

The Impact of Authentic Materials on Business English Students' Interpretive Reading Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

Business English communication students face significant challenges in developing interpretive reading comprehension skills when using traditional textbook materials that lack real-world business context and authenticity. This study investigates the effectiveness of authentic business materials in enhancing interpretive reading comprehension among Business English communication students, specifically examining their ability to understand and express comprehension of complex business texts. A quantitative research approach was employed with 50 Business English communication students as participants. The study utilized authentic business materials including annual reports, business correspondence, market analyses, and corporate communications. Data collection involved pre-and post-intervention assessments measuring interpretive reading comprehension levels and students' ability to express textual understanding. Results demonstrate that 85% of students achieved correct and comprehensive text understanding when exposed to authentic materials. While students showed proficiency in answering interpretive-level questions, variations existed in their ability to articulate comprehensive reading comprehension across the sample. The findings suggest that authentic materials significantly enhance interpretive reading skills in Business English contexts, though individual differences in expression abilities require targeted pedagogical interventions. This research contributes to ESP (English for Specific Purposes) pedagogy and offers practical insights for curriculum development in business communication programs.

Keywords: *Authentic materials, Business English, interpretive reading comprehension, ESP, reading skills*

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INTRODUCTION

The globalization of business has intensified the demand for effective English communication skills in professional contexts. Business English communication programs have evolved to address the specific linguistic needs of professionals operating in international business environments (Basturkmen, 2010). However, traditional pedagogical approaches often rely on simplified, artificial texts that fail to reflect the complexity and authenticity of real business communication. This discrepancy between classroom materials and workplace demands creates a significant gap in student preparation for professional contexts.

Reading comprehension, particularly at the interpretive level, represents a critical skill for business professionals who must process complex documents, analyze market reports, and comprehend nuanced business correspondence. The interpretive level of reading comprehension requires students to go beyond literal understanding, engaging in analysis, inference, and critical evaluation of textual content (Barrett, 1968). This higher-order cognitive processing is essential for effective business communication and decision-making in professional environments.

The concept of authentic materials has gained significant attention in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) pedagogy. Authentic materials are defined as texts created for real communicative purposes rather than pedagogical ones (Peacock, 1997; Gilmore, 2007). These materials provide learners with exposure to genuine language use and real-world contexts that traditional textbooks often fail to capture. The integration of authentic materials in ESP instruction has been shown to bridge the gap between academic learning and professional application.

This research addresses a crucial gap in Business English pedagogy by examining how authentic materials influence interpretive reading comprehension. The significance of this study lies in several key areas. First, it provides evidence-based insights for ESP curriculum development, offering concrete data to support pedagogical decision-making. Second, it bridges the gap between academic learning and workplace requirements by demonstrating the effectiveness of real-world materials in educational contexts. Third, it enhances critical reading skills essential for business success by focusing on interpretive-level comprehension abilities. Finally, it validates the use of authentic business texts in educational contexts through empirical research.

The importance of this research extends beyond theoretical contributions to practical applications in ESP instruction. Business English educators require evidence-based guidance for material selection and curriculum design. This study provides such guidance by demonstrating the measurable impact of authentic materials on student learning outcomes. Furthermore, the research addresses the growing need for professionals who can effectively process and analyze complex business communications in an increasingly globalized economy.

The central problem investigated is the discrepancy between traditional teaching materials and the authentic communication demands of business environments. Many Business English students struggle with interpretive reading comprehension when transitioning from academic to professional contexts, suggesting inadequate preparation through conventional pedagogical materials. This struggle manifests in difficulties processing complex business documents, understanding implicit meanings in professional correspondence, and making informed decisions based on textual analysis.

Traditional ESP materials often present oversimplified scenarios that do not reflect the linguistic complexity and contextual demands of authentic business communication (Martinez, 2002). This simplification, while intended to facilitate learning, may inadvertently limit students' exposure to the types of texts they will encounter in professional settings. The result is a preparation gap that becomes apparent when students enter the workforce and must navigate complex, authentic business communications.

This study contributes original insights by focusing specifically on interpretive-level comprehension rather than basic understanding, which has been the focus of much previous research. It utilizes a comprehensive range of authentic business materials, providing a more holistic assessment of authentic material effectiveness. The research examines both comprehension accuracy and expression

abilities, recognizing that understanding and articulation are distinct but related skills. Finally, it provides quantitative evidence for authentic material effectiveness in ESP contexts, addressing a gap in empirical research in this area.

The novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive approach to assessing the impact of authentic materials on interpretive reading comprehension. While previous studies have examined various aspects of authentic material use in ESP contexts, few have focused specifically on the interpretive level of reading comprehension or provided quantitative evidence of effectiveness in Business English settings.

Literature Review

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on several key concepts in applied linguistics and ESP pedagogy. The concept of authentic materials in ESP has been extensively discussed in applied linguistics literature. Peacock (1997) defines authentic materials as texts that were created to fulfill some social purpose in the language community in which they were produced, rather than specifically created for language teaching purposes. This definition emphasizes the real-world origin and purpose of authentic materials, distinguishing them from pedagogically designed texts.

Gilmore (2007) further elaborates on the concept of authenticity in language learning, arguing that authentic materials provide learners with exposure to real language use and cultural contexts that are often absent from traditional textbooks. This exposure is particularly important in ESP contexts, where students need to develop skills for specific professional domains. The theoretical justification for using authentic materials rests on the assumption that exposure to real-world texts better prepares students for the linguistic demands they will encounter in professional settings.

Reading comprehension theory provides another theoretical foundation for this study. Barrett (1968) proposed a taxonomy of reading comprehension that operates at multiple levels: literal, interpretive, and critical. The literal level involves understanding explicitly stated information, while the interpretive level requires readers to make inferences, draw conclusions, and understand implicit meanings. The critical level involves evaluation and judgment of textual content. This taxonomy is particularly relevant for business communication, where professionals must often read between the lines and make informed decisions based on implicit information.

Research on authentic materials in ESP contexts has demonstrated several benefits for language learning. Berardo (2006) found that authentic materials increase student motivation and engagement by providing relevant, real-world content that students perceive as meaningful and applicable to their future careers. This increased motivation translates into improved learning outcomes and greater student satisfaction with ESP courses.

Guariento and Morley (2001) examined the relationship between text authenticity and task authenticity in EFL classrooms, arguing that both elements are necessary for effective language learning.

Their research suggests that authentic materials alone are insufficient if they are not accompanied by authentic tasks that reflect real-world language use. This finding has important implications for ESP instruction, suggesting that educators must consider both material selection and task design when implementing authentic materials.

However, research has also identified potential challenges in implementing authentic materials. Martinez (2002) notes that authentic materials may present linguistic complexity that exceeds students' current proficiency levels, potentially leading to frustration and decreased learning outcomes. Bacon and Finnemann (1990) identified cultural and contextual barriers that may impede student comprehension of authentic materials, particularly for students from different cultural backgrounds.

Despite the growing body of research on authentic materials in ESP, several gaps remain. First, there is limited focus on interpretive-level comprehension specifically, with most studies examining general reading comprehension or basic understanding. Second, there are insufficient quantitative studies in Business English contexts, with much of the existing research being qualitative or anecdotal in nature. Third, there is a lack of comprehensive assessment of both understanding and expression abilities, with most studies focusing on one aspect or the other. Finally, there is limited research in diverse cultural contexts, with much of the existing research conducted in Western educational settings.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research approach using a pre-experimental design to assess the impact of authentic materials on interpretive reading comprehension. The choice of quantitative methodology was based on the need to provide empirical evidence for the effectiveness of authentic materials, addressing a gap in the literature where much of the existing research relies on qualitative observations or anecdotal evidence.

The pre-experimental design involved pre-and post-intervention assessments to measure changes in student performance following exposure to authentic business materials. While this design has limitations in terms of causal inference due to the absence of a control group, it provides valuable insights into the potential impact of authentic materials on student learning outcomes. The design was selected based on practical constraints within the educational setting and the exploratory nature of the research.

The research was conducted within a Business English Communication Program over one academic semester (16 weeks). The setting provided an authentic ESP classroom environment where authentic material implementation could be integrated into existing curriculum structures. This naturalistic setting enhances the ecological validity of the findings, as the intervention was implemented within normal instructional contexts rather than artificial experimental conditions.

The duration of 16 weeks was selected to provide sufficient exposure to authentic materials while allowing for meaningful assessment of learning outcomes. This timeframe aligns with standard academic

semester structures and provides adequate time for students to develop familiarity with authentic business texts and demonstrate improvements in interpretive reading comprehension skills.

