

Using online authentic materials and language corpus to foster vocabulary acquisition in English

El uso de materiales auténticos y corpus lingüísticos en línea para fomentar la adquisición de vocabulario en Inglés

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Abstract

The use of authentic materials in English language teaching has been the focus of study of many professionals of this field. Consequently, researchers have recognised that the use of authentic materials for the acquisition of new vocabulary contributes to the development of reading comprehension skills in students of English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL). This study intends to analyse the theoretical conceptions about teaching vocabulary using online authentic materials and language corpus for language skills development, especially in a world context in which teaching using the benefits of ICT has become an important asset to schools because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The methodology and the main results of a study conducted at the University of Cienfuegos and the University of Oriente are described in the article, as well as the main findings arising from the research.

Key words: online authentic materials, vocabulary, English language teaching.

Resumen

El empleo de materiales auténticos para la enseñanza del Inglés ha sido un tema tratado por los profesionales de esta rama. Consecuentemente, los investigadores han reconocido que el uso de materiales auténticos para la adquisición de nuevo vocabulario contribuye a desarrollar mejores habilidades de comprensión lectora en los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE). Este estudio pretende analizar las concepciones teóricas sobre la enseñanza del vocabulario empleando materiales auténticos online y corpus lingüísticos para el desarrollo de las habilidades lingüísticas, especialmente en un contexto global en el que la enseñanza mediante las TICs se ha convertido en una garantía para las escuelas debido a la pandemia del Covid-19. La metodología y principales resultados del y el estudio realizado en la Universidad de Cienfuegos y la Universidad de Oriente se describen en el artículo, así como los principales hallazgos de la investigación.

Palabras clave: materiales auténticos en línea, vocabulario, enseñanza del inglés

Introduction

Teaching a foreign language is a challenging task. Consequently, the four linguistic skills need a simultaneous and interrelated development to achieve learning successfully. The way the language teacher helps to develop or fosters these skills has been the focus of many scientific studies. The teaching-learning process of English has been characterised by the use of various methods since the second half of the 20th century, mainly aimed at the development of language skills. However, some skills have been neglected over the years, while others like those related to production have been focused more (Abreus, Marrero & Vazquez, 2011).

In this process, teaching aids have helped teachers of English improve their teaching and foster the development of integrated skills. Thus, the communicative approach emerged trying to reach better learning outcomes, where teaching aids have played an important role. There is a wide variety of teaching aids, but the use of authentic materials and its effectiveness to develop language skills have been deeply studied and proven (Abdel-Haq & Al-Hadi, 2018). Nevertheless, the fast development of current society, the various scientific advances, and the revolution the use of internet has caused in human lives; as well as the current living conditions imposed by a pandemic have motivated the course of this research. The use of online authentic materials is a tool English teachers can make use of because its availability for students in times when distance education has become the core option.

The use of authentic materials has been the object of study of previous research in which their usefulness in the development of language skills has been demonstrated, playing a decisive role in the acquisition of vocabulary. However, teachers should bear in mind that authentic materials are not developed for teaching purposes, but rather they are produced by and for native speakers of a language (Abreus & Haro, 2019). In addition, authentic materials are taken from newspapers, the radio, internet, among other sources; therefore, the language used is not adapted for teaching purposes (Spratt, Pulverness & Williams, 2011; Abreus & Haro, 2019), and living outside the linguistic environment often results in limitations related to language proficiency for learners.

The foregoing allows the authors to reinforce the usefulness of the use of authentic materials to bring the student closer to the foreign language in its natural context of production. Using internet to this end would furtherly facilitate this process due to its wide reach and acceptance among young generations. Many researchers have played the focus on the use of online authentic materials to acquire vocabulary, specially focusing

in the development of reading comprehension as one of the language skills. Crandall et al. (2016), who states that reading is built from two components (word recognition and comprehension), highlights the importance of reading in vocabulary acquisition and contextualization. Thus, developing reading comprehension leads to the improvement, almost unconscious, of integrated language skills.

A great deal of authentic material is found online. This is currently an asset, given both students skills to work online, and the conditions imposed by a pandemic situation worldwide. Thus, Nunan's (1989) concern on the difficulty of accessing authentic input to use in the classroom, particularly for teachers in a foreign language context, can be resolved. Anyone with an internet connection has more spoken and written authentic data at their fingertips than they could possibly know what to do with, so it is the teachers of foreign languages responsibility to make good use of this information for language learning.

On the other hand, vocabulary acquisition also benefits from the use of linguistic corpus. Corpus analysis is relevant to identify the possible and more frequent co-occurrences of words in natural language use, in view of the work with strategies linked to corpora (Escudero, 2006). Corpora are presented as online tools, and there is a corpus for every natural language. Since these co-occurrences are determined using the possible contexts in which the word is most frequently inserted, corpus texts must always be native production with real usage aims, based on the standard variants of the language; therefore, authentic texts. The former indicates that authentic materials not only enhance reading comprehension per se, but also when used as language corpora, reinforce vocabulary acquisition.

The following sections present a study conducted with English Language Students at the universities of Cienfuegos and Oriente (Santiago de Cuba), aimed at diagnosing vocabulary acquisition in reading comprehension development using online authentic materials, creating tasks for vocabulary acquisition based on students' level, and applying the tasks as follow-up.

