

THE ROLE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN IMPROVING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AMONG MALAYSIAN POLYTECHNIC STUDENTS

Liyana binti Ibrahim¹
Norliyana Bau binti Muhamad Affendi²

¹ Liyana binti Ibrahim: General Studies Department, Politeknik Nilai, Kompleks Pendidikan Bandar Enstek, 71760 Labu Negeri Sembilan (E-mail: liyana.ibrahim@polinilai.edu.my)

² Norliyana Bau binti Muhamad Affendi Bau: General Studies Department, Politeknik Nilai, Kompleks Pendidikan Bandar Enstek, 71760 Labu Negeri Sembilan (E-mail: nliyana@polinilai.edu.my)

*Corresponding author: liyana.ibrahim@polinilai.edu.my

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Abstract: *This study explores the role of authentic materials in enhancing communicative competence among Malaysian polytechnic students, focusing on students' perceptions and the specific challenges they encounter. Grounded in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles, the research employed a qualitative, phenomenological approach using open-ended questions to capture the lived experiences of ten diploma students from a Malaysian polytechnic. The findings reveal that authentic materials such as songs, movies, and real-life dialogues increase learner engagement and motivation and facilitate the development of core communicative skills, including listening, pronunciation, and accent awareness. These materials bridge the gap between classroom instruction and real-world language use, fostering more natural and effective communication. However, several challenges were identified, such as difficulty understanding fast-paced speech, unfamiliar cultural references, lack of structured guidance, and technical barriers like poor internet access and screen-related discomfort. The study highlights the importance of integrating authentic materials with appropriate scaffolding to maximise effectiveness. It also underscores the need for differentiated instructional strategies and infrastructure improvements to support diverse learner needs. By addressing the affordances and limitations of authentic materials, the study contributes valuable insights for curriculum developers, educators, and policymakers seeking to improve English language instruction in vocational education settings. The findings advocate for a more strategic and learner-centred incorporation of authentic materials to produce graduates with technical expertise and strong communicative competence for the global workforce.*

Keywords: *authentic materials, communicative competence, ESL, Malaysian polytechnic students*

Introduction

In the Malaysian educational landscape, polytechnic institutions are pivotal in equipping students with the technical and vocational skills necessary for the nation's economic advancement. As Malaysia strives to position itself competitively within the global market, the emphasis on English language proficiency has intensified, recognising its significance in facilitating effective communication in diverse professional settings (Ting et al., 2017). Despite the technical competencies acquired, many graduates from these institutions encounter challenges in meeting industry expectations, particularly concerning English communicative competence (Ting et al., 2017).

Communicative competence, encompassing the ability to convey and interpret messages effectively in various contexts, is indispensable for professionals navigating the complexities of the modern workplace (Hymes, 1972). In English as a Second Language (ESL) education, integrating authentic materials and resources produced for real-life communication purposes rather than pedagogical objectives has been advocated to bridge the gap between classroom learning and practical language use (Guariento & Morley, 2001). These materials, ranging from newspapers and podcasts to official documents and multimedia content, expose learners to the nuances of language as it is genuinely employed, thereby enhancing their communicative competence (Guariento & Morley, 2001). The theoretical underpinnings of utilising authentic materials align with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles, emphasising interaction and real-world relevance in language instruction (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). CLT posits that authentic materials can significantly contribute to learners' ability to use the target language effectively in real-life situations, thus fostering linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

While extensive research has explored the development of communicative competence in ESL and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, a discernible gap exists in studies focusing specifically on the impact of authentic materials on Malaysian polytechnic students. Given these institutions' unique vocational focus and demographic composition, it is imperative to investigate how exposure to authentic resources can practically enhance students' real-life communication skills within this educational setting.

Research Aim and Objectives

This study explores authentic materials' role in enhancing communicative competence among Malaysian polytechnic students. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine Malaysian polytechnic students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of authentic materials in improving their communicative competence.
2. To identify specific challenges that polytechnic students encounter when using authentic materials for language learning purposes.

Addressing the identified research gap holds significant implications for pedagogical practices and policy formulation in Malaysian polytechnics. By elucidating the effectiveness of authentic materials in fostering communicative competence, this study can inform curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and resource allocation, ultimately contributing to the production of graduates who are technically proficient and adept communicators in the global arena.

