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## Factors that Influenced Libyan Teachers' Decisions in Selecting Materials for EFL Reading Classroom

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### Abstract

Instructional materials have always been one of the key factors in enhancing teaching and learning. Hence, teachers assume the responsibilities in selecting effective materials to be used in the classroom. In order to decide instructional materials for the learners, teachers need to have the knowledge and understanding of selection criteria that will guide their decisions. This paper presents the factors that underlie Libyan EFL teachers' decisions in selecting materials for reading lessons. The participants of this study are three Libyan English language teachers teaching in Libyan international schools in Malaysia. Lesson plans on the teaching of reading comprehension were referred to and interviews were conducted with the respective teachers to understand their decisions regarding materials used to teach reading comprehension. The findings showed that there are seven main factors that affect the participants' choice of reading materials which are learners' background, proficiency level, interest in reading, skill development, authenticity, level of difficulty and appealing content. This article provides a better understanding on the EFL teachers' justifications of the materials selected in ensuring effective EFL reading lessons.

**Keywords:** instructional materials, reading comprehension, materials selection, EFL

## 1. Introduction

English language teaching (ELT) has been rapidly changing in align to modernisation and globalisation. Language educators are experiencing the era whereby learning the language at present is different from the way they themselves were learning in the past (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). Teachers are required to be constantly updated with the transition in teaching and learning in order to ensure that they are able to deliver effective lessons.

One of the areas in teaching and learning that has to be aligned with the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning is the use of instructional materials. Instructional materials play a crucial role in the teaching and learning of the English language (Capan, 2014). According to Cakir (2015), teaching materials can be defined as any tools that teachers use to assist their students in adequately learning the target language. They are also used as means to increase students' access to the language. Teaching instruments also include every instrument that contributes greatly to students' progress; anything which is used by teachers and learners to facilitate learning (Littlejohn, 2012; McDonough, Shaw & Masuhara, 2013; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018).

Instructional materials for language teaching and learning have been developed and adapted continuously to address the growing challenges of learning English as a second or foreign language (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). With the various selections of instructional materials being produced, teachers play a critical role in deciding the types of materials to be used or adapted in support of the teaching and learning process. Clearly, English language teachers need to equip themselves with the knowledge and skills in selecting and adapting materials appropriate for their teaching and learning contexts (Capan, 2014; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018).

Selecting instructional materials is one of the issues that English language teachers faced due to several reasons. Some teachers may not be able to identify the learning difficulties of their students and thus may not choose the right materials to address their students' learning needs (Incecay, 2011; Capan, 2014). In addition, teachers may also face problems to match the appropriate materials with the specific needs of the students or their different levels of proficiency (Incecay, 2011; Capan, 2014; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). Some teachers may also find it challenging to gain the right materials due to the lack of resources available (Howard & Major, 2004; Barahona, 2014; Abdul Hadi & Intan Safinas 2017; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018).

In reading classes, choosing appropriate reading materials is very crucial. Studies have highlighted that teachers have encountered challenges in selecting good reading materials (Arias, 2007; Abdul Hadi and Intan Safinas 2017). Arias (2007) described deciding suitable reading materials is a meticulous process in an EFL reading class. Abdul Hadi and Intan Safinas (2017) also claimed that the aspects of good reading lessons revolve around the potential and application of relevant instructional materials and teachers' teaching skills. This is because instructional resources facilitate the understanding of difficult concepts as well as the teaching and learning of the reading skills (Omuna, Onchera & Kimutai, 2016).

In EFL reading classroom, failure to provide effective instructional materials may obstruct learners' understanding. Omuna, Onchera and Kimutai (2016) debated that this issue may give an impact on teaching and learning of English reading skills. Teachers, who do not use effective teaching materials to engage their students in the learning process, are setting their students up for failure and disrupting the entire learning process (Leland, 2013).

