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USING AUTHENTIC MATERIALS TO DEVELOP STUDENTS' CRITICAL READING ABILITY

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ABSTRACT

This article uncovers the potential of authentic materials, such as real-world texts, materials and resources, in developing students' critical reading abilities. It argues that traditional textbook-based approaches often fail to engage students in meaningful ways and lack the complexity and relevance required for fostering critical thinking skills. The article examines specific strategies for incorporating authentic materials into the classroom, highlighting their effectiveness in motivating students, promoting deeper understanding of content, and developing essential critical reading skills such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. The benefits of using authentic materials for various subject areas and age groups are discussed, alongside practical tips and resources for educators.

KEYWORDS

Authentic materials, critical reading, VARK Model, biases, analysis, integration, advantages for readers.

INTRODUCTION

Engaging students in critical reading does not have to be a chore. By harnessing the power of authentic materials, we can transform the way students interact with text and develop a deeper understanding of both

the material and their own thinking processes. In this modernized world of high-tech advancements, It is highly vital to cultivate critical thinkers, who can navigate complex information, analyze arguments,

and form informed thoughts. In this matter, authentic materials are powerful tools in achieving this goal, offering a unique bridge between the academic world and the real world students will inhabit. The connection between critical reading and authentic materials is a synergic one, where each element enhances and strengthens the other. Authentic materials often showcase a range of viewpoints on a topic, requiring students to analyze different arguments, identify biases, and critically assess the validity of claims. This process fosters a more nuanced understanding of the subject matter and develops critical thinking skills [1; 56]. Professor James Paul Gee, literacy scholar, once noted: «Authentic materials help students understand that reading is not just about decoding words, but about interpreting meaning, understanding context, and engaging with the world around them» [2;5-9]. Authentic materials, like news articles, historical textbooks or documents, research papers, or even social media posts, present information in its raw, unfiltered form, reflecting the complexities and nuances of the real world. This contrasts with the often simplified and structured information found in textbooks, which may not fully prepare students for the intricacies of real-world texts. Critical reading skills equip students with the tools to engage actively with authentic materials, going beyond simply absorbing information. They learn to analyze, question, evaluate, and synthesize the content, building a deeper understanding. Nowadays, individuals are bombarded with a plethora of information from all directions- news articles, social media posts, blogs, and even personal networks. In this matter, people ought to know how to sort through it all and identify whether the provided information is credible, accurate, and relevant. By thinking critically, the process of acquiring or categorizing some new

information comes easy for learners. They are aware of that critical reading is not just about comprehending words on a page. It is more about developing the ability to analyze information, evaluate sources, identify biases, and synthesize varied viewpoints. The mentioned above skills are counted as pivotal for navigating the information age, making informed decisions, and becoming more active and engaged learner. The transition from passive reader to active thinker requires a conscious effort to engage with authentic materials critically. It means stepping beyond the comfort of textbook pages and venturing into the dynamic world of real-world texts, armed with the tools of critical reading to navigate their complexities and unlock their hidden meanings. Authentic materials consist of data that has exposure to a real world, world that is filled with news and information that updates almost every minute. To keep up with new tendencies of this modern world, individuals should practice their skills on a regular basis regarding to each field, should it be economics, fashion, medicine, legislation or even education.

For far too long, the traditional approach to education has heavily relied on textbooks as the primary source of information. While textbooks can be helpful in providing a structured foundation, they often present a sanitized and simplified version of knowledge, lacking the messy, multifaceted realities we encounter in the real world. The real world is a vibrant tapestry woven with diverse perspectives, conflicting viewpoints, and nuanced complexities that textbooks can't fully capture. Authentic materials are like a training ground for critical reading skills. They push students beyond passive consumption of information and encourage them to actively engage with the text, questioning, analyzing, and evaluating what they read.

Today's readers somehow stopped thinking critically. This is mainly because digital media consumption increased in the last decades and traditional reading habits have seen a sharp decline. This leads to the fact that people are being adapted somehow to ready-made decisions, and this leads to the fact that people give up mental and physical work, since in this modernized world we have alternatives for, say, everything. Thus, even by reading we can bring back and not let people forget to temper their minds

THE POWER OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

There are as many ways to learn as there are learners. Professor Carol Dweck, psychologist admits: «Critical reading is essential for developing a growth mindset. It encourages students to question assumptions, challenge their own beliefs, and seek out new information» [3;153]. Dweck pays attention to the fact that a growth mindset thrives on challenges. By integrating with authentic materials, such as social media blogs or platforms, where people share information, opinion, thoughts and experience in real-time, learners can improve their critical reading skills, since they provide students with a glimpse into how information is spread around the world and consumed by individuals. These platforms showcase a vast range of viewpoints, from personal opinions to professional insights. Students learn to identify different perspectives, biases and agendas. Moreover, students, via the process of acquiring some information, learn to question the credibility of sources, whether they are true or fake. They simply analyze author's potential biases, evidence that is presented, and author's background. Additionally, there are many influencers that motivate youngsters to show them up to the audience. By following them, what bloggers provide to their target audience, their subscribers can adapt

themselves to the floating ideas and partially imitate what is being trendy nowadays.

