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The authenticity of reading materials provided for students in secondary school classrooms in Iceland

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

English is prevalent in Icelandic society and students need to have adequate language skills to enter the university or professional work environment. Reading plays an important role in learning a language. Therefore, authentic reading materials in an ESL classroom could improve the language skills. Some authentic materials could improve vocabulary and prepare students for further academic studies or professional work fields. In this essay I look at the authenticity of reading materials used in the Icelandic secondary English classroom. I review the ambiguity of the term ‘authentic’ and determine for the purpose of this thesis, which definition is necessary for the linguistic context that I am looking at. I also look at arguments for and against the use of authentic reading materials in the ESL/EFL classroom. Additionally, I examine the status of English in Iceland as a whole and then more specifically English as it is used by secondary school students. English plays a significant role in the lives of the students leading up to and including secondary education. I review previous research that has been done on authentic reading material in the classroom, or authentic material in ESL/EFL textbooks. Finally, I have conducted interviews of four secondary school teachers. I interviewed two experienced (10 years or more teaching) and two newer (5 years or less teaching) teachers and examined the reading materials they use in their classrooms. As with other researchers, there is ambiguity, even among the four teachers, as to what constitutes authentic materials. The range varies from anything new, to any of the classics. A common agreement among the teachers is that authentic materials are important to the classroom and help improve the language skills of the students. The participants also all agreed that the authentic materials improved the language skills of their students as well as motivated them to learn.
Contents

1 Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 2
2 Literature review .................................................................................................................. 3
  2.1 Defining authenticity ....................................................................................................... 3
  2.2 Linguistic context ............................................................................................................ 5
  2.3 Previous research ........................................................................................................... 8
    2.3.1 EFL research ........................................................................................................... 9
    2.3.2 ESL research .......................................................................................................... 13
    2.3.3 Reading material at secondary school in Iceland .................................................... 15
    2.3.4 Summary ................................................................................................................. 16
3 The study ............................................................................................................................. 16
  3.1 Research questions ......................................................................................................... 16
  3.2 Participants ..................................................................................................................... 17
  3.3 Interview description ...................................................................................................... 18
4 Results and discussion ......................................................................................................... 18
  4.1 What is authentic reading material? ............................................................................... 19
  4.2 Which authentic materials should be used in the classroom? ......................................... 20
  4.3 How do authentic materials aid students in learning English? ....................................... 21
  4.4 Further comments/results ............................................................................................ 23
5 Conclusion ........................................................................................................................... 23
References ............................................................................................................................... 26
1 Introduction

English plays a prominent part in Icelandic society. According to Arnbjörnsdóttir (2007), due to expanding commerce, much business in Iceland is conducted in English. Iceland is a rather small country with only about 320,000 inhabitants and because it is such a small country, 90% of the educational material at the university is in English (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2009 as cited in Arnbjörnsdóttir and Ingvars dóttir, 2010, p.1). There is also a strong media presence of English including: television shows, movies, music, and computer/online games. However, Arnbjörnsdóttir (2007) states that the language input from these sources is passive and do not require interaction from the learner. Therefore, these sources develop the receptive language skills. Because of this, while conversing with many Icelanders, a native English speaker might assess that they are indeed fluent in English. However, upon closer evaluation, one might notice that menus, tourist plaques, and even written papers reflect errors in syntax that remind the reader or listener that English is not the Icelanders’ native language.

English language education in Iceland begins in the 4th grade, with the possibility of beginning earlier if a particular primary school chooses. With such an early start, students entering secondary school often have excellent conversational and contextual English abilities (understanding English within a specific context: i.e. movies, music, etc.). However, non-contextualized (novels, academic literature) English is much more difficult and in an academic setting, students may not perform as well as their initial fluency indicated. In fact, a study conducted by Arnbjörnsdóttir and Ingvars dóttir (2010) “shows that at least a third of university students in Iceland have some difficulty in comprehending English academic texts and there is some variation across disciplines” (p. 13). While Icelanders seem to have an astounding knowledge of English, the English they learn may not be adequate for their academic and professional needs.

While many Icelanders may not possess sufficient knowledge to participate in English academic and professional setting, one key factor that could help students develop their non-contextualized English skills, especially academic English skills, would be a strong presence of authentic reading materials in the secondary classroom. There are, of course, many different types of authentic reading materials. Tomlinson (2001) defines ‘authentic’ as “ordinary texts not produced specifically for language
teaching purposes” (p. 68). These can range from informal material such as e-mails, diaries, menus, recipes, comics, brochures, weather forecasts, jokes, and letters to more formal material including journal articles, novels, instruction manuals, reports, biographies, and academic textbooks. As already pointed out, students already receive English input from many of these informal sources, though not all input is from written sources.

A more thorough use of authentic materials in the classroom, especially more formal material, could help students bridge the gap between what they believe is fluency and actual fluency. Additionally, reading English authentic material could help students grasp more fully how English is written. This thesis will take a closer look at what is meant by authentic material and arguments for and against the use of authentic material in teaching and learning. I will also examine the English linguistic environment of Icelandic students studying at the secondary level. Moreover, this essay explores which authentic materials could be made greater use of to help develop the English of secondary school students in preparation for further study as well as professional work.

2 Literature review

I will provide a review of various studies that have been done on the use of authentic material in the classroom. These studies include authentic material that is not only read, but heard and seen as well. But before I begin this review, it is imperative to first define the term “authentic material”. With a foundational understanding of the term, the following material will be more easily categorized. However, finding a basic understanding of the term is not so easily accomplished as there seems to be various definitions between different authors.

