

A review on the implications of Realia in enhancing students' Educational experience in Online Language Classroom

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Abstract

The use of realia as an additional teaching material incorporated in the language classroom has long been documented. It is used in classroom instruction to enhance students' real-life experiences. However, there often exists a gap between the content taught in the classroom and its association with the real-life given the dynamic and complexity of each discipline that could restrict demonstration of real-life examples in the class. Although realia are easily obtainable, not all classrooms are supposed to employ additional materials as such due to the stipulated syllabus or content appropriateness. Various types of educational and illustrative realia like virtual realia, magazines, pictures, and songs are employed in the classroom practices and they are proven effective and yielded encouraging implications. Given the importance and longstanding usage of realia in classroom practices, this review aimed to review the types, implications, and limitations of realia in the recent educational context, specifically in the language classroom. It was concluded that the extensive use of realia may enrich students' learning experiences in various levels of language classroom as supported by the literature. The current review also provides practical implications to students, educators and stakeholders to gauge a more in-depth understanding about the use of realia in classroom practices.

Keywords: Context-appropriate, educational experience, language classroom, Realia.

Introduction

Realia are the authentic material or object that are accessible in the daily life. Realia have been studied extensively on various practices of learning and language acquisition; delivery of

modern language (Pfeffer, 1937); teaching foreign language with realia (Spurr, 1942); use of realia in Spanish text book (Arce, 1945); foreign language teaching (Berwald, 1987); and the teaching and acquisition of second language (Smith, 1997). Realia or 'real material' have been used in different contexts of language classroom. Realia have enriched the process of teaching and learning in the classroom, particularly in the ESL and the EFL classrooms (Percy, 2012; Smith, 1997). The authentic materials are accessible from the everyday life that aid to improve students' background knowledge tailoring real-life experiences (Budden, 2011). Realia comprises of material such as leaflet, music, pictures, flashcard, menu or maps or any print materials (Gobert, 2018). Basically, realia are categorised into two main aspects, namely materials with linguistic elements and materials that promote language production (Martinez, 2008). Incorporating realia into the classroom can establish a more enjoyable, interactive and effective learning atmosphere (Bala, 2015; Suyanto, 2007). The concepts of realia and teaching props are sometimes misinterpreted (Percy, 2012). Teaching props are usually the objects that are demonstratable to the students in teaching objects like food or vegetables. They usually do not contain any language elements (Percy, 2012).

Providing students with rich materials and creating a pleasant learning environment are utmost important to engage students more actively given that the conventional approaches such as text books or exercise books are considered rather outdated (Bala, 2015). However, in educational contexts, there is usually a gap between knowledge learned in the classroom and the applications in real world because of the predetermined scope of content and limited materials to cater to students' needs (Percy, 2012). Research has shown that additional learning materials in language classroom could enhance students' learning experiences (Stephen, 2016). However, not all learning experiences of students are enriched with lively and practical demonstrations of knowledge. This is especially challenging in general proficiency skills in language classes like writing which requires vivid illustrations of the topic discussed so that readers are able to delve into the world of the writer (Evawina, 2010). Additionally, the dynamic nature of each discipline accentuates the constraints of imparting practical knowledge and practises of real-life examples to students.

There are many classrooms which suffer to implement with instructional practices due to various constraints such as limitation in terms of facilities or resources. There is a need for more examinations such as quantitative and mixed methods research that investigate the instructional practices of the classrooms. Therefore, to review how activities-driven instructional practices are implemented in the language classroom, specifically online language classroom, the current integration of the stipulated syllabus and materials used in the classroom shall be examined. Also, it is worthwhile to explore the effective approaches that enhance the educational experience in the classroom as realia exhibit the attributes to bridge between knowledge delivery and the enhancement of real world experience (Percy, 2012). Given this background, understanding how realia are incorporated in the classrooms is pertinent to pursue the enquiry in this area so that students, educators and stakeholders could gain a more in-depth understanding about the use of realia in enhancing learning experiences in the classroom.