Literature Review

Integrating authentic materials in English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction has garnered significant attention for its potential to enhance communicative competence among learners. In Malaysian polytechnic education, understanding students' perceptions of authentic materials

and identifying their challenges in utilising these resources are crucial for effective curriculum design and pedagogical strategies. This literature review synthesises key studies and theories related to these objectives, highlighting existing research gaps and illustrating how the current study aims to address them.

Students' Perceptions of Authentic Materials in Enhancing Communicative Competence

Authentic materials and resources created for real-life communication are posited to bridge the gap between classroom learning and practical language use, fostering communicative competence (Guariento & Morley, 2001). Several studies have explored students' perceptions of such materials in Malaysia.

Rubaa'i and Hashim (2021) investigated Malaysian polytechnic students' perceptions of using cloud-based tools, which often incorporate authentic materials, for ESL reading activities. The study revealed that students had positive perceptions, finding these tools user-friendly and beneficial for enhancing their reading skills. This suggests integrating technology-driven authentic materials can effectively support language learning in polytechnic settings.

Similarly, Mandarsari (2023) examined the implementation of online authentic materials in teaching English at a secondary school in Malaysia. The findings indicated that teachers perceived authentic materials as beneficial for engaging students and improving their language skills despite facing challenges related to technological limitations and resource accessibility. Although this study focused on secondary education, its insights are pertinent to understanding the potential benefits and challenges of using authentic materials in polytechnic institutions.

While these studies provide valuable insights, there remains a paucity of research specifically targeting Malaysian polytechnic students' perceptions of authentic materials in enhancing communicative competence. The current study aims to fill this gap by focusing on this unique educational context and offering more tailored curriculum development insights.

Challenges Faced by Polytechnic Students in Using Authentic Materials

While beneficial, authentic materials present certain challenges for learners, particularly in polytechnic settings. Identifying these challenges is essential for developing effective instructional strategies.

Sanmugam and Shamsudin (2017) explored the perceptions of English language lecturers in Malaysian polytechnics regarding applying research to classroom practice. The study highlighted that, although lecturers recognised the value of research-based practices, they faced challenges implementing them due to a lack of experience and resources. This underscores potential difficulties in integrating authentic materials into the curriculum, as successful implementation often requires adequate training and support for educators. Furthermore, a study conducted at a Malaysian polytechnic identified deficits in English proficiency, confidence, and fluency as primary challenges faced by students in language learning (Overcoming Obstacles, 2023). These challenges can impede the effective use of authentic materials, which often require a certain level of language proficiency to be beneficial.

While these studies shed light on general challenges in language learning within polytechnics, there is a lack of focused research on the specific obstacles students encounter when using authentic materials. The present study seeks to address this by directly examining the challenges

polytechnic students face in this context, providing insights that can inform targeted interventions.

The reviewed literature indicates a growing interest in using authentic materials to enhance communicative competence in ESL contexts. However, several gaps and limitations persist. Much of the existing research has been conducted in secondary schools or general ESL settings, with a limited focus on Malaysian polytechnic institutions. Given polytechnics' unique vocational focus and student demographics, findings from other contexts may not be directly transferable. While some studies have explored educators' perceptions, a dearth of research focuses on students' views regarding the effectiveness of authentic materials in improving communicative competence. Understanding students' perspectives is crucial for designing learner-centered instructional strategies. Although general challenges in language learning within polytechnics have been identified, there is insufficient research pinpointing the specific difficulties students face when engaging with authentic materials. Addressing this gap is essential for developing targeted support mechanisms.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the role of authentic materials in improving communicative competence among Malaysian polytechnic students. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for investigating complex, context-dependent phenomena such as students' perceptions and learning experiences, as it allows for a rich, in-depth understanding of the subject matter (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on student perspectives, this approach facilitates a nuanced exploration of the perceived effectiveness of authentic materials and the challenges encountered in their use, which are central to the research objectives.

Research Design

The study adopted a phenomenological research design, which aims to understand individuals' lived experiences from their own perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). This design was deemed appropriate as the study seeks to capture how polytechnic students perceive and experience using authentic materials in their language learning processes. The phenomenological approach allows the researcher to identify patterns and themes from students' subjective experiences, offering insights that quantitative methods may overlook.