2.1 Defining authenticity

Tomlinson (2001) defines ‘authentic’ as being anything that is not written for the purpose of teaching English. This definition is ambiguous. Whereas, another author narrows the definition by pointing out that when teachers think of authentic material, they are thinking of informal communication the way it happens among speakers, rather than a more formal communication in the form of books and articles (Khaniya, 2006). For example, a recipe, newspaper article, or joke would be considered as authentic for the classroom over a classical work of literature or a peer reviewed journal article. On
the one hand, Ur (1996) defines authentic material as any material that is read by a native speaker (p. 150). Furthermore, Adams (1995) finds most definitions of authentic rather ambiguous and gives his own definition as materials that “are unaltered language data, and … are produced by and for native speakers of a common language and not for second language learners of that language” (p. 4). On the other hand, inauthentic materials would be any materials that are specifically written and designed for language learning purposes (Berardo, 2006). In contrast, Widdowson (1991) argues that what we call authentic may not actually be authentic. Authentic material includes or implies the native reader’s response to the text. He argues that a text only has meaning as the reader puts meaning into it. Using ‘authentic’ materials in the classroom immediately makes them inauthentic as the reading audience has changed (pp. 44-47). For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to authentic reading material as material that is not written for EFL/ESL teaching or learning purposes. This is a vague definition and one that can cover a vast variety of materials. Therefore, there is not only one type of authentic material, but many varieties. Teachers need to be aware of that when they profess to be using authentic reading material.

Nevertheless, while teachers must be aware of different varieties of authentic material, there are arguments for and against authentic reading material in the classroom. On the one hand, Khaniya (2006) lists numerous advantages of using authentic material: learners have more positive motivation, they are provided with cultural information, they are given ‘real’ language to read, and their learning needs are more fully met (p. 18). Other authors point out that authentic texts give the students a view of the way the language occurs naturally (Crossley, Louwerse, McCarthy, and McNamara, 2007). In addition, Day (1993), in his book, New Ways in Teaching Reading, argues that reading in another language benefits the reader by helping them learn the vocabulary and grammar of the new language, as well as cultural aspects of the target language (p. ix). According to the above literature, authentic reading texts in the classroom can positively affect students’ attitudes towards reading. Moreover, students learning a language may feel that they are truly learning the language if they are able to read authentic texts. As a result, they are more likely to be engaged if they can choose their own sources of authentic texts. Teachers also have more freedom to choose from a wide range of texts.
On the other hand, researchers have also noted a negative side to authentic texts. Berardo (2006), Crossley, et al (2007), and Khaniya (2006) and point out that authentic texts can be too difficult for students, and can sometimes be too culturally specific. Adams (1995) takes these arguments a step further and questions if even advanced students can comprehend all authentic texts. He also states that these authentic texts could traumatize less advanced students and lead to possible discontinuation of study (p. 5). In addition, most scholars list difficulty of text as a disadvantage of authentic texts. Often the students in question are learning English as a foreign language and are being introduced to authentic texts at a low level. This could frustrate and discourage them. However, this is not necessarily the case in Iceland. As will be shown, Icelanders often enter secondary school with a relatively high working knowledge of English. Authentic texts, instead of discouraging Icelandic students, could challenge them in areas they are still unfamiliar with.

2.2 Linguistic context
In Iceland, English can be heard frequently on television and many TV shows are from the United States or the British Isles. Furthermore, English songs are heard often on the radio, and websites used for information and games played online are also in English. Consequently, due to the extensive input, English in Iceland might be changing over to an ESL context rather than an EFL setting which could affect how English is taught in school. Notably, all of these English activities are receptive activities. The participants do not need to respond or reciprocate the language. A 2011 study shows that Icelanders will probably listen three times more than they speak or write, and read twice as much as they speak or write, showing that most of the English used in Iceland is used receptively (Arnbjörnsdóttir, p. 7). Rivers, in her 1986 article, addresses the question whether receptively learning a language is enough. She argues that while receptive input does aid in language learning, it is not enough for advanced English situations such as the university or professional work (p.6). She also points out that while native speakers appear to learn only by reception for the first years, they are, in fact, responding and trying to practice the language. She feels that reception of a language only is not enough to prepare students for further study or work (Rivers, ibid.). Therefore, while Icelanders appear fluent in English, some language skills may be lacking. The vast amount of English input however, does affect students studying
English in secondary school. According to Arnbjörnsdóttir (2007), students are proficient in conversational and colloquial English, but are most often lacking in academic English. Therefore, the English knowledge they have is not adequate for academic studies and professional work environments.

Although most students do not have sufficient knowledge of academic English, upon entering secondary school, students should have had the opportunity to develop their academic language skills (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2007). They will have completed six to seven years of English language learning prior to secondary school (Jeeves, 2013). Upon exiting secondary school four years later, at the age of 19 or 20, students will be expected to have a high enough level of English proficiency to enter university where the classes will be taught in English or textbooks will be in English. Unfortunately, an almost 50% dropout rate of the English program after the first year of study shows that there is gap in learning expectations and actual learning experiences during secondary education (Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2007). A reason for this lack of preparedness could be that the reading materials and exercises in school prior to university are not developing the necessary skills. A 2012 study by Egilsdóttir showed that among 9th graders, reading is on a decline (p. 56). She interviewed a few secondary school students and found that the students who had read extensively had a much wider vocabulary. She states that she wonders “… whether people realize how debilitating not being motivated to read extensively is” (p. 57). Deficiencies in reading education may be seen earlier than secondary education, but this paper will only evaluate reading material used during secondary education.

