

# L2 Learners' Perceptions of the Benefits of Authentic Material Use in Preparation for Academic IELTS Reading Comprehension Tests

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**Abstract:** Teaching materials hold a vital position in English language learning and teaching, and have gained a great deal of attention from many EFL teachers and material designers. It has been recognised that authentic materials (AMs) can be used as a potential source of material for language learning and teaching. However, there has been ongoing controversy when it comes to choosing them for reading comprehension. This study aims at investigating L2 learners' perceptions of the benefits of AM use for reading comprehension in IELTS preparation courses at a Ho Chi Minh City-based language centre in Vietnam. Data were collected from 150 learners who completed a questionnaire. Ten of them participated in semi-structured interviews. The results indicated that L2 learners believed that the use of AMs was beneficial as it could enhance their English language, cultural awareness, learning motivation, and reading strategies. The finding-based implications are presented to teachers, learners, and material designers in an attempt to enhance the quality of English language teaching in general and the use of AMs specifically.

**Keywords:** Authentic Materials; IELTS; L2 Learners; Perception; Reading Comprehension.

*Received 20<sup>th</sup> December 2023; Revised 25<sup>th</sup> February 2024; Accepted 15<sup>th</sup> March 2024*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33100/tckhxhvn10.2.TranQuocThao-HoangThiQuynhNhu>

## 1. Introduction

The benefits of authentic materials (AMs) for the English language class have been recognised and underscored. Researchers (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Guo, 2012; Kilickaya, 2004; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018) regard AM as a means for exposing learners to genuine language outside the classroom thus enhancing their language competence. Richards (2001) points out that AMs provide authentic

knowledge of culture, so they can be used to describe many features of the culture including practices, beliefs, and behaviour. Furthermore, non-pedagogical materials used in the classroom are interesting and can give learners positive motivation and engagement in the language learning process (Berardo, 2006; Gilmore, 2007; Tran & Hoang, 2023).

Among various standardised English language proficiency tests (e.g., TOEFL, TOEIC, CELPIP and the Cambridge English Qualifications of KET, PET, FCE, CAE & CPE), the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is one

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of the influential assessment tools in the field of English language teaching (IELTS, 2022). IELTS is globally recognized and accepted by over 10,000 organizations, including universities, employers, and governments worldwide (IELTS, 2022). The validity and reliability of IELTS are also accepted as proof of learners' language proficiency, which has led to an increased focus on preparation in English language teaching programs. There are two types of IELTS, namely academic IELTS test and general IELTS test. The former is to evaluate test-takers' language abilities to understand and communicate in academic settings, while the latter is to evaluate test-takers' language abilities to understand and communicate in non-academic settings (IELTS, 2022). Both types of IELTS tests are specifically designed to assess test-takers' practical, real-world language skills (IELTS, 2022); therefore, they feature different language tasks and situations that test-takers are likely to encounter in their daily and academic lives (British Council, 2022). It is seen that the AM use is varied in IELTS speaking, listening, writing and reading sections (e.g., Berardo, 2006; Gilmore, 2007). The AM use in the IELTS reading section can account for up to 80% of the overall reading tasks, but that in speaking, listening, and writing sections is relatively lower compared to the reading section (Gilmore, 2007). Additionally, the use of AMs in the IELTS reading comprehension section is in alignment with IELTS's overall objective of assessing the practical language skills and strategies that are necessary for success in various domains (IELTS, 2022). Accordingly, getting test-takers exposed to real-life texts and tasks in the IELTS reading comprehension section can lead to more accurate and meaningful assessments of their reading comprehension abilities and

better evaluate their readiness for the linguistic and cultural demands they may face in their future academic, professional, or personal endeavors (Guariento & Morley, 2001).

In the Vietnamese context, the inclusion of AMs in L2 classrooms at high schools or universities is not common probably due to the strict curriculum of the Vietnamese education system in which teachers might not be encouraged to alter the course syllabus and teaching materials, and because this might take teachers a prodigious amount of time to search for suitable sources, and create activities and exercises relating to the materials (Richards, 2001). Within the research context which is a language center offering informal IELTS preparation courses, the use of AMs in teaching reading has been encouraged to be deployed as getting learners familiar with real-life information and can be of great help in improving scores in IELTS reading tests. Additionally, the use of AMs in reading classes is thought to create a more motivating and interesting class, in which learners can be more likely to become more engaged (e.g., Bacon & Finnemann, 1990; Boyaci & Guner, 2018; Li, 2013; Marzban & Davaji, 2015; Namaziandost et al., 2021; Tran & Hoang, 2023).