Participants

Ten diploma students from a Malaysian polytechnic were purposively selected to participate in the study. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants had sufficient exposure to authentic materials in their English language courses and were, therefore, able to provide relevant and meaningful responses. The sample size aligns with qualitative research practices, where smaller samples are preferred to facilitate deep exploration of individual experiences (Palinkas et al., 2015). The participants represented a range of academic disciplines within the polytechnic and varied in English language proficiency levels, providing a diverse perspective on using authentic materials.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using open-ended questions administered through an online questionnaire. Open-ended questions are particularly effective in qualitative research as they encourage participants to express their thoughts freely and in their own words, resulting in more detailed and insightful responses (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The questionnaire consisted of two main sections aligned with the study's objectives: the first section focused on students' perceptions

of the effectiveness of authentic materials in improving their communicative competence, and the second explored the specific challenges they faced when engaging with such materials.

The questions were designed to be clear, non-leading, and open to interpretation, thus allowing participants to provide varied and personal responses. Examples of the questions included: “How do you feel authentic materials (e.g., videos, news articles, podcasts) have helped improve your English communication skills?” and “What difficulties, if any, have you experienced when using authentic materials in your English language learning?”

Tools and Instruments

The main instrument used in this study was the open-ended questionnaire, which was distributed via Google Forms. This platform was chosen due to its accessibility, ease of use, and ability to collect and organise qualitative data efficiently. The instrument was validated through expert review by two ESL educators with experience in teaching at Malaysian polytechnics, ensuring that the questions were appropriate, relevant, and aligned with the study's objectives. A pilot test involving two students was also conducted to identify any ambiguities or technical issues, leading to minor adjustments in the wording of some questions.

Rationale for the Method

The study's aim to explore perceptions and challenges rather than quantify outcomes drove the choice of a qualitative method, specifically the use of open-ended questions. Previous research has highlighted the value of qualitative approaches in educational settings for capturing learner experiences and contextualising language learning processes (Teng, 2021). Given the limited existing research focused on Malaysian polytechnic students in this context, a qualitative design allows for generating context-specific insights that can inform future pedagogical practices and curriculum development.

Moreover, open-ended questions have been found to elicit rich data that can reveal students' thought processes, beliefs, and attitudes toward learning materials—dimensions that structured surveys may fail to capture (Nowell et al., 2017). The flexibility of open-ended responses also allows participants to introduce new themes or concerns not anticipated by the researcher, thereby expanding the scope of inquiry.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed to ensure the integrity and transparency of the research process. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by assigning pseudonyms to all participants and storing the collected data securely in a password-protected digital folder.

The study complied with the ethical standards outlined by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education and adhered to best practices for conducting ethical research in educational settings (Universiti Teknologi MARA Research Ethics Committee, 2020). Given the online nature of data collection, additional steps were taken to ensure digital data security and privacy.

This methodology section outlines the rationale for employing a qualitative, phenomenological design to explore Malaysian polytechnic students' perceptions of authentic materials and their challenges in using them to improve communicative competence. The use of open-ended

questions enabled the collection of in-depth, contextually grounded data directly addressing the research objectives. Ethical standards were rigorously upheld to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

Findings

Malaysian polytechnic students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of authentic materials in improving their communicative competence.

1. Enhanced Engagement and Motivation

Students find authentic materials more engaging than traditional methods. They describe the learning process as fun and less boring, which increases their motivation to participate. This engagement helps maintain consistent language exposure.

“Very useful, as it can make learning much more fun, as well as easier to understand for many.” – P2

“I think it its better since it will give a new experience and also it is fun.” – P4

“Useful cause it's not boring.” – P6

2. Exposure to Real-Life Language Use

Learners value authentic materials because they expose them to real conversational English. They mention understanding slang, informal speech, and how people communicate naturally, which helps bridge the gap between textbook English and real-world usage.

“Learning with things enjoy like favourite songs or movies makes it more fun and engaging.” – P6

"Beside that get used learn different accents, slang and how people talk." – P7

“I think it’s better since it gives a new experience.” – P8

3. Development of Listening Skills

Authentic materials are highlighted to improve students' understanding of spoken English. Students cite improved listening to conversations, following speech patterns, and intonation. They often mention songs and movies as effective listening tools.