The secondary education requirements for languages are thorough. In Iceland’s national curriculum (2012), the description of ‘English and other foreign languages’ begins by saying that “the description of knowledge, skill and competence that characterizes English at different competence levels applies to all other foreign languages” (Menntamálaráðuneytið, p. 103). However, students will not find 90% of their university studies in French, Danish, Norwegian, or German. Interestingly enough, the university’s entrance exam requirements for Spanish, French, and German are level B1 according to CEFR (B1 is threshold, or intermediate level. CEFR ranges are from A1-C2) (https://ugla.hi.is/kennsluskra/).
Furthermore, the competency of the highest level of English (or other foreign languages) expected from students exiting secondary school includes that they understand for their own advantage when a complicated topic is being discussed, whether it is academic or technological; analyze historical, social, cultural and political context in a text, e.g., in literature and other texts; use an academic text and evaluate source material in a critical manner; write a concise, intelligible and well-structured text suitable for the intended reader; and write a argumentative text weighing the arguments for and against (Menntamálaráðuneytið, p. 107).

These expectations of language competency upon exiting secondary school show how prepared the students for the university setting should be. More authentic reading materials and materials of a more academic nature could better prepare students to meet these requirements in preparation for university.

As shown above, the language setting could be transforming from English as a foreign language to English as a second language. This could be occurring in the university setting as well. Since English might be becoming a second language in the academic and professional setting, attitudes towards learning can greatly affect a student’s motivation and progress in learning a language. A 2010 study looks at the attitudes of students learning English in Iceland (Jeeves, 2010). The study showed that students in secondary school had a positive attitude toward the study of English, stating that it was fun, interesting, and easy to get a good grade (p. 6). Therefore, it is important for teachers and students to understand why students have a positive attitude towards learning, because, if the classroom is a playground and there is no internalization of material, something should be changed. Authentic reading materials can be fun and useful at the same time. However, care should be taken that materials chosen develop the language skills of the students, and are not just for enjoyment purposes.

While many Icelanders have a positive attitude towards learning English, they also have a high estimation of their English abilities. According to Jeeves’ study, although students have a positive attitude towards the study of English and of their skills, they may be overestimating their skills (2010, p. 12). She states that students may be content with a more basic knowledge of the language than a near-native competency which would be required for professional work and further study (ibid.). Students view
English classes as easy and fun, even entertaining. Some students may even feel that they are not learning anything new. Students, who have grown up listening to English lyrics, watching TV shows in English, and surfing the net in English, would benefit from more formal authentic reading materials. By that I mean materials that are more academic: journal articles, textbook excerpts (not language learning textbooks), classical literature, and academic papers. These materials would challenge the students and they would come face to face with any inadequacies they have in comprehension of academic materials. The academic reading material would also give the students an idea of how academic material should be written. Moreover, it would introduce vocabulary that is not used frequently in daily communication. However, it is possible that the students would simply be bored and unmotivated to read these more difficult materials. Even Jeeves (2008) points out that longer reading entries presented in secondary school are seen as too long, boring, and too difficult (p.10). Egilsdóttir (2012) points out the same results from her study and she states that when test takers had to read longer texts they became frustrated (p. 57). The goal would be for them to enjoy the challenge and grow in their knowledge of English to be better prepared for further academics and professional work.

The prevalence of English gives students access to receptive functions, listening and reading. Unfortunately, these sources alone are not preparing students for the challenges of higher academic study, and possibly not a professional work place. Though the education requirements are extensive at the secondary school level, students are still struggling with English textbooks and classes upon entering the university. These problems should not be attributed to an unpleasant attitude towards English in school, as most students present a positive attitude towards their English classes. It is, however, possible that pleasant attitudes are due to classes being too easy for students. More authentic reading material could help students to bridge the gap between the English learned in secondary school and the English used in the university.

2.3 Previous research

There are a few articles that have already covered the topic of authenticity in the classroom, or authenticity in textbooks. In this section, I will mention those studies that I have found, outline their results, and point out their relevance to my paper. I will divide the articles into those that target an EFL audience, followed by articles targeting
an ESL audience. Finally, a recent study on the amount of authentic material used in secondary schools in Iceland will be reviewed.

2.3.1 EFL research

A. Siegel (2014) deals with authenticity in the classroom by researching the topics for conversation in textbooks in Japan and actual topic choices of EFL speakers in an international dormitory setting. The author found that conversation topics chosen outside of the classroom varied from those provided in textbooks in class. Siegel focused on the authenticity of textbooks and their use of conversation examples and the topics used covered in them. In her study of Japanese students, the author found that students are shy to communicate, even though they have a high level of English learning. She argues that if conversations that are more authentic are presented in textbooks and practiced, the students will be more willing to communicate. The study showed that students, when talking in a “natural” context (outside of the classroom and unscripted), chose to speak more frequently on topics not as frequently covered in the classroom. However, when topics did cross over and were covered in both circumstances, the unscripted conversations went deeper with the topic than the textbook. Siegel concludes by categorizing the most frequently discussed topics and discusses ways in which the real life conversations can help to influence textbook conversations and classroom conversations. Siegel’s emphasis is on the authenticity of conversation topics, and while students do utilize reading to begin conversations or get ideas for conversation topics, her paper was not focused on the authenticity of reading material in particular.

