

11TH GRADE EFL LEARNERS' PERCEPTION OF THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE NEW TEXTBOOK ENGLISH 11-TIENG ANH 11

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Abstract – *This study investigated EFL students' perceptions of the authenticity of texts and tasks within the new textbook Tieng Anh 11. The research followed a descriptive approach. The study collected data from questionnaires for 58 EFL students and interviews with six representative students at an upper secondary school in Mekong Delta area, Vietnam. Results from the questionnaire indicated that readings within the textbook were rated very positively while learning tasks received a less positive rating. Further interviews revealed that students emphasized the need for practical tasks for their real-life language use and the development of critical thinking.*

Keywords: *authenticity of textbook, EFL textbook, secondary English learning, Vietnamese EFL secondary students.*

I. THEORETICAL AND CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Teaching materials have been a key instrument in most language courses. Instructional materials serve as the basis for language input that learners receive and the language that occurs in a classroom [1]. Realizing that communicative competence involves much more than knowledge of language structures and that contextualized communication takes precedence over form [2], foreign language pedagogy advocates the necessity to teach language in context [3]. According to Ciornei & Dina [4], authentic materials, also known as realia, are now widely known as materials that include ideas, words, phrases and

expressions that are heard and read in real-life situations. Most teachers throughout the world agree that authentic texts or materials have been beneficial to the language learning process for providing examples of the target language used with a real communicative purpose. The authenticity of materials convey the notion of 'genuineness' of both text and task [5, p.349]. A real text itself does not contribute to language development, but it must be activated through formed-focused and language production tasks [6, 7]. More succinctly, the concept of authentic materials refers to texts written purposely to reflect real-world events in the target language community [8] and pedagogic tasks that prioritize language use for a genuine purpose [9, 10].

In general, studies on the importance of employing authentic materials in English teaching report the positive effects on student involvement in the learning process. The materials bring students closer to the target language culture and therefore result in making the learning process more enjoyable and motivating [11]. In terms of language acquisition, the materials might present learners with opportunities to make generalizations about grammar and vocabulary usage for themselves and observe how their prior linguistic knowledge might be employed or adapted in new circumstances [12]. The 'captivating' quality of authentic materials has been important since learners stimulated by the input were more likely to be open to it, thus facilitating language acquisition [13].

Vietnamese education shares the common goal of improving students' use of the English language to fit the requirements of the modern era, so action plans to support qualified teaching and learning for communicative purposes are often pursued in schools. At the upper-secondary level, a new series of English textbooks has been

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published and applied with the expectation of developing students' active communication skills. Moreover, the new textbooks were also deployed to expand knowledge of the culture and people of various English-speaking countries. However, only a handful of studies on teachers' and students' perceptions of the relevance, effectiveness or authenticity of the textbooks' texts and tasks have been conducted.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. *Effects of authentic textbooks on language acquisition*

Authenticity in instructional materials plays a crucial role in teaching and learning English as a foreign language. For students to learn a foreign language effectively, they must experience 'language with a purpose' the language that is used for communication contexts by native speakers [14]. Materials or textbooks should be authentic so learners can find a connection between their real lives and the textbooks [15]. According to Shrum and Glisan [16], authentic materials positively affect learner's motivation, as they relate more closely to learners' needs and support a more creative approach to teaching. According to Mishan [17], authentic texts provide the best sources of rich and comprehensible input for language learners and therefore influence affective factors for the learning such as motivation, empathy, and emotional involvement. They enable learners to communicate and interact socially in the target language environment to achieve an integrative learning value [18]. For instance, newspaper articles, reports or video clips about interesting stories that provide variable styles of language should accompany traditional teaching materials [19]. Thus, instructional materials should be constantly updated with the availability of various types of texts [20], and they should provide authentic cultural information and relate more closely to learners' needs [21, 22].