Sampling and review process

This review was conducted based on the sections structured employing the overview procedure. Kirchoff (2009) asserts that overview refers to the synthesis of the literature reviewed and description of the characteristics of the research entailed. To evaluate and search for the studies related to the area is crucial in research (Loy & Wahab, 2020). This method of review provides a general and concise summary of the related topic explored which offers informative descriptions for readers who are new in the area. The scope of overview is

generally broader in comparison to systematic review. Grant and Booth (2009) pointed out that the presentation of analysis of the literature are usually arranged 'chronological, thematic or conceptual'. This review synthesised the literature on the types of realia used, advantages, limitations and its implications in classroom practices. Arrangement of this review is also similar with that of Benavent and Peñamaría (2011). Hence, a total of 54 related studies that are related to the predetermined sections were reviewed. Electronic databases (e.g.: Google Scholar, journals and related studies cited in the review articles) were used. The reports were then reviewed, categorised and organised following the sections aforementioned.

Types of realia

According to Yilmaz (2011), realia are categorised into three main groups of learners' proficiency level, i.e., beginner (e.g., recipe or transportation schedules); intermediate learners (e.g., manuals or advertisements) as well as the advanced learners (e.g., research article or news articles). These could enhance students' mastery of language skills. Another type of realia is the virtual realia, usually presented in digital format. Virtual realia comprised of the linguistics and non-linguistics elements could provide students with cultural specific knowledge in the language classroom (Smith, 1997). Virtual realia are enriched cultural objects used to illustrate and facilitate students' learning experience to expose students with a better understanding of the taught culture. Not only that, it can stimulate student interest and their motivation to learn language by inspiring the sensory experiences (Campbell, 2017).

In this regard, internet provides a wide spectrum of learning experience for students. Incorporating social media in the classroom is effective in creating a better social encounter for students (Abe & Jordan, 2013). For example, *Technoparticipation* is a technology enhanced pedagogical strategy that incorporates virtual realia to facilitate classroom learning activities, such as discussion or scenario to augment learning students experiences (Campbell, 2017). This is a project initiated in 2015 by incorporating social media (e.g.: Skype, Textwall and Titanpad) to facilitate classroom practices in arts education. By exposing students to a reflective framework, this strategy contained three phases of *anticipation, action and analysis*. During the anticipation stage, students were exposed to a set of resources and were explained the anticipated actions to be taken in the following stage where students provided feedback about the activities. During the last stage, students analysed their own and peers' reflective feedback on the applications. Reflective feedback was in the forms of video, voice, and messages using these social media applications during classroom practices. The findings suggested that *Technoparticipation* yielded effective feedback from students, promoted active interactions among students and aided in assessing the effectiveness of teaching in the classroom.

Utilising virtual realia such as virtual reality (VR) is crucial in enhancing students' learning particularly in teaching technology-related subjects such as multimedia (Kealy & Subramaniam, 2006). It is essential for both conventional classroom and distance or online learning. Multimedia enhanced materials like videos, internet, audio, radio, or television are used for distance learning (Kumar, Sharma, & Vyas, 2003). For instance, videos expand the horizon of learning experiences for students (Harmer, 2001). Due to its convenient display, videos are extensively used to present the language use in the real-life context as well as to observe how language elements function. Moreover, in some science, agriculture and environmental-related topics, presenting videos could be more convenient in terms of access and is more time and cost effective (Isiaka, 2007).

Realia in language classroom

The pros and cons of realia and how they are employed in classroom varies from the needs and applicability of the tool. In exploring this aspect of authentic materials used in enhancing the education experience of students, various advantages and the limitations of realia are reviewed here.

Enhancement of students' educational experience

The use of realia manages to facilitate students' educational experience. Visual materials such as pictures, news, illustrations are used in the language classroom (Bala, 2015). Pictures are perceived as an effective tool to stimulate students' interest and boost their creativity (Harmer, 2001). Exposing students with these authentic materials, enables students to perceive the target culture contextually which can eventually contribute to their communication skills (Hidayati, 2010). The use of realia not only stimulates students' thinking, it also improves their creativity.