Additionally, Alex Gilmore (2011) looks at the possibility of authentic materials developing the English competency of Japanese learners. The author uses the term ‘communicative competence’ to refer to the speaker’s linguistic abilities, their ability to understand and convey communication, the speaker’s social awareness of what is acceptable and unacceptable to say, the ability to deal with communicative problems, and the ability to produce coherent spoken or written discourse on various genres. He also takes a look at the quality of textbooks and their representation of communicative competence. Moreover, his study looks at the differences between authentic versus textbook input on the development of communicative competence of learners. He hypothesizes that the authentic material is richer and will develop the learner more
The study used four second-year classes of students in Japan with the age range of the participants from 19-22. Two of the classes were control groups receiving only textbook instruction while the other two received mostly authentic material input. The authentic materials used were taken from films, documentaries, reality shows, TV comedies, web-based sources, home-produced videos of native speakers, songs, novels, and newspaper articles. Both groups were tested on their listening, pronunciation, grammar, oral, and role-play abilities. The author pointed out that those receiving the authentic material input “developed their communicative competence to a greater degree than those receiving the control treatment (textbook materials)” (Gilmore, 2010, p. 800). While this study was specific about authentic materials, it did not have a strong focus on reading materials in particular. Reading material was only one of several other input avenues provided for the students.

Furthermore, Clavel-Arroitia and Fuster-Marquez (2014) look at textbooks claiming to contain authentic texts and how authentic those texts truly are. By authentic, the authors mean texts that are taken from real life resources; newspapers, magazines, journals, blogs, etc. The authors found that the claim made in the textbooks that materials were authentic, was untrue and that the reality was that the texts were often edited to provide a shorter text and the text itself was often changed (p. 133). Colloquial phrases, slang, and grammar or words not common with RP British English were either edited or removed completely. These included American expressions, and phrases written in other British dialects. Sources from countries where English is the native language, such as India, were not even represented in the textbooks. Their study focused on the textbook’s input to the student and the realness of the textbook texts. Unfortunately, they noted that these texts have been edited so that they are, in fact, not real. Additionally, the authors pointed out that it is important for students learning English to get authentic input. They argue that in some cases, the textbook may be the only English with which the student comes in contact. Therefore, though this article does not present specific benefits of authentic reading material, it does point out the necessity of it.

Siao-cing Guo (2012) goes further than textbooks by studying the impact of authentic extensive reading in the EFL classroom setting. The author defines extensive reading as any large amount of reading usually for pleasure rather than specifically
learning (p.198). The study focuses primarily on the effects of using online materials and the students’ attitudes towards those materials. Guo asks a threefold research question of whether or not authentic reading materials have an effect on: vocabulary acquisition, improvement of grammar, and other language skills (p. 199). About fifty English major students in their fourth year of study at a Taiwan, five-year-college, were recruited and these students were assigned to two classes, an experimental group and a control group. Both classes received the same classroom instructions but “the experimental group was given supplementary materials related to course topics for extensive reading outside of class” (ibid.). The supplementary materials were 10 online reading materials related to course topics and English proficiency tests were administered as midterm and final exams. Moreover, an opinion survey was also administered to determine the students’ attitude toward the reading materials. In the results section, the author points out that for the pre-test results “there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups” (p. 200). Incidentally, both groups improved during the study, but the experimental group was higher than that of the control group. Additionally, the author also noticed an increase and difference on the vocabulary tested, but not on grammar. Correspondingly, the author noted that it was only after 3-4 months that the increase was noticed (p. 200). As for the attitude study, most students felt positive towards the outside reading material stating that it increased their understanding, helped with vocabulary, and increased their overall English skills. The author clearly pointed out in the discussion that there is a strong correlation between extensive reading and vocabulary development (p. 203). Extensive authentic reading gives greater exposure to the language than textbooks might. Additionally, the students had greater motivation to study due to a positive attitude towards the authentic reading materials. In conclusion, the author points out that there is a correlation between authentic reading materials and the attitudes of students and their motivation to read, as well as the improvement of their vocabulary (Guo, 2012).

Furthermore, while researching extensive reading, Trung Ngoc Dao (2014) also places an emphasis on internet resources. The study, which focuses on the secondary school level, looks at the role extensive online reading can play in the motivation of EFL students to read. The author defines extensive reading as reading book after book and focusing on content rather than language. The target class consisted of 30 10th grade
students in Vietnam who are majoring in English (p.75). The author’s main goal was to provide examples and resources of online reading material that could be useful for these students. However, he did not include an analysis or results of how these materials have affected the students in actuality, but just an outline of what can, and as the author believes, should be used in the classroom (i.e. extensive online reading material). It would have been interesting to see what the teacher felt were actual improvements after a year of teaching his proposed curriculum.

Dr. Caroline C. Hwang also looks at the role of extensive reading. Hwang’s article is more of an overview, analysis and recommendation for the implementation of authentic materials in the classroom (Hwang, 2005). She presents the problem of Taiwanese schools being adequately proficient in grammar studies, but lacking in other areas. Hwang calls the materials used “thin and flat … with no range” (p. 2). Furthermore, she points out that with such a strong grammatical background, students often seem like they are living in ancient times and unable to enter into current conversations. As a teacher, she encouraged her students to read magazines, best-seller books and watch TV and she had a positive response from her students (p. 8). Consequently, Hwang found that after a few years of implementing more authentic materials into her classroom her students felt more able to communicate in English on a variety of topics. For example, she mentions one exceptional student who seemed more proficient than others in the language. Hwang found out that though the student had studied the same program as the rest of the students, he had been reading English magazines out of personal interest for years. She attributed his excellence in the classroom to his extensive reading over the years (p.5). Due to this student’s experience, as well as Hwang’s own personal experience, Hwang recommends including current, popular authentic reading materials as well as video and audio materials. The study was not focused specifically on reading materials, but had a broader range and included current popular materials for the most part, not academic materials. Similarly, Hwang’s study corroborates the other studies in the way that authentic material does improve the language and heightens the motivation of students in learning the target language.