Research on the effectiveness of authenticity of text and task in EFL or ESL teaching has not arrived at a general consensus on its advantages for communicative competence of language learners. From an empirical perspective, the study of Kienbaum revealed that students 'bemoaned the fact

that there was not a finite set of lexical items for each topic' or 'missed the disciplined structure of finite content and finite testing' [23, p.21]. In other words, there was no difference found in language competence from classes using authentic or nonauthentic material. Likewise, Richards [24] pointed out that authentic materials often contain difficult language, unneeded vocabulary items and complex language structures, which cause a burden for the teacher in lower-level classes. House [25, p.64] mentioned that because authentic texts might be 'too culturally based' they cause problems for the students in decoding the texts, 'not just linguistically but conceptually'. In addition, authentic material is a rich source of target language input, but it mainly focuses on the contents and meanings of spoken expressions, not linguistic forms or other grammatical structures [26]. Therefore, if not fit for the learners' purpose and context of learning, authenticity in materials is a factor that demotivates students in their process of understanding the text or working on tasks related to the materials.

Authenticity in EFL teaching has been widely encouraged along with the communicative approach that aims to upgrade students' communicative competence and language acquisition through using the target language to transfer information to others [27–29]. Language is a means for communication purposes, so learning a language requires learning how to use the language in the communication contexts of native speakers [30]. Using authentic materials in language classes is considered one of the effective techniques in creating a more motivating classroom environment for learners [31, 32], and gives EFL/ESL students' a positive attitude towards authentic text [33, 34]. In general, from an empirical and conceptual perspective in TESOL, the authenticity of instructional materials has been a factor contributing to the ease of language acquisition for its role in language exposure, motivation, and opportunities for use [35].

B. *Research on teaching English with the new textbook Tieng Anh 11 in Vietnam*

Since 2008, the Ministry of Education and Training has had the general aim of English

proficiency from independent to advanced level for graduates from secondary to university level. Students are expected to be able to communicate confidently in English in real life situations. The corresponding action plans included designing a new curriculum, textbooks, teaching methodology, and assessment standards at all levels of education. In addition to language competence, the new action plan has also aimed to encourage students to acquire lifelong learning skills, nurture positive ethical values, and global citizenship to participate successfully in cultural and social activities [36], in reference to the Government decision, 2008. The new textbook *Tieng Anh 11*, one component of the action plan from 2014 to 2015, has now been used widely in upper-secondary education.

Each unit in the textbook provides key language points and skills-based tasks around a central theme. For example, Unit 1 reviews the topic ‘The Generation Gap’ [37, p.6-17] and is divided into three main components: language awareness, skill enhancement, and extended readings. The first component, language awareness, provides vocabulary tasks for form, meaning, and sound of words and phrases related to the topic of generation gap and family rules. The key grammar target of the component is form and usage of modal verbs of obligation. The second component, skills-based tasks, includes 1) reading for specific information of a text about the conflicts between parents and their teenage children, 2) talking in pairs about parent-child relationship problems and solutions, 3) listening to a conversation between two teenagers for specific information, and 4) writing a letter to a friend who was going to stay with the student’s family to explain his family rules. The third component, cross-cultural communication, involves reading about the return of extended families in the UK and the USA, then ends with a discussion about the situation in the context of Vietnam.

However, research investigating the methodology and practicality of the textbooks is limited. Research by Nguyen [38] revealed that the majority of 250 upper secondary school teachers and teacher trainers working in various provinces and cities throughout the country agreed that the

new textbooks possess several advantages over the old series. According to the teachers, one of the most significant advantages is that the books positively change the way English is being taught in secondary school by making it significantly more communicative and effective. On the other hand, the teachers also found a number of problems related to the practicality of the books; for example, they stated that many speaking activities were non-communicative, failing to elicit negotiation of meaning and presenting unrealistic and unnatural discourse. Also, guidance was not always available for students to complete tasks and socio-cultural information was not included in learning the rules of speaking in the target language. This study, in general, tended to suggest that textbooks should be teaching guides for teachers and not an absolute authority on which teachers depend entirely.