One of the areas that was commonly reported about the effectiveness of realia is the vocabulary acquisition among students. Not only realia help students to visualise vocabulary, it can also help to enhance the construction of meaning and hence make the vocabulary more understandable (Gau & Westley, 2007). In a study conducted by (Artika & Saputri, 2018) on the effectiveness of using realia as a tool to introduce the morphologies related to the external anatomy of a 'blue crab' to a group of elementary school students, the participants worked in groups, students were shown the male and female crab. Observation through video recording and feedbacks towards the use of a real crab in teaching the topic were collected from students. Finding suggested encouraging responses from the students towards the activity and the topic designed for the lesson. Some participants expressed their excitement and stimulated their learning experiences by observing the sea creature themselves (Artika & Saputri, 2018). Although this finding supports the use of authentic materials, the findings may not be generalisable to many other contexts as in using the animate, due to the less suitability and presentability.

Moreover, Hidayah (2011) investigated the effectiveness of using realia to improve vocabulary. The action research was conducted on 104 third year students in Terban, Jawa, Indonesia. Result of the pre-test and post-test revealed that students showed more interest and engagement in the classroom activity and they improved on their vocabulary mastery (Hidayah, 2011). Likewise, Erfina (2010), Ergasheva (2018), Faliyanti and Liantara (2018), and Sukrina (2010) showed that using realia had positive outcomes on vocabulary learning. The studies provided in-depth illustrations on the effective use of realia. They employed a similar experimental method where students were given a pre-test, a treatment, and a post-test. The consensus on this method indicates the appropriateness of the method to assess the practicality of any teaching instrument. Despite the advantages on how realia could improve the acquisition of vocabulary, it has its limitation. For instance, theoretically treatment catered to improve students' academic performance is needed to attain some anticipated effect (Hapsari, 2012) given the dynamic of classroom learning as well as the flexibility of students' learning ability. Specially, language intervention is deemed successful for young learners provided that supports are given from the schools and they are well-trained instructors (Fricke, Bowyer-Crane, Haley, Hulme, & Snowling, 2013). Therefore, future studies may adopt different approach to gauge a new perspective on the use of realia.

Similar findings were reported by Venida (2021). Using a quasi-experimental research, the study investigates the effect of instructional practices in teaching vocabulary in science subject employing the 5 'E' s cyclical learning procedures, they are: *engage, explore,*

explain, elaborate, and evaluate'. The types of realia incorporated comprised of the scientific concepts' vocabulary list, pictures and the Frayer model. Findings from the study showed that the experimental group performed better in the vocabulary posttest in comparison to the low scores by both control and experimental groups. This study once again proved that the positive outcome of using realia in enhancing vocabulary learning in science subject. Additionally, the application of realia in the classroom yields positive results in sensory and psychological experiences of the students. Exposing students to the authentic experiences such as listening to songs or watching topic-related videos are often perceived as one of the most effective approaches in classroom delivery, especially in the language classroom (Sukrina, 2010; Suyanto, 2007). There is a vast collection of songs and poetry that are creatively illustrated and made accessible online for various purposes. "Virtus realia" can be utilised in classroom to enhance students' sensory (e.g. auditory and visual) experiences which are suited for tactile learning such as using flashcards to learn vocabularies (Gobert, 2018). Bala (2015) conducted a study to examine how realia assisted in establishing an effective language teaching in the EFL classes through an experimental design. The control group received conventional learning (power point and class board) and experimental group received the treatment of using realia in an elementary EFL classroom. Finding suggested that the experimental group scored better than the control group as those exposed to realia were more active and motivated in comprehending the topics taught in the class.

Furthermore, the use of realia is not limited to the delivery of the content knowledge in the classroom. Realia are effective in imparting sociocultural knowledge. Harmer (2007) suggested that realia promote culture awareness given the situational scenario it carries. In a descriptive qualitative study on how realia stimulated learning the lexicon items among a group of fishermen's children by Nirmala (2019), the elements of realia were found to be encouraging children to develop their cultural-specific knowledge. In this study, herein referred to the live activities and the surrounding, which were the sources of language acquisition and expression of cultural specific phrases among the children. Nirmala (2019) contextually stressed the importance of realia from the perspective of leaning cultural-specific knowledge by experience (lived experience of the fishermen).