To draw more attention of English language learners, teachers, and material designers to the benefits of AM use, it is essential to conduct a study aiming at exploring L2 learners' perceptions of the benefits of AM use for academic IELTS reading comprehension in the context of a language center in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The research question is presented as follows:

What are L2 learners' perceptions of the benefits of AM use for IELTS reading comprehension?

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Authentic Materials***

AM refers to all types of text that are written by people whose first language is English (Heitler, 2005). AMs are written with the purpose of communicating rather than teaching (Tomlinson, 2011). They can be in varied forms such as literature, news, brochures, menus, ATM receipts, websites, or calendars (Hussein & Elttayef, 2018; Primadona & Prastiyowati, 2018). To summarise, AMs are any sources taken from real life that are initially created for native speakers.

### ***2.2. The Benefits of Authentic Materials in Reading Comprehension***

The benefits of AMs in reading comprehension have been widely discussed by researchers (e.g., Berando, 2006; Beresova, 2015; Fitriana et al. 2019; Li, 2013; Mishan, 2005; Richards, 2001). They can be categorised into four features including English language enhancement, cultural awareness, learning motivation, and reading strategies.

#### ***English Language Enhancement***

The advantageous features of AMs include the authentic and up-to-date language, the appropriateness for scanning and skimming, and the diversity of text types (Berardo, 2006). Being used in English language classrooms, AMs can benefit English learners' language competence (e.g., Akbari & Razavi, 2016; Bacon & Finnemann, 1990; Boyaci & Guner, 2018; Li, 2013; Marzban & Davaji,

2015; Namaziandost et al., 2021; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). Guo (2012) mentioned that using real-life materials for extensive reading can expand learners' vocabulary range including idioms, collocations, and phrasal verbs, then improve their reading comprehension, so exposure to this rich vocabulary helps learners to expand their lexical repertoire and improve their word recognition skills, which is essential for success in the IELTS reading comprehension. Using adequate authentic texts, according to the learners' level, can also help them develop their grammatical proficiency (Mishan, 2005).

#### ***Cultural Awareness***

It is agreed that different types of authentic written texts activate not only the target language comprehension but also culture acquisition (Beresova, 2015). The AMs contain natural language, thereby allowing learners to get exposure to the authentic culture (Beresova, 2015; Boyaci & Guner, 2018; Richards, 2001). Experiencing learning with newspaper articles, magazine articles, or literature can allow learners to observe authentic "customs, behaviours and interactions", thereby enhancing understanding of "underlying values and attitudes" (Mishan, 2005, p. 47).

#### ***Learning Motivation***

The factors of motivation and preference for AMs can be perceived as an underlying foundation for reading comprehension. With the use of AMs, Fitriana et al. (2019) underscored that learners' motivation and interest in reading can be enhanced. AMs are beneficial because they can have positive impacts on learner motivation, facilitate learners through authentic language exposure, fulfil learner's demands, and assist a more creative and

intriguing approach to language teaching (Richards, 2001). What is more, AMs are “inherently more interesting than contrived ones because of their intent to communicate a message rather than highlight target language” (Gilmore, 2007, p. 106). The use of AMs can activate a higher sense of motivation for language learners (Joraboyev, 2021). Learning with non-pedagogical materials, learners are likely to have a chance to get familiar with the natural use of the language, which gives them positive motivation about language learning (Berardo, 2006; Boyaci & Guner, 2018).

### *Reading Strategies*

Improving reading strategies for learners is another benefit of introducing AMs to the IELTS reading class (Berardo, 2006; Li, 2013; Mishan, 2005; Rao, 2019). Learners are able to achieve scanning, skimming, and over-reading for comprehension when practising reading with AMs (Li, 2013). Mishan (2005) asserts that by engaging with authentic texts, learners can develop their ability to recognize and different types of texts (e.g., academic articles, newspaper articles, advertisements), which commonly appear in the IELTS reading tests. In addition, she claims that the discourse in newspapers such as collocations, idiomatic expressions, and cliché is usually understandable and useful, so using AMs can get learners familiar with these features and then improve their reading comprehension. Similarly, Brown (2007) mentions that AMs can provide learners with meaningful and authentic tasks which can motivate learners to engage with the text, make inferences, draw conclusions and apply critical thinking skills, which are essential for successful performance in the IELTS reading test.