Despite these shortcomings, the series of textbooks could still be an effective instructional material for Vietnamese upper secondary school teachers and learners. Studies focusing on the authenticity of the new textbook should elaborate on what has been reported from the teachers’ points of view and also address the question of how the students perceived its authentic quality.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. *Research hypotheses*

This study is based on the assumption that a textbook must first motivate learners to improve their general skills and confidence in communication in real situations [39, 40]. As stated below, the study’s major research questions expect the new textbook to adhere to the principle of the communicative approach, reflected in the genuineness of texts and focus on communication tasks for students’ communicative competence [41].

What was EFL students’ perception of the authenticity of the new textbook *Tieng Anh 11*? Were there challenges that they might meet in learning English with the new textbook?

B. *Research design and participants*

Research design

This descriptive study employed a questionnaire and interviews to collect (i) feedback from the participants on the authenticity of the new textbook *Tieng Anh 11* and (ii) problems students face in using the book.

Research participants

For the questionnaire, the participants involved 58 students in grade 11 who had been studying English with the new textbook *Tieng Anh 11* in a particular upper secondary school in Mekong Delta. They were at the age of 17 and in the second semester of the academic year 2018-2019. There was no selection based on age or gender. All of the EFL students invited to answer the questionnaire were at the pre-intermediate level of English proficiency. The EFL students had different numbers of years studying English since they received different education curricula in primary and lower secondary levels; for example, some studied English from grade 3, and others started to learn English from grade 6 before all used the new textbook *Tieng Anh 11*. For the interview, among 58 EFL students, six students were invited to participate in a personal face-to-face interview in Vietnamese. They were chosen randomly from the attendance list to be representatives of the students at the school. There was no time limitation, so the respondents could share with the interviewer for as long as they wanted. The approximate time for each interview was 30-45 minutes. The Vietnamese responses from the students were transcribed and translated into English by the researcher.

C. Measurement instruments

Design of questionnaire

The concept of communicative values of a textbook and textbook authenticity was the anchor for designing the questionnaire. In particular, the concept of communicative textbooks emphasizes that textbooks should be balanced between the knowledge and practice of the language and between the relevant language skills and language integration [42]. The questionnaire items were designed with regard to the features of authentic materials and authenticity in foreign language learning proposed by Shuang [43], Gass [44],

and Siegel [45]. They were also based on the survey results of Daskalos & Ling [46] on the contents and tasks of the textbook that ESL students perceived as the most authentic. In brief, the general concept of authenticity within the questionnaire inferred that an authentic textbook must convey the language occurring naturally in society and reflect the target language culture.

The questionnaire included three components of 20 items. The first component included six items on perceptions of the text authenticity, for example, I think the contents of the texts keeps me informed about what is happening in the world, and I think the texts provide me with vocabularies and expressions that I can use in real situations. The second component, also with six items, was about the authenticity of tasks. For example, it included statements like: I think the tasks in the new textbook *Tieng Anh 11* are interesting; I think the tasks contribute to creating a real context for learning; I think some tasks are not appropriately pitched at my level; I think some tasks are not creative since part of the answers is already displayed in the body of texts. The third component included eight items for challenges they met when learning with the book, including such statements as I think the texts often contain difficult language that causes me problems in interpretation, and The artwork in the textbook is beyond my knowledge. The items used five-point Likert scale responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients of the student questionnaire reached .77.

Design of interview

Interviews are one of the major approaches in collecting data for qualitative research due to their advantage of providing deeper access to the perspectives of participants and the issues being researched [47]. Rather than structured or deep interviews, the interviews were semi-structured, used open-ended questions, and were conversational and informal in their tone [48]. Semi-structured interviews allowed interviewees to respond in their own words, and not just yes or no answers [49].