“Using authentic materials like movies, songs, and social media... help with listening skills, intonation, and accent training.” – P5

“Listening to English songs or dialogues in movies trains my ears to catch the rhythm and tone of natural conversations.” – P6

“I can hear how words are used in context and it helps me understand fast speech.” – P10

4. Improvement in Pronunciation and Accent

Students report better pronunciation and understanding of accents through regular exposure to authentic spoken content. They learn by mimicking native speakers and practising with subtitles or lyrics. This also boosts their oral fluency and accent adaptation.

“Movies and songs help with listening skills, intonation, and accent training.” – P5.

“You can copy how native speakers say things and practice that.” – P8

“I like to follow along with lyrics or subtitles to learn how to pronounce correctly.”
 – P9

Challenges that polytechnic students encounter when using authentic materials for language learning purposes.

1. Difficulty Understanding Fast Speech

Many learners struggle to follow the rapid pace of native speakers, especially in materials like TV shows and movies. This often results in missed details and an overall lack of comprehension. The speed of speech presents a major barrier to understanding and confidence in listening.

“One difficulty in using authentic materials to learn English is the challenge of understanding fast speech, and cultural references which can make comprehension difficult for learners.” – P5

“One difficulty I face is the speed at which native speakers communicate in movies and TV shows.” – P10

“It's challenging because sometimes they speak fast and use some different phrases that I rarely know.” – P9

2. Struggles with Cultural References

Cultural references that are implicit or unfamiliar can confuse learners, especially when they are not explained. Without shared cultural background knowledge, it becomes difficult to relate to or interpret the material accurately, creating a gap between the learner and the content.

“Using authentic materials can be challenging or uncomfortable due to unfamiliar vocabulary, fast-paced speech, and cultural references that may be difficult to understand without content.” – P5

“One difficulty in using authentic materials to learn English is the challenge of understanding fast speech, and cultural references which can make comprehension difficult for learners.” – P10

“Can't relate.” – P2

3. Lack of Structured Guidance or Explanation

Some students find authentic materials overwhelming due to the lack of formal structure or learning aids like manuals, translations, or subtitles. This absence makes it hard to grasp

unfamiliar content, especially for beginners. Learners feel more confident when support materials are available.

“Not have a manual to learn.” – P1.

“Usually when the materials don't provide any translation. It's hard for my first time of using this method, but over time, I've gotten used to it.” – P4

“Lack of clear explanations or subtitles in some cases, which can lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations.” – P2

4. Technical or Internet Access Issues

Limited or unreliable internet connectivity hinders access to authentic digital materials. In addition, pop-up ads and loading issues distract and frustrate learners. These technical challenges are particularly problematic in less connected learning environments.

“Internet problem.” – P6

"It damages my eyesight... I can't face screens after a certain period as it causes me a headache." – P7.

“It's also challenging because of all the ads that you'll constantly come across on your screen.” – P5.

Discussion

The present study investigated the role of authentic materials in improving communicative competence among Malaysian polytechnic students, with particular attention to the challenges faced in using such materials. The findings revealed that while students generally perceive authentic materials as effective tools for enhancing their language skills, they also encounter significant challenges that must be addressed to optimise their use in language learning contexts.

Authentic materials were found to promote higher engagement, motivation, and real-world language exposure. This aligns with previous research, which indicates that authentic materials positively contribute to learners' communicative competence by presenting language in meaningful and relatable contexts (Gilmore, 2007; Teng, 2021). Participants in this study reported increased enjoyment and interest in language learning when exposed to songs, movies, and real-life dialogues, consistent with Guariento and Morley's (2001) argument that authenticity in materials can bridge the gap between classroom instruction and real-world communication.

Moreover, students highlighted developing listening skills, pronunciation, and awareness of different accents as key benefits of engaging with authentic materials. These outcomes correspond with findings from Mandarsari (2023), who observed that authentic digital content enhances learners' auditory processing and accent familiarity. Similarly, Rubaai and Hashim (2021) noted that digital tools incorporating authentic texts improve reading and listening comprehension among Malaysian students, reinforcing the effectiveness of such materials in developing various dimensions of communicative competence.