In brief, the benefits of using real-life texts in IELTS reading comprehension classes are tangible. By engaging with AMs in IELTS reading comprehension classes, learners can develop their overall English language proficiency and understand various linguistic features, gain valuable insights into the cultural and social norms of the English-speaking world to interpret and respond to the contextual cues present in the reading passages, contribute to increase learners’ learning motivation, and develop a diverse range of reading strategies to effectively comprehend and analyze the content.

### *2.3. Previous Studies*

The use of AMs has created significant concerns in many researchers inside and outside Vietnam. Many studies have been conducted to investigate the effectiveness of AM use in language learning classrooms such as the studies of Guo (2012), Marzban and Davaji (2015), and Jooyandeh (2017). The three studies divided the participants into two groups: one learning with AMs, and the other learning with traditional books. The overall results showed that the former groups, in all studies, outperformed the latter ones regarding vocabulary improvement and reading comprehension. It can be concluded that AM use in the language classroom is efficacious.

When it comes to learners’ perceptions of the implementation of AMs, Albiladi (2019), and Fitriana et al. (2019) explored learners’ perceptions of AM use. Albiladi (2019) conducted a study to investigate learners’ perceptions of the pros and cons of AM use in ESL reading classes in the United States. Observations and semi-structured interviews were employed to gather data. The results showed that the participants were interested in reading

different types of materials. They believed the use of real-life texts improved their motivation and cultural awareness. However, most of the participants admitted text difficulty was the most common problem. The second problem of AM use was the lack of pedagogical intentions as learners found that AMs still contain unknown abbreviations, slang words, and phrases which were not explained.

Similarly, Fitriana et al. (2019) conducted a study aiming at exploring learners' attitudes towards the incorporation of AMs for reading skills at Al Ilyas Vocational High School in Indonesia. Using questionnaires and observation, the study revealed that learners had positive perceptions towards the use of AMs in the reading class. The participants thought reading using non-pedagogical materials was straightforward and interesting, and the learners were more active in the reading class.

In Vietnam, Dinh (2020) carried out research to investigate teachers' and learners' perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of AMs used in teaching English and to explore the differences between teachers' and learners' perspectives on AMs. Ninety-three juniors and five teachers of English at Hanoi University of Home Affairs in Vietnam took part in the study. The survey, using a questionnaire and semi-structured interview, revealed that the majority of the teacher and learner participants had positive attitudes towards AM provision in their class which included enhancing learners' language skills, motivation, and cultural knowledge, and supporting teachers a creative teaching approach to teaching. On the other hand, Nguyen (2010) investigated EFL teachers' perceptions of the readability of AMs and how the modified AMs are used in teaching

reading in Vietnam. A questionnaire and a test were employed to gather data from 26 EFL teachers. The outcomes showed that awareness of readability and modification of real-life texts in teaching reading are advantageous to the teachers in facilitating their teaching process and to the learners in their language acquisition. From the previously mentioned studies, it can be seen that research on learners' perceptions of the benefits of AM use for IELTS reading comprehension has not gained attention in Vietnam recently. To that end, this study endeavours to explore L2 learners' perceptions of the benefits of AM use for IELTS reading comprehension

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Research Site and Research Participants***

The convergent mixed methods design was adopted to conduct this study. It is a combination of quantitative design and qualitative design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to collect data on L2 learners' perceptions of the benefits of AM use for IELTS reading comprehension. The study was conducted at a language Centre in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, which offers a variety of academic IELTS preparation courses ranging from basic to advanced levels. Each course lasts ten weeks, and each week learners have two ninety-minute sessions in which they learn the four language skills i.e. reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In the IELTS reading class, learners are provided with authentic reading texts about different topics in accordance with the topics in the coursebooks. The AMs are selected based on a set of criteria given by the language center administrators and checked by the

head of the English division. Learners are asked to take part in different AM-based learning activities for pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities. For example, for pre-reading activities, learners are required to read an authentic news article relevant to the topic in the learned topic and work in groups to compile a list of 10 challenging or domain-specific words and structures they find in the authentic news article. As for the new words, they are asked to research the meanings, parts of speech, and contextual usage of the words. Regarding the complicated structures, the teacher explains them and provides structure drills to learners. This activity can help learners to expand their understanding of various linguistic features.