While Hwang addresses modern authentic texts and the motivation of students learning a new language, Enas Ibrahim Al-Musallam’s (2009) thesis looks specifically at the attitudes teachers and students have towards the use of authentic material in the
EFL classroom. The author defines authentic material as that which is used by native speakers and not simplified for foreign or second language learners (p.14). The author’s study consisted of 144 female, first and third year students in Saudi Arabia as well as teachers who taught the English classes (p.40). Two different questionnaires regarding attitudes towards authentic material were given, one to the students and one to the teachers and, in addition, the author also conducted teacher and student interviews for a deeper understanding of attitudes. An article from Newsweek and a text from The New York Times were chosen to give the students an idea of what was meant by authentic reading material and based on these examples, the results show that the majority of students felt that reading is important for improving their language skills and most students had a positive attitude towards authentic reading materials (p.53). The students referred to 10 types of authentic reading materials they wanted to see more of in class: surveys, advertisements, reports, jokes, real stories, letters, comic books, interviews with famous people, and biographies (p. 70). In the same way, all of the teachers agreed that reading is very important and had a positive attitude towards authentic reading materials, though the teachers mentioned that time, the students’ abilities, and rigid curriculum were hindrances to using authentic reading material (Al-Musallam, 2009, p. 92). While this article does not deal specifically with linguistic benefits of using authentic reading material in the classroom, a positive attitude towards any reading is seen as a benefit.

These studies all have in common that they were directed at EFL classes, textbooks, or teachers. As mentioned earlier in this paper, Iceland might be crossing over to ESL centered learning due to the quantitative input of English in society and the demands of English from students in the university or professional sphere. While not much research has been done on authentic reading materials in an ESL setting, two studies will be reviewed.

2.3.2 ESL research

In the ESL sphere of teaching English, Su Shu-Chin’s (2008) study explores the attitudes of teachers and students in two selected TESL programs. The author’s purpose in “this study was to survey ESL instructors on the frequency of usage of authentic materials” in addition to the attitudes of the students to authentic reading material (p. 178). The participants were from two adult ESL programs; one from Kentucky and one
from Indiana, though the study did not specify any age ranges. The students were asked to list authentic materials and those included: internet, talks/discussions, newspapers telephone, computer programs, street signs, radio weather reports, money, maps, TV programs, recipes, songs, advertisements, pamphlets/brochures, coupons, catalogs, paintings/artwork, photographs/slides, bus schedules, cartoons/comic books, and puppets (p. 179). The students were then asked to list types of material from most important to least important, listing the most useful and desired form of material as talks/discussions and newspapers. Consequently, the author found that what the students viewed as important and what the teachers actually used as teaching materials varied. Therefore, the author argues that teachers should be more aware of what materials students want to use as they will be more motivated to use the material and learn from it. However, the ESL classes taught do not appear to be in preparation for academic or professional work environments and therefore the use of authentic material varies drastically compared to what might be used in the Icelandic secondary schools.

In contrast Don Miller’s (2011) article looks specifically at preparation for academic studies. He examined second language textbooks versus the actual target language and found that there was a discrepancy between instructional material and the target language. He also pointed out that few studies have been done on ESL reading materials, and few have been done to see how closely the language of ESL materials matches that of the target language. Additionally, Miller’s study looks specifically at how ESL material is used to help students who plan to further their academics. Do they receive examples of the language they will get in further studies? The study limited the comparison of textbooks to vocabulary, compression features (syntactic features), and lexico-grammatical features including word length and sentence length (p. 36). 75 reading passages were chosen from three, well-known, advanced-level ESL reading textbooks. In addition, a large selection of words were chosen that would be encountered at the university level and 28 lower-division university texts were chosen from university textbooks from 18 different disciplines (p. 37). The author found that the university texts varied quite differently from the ESL textbooks, but often the texts could vary from one discipline to another. Of course, as he points out in his study, choosing only three ESL textbooks did not give a wide variety to his study (p. 45). He concluded by stating that while this study should not change all textbooks, if further
study finds the ESL textbooks to be lacking, they should consider changing some of the reading material (ibid.). This study was relevant as it touched on the issue of preparation for further academics, though specifically looking at ESL textbooks.

ESL studies are often centered on immersion programs to integrate new immigrants into society where English is the majority language. Iceland has a special case where the students are already integrated into society where English has no official status, but is widely used. Therefore, there is a need for additional language skills for specialized cases such as academics or professional fields of work.