Analysis of the questionnaire data

SPSS Descriptive Statistics and One-sample t-test were utilized in the study to measure the

sample mean and whether the mean was statistically different from a known population mean. In particular, descriptive statistics were first run to calculate the mean score of six items related to students' self-perception of the authenticity of texts in the new textbook. One-sample t-test, then, was used to compare the mean and the test value of 3.5 as the standard point for an above-average level. The score of 3.5 was interpreted as an above-average level within the following scale from 1 to 5: Very Low (1.00), Low (1.50); Somewhat Low (2.00); Below Average (2.5); Average (3.00); Above Average (3.5); Somewhat High (4.00); High (4.5); Very High (5.00). If there was no difference between the score and the test value of 3.5, it was confirmed that the perception of students was at an above-average level. If there was a difference between the score and the test value, the one-sample t-test was used to compare the mean score and the test value of 3.00 or 4.00 to examine the downward or upward trend of the mean score. The same statistical analysis procedure was employed to explore students' self-perception of the authenticity of tasks in the new textbook based on six questionnaire items and find challenges that students met in their learning process with the new textbook through eight items in the questionnaire.

Analysis of the interview data

All interview responses were recorded using the recording software of a mobile phone. In order to avoid shyness from participants, the interview took place at the school library. The information was transcribed by the researcher. Information from the interviews was grouped into (i) students' general perceptions of the effectiveness of the new English textbook for grade 11, (ii) the degree of interest in texts and tasks, (iii) perception of text and task variation, (iv) helpfulness of texts and tasks in developing the students' cultural awareness, and (v) whether the textbook supports their learning of English in general.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Perceptions of the authenticity of texts

The Descriptive Statistic Test was first run to check the mean score of students' perceptions of

the authenticity of texts. And one-sample t-test was used to compare the mean and the test value of 3.5 as the standard point for an above-average level. The mean score of students' self-perception of the authenticity of texts in the new textbook was 3.41 on a scale of 5 points. One-sample t-test was run to compare the mean score ($M=3.41$, $SD=.57$) and the test value of 3.5. The result indicated that there was no difference between the score and the test value. The results supported the conclusion that the self-perceived authenticity of texts in the new textbook *Tieng Anh 11* was at an above-average level.

Based on the follow-up interviews, students generally revealed that their learning was supported effectively with the full-of-life and up-to-date content and that language points and cultural knowledge were effectively illustrated. For example, interviewees provided the following perspectives:

'My purpose in learning English is to communicate confidently with foreigners. The texts provide me with several vocabularies and grammatical structures that I can easily remember. The texts are various in terms of topics. Topics are about nowadays issues such as global warming.' (Student 2)

'I learn English to search for more information about the topics I am interested in and to improve my English proficiency, especially in reading and writing. The texts provide "hot" news in the world such as global warming, the generation gap, further education and so on. I can apply the information from the texts in other subject presentations. Diversity in the content of texts is noticeable. The subject matters of texts are various. For example, there is one text that I really enjoy about a woman firefighter.' (Student 3)

'I want to learn English to support my future job. The texts give me a variety of grammatical structures. Topics are various and new. These topics are related to different issues happening in society such as the environment. For instance, thanks to the

texts, I know more about the world heritage sites.’ (Student 4)

‘I am studying English with the purpose of improving English in communication and finding a good job. The textbook is appropriate for my needs of learning English. For example, I know more about the British, American, and Vietnamese education systems. I also like the texts with beautiful illustrations.’ (Students 6)

B. Perceptions of the authenticity of tasks

The mean score of students’ perceptions of the authenticity of tasks was 3.22 on a scale of 5 points. One-sample t-test was administered to check whether the mean score of students’ perceptions of the authenticity of tasks ($M = 3.22$, $SD = .60$) was statistically different from the test value of 3.5, which indicated the above-average level on the five-point scale. The result showed that the mean score was statistically different from the test value 3.5 ($t = -3.49$, $df = 57$, $p = .001$). The subsequent one-sample t-test to compare the score and the test value of 3.0, the average level on the five-point scale, showed no difference between the mean score and the test value. It was therefore concluded that students’ perceptions of the authenticity of tasks in the new textbook were at an average level.

