribute to student autonomy and sustained self-learning?

Methods

Participants

The participants were 14 English-major college alumni in Japan. These students had taken a Business Communication course and experienced learning English using AMs in certain classes. All participants had at least three years of work experience, a period of time we deemed sufficient to allow us to assess their independent language learning post-college. Table 1 on the following page shows that the participants' professions were diverse, ranging from high school English teachers and international flight crew members to work in logistics, securities, retail, and IT-related companies. These occupations are typical job opportunities for college students.

Prior English Learning

The AMs used previously were related to businesspeople or business topics. These materials were used for reading and listening practice. Newspaper or magazine articles were used for reading, whereas recorded interviews with global business leaders were used for listening. The class was held once a week in the third year for 15 sessions over one semester.

In class, learners first read an article on a certain topic. Next, they listened to

Table 1

Participants' Details

Participant	Profession/company	Participant	Profession/company
J1	International flight crew (A)	J8	Trading company
J2	High school English teacher	J9	International logistics
J3	Ship equipment sales	J10	Airport (freight service)
J4	English teacher at an international school	J11	Apparel industry
J5	IT-related company	J12	Railroad company
J6	Education-related IT tools company	J13	International flight crew (C)
J7	International flight crew (B)	J14	Securities company

material on the same (or a related) topic. It was done in this way to scaffold the learning process effectively with students first seeing difficult English vocabulary and expressions on paper. Additionally, reading an article first enables learners to unlock prior knowledge, build schema, and understand the topic and content. This helps them understand the audio more easily and complete associated activities. After reading and listening, students engaged in in-class discussions with each other about the materials.

Data Collection

The data on participants' current situation, thoughts on their prior classroom experience, and general reflections were collected through semi-structured online interviews in which participants could express their views freely. The main questions we asked were about the following: their current use of English in their jobs; their present English learning practices as working adults; and the perceived effectiveness of the AMs used in their college English courses for their later learning.

The purpose and details of the research were first explained to the

participants, and they signed a consent form. Next, twelve individual interviews and one group interview with two participants were conducted remotely via video conferencing because of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Each session lasted 60–90 minutes to facilitate an in-depth discussion. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim in Japanese to allow for a detailed textual analysis. This approach enabled us to capture nuanced insights into the participants' experiences and perceptions of the AM's practical utility in education. It also helped ensure the findings' reliability and validity in addressing the research question.

Data Analysis

The data from the participants' interviews were analyzed in the following ways. Text mining was performed to examine the responses to the interview questions using the KH Coder (Higuchi, 2016a). Subsequently, a co-occurrence network diagram was created using Subgraph to examine the relationships between the words (Higuchi, 2016b). Subgraph automatically groups strongly related words using extracted words (nodes) with color codes for each group. The characteristics of this group can be observed by examining the words within the group. To improve the network diagram's accuracy, we focused on nouns, adjectives, and verbs. Words like “be” and “do” that have no significance were excluded. Sixty of the most frequently appearing words were used to construct a network diagram.

We loaded the questions as “external variables” into the KH Coder to categorize the interview content by each element. Next, we plotted the association between the words and external variables in a co-occurrence network diagram. We extracted characteristic words for each external variable and observed the topics (keywords) discussed. We then extracted and observed sentences containing words deemed characteristic and the words with which they co-occurred.

Results

Current Status of English Usage

Not all the participants reported using English four skills daily at work, and some used only certain skills. For instance, a participant working in securities reported using only reading skills in the workplace. The IT worker indicated that they used writing skills. Notably, the two participants who used all four skills worked in an apparel industry overseas and as an international flight crew member. The participant working in the apparel industry communicated with most colleagues and customers in English. Therefore, it was natural for them to use all English skills in their daily work environment. Except for these two cases, writing and speaking were indicated as the most common skills used in the workplace, depending on the occupation (service and internationally focused roles demanding more speaking, and educational, clerical and specialized professions emphasizing written communication).

Current Learning

All the participants continued to learn English even if their work did not demand proficiency in English. The purpose of learning changes as individuals transition from student to working adult. The respondents frequently stated one of two purposes for having studied English before college admission. One was, “I wanted to enter college.” The other was “I simply liked English.” Studying English during college was driven by the desire to enhance employment prospects. The respondents stated that a “high TOEIC [Test of English for International Communication] score is advantageous for employment.” The purpose of learning English after graduation changed with their work (e.g., “I need English for my work”). Others stated that they were inspired to learn more. One respondent had a stronger desire to speak English than before because they were now free from studying and more motivated to learn.