## 2. Literature Review

Piaget's Cognitive Theory is one of the theories that focused on development and learning. According to Cognitive theory, all children go through the same order of development, but they do so at different rates. He further explained that an important implication of this theory is adaptation of instruction to the learner's developmental level. The content of instruction needs to be consistent with the developmental level of the learner. In the context of instructional materials, the teachers need to take into consideration the learners' cognitive development in choosing the appropriate materials. The teachers need to provide a variety of materials and they have to match the learners' cognitive ability to promote understanding of the content of the materials presented (Tomlinson, 2011; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018).

In addition, Aloqaili (2012) emphasised that reading materials used in class must be able to tap on learners' schemata to ensure understanding and meaningful input of the materials. The teachers need to carefully choose materials that are related to learners' background and teachers need to make connections of the content of the materials with the learners' schemata. On the other hand, Liu et al. (2010) argued that some reading materials might relate to learners' schemata but they were not able to comprehend the texts due to their proficiency level. Hence, apart from ensuring that instructional materials relate to learners' background knowledge, learners' proficiency level is also one of the local contexts that need to be considered when choosing learning materials (Intan Safinas et al., 2012). Studies have shown that in the context of language acquisition, proficiency level is a critical element to be considered in selecting appropriate reading materials (Howard and Major, 2004, Intan Safinas et al., 2012; Tomlinson, 2011). Tomlinson (2011) argued that teachers need to adapt materials that they find inappropriate for the learners' language ability before using them. These materials can be simplified, some parts can be deleted or the length can be reduced.

Selecting reading materials also should revolve around learners' interest (Howard and Major, 2004; Tomlinson, 2011; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). Fluency is a result of building reading proficiency through lots of interesting reading materials (Beglar, Hunt & Kite, 2011). As proposed by Tomlinson (2011), reading materials should be of a variety of comprehensible and compelling items such as comic books, graphic novels, magazines, newspaper articles and short stories that engage the learners.

Arias (2007) highlighted a set of criteria that EFL teachers should consider in selecting reading materials. She divided the criteria into two core factors. The core factors revolve around two significant elements in the process of selecting reading materials. The first aspect is associated with the learners. It refers to learners' proficiency, schemata, interest and learning needs. Another aspect focuses on the instructional materials. The factors that relate to instructional materials are the subject matter, relevance and authenticity.

Similar views were expressed by a considerable number of researchers who emphasised on several converging principles underlying materials development and selection in the context of English language teaching (Howard & Major, 2004; Harsono, 2007; Hardika, 2012; Tevdoska, 2015; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). Some of the converging principles are: (1) materials should be contextualised; (2) materials should achieve impact; (3) materials should help learners to feel at ease; (4) materials should help learners to develop confidence; (5) materials should encourage learners to develop learning skills and strategies; and (6) materials should expose the learners to language in authentic use (Howard & Major, 2004; Harsono, 2007; Hardika, 2012; Tevdoska, 2015; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018).

One of the most highlighted principles in materials selection is instructional materials need to be contextualised to the target learners' background, experiences and level of proficiency. The topics selected should be relevant and appropriate to the learners in order to ensure learners develop interest and they become engaged with the lesson (Howard & Major, 2004; Harsono, 2007; Hardika, 2012; Tevdoska, 2015; Tomlinson and Masuhara, 2018).

Apart from that, personal engagement and motivation can be gained through materials that achieve impact such as the presentation of novel illustrations and content (Hardika, 2012; Tevdoska, 2015; Tomlinson and Masuhara, 2018). Novelty can be achieved using unique and appealing stories and local references. Various types of texts from different sources to address diverse learners may also attract learners to read.

Materials should also be flexible in terms of content. They should offer a wide range of possibilities from which students can choose which among them are most suitable and make them feel at ease. Materials can also help learners to feel at ease when they consist of illustrations rather than just texts and the texts presented are those related to their own cultures that include examples (Harsono, 2007, Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018).