Based on the convenience sampling technique, a group of 150 learners who were taking academic IELTS preparation courses participated in answering a questionnaire, and 10 of them were invited to volunteer for the interview. Regarding background information of 150 participants, there were 97 females (64.7%) and 53 males (35.3%). They were high school and university students and classified into four age groups: under 16 years old (4%), from 16 to 18 years old (23.3%), from 19 to 22 years old (34.7%), and over 22 years old (38%). The majority of the participants (73.3%) were learners at the basic level, while only 26.7% of them were at the pre-intermediate level. In terms of the amount of time learning IELTS, 54.7% spent less than one year, 32.0% spent from one to two years, and only 13.3% allocated over two years to prepare for IELTS.

### 3.2. Research Instruments

Data were collected from participants' responses via the use of the questionnaire and semi-structured interview to gauge L2

learners' perceptions of the benefits of AM use for IELTS reading comprehension. Two research instruments were designed based on the research focus and literature review. They were constructed in English, then translated into respondents' mother tongue to make sure that language difficulty did not hinder respondents in answering the questions.

The questionnaire of this study is composed of two main sections. The first section (Section A) gathers respondents' demographics regarding their gender, age, level, and number of years learning IELTS. The second section (Section B) has 30 items which feature a five-point scale (*Strongly disagree* to *Strongly agree*) attempting to gauge respondents' perceptions of the benefits of AM use for IELTS reading comprehension. The benefits in this section are classified into four main elements: language improvement, cultural awareness, motivation, and reading strategies. The reliability of the questionnaire was authenticated in terms of Cronbach Alpha at .96.

The interview includes five main questions which were designed based on the research focus and questionnaire as it aims to support the data gained from the questionnaire. All the interview questions were first designed in English and were then translated into Vietnamese. Both questionnaire and interview questions were piloted before they were used in the main study to ensure their validity.

### 3.3. Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

To collect data, hard copies of the questionnaire were sent to respondents. It took them around 20 – 25 minutes to answer all the questions. Then, ten

participants were invited to participate in the interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 15-20 minutes. All interview sessions were recorded for later transcription to ensure that there was no information overlooked.

As for the data analysis, quantitative data collected from the questionnaire were analysed with the assistance of SPSS in which frequency, mean, and standard deviation were calculated. The interval mean scores for the L2 learners' perceptions were deciphered as follows: 1-1.80: strongly disagree; 1.81-2.60: disagree; 2.61-3.40: neutral; 3.41-4.20: agree; and 4.21-5.00: strongly agree. Qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analysed in the form of content analysis which consisted of the following steps: (1) all the recordings were transcribed; (2) the transcripts were coded, read and re-read several times; (3) the categories were generated and grouped based on the research focus. The interviewees were coded as S1, S2 to S10.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

*L2 Learners' Perceptions of the Benefits of AM Use for IELTS Reading Comprehension*

As shown in Table 1, the average mean score of L2 learners' perceptions of the benefits of AM use for IELTS reading comprehension is 4.19, which means that the vast majority of the respondents agreed that the use of this type of material was a positive influence on their reading comprehension. L2 learners' perceptions of the benefits of AM use for IELTS reading comprehension were demonstrated via four elements encompassing language improvement, cultural awareness, motivation, and reading strategies. These elements were calculated with the values of mean scores ranging from 4.13 to 4.24. This means that most participants agreed on the benefits of AM use for IELTS reading comprehension. The highest mean score was seen in language improvement and cultural awareness (M=4.24; SD=.54; and M=4.24; SD=.63), followed by the motivation element (M=4.14; SD=.62) and reading strategies (M=4.13; SD=.59). In general, it is clear that the participants had positive perceptions of the benefits of AM use regarding language improvement, cultural awareness, motivation, and reading strategies.

**Table 1:** *L2 Learners' Perceptions of the Benefits of AM Use for IELTS Reading Comprehension*

No.	Components	N=150	
		M	SD
1	Language improvement	4.24	.54
2	Cultural awareness	4.24	.63
3	Motivation	4.14	.62
4	Reading strategies	4.13	.59
Average		4.19	.51

### *L2 Learners' Perceptions of the Benefits of AM Use for IELTS Reading Comprehension in Terms of Language Improvement*