The study involved 50 Business English communication students (N=50) selected through convenience sampling from existing program cohorts. Participants were undergraduate students aged 19-22 with mixed English proficiency levels, representing a typical Business English student population in the Indonesian educational context.

The sample size of 50 students was determined based on practical considerations and represents a substantial portion of the target population. While convenience sampling limits the generalizability of findings, it was the most feasible approach given institutional constraints and ethical considerations. The mixed proficiency levels within the sample provide insights into how authentic materials affect students with varying linguistic backgrounds and abilities.

Demographic characteristics of the participants included diverse academic backgrounds, with students representing various business-related majors including international business, marketing, and management. This diversity reflects the typical composition of Business English programs and enhances the applicability of findings to similar educational contexts.

Authentic materials were carefully selected to represent real-world business communication across various contexts and text types. The selection criteria emphasized relevance to business communication, linguistic complexity appropriate for undergraduate students, and representativeness of authentic business discourse. Materials included annual corporate reports from major international companies, business correspondence samples representing various communication purposes, market analysis documents from reputable business publications, financial newsletters from established financial institutions, and industry publications covering diverse business sectors.

The selection process involved evaluation of materials for linguistic complexity, cultural appropriateness, and pedagogical potential. Materials were chosen to represent different genres of business communication, ensuring that students were exposed to the variety of texts they might encounter in professional settings. The authenticity of materials was verified by confirming their original communicative purpose and real-world application.

The study employed multiple assessment instruments to measure different aspects of interpretive reading comprehension. Pre-intervention assessments established baseline interpretive reading comprehension levels using standardized reading comprehension tasks adapted for business contexts. These assessments measured students' ability to make inferences, draw conclusions, and understand implicit meanings in business-related texts.

Post-intervention evaluations utilized authentic material-based comprehension tasks specifically designed to assess interpretive-level understanding of the materials used during the intervention. These tasks required students to demonstrate their ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information from

authentic business texts. The assessments were designed to reflect the types of reading tasks that business professionals regularly encounter.

Expression assessments involved both written and oral comprehension demonstration tasks, recognizing that the ability to articulate understanding is as important as comprehension itself in professional contexts. Written assessments required students to produce summaries, analyses, and responses to authentic business texts, while oral assessments involved presentations and discussions based on reading materials.

Data collection was implemented in four systematic phases over the 16-week semester. Phase 1 (Weeks 1-2) involved pre-intervention baseline assessment, where students completed initial reading comprehension tasks to establish their starting proficiency levels. This phase provided crucial baseline data for measuring improvement following the intervention.

Phase 2 (Weeks 3-14) comprised the authentic material integration period, during which students engaged with various authentic business texts through structured reading activities, discussions, and analysis tasks. This extended exposure period allowed students to develop familiarity with authentic business discourse and practice interpretive reading skills in meaningful contexts.

Phase 3 (Weeks 15-16) included post-intervention evaluation, where students completed assessment tasks using authentic materials to demonstrate their developed interpretive reading comprehension skills. These assessments were designed to measure both understanding accuracy and expression abilities, providing comprehensive data on student learning outcomes.

Phase 4 involved complete data compilation and analysis, including statistical processing and interpretation of results. This phase ensured systematic and thorough analysis of all collected data to support valid conclusions about the effectiveness of authentic materials in enhancing interpretive reading comprehension.

Data analysis employed descriptive statistics including mean scores, percentages, and standard deviations to characterize student performance and identify patterns in learning outcomes. Comparative analysis examined pre-post intervention differences to assess the magnitude of improvement following authentic material exposure.

Performance categories were established to classify accuracy levels and expression abilities, providing nuanced insights into different aspects of student performance. Statistical processing was conducted using SPSS version 28.0, ensuring reliable and valid analysis of collected data.

The analysis approach was designed to address the research questions comprehensively while accounting for the limitations of the pre-experimental design. Results were interpreted with appropriate caution regarding causal inferences, while emphasizing the practical significance of observed improvements in student performance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overall Performance Results

The study revealed significant improvements in interpretive reading comprehension following the implementation of authentic business materials. The most striking finding was that 85% of students (n=43) achieved correct and comprehensive understanding of business texts when using authentic materials, representing a substantial improvement from baseline measurements obtained during the pre-intervention assessment phase.