Another principle is that materials should help learners to develop confidence. When students are at ease, they can develop their confidence in producing the answers and giving their opinions during the teaching and learning process (Hardika, 2012). Learners who are given texts that are slightly above their ability would also experience development in their confidence when they are able to use their language skills and reading strategies in understanding the texts (Howard and Major, 2004; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). Tomlinson (2011) argued against simplifying texts to the learners' level of proficiency. Instead, he proposed that materials used need to get learners to stretch beyond their level of proficiency through exposing them to accompanied tasks that are stimulating and challenging but achievable. This will get the learners to feel successful and further build their confidence.

Besides that, materials should facilitate learners' utilisation of learning skills and reading strategies. Materials enable the learners to be interested in them, which can draw their attention and encourage them to assess their own learning and language development (Howard & Major, 2004; Harsono, 2007). Jackson (2011) reported on the benefits of learning exercises that require the learners to make decisions and explore their own learning styles and strategies.

Another highlighted principle is that materials should expose the learners to language in authentic use. Localising materials has the benefits of familiarity and connects them to the learners' world while also matching local practice and curriculum (Howard and Major, 2004; Tomlinson, 2011; Garton & Graves, 2014). A lot of teaching and learning materials can provide exposure to authentic input through the instructions, the advice they give for the activities and the spoken and the written texts included in the materials (Howard & Major, 2004; Harsono, 2007; Tomlinson, 2011). Authentic language usage will help the students to learn the target language better as they use it in real-life situations. In other words, the information ought to vary in style, mode, medium and reason and ought to be rich in components which are normal for usage in the target language such as stories, songs, speeches, newspaper articles and others.

Past literature has evidently highlighted that selecting materials for teaching English is an action that requires several considerations involving guidelines and principles that relate to language acquisition. Local context is one of the strongest influencing factors in selecting materials and for the teaching of reading, the development of reading skills as well as the

presentation and relevance of the materials are among the most significant factors.

### **3. Data Collection Methods**

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach, and its objective was to highlight the factors that influenced the selection of instructional materials to teach reading. Three teachers from three Libyan International Schools in Kuala Lumpur participated in the research. These teachers are qualified EFL teachers and have been teaching for more than five years. In addition, these teachers also have considerable experience in teaching EFL reading skills for all levels – low, intermediate and advance.

The data were collected from semi-structured interviews with the three teachers. Interviews were conducted to get insights on the teachers' beliefs and underlying principles in selecting materials to teach reading. After the lessons were carried out, the participants were interviewed again with regards to their lessons and the materials used. The interviews were done to investigate the factors that affected their choices of materials in the EFL classroom.

Interviews have been highlighted as one of the best approaches in exploring participants' justifications and understandings of a particular context (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Interviews offered insights into the meanings conceptualised by individuals and groups which were attached to their experiences, social processes, practices and events (Edwards & Holland, 2013; Jamshed, 2014).

The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. Themes related to the criteria in selecting materials to teach reading were identified and coded for further analysis.

### **4. Findings and Discussion**

The findings indicated that all of the participants shared a set of underlying principles and understanding related to the selection of reading materials. These teachers highlighted seven factors that influenced their decisions in choosing the appropriate materials for teaching reading comprehension. The factors can be divided into two categories that are factors related to the students and factors related to the instructional materials. There are four main themes generated under factors related to students which are background knowledge, proficiency level, interests and skills development. For the latter, three themes identified are authenticity, level of difficulty and appealing content.

#### **4.1 Background knowledge**

Arias (2007) and Aloqaili (2012) asserted that prior knowledge has a crucial impact on learners' ability to comprehend a text. Both researchers argued that for reading texts to be meaningful and effective, they have to tap on learners' schemata. Based on the findings, all of the participants mentioned that learners' background knowledge play a huge role in their decisions of the reading texts to be utilised. For instance, Participant 1 chose texts on topics such as chocolate and crossing the wadi. While participant 2 and 3 chose texts on hair with regards to Islamic beliefs, dilemmas and Arab culture. The participants also justified that they chose the texts based on their understanding that their learners were able to relate to the texts



using their existing knowledge. They also highlighted that when the students were able to relate to the texts, the reading became meaningful and beneficial.