With regards to the first component of the benefits of AM use for IELTS reading comprehension, the results in Table 2 show that the majority of the learners believed using AMs in IELTS reading classes was beneficial for their language improvement in regard to vocabulary (item LI01: M=4.52; SD=.67) and grammar (item LI08: M=4.17; SD=.79). They strongly agreed that words in AMs were helpful for IELTS reading (item LI07: M=4.33; SD=.76). The materials helped them review their vocabulary (item LI06: M=4.21; SD=.77) and learn new idioms (item LI02: M=4.13; SD=.83), collocations (item LI03: M=4.31; SD=.71) and discourse markers (item LI04: M=4.30; SD=.73). Furthermore, they agreed that the materials kept them updated

with trendy and newly-invented words (item LI05: M=4.34; SD=.74). In terms of grammar, most of the respondents admitted that they were able to not only review their knowledge of grammar (item LI10: M=4.05; SD=.81) but also learn new complex structures (item LI09: M=4.17; SD=.82) thanks to the utilisation of AMs. Therefore, they thought grammar structures in AMs would be of great help for IELTS reading (item LI11: M=4.15; SD=.77). It is also noticeable that they agreed that their reading speed could improve when using materials taken from real life in reading comprehension classes (item LI12: M=4.23; SD=.83). In summary, the use of AMs for IELTS reading comprehension was believed, by respondents, to be beneficial for L2 learners' language improvement.

**Table 2:** *L2 learners' Perceptions of Language Improvement*

No.	Items	N=150	
		M	SD
LI01	Using authentic materials helps me enrich my vocabulary.	4.52	.67
LI02	I learn a wide range of idioms from authentic materials.	4.13	.83
LI03	I learn a wide range of collocations from authentic materials.	4.31	.71
LI04	I learn a wide range of discourse markers from authentic materials.	4.30	.73
LI05	Using authentic materials helps me update with trendy and new words.	4.34	.74
LI06	Using authentic materials helps me review my vocabulary.	4.21	.77
LI07	Vocabulary in authentic materials is helpful for IELTS reading.	4.33	.76
LI08	Using authentic materials helps me increase my knowledge of grammar.	4.17	.79
LI09	I learn a wide range of complex sentences from authentic materials.	4.17	.82
LI10	Using authentic materials helps me review my knowledge of grammar.	4.05	.81
LI11	Grammar structures in authentic materials are helpful for IELTS reading.	4.15	.77
LI12	Using authentic materials improves my reading speed.	4.23	.83

Similarly, the interview recorded a 100% consensus of the learners on vocabulary and grammar development. They all believed the use of AMs helped

them improve their vocabulary and grammar. The learners showed strong agreement on what they can gain after learning reading with AMs.



“The ample words in these materials are authentic, colourful, and trendy, which enhance my range of vocabulary a lot. I remember the vocabulary and grammar structures longer and also revise the words that they have known better.” (S2)

“There are many new and unfamiliar words but I feel eager to learn, so my knowledge of vocabulary can be increased. I have obtained more idioms, phrasal verbs and terminologies thanks to this use. The improvement in grammar structures is not very significant yet the styles and registers of the articles are amazing and reliable, which impresses me...” (S5)

*L2 Learners’ Perceptions of the Benefits of AM Use for IELTS Reading Comprehension in Terms of Cultural Awareness*

Table 3 illustrates how the learners perceived the impact of the use of AMs on cultural awareness. In general, the majority of the learners agreed that their knowledge

of culture was broadened thanks to the use of AMs (item CA02: M=4.29; SD=.75). In particular, the materials can widen their knowledge about the culture of the target language (item CA01: M=4.34; SD=.74). They agreed that the utilisation of non-pedagogical materials allowed them to be aware of the discrepancies and similarities between their own culture and the target culture (item CA03: M=4.22; SD=.79; item CA04: M=4.19; SD=.74). As a result, most of them admitted that they had appreciation and tolerance towards the target culture after using AMs to learn reading comprehension (item CA05: M=4.17; SD=.76). To summarise, there was considerable agreement from the respondents that AMs had a beneficial goal in raising their awareness of culture, helping them not only gain general knowledge of culture but also understand and respond positively to the target culture.

**Table 3:** L2 Learners’ Perceptions of Cultural Awareness

No.	Items	N=150	
		M	SD
CA01	I can understand more about the target culture by using AMs	4.34	.74
CA02	I can enhance my knowledge of culture by using AMs.	4.29	.75
CA03	I can recognise the differences between my country’s culture and the target cultures via the use of AMs.	4.22	.79
CA04	I can recognise the similarities between my country’s culture and the target cultures via the use of AMs.	4.19	.74
CA05	I become respectful and tolerant towards the target culture via the use of AMs.	4.17	.76

Aligning with the results above, collected qualitative data indicated that the majority of the interviewees had positive views on their cultural knowledge enhancement when reading real-life texts. Detailed explanations are presented below:

“I broaden my horizons in culture when reading authentic texts. I understand the target culture better so being able to distinguish my own culture from the target culture.” (S9)