In another study, investigated the role of graffiti in conveying cultural knowledge in Spanish language classroom. Photos of the graffiti from various cultural sites were shown to students and predesigned questions were addressed to students to assess their prior knowledge with regards to the cultural elements exhibited in the graffiti. The five stages consisted of discussion, comparison, verification, elimination, and reflection. Through the construction of contextual meaning, students are trained to be more aware of the culture knowledge and be sensitive towards their surroundings. Nevertheless, not every aspect of cultural knowledge can be illustrated through authentic materials, such as cultural heritage which is intangible although verbal expressions is perceived as one implicit type of cultural heritage (Bernini, 2014). Other cultural practices, customary or traditional festivals might be documented in audio-visual documentary format, whereby the demonstrations to students may just be limited to schools with appropriate like internet accessibility and television, but not to schools with poor resources, particularly those located in the underdeveloped areas.

Besides, realia in teaching and learning are used to promote speaking skill of students with low motivation. As highlighted by Baidawi (2016) , the use of aided materials such as realia and other visual media could engage students in learning the speaking skill more actively and effectively. Harmawan and Amri (2018) conducted a research on a group of junior high school students and found that application of realia in pre-teaching, teaching and post-teaching sessions positively stimulated interest and motivation of the students in the speaking class. Students were more receptive towards the use of realia in teaching speaking because they were able describe and provide their feedback of their own description with the

facilitation of the teachers in the class. Another action research reported the same effects of realia in helping the primary school students to improve their motivation to speak. Using realia, Fajariyah and Yulia (2019, p. 23) conducted a three-stage cycle experiment of “exploration, elaboration and confirmation” to examine students’ ability to speak. It was concluded that students were inclined to describe, engage in the discussion and provide their opinions with confidence. .

Patau (2020) investigated oral skills in teaching descriptive writing on the eighth-grade students. The results of the descriptive qualitative study demonstrated students’ positive response in illustrating the objects verbally. Although the literature supports improvement of students’ speaking skills with the help of realia, these studies lacked explanations on the procedure in material selection and relevance of the authentic materials to students’ proficiency. The only criterion usually given is that the selected materials must be related to the syllabus. Therefore, providing a systematic procedure on the material selection can reduce bias and increase reliability of the studies.

Using realia is one of the most effective ways to induce fun in teaching and learning as various categories of realia related to everyday use can be employed. Realia are relevant as they are connected to real context. Harmer (2007) mentions about the three elements called ‘ESA’, namely ‘Engage, Study and Activate’. ‘Engage’ is when students are stimulated to learning and to get involved in the activities through objects or pictures ‘Study’ aims to focus on the construction of the language. Finally, ‘Activate’ is when students generate new products. Thus, it enhances the imaginary power of the students as they can easily relate to the objects and if pictures and videos are used, they get to engage with real discourses. However, there might be some practical challenges in using realia in the classroom among which the foremost would be to choose from the many categories of realia available.

Limitations of utilising realia

Despite the positive implications of incorporating realia in the classroom, there is always a different perspective into it. Given that realia are the contextual based authentic materials taken from the real world, they are not functional in every classroom. As a result, these authentic materials may lose their efficiency when applied in the other contexts (Benavent & Peñamaría, 2011). Besides, due to the richness and diversity of realia, selecting the right type of materials could be challenging (Wegener, 2008). The relevance of any authentic material is subject to the specific context only and the authenticity of the material is not directly associated with relevancy of its usage in the classroom (Peacock & Flowerdew, 2001) . This is especially common for virtual realia that is easily accessible online but could be obsolete in a quicker pace compared to printed materials like textbooks. In addition, materials extracted online can only be used for a specific group or of learners, therefore, the instructors need to search for more recent materials that are context relevant (Wegener, 2008). Consequently, the process of sourcing the appropriate realia could be time consuming (Benavent & Peñamaría, 2011). Considering these factors, preparations for classroom activities for the educators might be hindered which may eventually affect the quality of classroom negatively.