“ ... it must tackle students’ background knowledge of the topic. It must be able to attract students’ attention and interest” (P2, IN2)

“They can understand better as the materials used are closely related to their life. They are also easy to carry out. They make the reading lesson be more meaningful and beneficial” (P3, IN1)

#### **4.2 Proficiency Level**

Most studies on instructional materials in language acquisition highlighted learners’ proficiency as one of the key factors in choosing effective materials (Howard & Major, 2004; Arias, 2007; Tomlinson, 2011; Aloqaili, 2012; Intan Safinas et al., 2012; Garton & Graves, 2014; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). Reading materials need to meet learners’ language ability for the materials to be comprehensible to the learners.

Based on the interviews, the participants were given classes with multiple proficiency level learners in a classroom. All of the participants collectively emphasised that they selected reading materials to cater to the diverse proficiency level learners. Hence, the materials they selected were of intermediate level of difficulty to ensure that all of the learners were able to comprehend the texts. However, the participants emphasised that although they chose average difficulty texts, they gave achievable tasks for the learners to do.

“Each student has their own proficiency and interest. There is a mixture of good, average and weak students in my classroom. So, it’s hard for me to you know, help them with weaknesses and strengths in reading individually. I usually prepare materials that are in average difficulty so that it can cater to all levels of students” (P1, IN2)

“I can’t choose materials that cater to individual learning objectives. I believe that my students have different reading proficiency. I usually make sure that the materials I use suit average level of difficulty. So, you know all of them can do it. It might still be challenging, but at least they can do it” (P2, IN 2)

#### **4.3 Learners’ Interest**

Learners’ interest has been highlighted as a crucial factor in providing meaningful input and promoting reading comprehension (Beglar, Hunt & Kite, 2011; Tomlinson, 2011). The participants agreed that taking time to know students’ interest and providing reading materials that cater to it worked as a leverage that helped in reading comprehension. They also believed that to maintain students’ attention, reading materials should be perceived as meaningful and purposeful to the learners.

“Reading is not something that students usually consider as a hobby. Most of them even despise reading. I had a student of mine who literally rolls his eyes whenever we start the reading lesson. So, I try my best to include something that is easy and fun to them” (P1, IN 2)

“From the first week of the session, I try to get to know them. Get to know what their interest are. I’ll make a point of you know choosing the topics they like in turns” (P2, IN 2)

“Reading is not an easy task. They don’t really fancy reading. The students I mean. By using interesting and meaningful materials, they can see the purpose of reading and see it as an active process instead of a meaningless one” (P3, IN 2)

#### **4.4 Skills development**

In the teaching of reading comprehension, it is important that learners are exposed to materials that promote development of language skills (Howard & Major, 2004). Language teachers need to be able to get learners to use their reading skills and promote development of the skills.

Participants 1 and 2 claimed in their interviews that it was significant to be able to use reading materials that did not only provide students with new skills but also developed the present skills. They mentioned that a good reading material should be able to build and enhance their skills.

“From a perspective of an English teacher, a good reading material must be meaningful. It must be purposeful and beneficial for students’ reading skills. It is also supposed to be able to you know, connect the dots” (P1. IN 1)

“In simple words, it’s not too difficult, but it’s good enough to make them apply what they have learned previously and also learn new skills. It’s no too much for them to absorb” P2, IN 1)

“I want my students to improve. All teachers want that. But I believe in gradual improvement. I walk my students through gradual improvement. For instance, if today’s topic is about life cycle of an animal and they manage to achieve the learning objectives, tomorrow’s lesson can be moved to a slightly difficult text like extinction” (P3, IN 1)

The four factors related to the target learners clearly echoed the principles in materials selection and development asserted by many researchers in the field (Howard and Major, 2004; Tomlinson, 2011). Another three factors highlighted by all the participants discussed about the characteristics of the materials are authenticity, level of difficulty and appealing content.