“AMs ensure there is no filtering or editing. This means that I can have a chance

to have a different insight into the authentic culture I am learning about. Culture presented in authentic texts versus non-authentic texts is much different.” (S10)

### *L2 Learners' Perceptions of the Benefits of AM Use for IELTS Reading Comprehension in Terms of Motivation*

As indicated in Table 4, learners' perceptions of motivation had total mean scores within the range between 4.00 and 4.27. This indicates that a number of the learners thought that the use of AMs had positive effects on their motivation. One of the motivating elements receiving the highest agreement was the contents of AMs. The learners believed learning reading comprehension with AMs was encouraging because of the compelling contents (item M06:  $M=4.24$ ;  $SD=.75$ ). Moreover, they agreed what was written in the materials was up-to-date and authentic,

fostering their motivation to learn reading (item M07:  $M=4.27$ ;  $SD=.79$ ). Besides that, they thought the topics and language found in AMs also made them feel motivated. The topics were engaging (item M05:  $M=4.20$ ;  $SD=.76$ ) and the language was authentic (item M04:  $M=4.18$ ;  $SD=.76$ ). Hence, most of the respondents asserted that AMs had a positive influence on their reading habits in general (item M02:  $M=4.15$ ;  $SD=.76$ ) as well as their motivation in learning IELTS reading (item M03:  $M=4.05$ ;  $SD=.84$ ). Understandably, the respondents were interested in learning IELTS reading with AMs (item M01:  $M=4.00$ ;  $SD=.83$ ). They also felt more self-assured after attending these classes (item M08:  $M=4.06$ ;  $SD=.77$ ). To conclude, the majority of the learners agreed on the positive impacts of AM use on their motivation.

**Table 4:** *L2 Learners' Perceptions of Motivation*

No.	Items	N=150	
		M	SD
M01	I like learning reading comprehension with AMs.	4.00	.83
M02	AMs motivate me to read.	4.15	.76
M03	The use of AMs motivates me to learn IELTS reading.	4.05	.84
M04	Learning reading comprehension with AMs is motivating because they contain real-life language.	4.18	.76
M05	Learning reading comprehension with AMs is motivating because topics are interesting.	4.20	.76
M06	Learning reading comprehension with AMs is motivating because the contents are interesting.	4.24	.75
M07	Learning reading comprehension with AMs is motivating because the contents are up-to-date, helping me to gain real information.	4.27	.79
M08	I feel more confident in the IELTS reading after learning with AMs.	4.06	.77

From the data collected during interviews, there was also very strong agreement on the motivation AMs

provoked. All of the learners in the interviews expressed that they were engaged and motivated when learning

reading comprehension with non-pedagogical materials. The opinion that the contents and topics in AMs were the catalysts for motivation was most agreed, followed by the ideas of creating a relaxing atmosphere, and having attractive layouts, which seems consistent with the quantitative data collected from the questionnaire.

“They don’t cause boredom in the class because the contents are down-to-earth and lively, triggering my curiosity and concern. The problems in the texts are real...” (S4)

“The use of real texts creates a far more engaging atmosphere than the use of scripted texts. AMs make me feel motivated because I like exploring new things. I am eager to read and understand real ones. The atmosphere was more inspiring than the previous normal classes.” (S6)

### *L2 Learners’ Perceptions of the Benefits of AM Use for IELTS Reading Comprehension in Terms of Reading Strategies*

Table 5 depicts the results of learners’ perceptions of reading strategies when using AMs in IELTS reading classes. The total mean scores of five question items ranging from 4.03 to 4.27 revealed it was efficacious to use real-life materials in

reading classes to better learners’ reading strategies. A large number of the learners agreed that to construct the meaning of the texts in AMs, they were required to use their prior knowledge (item RS01:  $M=4.27$ ;  $SD=.69$ ). Also, the use of real-life texts encouraged them to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words by using contextual clues (item RS02:  $M=4.26$ ;  $SD=.74$ ). With the utilisation of these texts, they could predict the overall idea of an article when skimming the title (item RS03:  $M=4.02$ ;  $SD=.83$ ) and find the topic sentence of each paragraph in a shorter time (item RS04:  $M=4.07$ ;  $SD=.77$ ). Moreover, illustrations such as pictures, images or photos in AMs can be of great help for predicting the content of the text (item RS05:  $M=4.03$ ;  $SD=.87$ ).

