

Using Realia as an Effective Pedagogical Tool

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Abstract: The use of realia is commonplace in the ESL/EFL classroom and is widely considered to have great value in fostering an active teaching-learning environment. It provides the learners a meaningful learning experience as it connects the classroom activities to the real world. This paper attempts to show some uses of realia, its advantages and disadvantages. For this paper, a survey has been conducted which throws some light on different teachers (tertiary level) perspective of realia and its usage in language classroom. It also provides some suggestions on how to choose realia appropriately for classroom activities to ensure effective learning.

Key Words: Realia, pedagogical tool, effective learning, classroom activities, real life experience.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Language learning is a dynamic and living process. There is no limit in the field of language learning activities. As language is an integral part of our social and everyday relations, it is better if the activities and exercises of the language classroom are not limited to the text books only, rather taken from our regular experiences. So, beside regular texts, realia can facilitate learning in tremendous ways because it connects the classroom activities to real life experiences. It helps to make a language class broader, richer and more functional. It can serve as a very useful pedagogical tool as it can be taken from various sources and applicable in large number of activities. Using realia can make the learning process meaningful and more memorable for the learners as they can connect it with their real life; thus, adding a new dimension in the language learning process. They feel motivated and get involved with the learning process as they can apply their knowledge in everyday situations. However, choosing appropriate materials can be challenging for the teachers as they need to consider the complexity and quality of the materials, keeping in mind the competence level and cultural background of the learners. But most importantly teachers have to choose materials which serve their teaching objectives and also the functional needs of the learners.

What is realia?

According to Richards and Schmidt (1985), realia can be defined as "(in language teaching) actual objects and items which are brought into a classroom as examples or as aids to be talked or written about and used in teaching." On the other hand, Dickens, Robertson & Hofmann (1995) define realia as "Anything which has a purpose outside of the ESL classroom and can be brought into the classroom."

Chris Soames (2010) suggests that, in the TEFL classroom, the word *realia* means "using real items found in everyday life as an aid to teaching English. Using realia helps to make English lessons memorable by creating a link between the objects and the word or phrase they represent."

Vivian Cook (1981) defines authentic materials as something that simply means "using examples of language produced by native speakers for some real purpose of their own rather than using language produced and designed solely for the classroom. Anybody who takes into the classroom a newspaper article, an advertisement, a pop song, a strip cartoon, or even a bus ticket, is using authentic materials."

Technology has begun to impact the use of realia by adding the virtual realia. According to Bryan Smith (1997), virtual realia means "(in language teaching) digitized objects and items from the target culture which are brought into the classroom as examples or aids and used to stimulate spoken or written language production."

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of realia is widespread in ESL/EFL classrooms as it helps to make the language classroom dynamic and productive. By presenting information through diverse media, realia helps to make English language input as comprehensible as possible and to build "an associative bridge between the classroom and the world" (Heaton, 1979). As Berwald (1987) notes, realia "are not only a series of artifacts that describe the

customs and traditions of a culture, but they are also a set of teaching aids that facilitate the simulation of *experience* in the target culture". Realia provides language learners with multi-sensory impressions of the language which, as Rivers (1983) notes is "learned partly at least through seeing, hearing, touching, and manipulating" items. And interaction with authentic materials aids in contextually grounding instruction by bringing students into contact with language as it is used in the target culture in order to meet actual communication needs. The use of realia, then, can "enhance linguistic and cultural comprehensibility, which are both prerequisites for real language learning" (Bryan Smith, 1997)

Harmer (2003) suggested the following reasons why video (considered as virtual realia) can add a special, extra dimension to the learning experience:

1. Seeing language in use: This greatly aids comprehension, since for example, general meaning and moods are often conveyed through expression, gesture and other visual clues. All such paralinguistic features give valuable meaning clues and help viewers to see beyond what they are listening to, and thus interpret the text more deeply.
2. Cross-cultural awareness: Video uniquely allows students a look at situations far beyond their classrooms.
3. The power of creation: When students use these themselves they are given the potential to create something memorable and enjoyable.
4. Motivation: Most students show an increased level of interest when they have a chance to see language in use as well as hear it, and when this is coupled with interesting tasks.

He has also shown some activities designed for specific video situations as followed

- General comprehension
- Working with aspects of language
- Video as a springboard (spark) to creativity

How to Use Them in the Class

Chris Soames (2010) has described some methods of using Realia. He believes "for learning vocabulary/grammar it is unrealistic to bring real objects into your classroom for every single word that you wish to teach and some words will lend themselves better than others to using realia. Realia can be used indirectly as a tool for teaching grammar; for example, items of food and drink are perfect for teaching uncountable and countable nouns.