However, the study also uncovered several challenges students face when engaging with authentic materials. Among the most prominent were difficulty understanding fast-paced speech and unfamiliar accents. These challenges mirror findings by Gilmore (2007) and Wong et al. (2022), who highlighted that learners often struggle with native speaker speed and pronunciation, particularly when lacking contextual or linguistic support. Additionally, cultural references and idiomatic language further complicated comprehension, echoing previous observations by Peacock (1997), who stressed the importance of cultural familiarity in processing authentic input.

Another significant finding was the perceived lack of structure and guidance accompanying authentic materials. Several students expressed difficulty understanding materials without translations, subtitles, or contextual explanations. Teng (2021) supports this issue, arguing that while authentic materials provide exposure to natural language, they must be accompanied by pedagogical scaffolding to be effective for learners, especially those with lower proficiency levels.

Technical and health-related barriers also emerged, such as internet connectivity issues and discomfort from prolonged screen exposure. These findings resonate with Sanmugam and Shamsudin (2017), who reported infrastructural and resource challenges in Malaysian polytechnics that hinder effective ESL instruction. Addressing these logistical concerns is critical as online and multimedia-based learning becomes more prevalent.

The findings from this study offer several new insights into the use of authentic materials in the Malaysian polytechnic context. First, the diversity of student experiences emphasises the need for differentiated instructional strategies that cater to varying levels of language proficiency and technological access. Second, while prior studies have largely focused on either secondary schools or higher education institutions, this research fills an important gap by centring the experiences of vocational students whose communicative needs are closely tied to workplace readiness.

In terms of implications, the findings underscore the importance of integrating authentic materials thoughtfully within the curriculum. Educators should provide explicit support through glossaries, subtitles, cultural notes, and guided listening or reading tasks to help students navigate complex content. Moreover, institutions should invest in infrastructure and digital literacy training to mitigate access issues and promote inclusive learning environments. Curriculum developers might consider blending authentic materials with graded resources to ensure accessibility while maintaining exposure to real-life language.

One limitation of this study is its reliance on self-reported data from a relatively small sample of ten students. While qualitative methods provide rich insights, the generalizability of the findings is limited. Future studies could incorporate classroom observations or mixed-methods approaches to validate and expand upon these results. Additionally, while the study identified key challenges and benefits, it did not explore teachers' perspectives or the long-term impact of authentic material use on communicative competence. Further research could investigate these dimensions to provide a more holistic understanding.

Overall, this study contributes meaningfully to communicative competence by highlighting how authentic materials can empower and challenge learners in vocational education settings. By addressing the barriers identified and leveraging the motivational benefits of authentic input,

educators can better support Malaysian polytechnic students in developing the communicative skills necessary for academic and professional success.

Conclusion

This study has explored the role of authentic materials in enhancing communicative competence among Malaysian polytechnic students, with a particular focus on their perceived effectiveness and the challenges they encounter. The findings indicate that authentic materials such as songs, films, social media, and other real-world resources can significantly enrich language learning experiences by fostering engagement, promoting real-life language exposure, and developing core communicative skills such as listening, pronunciation, and fluency.

However, the study also highlights several barriers to the effective use of authentic materials. These include difficulties with fast-paced speech, unfamiliar cultural references, limited contextual support, and technical constraints such as poor internet access and screen fatigue. While many learners appreciate these materials' authenticity and practical value, their effectiveness is contingent on adequate pedagogical support and learner readiness.

The study contributes to the growing body of research on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) by affirming the potential of authentic materials to enhance communicative competence in vocational education settings. It also underscores the need for targeted instructional strategies that bridge the gap between exposure and understanding. As Malaysia continues to strengthen English language instruction in polytechnic institutions, the thoughtful integration of authentic materials supported by structured guidance and technological infrastructure can play a pivotal role in producing graduates who are technically proficient and competent communicators in a globalised workforce.

Future research should expand on these findings by incorporating larger and more diverse samples, examining teacher perspectives, and assessing long-term outcomes of authentic material integration. Ultimately, a balanced approach that combines authenticity with accessibility will best support learners in achieving meaningful communicative competence.

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