Educationalist Neil Donald Fleming put forward the VARK model in 1987. In this model, Fleming developed a way to help students learn more about their preferences. VARK learning styles are visual, auditory, read-write, and kinesthetic [4]. Authentic materials somehow connected to the betterment of learners. Many students admit that the process of learning a target language can be easier if they integrate more with authentic materials. Moreover, among them there are more and more students that appreciate learning a language by visual materials. We all know that it is not mandatory to learn a language via textbooks. Thus, in order to keep up with trendy methods of learning styles, learners should try to find the methods and techniques that are suitable for them, and there, the role of authentic materials cannot be denied, since people are opting for intensive learning pattern, which keeps them close and aware of being situations. In the process of learning a definite language, learners should imagine that there are no barriers ahead of them. They have to integrate more with authentic materials. Here the VARK model can be counted as practical. Authentic materials can be connected tightly with the VARK model, since there are students, who appreciate learning a language intensively as fast as possible, thus they alter even their cell phone modes to the target language, so that to get close and adapt themselves to the language. VARK model learners could identify the correlation of authentic materials in the following prompts:

- **Visual**

Visual learners thrive on images, diagrams and presentations. Moreover, authentic materials, such as

articles, blog posts, and social media content, frequently incorporate visual elements like images, videos, and infographics. These visual components can be incredibly captivating for students who learn best through seeing and observing. They make the learning process more engaging and help to harden understanding. Many online platforms, like social media and blogs, utilize visuals to enhance their messages and communicate information effectively. These platforms often incorporate striking images, dynamic videos, and informative infographics to grab the attention of visual learners and make their content more impactful. To further engage visual learners, teachers can encourage students to create their own visuals. This can involve constructing infographics to summarize complex information, designing posters to visually represent key concepts, or building timelines to demonstrate historical events. By creating their own visuals, students gain a deeper understanding of the information and develop valuable skills in communication and visual representation.

• Auditory

Authentic materials can encompass a wide range of audio resources, including podcasts, interviews with experts, and audiobooks. These audio materials cater to aural learners, those who learn best through listening and absorbing information aurally. To promote active listening and verbal expression, we have to create opportunities for students to engage in discussions and debates related to the content of authentic audio materials. This encourages students to share their insights, analyze information, and articulate their understanding verbally. Further we need to encourage aural learners to express their understanding through oral presentations. Students can create presentations based on their analysis of

authentic audio materials, allowing them to synthesize information and communicate their insights effectively through spoken language.

• Read-Write

Read-Write learners excel with textbooks, notes, essays. Authentic materials, like news articles and blog posts, are powerful tools for developing reading and writing skills. These materials provide learners with real-world language, fostering natural reading and writing comprehension. It is highly vital to inspire students to journal their thoughts, reactions, and analysis of the materials. This deepens understanding and encourages critical thinking.

• Kinesthetic

Kinesthetic learners need to be actively involved in the learning process through movement, hands-on activities. It is already known that authentic materials are linked to real-world activities. For instance, after analyzing an environmental news article, students can take part in a recycling project, making the learning tangible and impactful. Teachers have to use authentic materials as the basis for role-playing scenarios or simulations. This allows learners to step into different perspectives and actively engage with the content. Moreover, students can translate their analysis of authentic materials into creative projects. This could involve building a model, designing a product, or even creating a theatrical performance.

STATISTICS ON AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

Dr. Howard Gardner stated that the importance of understanding and responding to different learning styles is crucial for student's success [5]. A meta-analysis by (2010) found that students using authentic

materials showed significantly higher levels of motivation and engagement compared to those using traditional textbooks. The research conducted in (2015) found that learners using authentic materials for reading practice showed significant improvements in reading comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary acquisition. The main reason for this is that authentic materials expose learners to language used in natural contexts, helping them develop a deeper understanding of grammar, vocabulary, and how language functions in real-world communication. Study that was conducted in 2017 found that learners who analyzed authentic texts like news articles and blog posts demonstrated improved critical thinking skills, including identifying biases, evaluating evidence, and forming informed opinions, as authentic materials often present complex ideas and diverse perspectives, prompting learners to engage in higher-order thinking and analysis.

CONCLUSION

In an era of information overload, equipping students with critical reading skills is supreme. Authentic materials are more than just practice tools; they serve as a spark and motivation for the development of vital competences of learners. By engaging with real-world texts, students step out of textbooks and delve into the dynamic world of language and ideas. The use of authentic materials fosters a deeper understanding of how language functions in context. Students encounter a variety of perspectives, learn to identify biases, evaluate evidence, and form informed opinions. This process goes beyond simply decoding text; it empowers them to navigate the complexities of information, analyze arguments, and construct their own informed interpretations. Moreover, authentic materials spark intrinsic motivation. When students

engage with texts that resonate with their interests or address real-world issues, they become active participants in the learning process. This inner drive promotes deeper engagement, leading to a more profound understanding of the subject matter and a greater desire to explore more and more.

Ultimately, the utilization of authentic materials is not a mere pedagogical strategy, but a way to empowering critical readers. It transforms the learning experience, moving beyond rote memorization and instilling in students the ability to analyze, evaluate, and ultimately, engage critically with the world around them.

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