2.3.3 Reading material at secondary school in Iceland

Finally, a recent study, just made available February 2015, by Jóna Guðmundsdóttir (2015), looks at reading material in the English classroom in Iceland. She explores which types of texts are used as well as what kinds of assignments are used with the texts. Incidentally, she views English as a foreign language in Iceland, stating that at the primary and secondary level it is still taught as a foreign language and not as a second language (p. 1). Guðmundsdóttir has a threefold research question in her study, which investigates the quantity of literature in the EFL classrooms, the kinds of literature (types and periods), and lastly, how that literature is used (p. 20). 81% of her participants were secondary level teachers, with 78% having taught over 10 years (p. 27). Her results showed that at the secondary level, 47-76% of the material was labeled ‘literature’ with the other categories being ‘newspapers/magazine articles,’ ‘social media,’ ‘specialized texts,’ and ‘other’ (p. 89). The literature category dominated in proportion to all other categories. Furthermore, she also argues that, though literature is the preferred reading material, it would be best for students to be introduced to various types of texts to understand how English is used in all settings. Finally, Guðmundsdóttir concluded by showing that even from teacher to teacher, there are inconsistencies between the amount of text and type of text chosen, so students are “unequally prepared to transfer between educational levels…” (p.110). To expand, the study presented later looks more closely at what is authentic material specifically and whether authentic material has an added benefit over other materials.
2.3.4 Summary
All the studies mentioned above touched on some aspect of what I am researching in this paper. While several of the studies represented the same age group, few engaged the linguistic setting which is seen in Iceland. The status of English in Iceland, coupled with the expectations of students in secondary school and leaving secondary school present a unique case to be studied. English plays an important role in Icelandic society, but not important enough to adequately prepare students for the tasks ahead of them in specialized settings.

3 The study
As noted above in previous research, many studies have been done on the use of authentic materials in the classroom and many of those studies focused on an EFL classroom. Most often in the EFL classroom setting, the authentic materials used are to help students cope in an English speaking situation. For example, reading signs, recipes, newspaper announcements, etc. are seen as vital to the student. In Iceland, however, students are already apt at navigating these linguistic signs. Instead, the Icelandic classroom leans more towards teaching English as a second language, rather than a foreign language. With this in mind, I conducted a short study involving only a few participants to determine what kinds of authentic materials should be used in the Icelandic setting.

3.1 Research questions
This research seeks to answer a key question that has already been addressed to an extent: What is authentic reading material? I have already looked at other researchers’ definitions of what the term ‘authentic’ means. I have also reviewed various kinds of material those researchers believe constitute authentic reading material. My study asks a small group of teachers to define what authentic reading material is. Under the scope of authentic reading material, I will also seek to know what they see as necessary authentic reading material in the classroom. Finally, I will determine from each participant which authentic materials should be used and how those materials influence the students’ use and knowledge of the language.
3.2 Participants

Four teachers participated in this study. I chose the participants based primarily on years of experience. Participant 1 (P1) is in his 40s and has taught at secondary school for 12 years. P1 is a native speaker of English and has BA degrees in Religion and History and an MA degree in Education from an English university. Participant 2 (P2) is in her 30s and has taught at secondary school for 5-6 years. P2 is a native speaker of Icelandic and has a BA degree in English, an MA degree in English, and a teaching diploma from an Icelandic university. Participant 3 (P3) is in her 30s and has taught at secondary school for 3 years. P3 is a native speaker of Icelandic and has a BA degree in English and an MA degree in English teaching from an Icelandic University. Participant 4 (P4) in her 60s and has taught at secondary school for 21 years. P4 is a native speaker of English and has BA degrees in English literature and Religion as well as an MA degree from an English University.

I attempted to have teachers with more experience as well as teachers who are rather new to the teaching field to see if there was any difference between the two. Therefore, two of the participants have taught for 10 years or more and two have taught for approximately 5 years or less. All the teachers have been teaching in secondary school in Iceland and while not specifically chosen as such, two of the participants were native English speakers and two of them native Icelandic speakers. Both of the non-native English speakers stated they started learning English at age 11 and began using it on a regular basis when they were in their 20s. Additionally, the level of personal education was the same for all, with an MA being the highest degree obtained. The two native speakers took their degrees at a native English university while the two non-native English speakers both had their degrees from a university in Iceland. Both of the non-native English speakers had their BA degrees as well as their MA degrees in English, but the native English speakers had BA degrees in history, religion, and English literature.

A broader study would show if there are any correlations between foreign versus native teachers as well as male versus female teachers, but this case study will not be looking strongly at those points as the pool of participants is rather small.
3.3 Interview description

I met with each teacher separately so that none of their answers would influence another’s answers. Each interview took between 10 and 20 minutes and I asked a series of questions relating to authentic reading material. The questions were open-ended allowing for any possible answers. At times, however, I asked for clarification on a particular question with one teacher that I may not have needed to ask with another teacher. Those questions are not considered a part of the interview questions. I began by asking a short background information from each participant and then continued with the following questions:

1. What is authentic reading material?
2. How much of the reading material provided for your students is authentic?
3. What types of authentic reading material are provided for your students?
4. Please list types of authentic materials from ‘most useful’ to ‘least useful’ for your classroom. Why?
5. Do you find that using authentic reading material in the classroom improves the language skills of the students? In what ways?
6. Do you think authentic reading material is necessary in the Icelandic classroom? Why or why not?

As already stated, clarification questions were often added in the interview or used to encourage further responses, but not included in the original questionnaire. Each interview was recorded and transcribed to ensure that no participant was misquoted.

4 Results and discussion

This section will address the results of the interviews as well as the discussion. I will be placing these two sections together for ease of understanding. I will present the results in the three parts of my research question. Due to the ambiguity of the meaning of the word ‘authentic’ and the variants of which materials fall under that term, I first and foremost wanted to know what each participant thought of as authentic reading material. Then, based on studies showing that students are not always well prepared for further studies, I wanted to know which particular materials the participants felt would be most beneficial for the secondary school classroom. Finally, I wished to know in
what particular ways the materials they mentioned might help the students in their language skills.