Here are some ideas on how to use realia in your lessons.

- Use your country's flag and a map to show students where you live and to help them learn the names of foreign countries
- Utilize toys such as plastic animals and toy cars in games for young learners
- Timetables, tickets and pedestrian maps are great for practicing role-play scenarios such as asking for directions, or buying tickets
- Use mobile phones to create telephone conversations, practice giving numbers, arranging meetings, or discussing a new product "

Focusing on the competency level of the learners, SebahatYilmaz(2011) has listed some materials of realia that can be used in the classroom.

Beginners	Intermediate	Advanced
Television timetables	Teenage magazines	General newspaper articles
Cinema timetables	Surveys & teenage issues	Magazine articles
Train timetables	Newspaper articles from	Academic material
Restaurant menus	tabloid newspapers	At advanced level you can choose
Postcards (Writing)	Instruction manuals	nearly anything, because they
Utility bills	Adverts & flyers	should have developed strategies to
Application forms		cope with unknown vocabulary.
Classified adverts		
Recipes		

Necessity of Realia

- Using realia stimulates the mind, and it encourages creativity by involving the senses in the learning process. Realia saves time, as learners can recognize an object immediately, thus lengthy explanations are no longer necessary. Realia "can be used as a valuable resource which fosters creative and active learning and promotes motivation" (Bably&Majid, 2011).
- Using realia will generate interest and it will help to create an atmosphere that is conducive to learning.

- For young children, realia can be very effective. Young children are at the perfect age to learn a language and, as they are visual learners, teachers should try to tap into their natural creativity. Children love to role-play and enjoy playing games. Simple stories using toy animals or puppets can be made up, and children will enjoy their English lessons, and be motivated to learn.
- Realia is often more interesting than materials from text books and can really engage the students in the learning process.
- Students will be expected to use real materials when they leave the classes, and realia paves the way for learners to connect their classroom activities with the real world. Through realia, students are exposed to real discourses, as in videos of interviews with famous people, magazines, pictures, etc. So, it engages and motivates the learners, at the same time, they learn to use the target language in different contexts.
- Authentic materials keep students informed about what is happening in the world. It increases their global awareness.
- Language change is reflected in these authentic materials so that students and teachers can keep abreast of such changes. Books, articles, newspapers, and so on contain a wide variety of text types, language styles which are not easily found in conventional teaching materials.
- They can encourage reading for pleasure because they are likely to contain topics of interest to learners, especially if students are given the chance to have a say about the topics or kinds of authentic materials to be used in class.
- Language teaching should not be confined to certain textbooks or worksheets only and needs to move beyond reliance on fixed course materials. Introducing realia based activities can enliven instructions, allow variety and give the learners a glimpse of the culture of the target language.
- One of the powerful reasons for learning a new language is to get closer to its speakers, to understand them better and take part in their lives, in other words the integrative motivation. Authentic materials utilize this motivation very strongly by their ordinariness and flavor of everyday life; they seem exotic and exciting, the very stuff of strange foreign life. For students who have this motivation, authentic materials are a highly effective way of bringing the target culture closer (Vivian Cook, 2010)
- If the students actually need to be able to communicate and interact socially, realia seems an essential preparation for their task. Sometimes course contents of language learning courses fail to completely prepare the learners for the real world. Some important vocabulary or structures are ignored in regular curriculum, which are commonly used in the target language. However, using realia offers the learners the opportunity to be familiar with those vocabulary or structures and prepares them well for the real world.
- Bringing realia into classrooms has created the opportunities for students to be active learners and allowed instructors to be facilitators. Because of this, lessons become more interactive and students become more independent.
- Students feel comfortable and motivated with authentic materials. Increased motivation leads to increased language use which leads to improved proficiency.
- It makes language learning an educational process of self-development and discovery as well as the learning of a language

III. LIMITATIONS

As suggested by Daniela Temo (2009), the disadvantages of using realia in the classroom mentioned by several writers are:

- The materials may be too culturally biased, so unnecessarily difficult to understand outside the language community.
- The vocabulary might not be relevant to the student's immediate needs.
- Too many structures can be mixed, so lower level students might have a hard time decoding the texts.
- Special preparation is necessary which can be time consuming.
- With listening tasks, too many different accents can be heard which can cause some confusions.
- The material can become outdated easily, e.g. news.
- There are many headlines, adverts, signs, and so on that can require good knowledge of the cultural background.