Current Learning for Work

Below are some of the types of learning in which the participants continued to engage because of their work:

- Watch TED Talks and YouTube videos to increase knowledge and use

them in class (by educators).

- Learn at an English conversation school to observe how students teach and discuss academic topics such as politics and economics.
- Study for the TOEIC (required by the company or for promotion).
- Study for situational conversation with AI (required by the company).
- Study to teach English to committee members to improve employees' English proficiency.
- Study Japanese manuals provided by the company to be able to explain possible questions in English.

Many participants stated that they continue to learn English for work purposes. Some companies provide specific materials to equip employees with English skills. The participant who worked for an airline said there was an e-learning system for employees. Some mentioned that they continued studying English to increase their TOEIC scores and chances of promotion.

Current Learning Unrelated to Work

The following are non-work-related reasons for voluntarily continuing to learn independently:

- Watch TED Talks half as a hobby and half for information gathering and watching presentations.
- Watch English news on TV.
- Incorporate English into daily life so that it is not burdensome. The first method involves watching foreign dramas.
- Increase vocabulary for daily life, as it is needed in international marriages.
- Click on the link and read topics on Instagram when celebrities recommend them.
- Look at news apps when something comes up to check for relatable issues.
- Read original news articles when surfing online.
- Subscribe to and read *The New York Times* app.
- Learn in an English conversation class.

Thus, some participants continued to learn English for their work and made it a habit to use the language. Others did so because English was seemingly

rooted in their lives.

AMs and Previous Teaching Methods

We asked the participants for their views on the AMs they used in college English courses to examine what they perceived as effective in their subsequent learning. The participants' feedback on AMs was divided into six categories: experiences and exposure, usefulness, inspiration, familiarity and relevance, varieties of English, and real English. For each category, the following comments were selected from the participants.

Experiences and Exposure.

- I read newspaper articles in class, so I no longer resist reading English newspapers. (J13)
- I feel reading newspaper articles should not be difficult, and there is no reason I cannot read them because we did it in class, so I sometimes look up words on the Internet and try to get their overall gist. (J10)
- When I was a student, I was exposed to real English once, and I think that helped me become less resistant to it when I started working. . . I try to acquaint myself more with real English. (J14)

Most participants believed that learning English with AMs in college was a good experience, encouraging them to continue learning the language.

Usefulness.

- I thought that it was a study of English that would benefit me in terms of knowledge. The content is useful for learning about the world and English. (J7)
- I felt that classes that dealt with current affairs in some countries would be useful in the future. (J6)

The participants were exposed to AMs as an English teaching tool and to learn about current global affairs. This shows the importance of the topic and content when choosing AMs for classroom use.

Inspiration.

- I was inspired by the speeches and thoughts of businesspeople. When I thought about what I would do, I used them as references for my life. (J5)

- Speeches of businesspeople were interesting for seeing people's ways of thinking. When I thought about what I would use as a reference when deciding on my life, I was very inspired by the way those people thought. (J5)
- When I made a mistake at work, I remembered what was said in the speech and tried to overcome hardship. This spirit is always in my heart. (J1)

The participants were inspired by the content and recalled it later in their lives. Here, the importance of content and its influence on our lives can be observed.

Familiarity and Relevance.

- We read about the companies with which we were familiar. I was able to connect this to my daily life. (J6)
- After listening to an interview with the CEO of a famous company, and when I happened to watch the news about the company on TV, I thought, "Hey, I actually know about this," and I was able to connect it to my daily life. (J13)
- We started job hunting in our third year. We read about companies that were close to us, which left a strong impression on me and led me to think deeply about job hunting. (J9)

The participants remembered the AM content that was relevant to their lives.

Varieties of English.

- I became interested in the fact that people speak English with various accents, including Japanese. This experience is connected to my work. (J2)
- When I listened to an interview with the CEO of a company, I was shocked to hear that people of different nationalities spoke differently. Subsequently, I listened to the English language of people of different nationalities on YouTube. I became interested in the English spoken by people of many nationalities, which is very useful for my current job. (J1)

The participants possibly heard English from non-native speakers for the

first time. They had become accustomed to American English since high school. However, they soon realized that different forms of English are used in the real world.

Real English.

- English in textbooks is like a model of English. It is good to listen to English used in everyday life. (J2)
- In textbooks, you only get words that appear in the textbook, specific words that appear on the TOEIC etc., and I wondered if they were really used in business. In the interview, I understood the English words and phrases that people use worldwide, which is great. (J14)

The participants sensed that the English in textbooks is not exactly what people use daily. For instance, listening materials are recorded in a grammatically clear and easy way for students to listen to. AMs made colloquial usage more recognizable to learners.