4.1 What is authentic reading material?

This section begins with my first interview question, “What is authentic reading material?” and I was surprised by the responses. The wide range of answers included: materials (P1) “…gathered from authentic sources like magazines, the internet, books;” (P2) “…material published by an English native speaker;” (P3) “something that you collect that is current in today’s society;” and (P4) “most of the classic literature.” As can be seen, these answers are rather vague and differ from each other. Most of the earliest definitions in this paper defined authentic as being either written by a native speaker and/or read by native speakers (Adams, 1995, Ur, 1995, and Widdowson, 1991). Having been written by a native English speaker was not even part of the criteria for some of the participants. Additionally, there were no specific factors common to all participants, even with such a small group. Where one participant said something current and new, another said something old and classical. The only unifying factor of all the definitions, which was not directly stated, was that authentic reading material is that which is not written for a textbook designed to teach English as a second/foreign language. This common feature was implied in all the interviews by contrasting the textbook with what the participants deemed as authentic material. Furthermore, this commonality agrees with both Berardo (2006) and Tomlinson (2001) that ‘authentic’ is anything not written for teaching English purposes.

Clarification of each participant’s definition was seen when asked what types of authentic reading materials were provided for their students. Because each participant’s definition influenced their answer about what types of material are used the types of authentic materials used in the classroom varied between participants. A comprehensive list of all participants included: extracts from short stories, articles from periodicals, newspaper articles, magazine articles, compilations, short stories, anthologies, novels, materials taken from online, journal articles, classic literature. While there is a range of materials, most of these would fall under more formal reading. Specific magazines and journals were given which included, News Scientist, National Geographic, and the Guardian. Specific novels or authors listed were, Roald Dahl, Shakespeare, Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Breakfast at Tiffany’s, Hunger Games, The Hobbit, Holes, A Trumpet, The
Secret Life of Bees, and Lord of the Flies. In agreement with the participants, many of the previous authors also mentioned books, articles, and short stories, though not exclusively (Al-Musallam, 2009, Clavel-Arriotia and Fuster-Marquez, 2014, Gilmore, 2011, and Hwang, 2005). Interestingly, Khaniya’s (2006) definition and examples of ‘authentic’ would contradict the above examples which included more informal communication material such as recipes or jokes. Likewise, some of the previous studies covered in this thesis also referred to informal communication when reciting which authentic materials were used. While the studies mentioned authentic sources that were not reading material, the informal reading materials included were: advertisements, jokes, letters, street signs, weather reports, maps, recipes, coupons, bus schedules, and comic books (Al-Musallam, 2009 and Shu-Chin, 2008).

Those participants who described authentic material as from “authentic sources,” by native speakers, or current in society were the ones who listed magazine articles, journal articles, and internet articles as types of authentic materials. Whereas, the participant who described authentic as being the classics named Shakespeare as a type of authentic material. Interestingly, Adams (1995), Berardo (2006), Crossley, et al (2007), and Khaniya (2006) would all argue that classic material such as Shakespeare would probably be too difficult for EFL learners, even if the students were advanced.

4.2 Which authentic materials should be used in the classroom?

Participants were asked to rate the authentic materials used from most useful to least useful. This question steered the participants to answering which materials should be used in the classroom. For this question, most of the participants agreed that the most useful materials were journal or academic articles that related specifically to what students were prioritizing in and planning on studying in the university. Only one of the previous researches looked at the need for preparing students for further academic work. Miller’s (2011) article focused on the material provided in textbooks for an ESL audience and whether that material was academic enough for continuing education. In contrast, most of the previous research studies, partly due to the fact that most focused on EFL teaching, focused on more informal authentic sources (internet, talks, newspaper articles, TV shows, jokes, etc.) (Al-Musallam, 2009, Gilmore, 2011, Hwang, 2005, and Shu-Chin, 2008). However, P4 found that whatever material could get the group reading was the most useful material and this idea falls in with many of the
previous studies that focuses on authentic material motivating students to read more (Al-Musallam, 2009, Guo, 2012, Hwang, 2005, Shu-Chin, 2008). Finally, According to most of the participants, the least useful materials were articles taken from the internet because of the generic vocabulary used and short stories because the language is often antiquated.

4.3 How do authentic materials aid students in learning English?

When asked if using authentic material in the classroom improves the language skills of the students, participant 1 (P1) answered with “absolutely”. Notably, P1 also stated that they used 80-90% authentic materials in the classroom. They also stated that vocabulary was improved as well as word order and the students’ writing. P1 also noted that grammar and punctuation improved. The other participants also noticed an improvement, but none were quite as positive as this teacher. The other participants noticed an improvement in vocabulary and understanding, though P3 stated that there was no improvement in grammar or writing skills. P3 was more focused on noting an improvement of interest and engagement with the material than specific language skills attained.

A key point that kept surfacing during the interviews was the concept that the students were improving with the reading materials only if they were putting in the work, trying to improve, and actually doing the reading assigned to them. P4 stated that while reading was improving the skills of the students, it was not the reading alone. The participant felt that the reading combined with discussions and assignments related to the reading reinforced what the students learned from the reading. Several of the other studies agreed that reading in the classroom was not enough, but unlike P4, Dao (2014) and Guo (2012) believe that if there were just more reading, extensive reading, then reading would be more beneficial to students.