From the interviews, all six students stated that the tasks were designed for the purpose of testing instead of for the use of the language and development of critical thinking in real life. Students, in general, appreciated the tasks for reviewing their knowledge but felt that tasks were abundant and just for consolidating language knowledge. No one mentioned the influence of tasks on their cultural understanding. For example, the interviewees stated that:

‘Tasks are simple.’ (Student 1)

‘I think maybe I can use in real life’ (Student 2)

‘I like the tasks. However, I think I cannot apply in my real life.’ (Student 3)

‘Sometimes I think tasks in the textbook are interesting, sometimes not, because they are

somewhat redundant.’ (Student 4)

‘I do not think that I can use these tasks in my job in the future. If yes, it is just answering the questions. I only do the tasks in the exams.’ (Student 5)

‘I like tasks in the textbook, but I think I just use the task of answering questions in my life after graduating.’ (Student 6)

C. Challenges students meet with the textbook in their learning process

The mean score of self-perceived challenge from the questionnaire was 2.67 on a scale of five points. One-sample t-test to compare the score and the test value of 3.5, the above-average point, showed a statistically significant difference between the mean score and the test value ($t = -15.563$, $df = 57$, $p < .001$). The subsequent one-sample t-test compared the mean score and the test value of 3.0, which indicated an average level, and showed no statistical difference. It was therefore concluded that students’ self-perceived challenge related to the new textbook was at the average level, potentially indicating that students did not think that the new textbook presented them with major problems in their language learning.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Conclusion

Self-perceived level of authenticity of texts, especially in vocabulary, grammar points, content, and cultural features of the new textbook was at an above-average level. Students agreed that the texts reveal to them the real-life English language communication contexts with interesting topics and cultural diversity. Most students claimed that they gain significant benefits from the vocabulary, grammatical structures, and information from the texts. These findings are in line with Nguyen’s study of the positive responses reported from the teachers about the communication content within the textbook [38].

For self-perceived authenticity of tasks, students judged it at an average level. Most students

appreciate the diversity of task types. Nevertheless, students felt that the tasks mainly serve the purpose of language knowledge consolidation for testing and not explicitly of nourishing critical thinking skills. These findings support the report of teachers' perspective on the shortfalls of communicative speaking activities that encourage realistic and natural negotiation of meaning from the textbook [38].

For challenges in studying with the textbook, the majority of students did not report specific problems in terms of cultural differences, language input, and cognitive effort required for understanding the texts and completing the tasks.

B. Recommendations

Authentic materials present readers with cultural messages and prepare them for real communication more than other pedagogical materials [50]. Through authentic materials, teachers and students are able to approach the target country's culture and the inhabitants there. Then, they have the ability to compare their culture and lifestyle with that of a particular country. On the assumption that the new textbook applied in secondary English education may reach a higher level of authenticity than the early version, this study aimed to seek more insights into students' perceptions of the authenticity of the textbook Tieng Anh 11 for language learning. According to the students, in terms of reading texts, the textbook was considered a beneficial learning resource for them through its updated information, usable vocabulary and structures, and social and cultural knowledge. However, the EFL students stated the need for authentic communication tasks to accompany the texts. In Breen's definition of the term, such tasks 'involve the learners not only in authentic communication with text and with others in the classroom, but also about learning and for the purpose of learning' [51, p.66].

The new textbook Tieng Anh 11 meets the needs of students in creating an effective learning environment. Further studies should be conducted with larger samples and a more elaborate questionnaire to investigate the authenticity of the textbook Tieng Anh 11 more deeply. Specific investigations into authenticity for each type of

task and in each skill should be completed to provide more information to the community and to determine differences in students' perception of each specific skill and task. There should also be further research on the authenticity of textbooks at other levels in the secondary system and whether students at different schools or in different locations of Vietnam share similar or different perceptions of the textbook. Further research is vital to promote language teaching that provides students with authentic and natural language input and to achieve the goal of Vietnamese students to be able to communicate independently and confidently in English.

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