Another constraint of the use of realia is that using additional materials can hinder classroom learning processes when technical issues arise, especially in the use of virtual realia. For example, having to face possible internet disruptions may trigger negative implications during classroom delivery (Abe & Jordan, 2013). Disruptions during the demonstration of the virtual realia may cause difficulty managing the class, challenge the authority, and status of the educator (Selwyn, 2011). In a study by Campbell (2017), it was reported that due to the poor sound system, it had impacted a sketchbook practice on a collaborative learning administered on a skype live drawing session between the fine arts students and the instructor.

Mediated technology enhances teaching approaches, despite posing some potential threats to the current practices of the educators and their control over the perceived maintenance of the digital platform (Williams, 2008).

Another limitation of realia is in teaching vocabulary extensively. In contrast to earlier studies which reported positive implications on vocabulary performance using realia, several other important differences are observed. First, it is a constraint when vocabulary instruction is limited to the demonstration of one or related authentic sample only (Soames, 2010). This has been associated to the diversity and vast vocabulary size of a language (Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997). For academic vocabulary alone, 3.5 million frequently used English academic words were recorded (Coxhead, 2000), which implied the context, type of discipline, and level of proficiency of the students could be influenced. Another constraint of learning vocabulary using realia as highlighted by Long (2007) as the lack of one-to-one resemblance between word and object due to the unrepresentativeness of the some contextually relevant authentic materials. Given the drawback of some authentic materials possessing little resemblance to the language being learned, questions on the practicality and suitability in the language classroom may arise in terms of time and cost for searching the right materials. Hence, as proposed by Hyland (2019), this problem can possibly be solved by employing the content experts to design the materials and facilitate the selection of the materials to avoid any inappropriate aided materials used in the classroom.

Finally, findings from several sources established that not all realia can present the cultural-related elements comprehensively. Imparting cultural knowledge using realia should be also considered with caution as some cultural-related materials incline to be bias in nature (Tamo, 2009). For instance, Pavlova, Bogachenko, Bazhenov, and Vashkyavichus (2019) examined the techniques employed to translate 250 Chinese characters extracted from two selected Chinese media realia into the Russian language. In translating the media realia from the source language to the target language, not all words could be equivalently translated in terms of meaning, cultural values as well as the historical elements. Similar findings were observed in the study on translating realia from several source texts to the Georgian language (Djachy & Paresishvili, 2014). Findings suggested that lack of awareness and background knowledge in the target cultural resulted in non-equivalent translation in realia. Therefore, considering the context-appropriate factor, realia may not be functional to be used in this type of classrooms as teaching materials because meaning could be biased due to cultural variations, particularly for the materials adopted and translated from different cultures.

Conclusions and implications

Classroom delivery has always been a dynamic process that requires contextualized approaches to ensure the effectiveness of teaching and learning. The approaches should be aligned with the current educational atmosphere and demands, typically online learning which posts greater challenges for the language classroom. Hence, the role of realia in enriching student learning experiences is inevitably important amidst the shift from conventional face to face teaching and learning mode to online mode.

This review offers some practical implications. First in terms of classroom practices, educators must make informed decisions on choosing the most appropriate based on the context of the teaching and learning and also based on the cultural background of the learners. Where classrooms are increasingly multicultural, choosing realia suitable for the class might be one of the challenges confronting the educators. The other consideration would be the practical relevance of the realia used and addressing the different types of learners in the classroom which was highlighted in the reviewed studies. In addition, curriculum designed incorporating the right kind of realia may be useful considering the pros and cons of the

effectiveness of realia as reported in the studies review. It can be considered one of the best practices to advance pedagogical approaches that aim to cater to learners of various background and aptitude in different level of classrooms.

Since the use of realia is common both physically and virtually, it is suggested that future studies consider exploring the perceptions of educators and learners towards the challenges of using authentic materials in a language classroom, particularly in an online writing class where instant feedback and physical interaction are obstacles. Also, in addition to employing the common experimental method to study the effectiveness of incorporating realia in the classroom, future studies may incorporate sourcing and categorising the types of realia according to the content and various needs of learners from different level of language proficiency and background to yield a more effective classroom practice in general, typically in the online classroom.

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