#### **4.5 Authenticity**

Interestingly, all of the participants emphasised on how authentic reading materials encouraged the learners to apply the reading skills acquired in class to their real life experience. They justified the relationship between authentic materials and its close connection to learners’ personal experience made these materials served a purpose and became relevant in the reading class.

“I use a lot of materials that are relatable to them. And they must also be authentic. So, it can gauge their understanding better when they can see it in their daily life. I also make sure that the materials include the language skills so that they can see the relationship among all those skills. It can open their eyes on the relevance of the materials” (P2, IN 1)

“They can understand better as the materials used are closely related to their life. They are also easy to carry out. They make reading lesson be more meaningful and beneficial” (P3, IN 1)

#### **4.6 Level of difficulty**

From the interviews conducted, the level of difficulty of texts was highlighted as one of the factors that underlay the participants’ decision in choosing reading texts. Interestingly, all of the participants mentioned the connection between the level of difficulty of the reading materials and the development of the learners’ reading ability. According to them, utilising materials that challenged learners could motivate the learners to improve their reading skills.

“We need to prepare a lesson that students are ready to learn if their learning experience is to be effective. For example, the level of difficulty of the reading text. I always ask myself, “Are they ready to move to the next level?” or “Can they cope with this kind of text already?”, before I select the materials” (P1, IN 2)

“I focus more on their abilities. I like to challenge my students once I know they can manage the present reading task. I usually bring in materials that are slightly difficult than what they had previously” (P3, IN 2)

#### **4.7 Appealing content**

Engaging materials is one of the characteristics of the materials that the participants consistently highlight during the interview. Tomlinson (2011) highlighted that teachers need to achieve impact through the instructional materials selected by choosing texts with appealing content from various sources. The participants clearly stated in the interviews that they chose topics that appeal to their learners.

“I usually prepare materials that are in average difficulty so that it can cater to all levels of students, and it also must be interesting. To tackle a huge number of students, we need to make sure that the topics and the activities are attractive enough to get them going throughout the lesson” (P1, IN 2)

“In my opinion, it must tackle students’ background knowledge of the topic. It must be able to attract students’ attention and interest. If they are not interested in the topic, the lesson will not be effective as I hope it would be” (P2, IN 2)



## 5. Conclusion

This qualitative study explored the factors that underlay the decisions made by the Libyan English language teachers regarding the instructional materials used in their reading classes. The findings of this study supported past findings in the selection of EFL reading materials whereby materials were selected based on a set of particular criteria (Howard & Major, 2004; Arias, 2007; Tomlinson, 2011; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). The participants' retrospective feedback have indicated that they have formed a set of imprinted principles that guided their decisions (Abdul Hadi & Intan Safinas, 2017).

The findings have shown that the participants made decisions based on two main elements which are learners and materials. Four factors related to learners that influenced their decisions are background knowledge, proficiency level, interests and skills development, while three factors are connected to materials which are authenticity, difficulty level and appealing content. Clearly, the local contexts dominantly influenced the teachers' decisions as reported in many studies on materials selection in English language teaching (Howard & Major, 2004; Arias, 2007; Tomlinson, 2011). The participants also highlighted the strong association between interest and motivation and how it has a huge impact on promoting reading skills among learners with multiple learning ability.

This study provided evidence that teachers' knowledge, beliefs, assumptions and experience informed their instructional decisions and selection of materials. In the context of the Libyan EFL teachers, their retrospective comments showed their shared conceptions of the selection criteria. Their decisions were also heavily influenced by the learners' characteristics and attitude towards the language and their motivation to read. Evidently, the teachers conceptualised their selections of reading materials based on their principles, beliefs and understanding that are parallel to the guidelines and principles in language teaching materials selection.

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