All the participants felt that authentic reading materials, whatever that meant for each teacher, were necessary for the Icelandic classroom. P1 expressed the idea that authentic material is necessary because it gives students exposure to the language as it is written by and for native English speakers. Crossley, et al (2007) agrees with this by pointing out that authentic material gives the students a view of how the language occurs naturally. Another benefit mentioned by the participants was that learning vocabulary from certain fields of study could help in their further studies or even
professional experiences. Since not all studies look at the same types of authentic materials, not all authors would agree with the participants. But Day (1993) agrees that reading helps learn vocabulary and grammar, though he adds it can also help the students learn about the culture as well (p. ix).

Participant 2 expressed the need for authentic reading material because it allows the teacher and students more freedom to choose for themselves what material they want to use and which materials best would prepare the students for the next phase of their life. In choosing their own authentic reading materials, teachers and students can eliminate unnecessary readings that have no relevance to the students. P2 also noted that textbooks can be disconnected, unrelated, and boring for students. Choosing up-to-date articles and papers engages the students and the readings become relevant to them. This teacher found that students were much more engaged in the material and enthusiastic to create material of their own. Again, the idea that current literature and authentic material create a motivation in students was a prevalent theme amongst almost all researchers presented earlier.

Participant 4 felt that students who read more had more creativity and imagination than those who did not, which agrees with Egilsdóttir’s 2012 study of secondary school students mentioned above. This same teacher felt that classical literature should play a large role in the classroom. P4 admits this is due to her degree in English literature, but Widdowson would probably agree with her. Widdowson (1984) points out both arguments against and for using literature in the ESL classroom. His arguments against using literature are that the purpose of literature is useless to today’s pedagogical world as students are not likely to use Jane Eyre in their academic or professional settings. He also speaks about the process as possibly confusing students. Some prose and poems, and even older literature, are likely to not follow the set rules that are being taught to the students, thus confusing them as to what is the correct way of saying something (pp. 160-161). He also argues that using prefabricated texts, as found in textbooks, can be dead and unrealistic. However, in the end, Widdowson argues that literature is a more living example of the language and gives significance to the sentences that are being learned (p. 168). He argues that “… the use of language and the acquisition of language are essentially creative processes…” and literature is more
creative than textbook excerpts (p. 170). Therefore, P4’s argument that reading the classics leads to more creativity is corroborated with Widdowson’s own analysis.

4.4 Further comments/results

One of the questions asked was the quantity of authentic material used in the classroom. Some of the participants found this question difficult. Some teachers teach many levels of English, from remedial classes to advanced English classes and they noted that between these levels of classes there might be a large difference of how much authentic reading material is used, just based on the level of reading of the students. I asked for average ranges from the average English classes. The ranges given were anywhere from 20-25%, 50%, 60% and the highest stated to have 80-90% authentic reading materials. Those with the higher percentage of reading materials stated more positively an increase in language skills of the students.

Though all participants did not agree on what authentic material is or which materials would be best for the secondary school classroom, they did all agree that authentic materials are necessary. These findings agree with the previous research conducted and covered above. Additionally, the participants agreed with previous research by stating that authentic materials increased the motivation and interest of the students to read. All of these findings conclude that authentic reading material is important and even critical in the Icelandic secondary school English classroom. The best classroom would benefit from both literature (novels, short stories, classics) and current articles that prepare the students for further academics.

5 Conclusion

English is prevalent in Icelandic society; however, most sources of English input are receptive sources. The television, radio, and internet all provide some English input, but children are not required to respond to these sources. Teaching English begins early, in the 4th grade and students express enjoyment in learning English and going to English classes, and many students have a positive attitude towards their own English abilities. Unfortunately, there still seems to be a lack when students enter higher education. Even though the language requirements for graduating from secondary school are rather high, there still seems to be a gap.
Because of the gap between what students should know, and what students do know, I conducted some interviews to find out if more authentic reading materials in the secondary classroom could improve the skills of the students and possibly help bridge the gap towards further education. The term ‘authentic’ is ambiguous and determining a definition for this paper was tricky. I took the term ‘authentic’ to mean anything not written for language teaching or learning purposes, but recognized that, based on this broad definition, there are many types of authentic materials. Due to that fact, I delineated which specific types of authentic material I was referring to. This thesis referred predominantly to formal authentic reading materials. Unfortunately, most previous research focuses on more informal authentic materials, and not only materials for reading. This is more than likely because most previous research focuses on EFL students who might not have achieved the level of English proficiency that Icelanders have due to the amount of receptive input of English in Iceland.

Icelanders receive so much receptive input of English that I focused my interviews only on reading material. I interviewed four teachers and found that they all focused on formal English reading sources and none of the participants mentioned having jokes, recipes, or road signs as beneficial for students to progress into further education. They all stated that authentic reading material is necessary and beneficial for students, though the types of material and the degree of benefit varied between participants. Even though there were variances, the range of types of material was all within formal English sources; articles, books, and short stories. The benefits of reading were also varied, but still in a general area. For example, most agreed that vocabulary and grammar were improved, though to various degrees, and all agreed that authentic materials improved the motivation of students to learn. The most important point the participants made was that benefits were only seen if the students actually put forth the effort to read the material, otherwise very little improvement was seen.

Based on the material gathered in this thesis, I recommend that more formal authentic materials need to be implemented in the school system, even from earlier on than just secondary school. As seen from the interviews and the previous research, formal authentic material should include journal articles, academic works, and literature as well, to keep creativity up and keep students interested. While the classroom should be an enjoyable place, if students are not being challenged and academically prepared
for the next step in their studies, they will regret the time and resources that could have been used to better prepare them.
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