IV. SUGGESTIONS

- English Language Teaching objectives should not be compromised to fit materials. Before choosing every material, the teacher must consider whether the material is suitable for the learners, focusing on their competency level, cultural background, interests, etc.

- The materials must be organized. There is nothing worse than entirely disconnected bits of authentic language that are not linked to other aspects of the teaching.
- According to Vivian Cook (1981), “Authentic materials are indeed a valuable part of the teacher’s stock in trade, and can do some things that other materials are not capable of. However, inevitably they have to be used in small doses, must be carefully selected and controlled, and need well-thought out teaching exercises to be fully exploited.”
- Teachers need to consider how much new vocabulary and grammar structures are in the materials. If students are to cope with real materials, they may have to learn to deal with topics with a lot of alien vocabulary. If the difficulty level of the materials is not at par with the students’ competency level, they might find the tasks overwhelming and frustrating.
- One of the main purposes of using realia is to motivate the learners by making the classroom activities more interesting. So, before selecting materials, teachers need to find out the area of interest of the learners. If they choose materials related to the learners’ field of interest, it will be immensely effective to actively engage the learners in the learning process.

V. ANALYSIS

For this paper, a survey has been conducted where fifteen tertiary level’s teachers have participated. All of them have been teaching in Bangladeshi universities, teaching in different parts of Bangladesh, for several years. The survey questionnaire is also included in the appendix at the end of the paper. The result of the survey is given below.

Table-1

	A Strongly Agree	B Agree	C Neutral	D Disagree	E Strongly Disagree
1.Using realia in class helps student understand the concept better	60%	40%	0%	0%	0%
2.Using realia can make the learning process interactive	66.67%	33.33%	0%	0%	0%
3.Realial can be a very useful pedagogical tool beside texts	33.33%	66.67%	0%	0%	0%
4.Using realia is a great way to connect classroom activities with real life experiences	26.67%	66.67%	6.67%	0%	0%
5.Using realia in the classroom can help to make students motivated	26.67%	66.67%	6.67%	0%	0%
6.Using realia in classroom can be helpful to expand learners’ vocabulary	20%	46.67%	33.33%	0%	0%
7.Using realia in the classroom can help to enhance the creativity of learners	26.67%	53.33%	20%	0%	0%
8.Realial can be a helpful tool to ensure effective learning	26.67%	73.33%	0%	0%	0%

This section of questions focuses on the effectiveness of using realia in the language classroom. For Q1, 60% of the teachers strongly agreed and other 40% of the teachers agreed that realia helps the student to understand the concept better. For Q2, 66.67% strongly agreed and 33.33% agreed that realia can make the learning process interactive. For Q3, 33.33% strongly agreed and 66.67% agreed that realia can be an effective pedagogical tool beside texts. For Q4, 26.67% strongly agreed and 66.67% agreed and 6.67% were neutral that realia is a great way to connect classroom activities with real life experiences. For Q5, 26.67% strongly agreed and 66.67% agreed and 6.67% were neutral that using realia in the classroom can help to make students motivated. For Q6, 20% strongly agreed and 46.67% agreed and 33.33% were neutral that using realia in classroom can be helpful to expand learners’ vocabulary. For Q7, 26.67% strongly agreed and 53.33% agreed and 20% were neutral that using realia in the classroom can help to enhance the creativity of learners. For Q8, 26.67% strongly agreed and 73.33% agreed that realia can be a helpful tool to ensure effective learning. Thus, this section shows that majority of the teachers believe using realia in the language classroom can be effective in many ways.

Table-2

	A Strongly Agree	B Agree	C Neutral	D Disagree	E Strongly Disagree
1.It is often difficult to find suitable realia for classroom activities	26.67%	46.67%	20%	6.67%	0%
2.While using realia, maintaining discipline in the class can be a problem	0%	66.67%	20%	13.33%	0%
3.Choosing the right materials can be time consuming	13.33%	53.33%	26.67%	6.67%	0%
4. Many teachers do not use realia in the classroom because they find it troublesome	13.33%	60%	26.67%	0%	0%
5.In certain cases, using realia can be expensive	26.67%	53.33%	20%	0%	0%
6.While using realia, teacher may have to spend too much time in one activity	13.33%	73.33%	13.33%	0%	0%