The baseline assessment revealed that students initially struggled with interpretive-level reading tasks, with only 58% demonstrating adequate comprehension of business-related texts prior to the intervention. This 27 percentage point improvement following authentic material exposure suggests a meaningful impact on student learning outcomes and provides empirical support for the effectiveness of authentic materials in ESP contexts.

The improvement was consistent across different types of authentic materials, with students showing enhanced performance in comprehending annual reports, business correspondence, market analyses, and industry publications. This consistency suggests that the benefits of authentic materials are not limited to specific text types but extend across the range of business communication genres.

Interpretive Reading Comprehension Analysis

Students demonstrated good performance in answering interpretive-level questions, indicating successful processing of implicit meanings and analytical content within authentic business texts. The ability to make inferences, draw conclusions, and understand implied information showed marked improvement following exposure to authentic materials. This finding aligns with Barrett's (1968) reading comprehension taxonomy, which emphasizes the importance of interpretive-level skills for effective reading comprehension.

Specific areas of improvement included the ability to identify underlying business strategies from annual reports, infer relationship dynamics from business correspondence, and recognize market trends from analytical documents. Students showed particular strength in connecting explicit information with implicit meanings, suggesting that authentic materials provide the contextual richness necessary for developing these higher-order reading skills.

The improvement in interpretive skills was particularly notable in tasks requiring students to synthesize information from multiple sources, evaluate the credibility of business claims, and make predictions based on textual evidence. These skills are directly applicable to professional contexts where business practitioners must make informed decisions based on complex textual information.

Expression Ability Findings

While comprehension accuracy was high, the study revealed important variations in students' ability to express their reading comprehension effectively. This finding suggests a critical distinction between understanding and articulation skills, with implications for ESP pedagogy and assessment practices. Approximately 73% of students who demonstrated accurate comprehension were able to express their understanding clearly and comprehensively.

The expression ability variations manifested in different ways across the sample. Some students showed strong comprehension but struggled with organizing their thoughts coherently in written responses. Others demonstrated good analytical thinking but had difficulty articulating complex ideas in oral presentations. These variations highlight the need for explicit instruction in communication skills alongside reading comprehension development.

The gap between comprehension and expression abilities was most pronounced in tasks requiring students to explain their reasoning processes or justify their interpretations of business texts. This finding suggests that while authentic materials effectively enhance reading comprehension, additional pedagogical support is needed to help students articulate their understanding effectively.

The 85% success rate provides strong empirical support for the hypothesis that authentic materials enhance interpretive reading comprehension in Business English contexts. This finding aligns with previous research by Peacock (1997) and Berardo (2006), who emphasized the motivational and contextual benefits of real-world materials in language learning. The quantitative evidence from this study adds to the growing body of research supporting authentic material use in ESP instruction.

The effectiveness of authentic materials can be attributed to several factors identified in the literature. First, authentic materials provide linguistic complexity that reflects real-world communication demands, preparing students for professional contexts (Gilmore, 2007). Second, the relevance and meaningfulness of authentic materials increase student engagement and motivation, leading to improved learning outcomes (Berardo, 2006). Third, authentic materials expose students to cultural and contextual information that is often absent from traditional textbooks, enhancing their overall communicative competence.

The observed proficiency in answering interpretive questions demonstrates that authentic materials successfully engage higher-order reading skills. This finding supports the theoretical framework provided by Barrett (1968), which emphasizes the importance of moving beyond literal comprehension to interpretive and critical levels of understanding. The ability of authentic materials to facilitate this progression suggests their value in developing the sophisticated reading skills required for business communication.

CONCLUSION

This study provides compelling empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of authentic materials in enhancing interpretive reading comprehension among Business English students. The 85% success rate in achieving correct and comprehensive text understanding demonstrates significant pedagogical value and validates the use of authentic business materials in ESP instruction. The research confirms that authentic materials successfully engage higher-order reading skills and provide the contextual richness necessary for developing interpretive comprehension abilities.

The study also identified important nuances in student performance, particularly the distinction between comprehension accuracy and expression ability. While the majority of students demonstrated improved understanding of authentic business texts, variations in their ability to articulate this understanding highlight the need for comprehensive pedagogical approaches that address both receptive and productive skills in ESP contexts.

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