In brief, there was an agreement on the benefits of AMs for learners’ reading strategies as AMs can provide learners with authentic task engagement such as using background knowledge to understand the meaning, using context to guess new vocabulary, skimming the title to grasp the main ideas, finding topic sentences, and using illustrations to predict the content.

**Table 5:** *L2 Learners’ Perceptions of Reading Strategies*

No.	Items	N=150	
		M	SD
RS01	AMs require me to use my background knowledge to construct the meaning of the text.	4.27	.69
RS02	AMs require me to use context in the reading to guess the meaning of new vocabulary.	4.26	.74
RS03	I can predict the main idea of a text by skimming the title of the article.	4.02	.83
RS04	I can find topic sentences of the paragraphs more quickly in AMs.	4.07	.77
RS05	I can predict the content of the text by illustrations such as images, pictures, or drawings.	4.03	.87

Qualitatively, the data obtained from the last question of the interview showed that 70% of the learners strongly agreed on the benefits of AMs for their reading strategies while 30% of them were not really concerned about this factor when learning reading. Of seven learners who held a positive opinion on reading strategies, all of them had similar ideas about their improvement in skimming techniques and prediction skills. The illustrations of their ideas are presented below:

“I think my skimming technique has improved a lot because the headlines of the articles are quite easy to understand. When I read the headline, I can somehow imagine the content of the text. Also, the texts are well-organised and -structured so I can find the main ideas of each section better. In reading, I think skimming is a technique that all readers should have and I believe using AMs can help me improve this.” (S9)

“I think I can improve the strategies for reading skills after learning with AMs. These materials are understandable. Interestingly, I can guess the meaning of new words in the text. Moreover, the topics are familiar to me so I can understand the articles better. So, I think after this class, I can enhance my prediction skills.” (S6)

#### **4.2. Discussion**

In this study, L2 learners’ perceptions of the benefits of AM use for IELTS reading comprehension were examined regarding four main factors, consisting of language improvement, cultural awareness, motivation and reading strategies. The results revealed that the learners had positive perceptions of the benefits of AM use for IELTS reading comprehension. The use of AMs brought many benefits for the participants’ language learning.

Concerning language improvement, the majority of the learners agreed that AMs were advantageous for their vocabulary and grammar. The learners strongly agreed that words emerging in authentic texts were helpful for IELTS reading. They were able to revise their knowledge of vocabulary, memorize the words better, as well as learn new idioms, collocations, and discourse markers. Of the words written in authentic texts, there were authentic uses of vocabulary that almost all learners thought beneficial to them. The responses on vocabulary improvement from this study were in agreement with what was found in the studies of Guo (2012), showing that bringing AMs into reading classrooms can extend learners’ vocabulary range, thus improving their reading comprehension skills. Additionally, aligning with Mishan (2005)’s confirmation about the development of grammatical proficiency by means of appropriate AM use, numerous learners in this survey also agreed on their grammar improvement in AM-based classes. Authentic texts were a good source for them to review their grammar knowledge and can offer them a wide range of complex structures. As a consequence, most of them believed the grammar structures found in AMs can help them with IELTS reading. The reason for learners’ assertions on language improvement might be because the linguistic input in authentic texts is rich, wide-ranging and motivating as discussed by Mishan (2005). Moreover, most of the participants, accounting for nearly three-quarters of the total participants in this survey, were at a basic level. With limited knowledge of English, learners at this level, therefore, can find sufficient numbers of new words and structures in the given texts to learn from. Hence, it is understandable that the benefits of AM use for language improvement were

recognised. Furthermore, along the same lines as the findings of Unluer and Yasar (2012)'s survey cited in Boyaci and Guner (2018)'s paper, the learners asserted that their reading speech eventually improved as a result of the AM inclusion in reading comprehension classes. The findings about language improvement supported the findings of the studies of Marzban and Davaji (2015) and Jooyandeh (2017), which showed that among the two examined groups, the group using AMs outperformed the other group in reading comprehension.

In terms of cultural acquisition, a number of the learners claimed that the use of AMs helped them broaden their knowledge of culture. They were more knowledgeable about the culture of the target language. They believed AMs were an appropriate source to learn culture because they reflected genuine and plentiful information about it. From that, they were able to be aware of the discrepancies and similarities between their culture and the target culture. Therefore, the inclusion of AMs in reading classrooms made most of them appreciate and respect the target culture. Overall, the results regarding cultural awareness showed that learners' perceptions of cultural competence after using real-life materials were positive. The explanation for this can be that cultural elements are meaningful for language learning and AMs might genuinely reflect these elements. According to Kilickaya (2004), cultural elements are as important as the language itself and being aware of the culture underlying language can ensure language intelligibility, and according to Richards (2001), AMs can provide genuine knowledge of culture, demonstrating many cultural aspects such as practices, beliefs and behaviour. This outcome was similar to the outcome of the study conducted by

Beresova (2015) in which the learners agreed that authentic texts in the newspaper gave them a great opportunity to expand their knowledge of culture.