This section of question focuses on the limitations of using realia in the classroom. For Q1, 26.67% have strongly agreed, 46.67% agreed, 20% were neutral and 6.67% disagreed that it is often difficult to find suitable realia for classroom activities. For Q2, 66.67% agreed, 20% were neutral and 13.33% disagreed that maintaining discipline in the class can be a problem while using realia. For Q3, 13.33% strongly agreed, 53.33% agreed, 26.67% were neutral and 6.67% disagreed that for using realia, choosing the right materials can be time consuming. For Q4, 13.33% strongly agreed, 60% agreed and 26.67% were neutral that many teachers do not use realia in the classroom because they find it troublesome. For Q5, 26.67% strongly agreed, 53.33% agreed and 20% were neutral that using realia in certain cases can be expensive. For Q6, 13.33% strongly agreed, 73.33% agreed and 13.33% were neutral that teacher may have to spend too much time in one activity while using realia. So, this section demonstrates that there are certain limitations in using realia that needs to be taken care of in order to implement it properly.

Table-3

	A Strongly Agree	B Agree	C Neutral	D Disagree	E Strongly Disagree
1.The age of learners should be kept in mind while choosing realia	66.67%	26.67%	0%	6.67%	0%
2.The materials must be culturally appropriate	53.33%	33.33%	13.33%	0%	0%
3.The materials' difficulty level must be at par with the students competency level	33.33%	60%	6.67%	0%	0%
4.Realia is more suitable for young learners than adult learners	20%	20%	40%	20%	0%
5.Realia should not be used in every activity	60%	33.33%	6.67%	0%	0%
6.Realia should be used in class very often	0%	33.33%	40%	26.67%	0%

This section of questions throws lights on certain aspects that need to be considered carefully while choosing materials for the classroom activities. For Q1, 66.67% strongly agreed, 26.67% agreed and 6.67% disagreed that the age of learners is an important factor while choosing realia. For Q2, 53.33% strongly agreed, 33.33% agreed and 13.33% were neutral that materials must be culturally appropriate. For Q3, 33.33% strongly agreed, 60% agreed and 6.67% were neutral that materials' difficulty level must be at par with the students' competency level. For Q4, 20% strongly agreed, 20% agreed, 40% were neutral and 20% disagreed that realia is more suitable for young learners than adult learners. For Q5, 60% strongly agreed, 33.33% agreed and 6.67% were neutral that realia should not be used in every activity. And finally, in Q6, 33.33% agreed, 40% were neutral and 26.67% disagreed that realia should be used in class very often. These opinions highlight the need to consider different aspects of selecting appropriate realia for classroom activities to achieve the most successful outcome.

VI. CONCLUSION

As Katie Head & Tailor(1997) suggest, in teacher education, “development means change and growth” So, teachers should be willing to try innovative materials beside traditional texts that can affect the language classroom positively. Teachers should make themselves aware of the new ways of teaching language that allows them to engage the students more with the learning process, where the learners feel motivated to learn. So, rather than holding on to the fixed text books, teachers should incorporate new strategies and realia offers a wide range of contents to be used in the classroom that can help learners comprehend the concept better. Using realia can be challenging sometimes for the teachers, but as it benefits the learners, teachers should introduce realia that helps to bridge the gap between classroom activities and real life experiences. The main objective of teaching is to make the learning process meaningful for the learners, enabling them to grasp the concept of each lesson they learn and realia offers that scope. So, teachers should feel more encouraged to use realia in the classroom; however, the selection of the materials has to be well thought and relevant to the functional needs of the learners.

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Appendix

Survey questionnaire:

For each statement, please check the appropriate box (✓)

	A Strongly Agree	B Agree	C Neutral	D Disagree	E Strongly Disagree
Using realia in class helps student understand the concept better					
Using realia can make the learning process interactive					
It is often difficult to find suitable realia for classroom activities					
The age of learners should be kept in mind while choosing realia					
The materials must be culturally appropriate					
Realia can be a very useful pedagogical					

tool beside texts					
While using realia, maintaining discipline in the class can be a problem					
Using realia is a great way to connect classroom activities with real life experiences					
The materials' difficulty level must be at par with the students competency level					
Choosing the right materials can be time consuming					
Realia is more suitable for young learners than adult learners					
Using realia in the classroom can help to make students motivated					
Many teachers do not use realia in the classroom because they find it troublesome					
Using realia in classroom can be helpful to expand learners' vocabulary					
Using realia in the classroom can help to enhance the creativity of learners					
In certain cases, using realia can be expensive					
While using realia, teacher may have to spend too much time in one activity					
Realia should not be used in every activity					
Realia can be a helpful tool to ensure effective learning					
Realia should be used in class very often					

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