Summary

The participants, who were English majors, continued to use or learn English after graduating from college. They reported that:

- They found it valuable to listen to or watch AMs used in real life.
- They were motivated and influenced by the topics and contents.
- They learned the language to increase their world knowledge and career insights.
- They built confidence as English users.
- They acquired positive study habits to enable them to continue learning.
- They felt confident in reading and listening to AMs once they had used them in college.
- They were inspired by the messages and took them seriously later.
- They became more interested in the topics that were relevant to them.
- They also became interested in both their current companies and future potential employers.
- They thought it was a good opportunity to listen to non-native speakers of English, as they encountered these speakers in their jobs.

Discussion

Though this is a preliminary study and further investigation is required to widen the scope and address limitations, the study suggests that AMs are a contributing factor in helping those who have experience in English education continue learning post-college.

The AM content influences learners and becomes significant to them in different ways. For that reason, the content should include perspectives that are inspirational, relatable, and relevant to their lives. Moreover, the English presented in AMs should be diverse and not exclusively the English spoken by native speakers. This helps students realize that there are multiple English language forms. Also, as AMs can be difficult for learners, the material selected should be accessible to them; that is to say, the content should reflect their own experiences, aspirations, or future goals in order to foster stronger engagement and motivation, as the findings suggest. In short, teachers should choose AMs carefully and deliberately.

It is unlikely that traditional textbooks will disappear from most classrooms in the near future. At the same time, the growth of artificial intelligence and digital communication means that authentic and authentic-like language is increasingly accessible for students and educators alike. Given the benefits of AMs as shown in the literature review and suggested by this study, it is essential to consider how this real-world language can be meaningfully integrated into formal education, bridging the gap between the classroom and real life.

While the study does not claim that classroom authentic materials alone led to long-term motivation and ability to study independently, it emphasizes how thoughtfully selected AM—closely related to the English-major students' specialty of Business Communication and grounded in familiar, real-life topics—helped spark deeper interest. After reading and listening to the materials, there followed in-class discussions that encouraged reflection and personal engagement. Some students even pursued further individual research connected to the AMs, developing their graduation theses based on the themes explored in class. This suggests that the impact of the course and the materials may have extended beyond short-term learning and was a possible contributing factor to

sustained motivation.

Future studies are needed to establish more definitively a connection, and the nature of that connection, between AMs and independent post-college learning. If this connection can be shown, it would benefit students to have AMs incorporated more systematically into tertiary language education.

Limitations

There are significant limitations of the preliminary study regarding data collection. While the small sample size (N=14) all from the same college class was deliberate and balanced against practical considerations (such as the difficulties of recruiting a very specific post-college cohort), it does reduce the generalizability of any findings, and the lack of a control group also limits the findings. There is the possibility of skewed results through self-selection bias (Chen et al., 2021), whereby those who volunteered to take part may have been more motivated and engaged with English. It is also possible that students who already have a strong interest in foreign language learning are more inclined to pursue careers requiring language skills and, as a result, are more likely to view their formal study as meaningful and formative. Moreover, participants' awareness of the study's objectives could have introduced confirmation bias (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Finally, self-reporting by participants could be affected by subjectivity and selective memory. Future research into this will need to address these data collection issues.

Other limitations must also be acknowledged. First, the diverse nature of learners' experiences with English outside formal education was not fully captured. Some participants may engage with English regularly through online gaming, social media, or work-related contexts, while others may rarely use it outside of class. This variability suggests that learners' responses to AM cannot be treated as uniform. The study's design did not account for these individual differences.

Additionally, the direct attribution of participants' sustained motivation and learning to the AM used in one course requires caution. The broader context of learners' language exposure must be considered, as multiple factors—both

personal and environmental—likely contributed to the outcomes observed. Therefore, the study should be interpreted as a preliminary exploration of a possible relationship rather than a causal claim.

Finally, this study is preliminary and should be viewed as an initial exploration of the impact of AM on learners' motivation and sustained engagement with English. It acknowledges that the research is still a work in progress and that, while it offers an emerging empirical foundation, the findings are not conclusive. The limitations noted highlight the need for future studies to adopt more rigorous and refined methodologies in order to strengthen these initial findings and develop a more comprehensive and validated understanding of the role of AMs in language learning.

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