In addition to language improvement and cultural awareness, motivation was another factor that received high agreement from the respondents. Although the study of Peacock (1997) revealed that the learners did not think AMs were interesting, the respondents in this study favoured the use of AMs in their classes and thought this inclusion in the reading classrooms motivated them, thereby boosting their confidence. The reasons for the incremental motivation varied including the contents, the topics and the language used in these texts. They said that the content of real-life texts was compelling and thought-provoking, the topics were abundant and not too academic, and the language was genuine and trendy, making them feel motivated in the AM-based class. These ideas were quite similar to the findings collected from the research of Sample (2015), clarifying that the exemplifications for the learners' motivation were the exposure to the natural use of language, and the diversity of the materials to help learners avoid repetition in the classroom. In this study, it can be explained that because the materials used in the classes were appropriate and interesting for the learners, they felt motivated. The topics on environmental issues and health from an authentic website and a newspaper might be able to draw their attention and interaction successfully. The results in this session were clearly consistent with those of previous studies by Fitriana et al. (2019) and Albiladi (2019), indicating that AM use generally augmented class motivation.

Regarding the development of reading strategies, the finding was supported by

Mihan (2005) who stated that learners can develop their reading strategies from reading AMs. This study found that L2 learners held positive perceptions of reading strategy improvement in the AM-based class. The majority of the respondents agreed that authentic texts encouraged them to develop their previous knowledge to understand the meaning of the texts. They were also better at prediction skills and skimming by means of the titles, illustrations, and structure of the texts. The explanation for the findings can be that the materials used in the examined classes could be logically organised and clearly structured with a variety of illustrations; thus, facilitating the learners to grasp the main points and predict the overall meaning of the texts more quickly. What is more, referring to the background information of the learners, over 80% of them spent less than two years in preparation for the IELTS. This time allocation might be insufficient for them to be skilful at reading strategies and techniques, so bringing AMs to IELTS reading classes can be of great help for learners to achieve these reading skills. The opinions in this study were partially in line with those of Li (2013), who figured out that AMs could help learners envision the meaning of the reading, and achieve good scanning and skimming techniques.

## **5. Conclusion and Implications**

This study sets out to delve into L2 learners' perceptions of the benefits of AM use for IELTS reading comprehension at a Ho Chi Minh City-based language center. It employed two research instruments for data collection. The findings were that L2 learners believed that the use of AMs for reading comprehension in IELTS

preparation courses was beneficial for enhancing their English language, cultural awareness, learning motivation, and reading strategies.

Some pedagogical implications are suggested. For teachers, it would be valuable to consider the implementation of AMs in the IELTS reading class. This research shows that Reading AMs is a good way for learners to enhance language skills, raise cultural awareness, stimulate motivation and improve reading strategies. Therefore, it is important for teachers to improve the effectiveness of reading classes by including AMs in their lessons. For learners, it is important to improve reading comprehension skills by reading various types of materials, not only pedagogical books but also texts found in real life. Learners should create the habit of reading newspapers, books, stories and other types of authentic sources because they were proven to have positive influences on learners' reading skills. For material designers, the positive perceptions of AM use collected in this study imply that the introduction of real-life-based texts is essential in learning and teaching materials. The books will be more efficacious if there is the inclusion of authentic reading texts. More particularly, when it comes to selecting authentic texts for reading books, material designers should pay attention to the contents, cultural elements, the reading presentation and the language use, which can enhance learners' engagement and motivation in reading

The study was carried out with some inevitable limitations. Firstly, the study was conducted with a limited number of participants. The sample size should be extended to make generalisation more feasible, yet there were not enough favourable conditions regarding the

locations and human support to implement this. Secondly, the mixed-methods design using a questionnaire and semi-structured interview was employed for data collection. This may cause response bias, which may lead to the limiting of the validity and reliability of the findings. Therefore, future research could employ a variety of research instruments such as document analysis or experimental measures to provide a more comprehensive and triangulated understanding of the research topic if a similar study is conducted in similar contexts.

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