Material and methods

The study was conducted using a sample of 35 students majoring in English at the University of Cienfuegos (15) and the University of Oriente (20) in Cuba. All participants were in second year of the major during the research development. Students participating had had previous exposure to the foreign language, and developed skills in all four major

language skills at certain level. As well, they had had prior contact with authentic language, which was essential to include them in the study. The language used in online authentic materials requires previous knowledge of grammatical structures, lexical items, using word parts, such as prefixes, suffixes, and roots, to determine the meanings of words. Thus, the level of language participants had was essential for their inclusion in the study. In all cases, students had an A2 level of language usage, according to the Common European Framework of References (CEFR).

The research process included three stages:

- A diagnostic stage, where the researchers explored the level of vocabulary acquisition participants showed while reading comprehension development using online authentic materials (this was developed thought a diagnosis test).
- A tasks-creation stage, where the researchers elaborated a set of tasks for vocabulary acquisition according to the level of students
- An assessment stage, where the application of tasks was followed up

Collecting data and data analysis are two of the most important steps in conducting research. In order to collect data for the diagnostic stage, a test was applied to the 35 participants involved in the study. The diagnosis test intended to explore how students took into consideration the instructional techniques to promote the development of students' core vocabulary revisited by Pan (2017); and theorized in the Discussion session of this article.

Participants were exposed to an online authentic text, accessible through <https://www.webforum.org/agenda/2020/09/covid-19-what-you-need-to-know-about-the-coronavirus-pandemic-on-23-september/>. The material was about COVID-19: What you need to know about the coronavirus pandemic on 23 September, and consists of three sections describing the COVID-19 situation worldwide at that moment. The students were asked to identify at least 5 words containing suffixes, 5 compound words, and 2 words with prefixes in the material. After identifying the words, they had to complete the reading comprehension tasks assigned. Then, they had to use Skell Sketch Engine, a state-of-the-art web-based tool for building, managing and exploring large text collections in English, the different meanings, co-occurrences and usages of the words and determine the meaning and sense that suits context (see <http://www.sketchengine.co.uk/>).

In the second part of the study, the researchers created a proposal of tasks intended for vocabulary acquisition in language students. This time the focus was on the language items that could be reinforced using the Skell Sketch Engine corpus, and thus contribute

to develop reading comprehension skills. Online authentic materials were selected from the internet, following the requisites for authentic materials selections presented in the Discussion section of this article. Finally, some of the tasks designed were applied to the same sample students who participated in the diagnosis tests, so that the progress in vocabulary acquisition could be assessed.

Approaching the proposal for vocabulary acquisition using online authentic materials and linguistic corpus

After analysing the results of the diagnosis test of the students, the authors elaborated a proposal for vocabulary acquisition, taking as main basis the use of online authentic materials and linguistic corpus to foster reading comprehension.

In this section, the authors present two sample tasks of the ones elaborated, so that readers can follow a model for tasks creation on their own. These two tasks are also analysed in the Results section.

Task 1. Go to <http://www.natureindex.com/institution-outputs/australia/the-university-of-queensland-up/>, and read the text “Wildlife threatened by mining in renewable-energy future”. Then, complete the following items:

- a) Lexis comprises individual vocabulary items or combination of words that convey a specific meaning. From the previous excerpt take out: all compound words you find, all derived words you find, at least 10 nouns and 5 adjectives.
- b) In the cases of derivation, take out items having the following patterns
 - Prefix + base word
 - base word + suffix
 - prefix + base word + suffix
 - a word formed out of 0 derivation or conversion
- c) When can we say affixes are derivational and when inflectional? Take out examples from the previous excerpts.
- d) Select three of the compounds from exercise a) and determine the five more frequent usages in the English Language Corpus. Analyze the meaning and sense these co-occurrences indicate, and select the one that suits the context of the text. You can use the corpus tool Skell Sketch Engine (<https://skell.sketchengine.co.uk/un.cgi>).
- e) Read the text again and answer the following questions:
 - Why are lithium, titanium and copper so important in present day?
 - What have researches found out?

- What is the reason for this mining surge?
- Why could this urgent need for renewable energies prove worse for biodiversity than climate change?
- What must conservation efforts aim at?

Task 2. Go to <https://www.nwf.org/Home/Magazines/National-Wildlife/2020/Oct-Nov/Animals/Red-Wolves>, and read the text. Then complete the following chart as suggested. All the examples should be from the article.

PART OF SPEECH	EXAMPLE	FUNCTION
Adjective (superlative)		. To describe or give information about a noun, pronoun or part of a sentence, in a superlative degree
Conjunction		. To join words, sentences or parts of sentences
Preposition		. To connect a noun, noun phrase or pronoun to another word or phrase

b) Select from the text four prepositions, and consult the English Language Corpus in Skell Sketch Engine to put examples of the different notions they can indicate. That is, time, location, etc. Organize your extracts in the following chart (the first one is offered as example):

PREPOSITION	TIME	LOCATION	LINK OR COMPANY	MODIFIER OF VERB
in	<i>Senator Stennis announced the decision in winter...</i>	<i>...she had refused to give further information. The issue was clearly already in the drawer...</i>	-	<i>...that is because our university owns the license to a program to turn in plagiarism...</i>

2.1 Match the words listed 1 to 5 with the correct description listed A to D. you can use the descriptions more than once.

1. non-profit, vice coordinator, misperceptions
2. photographer, biologists, eastern
3. range, habitat, country
4. declining, fall, coyotes, red wolves

5. wolf pups, filmmaker, landscape, Atlantic Regional Center, Species Survival Plan, gunshots, much-maligned canid cousin

- A. Compound words
- B. Lexical sets
- C. Prefix + Base words
- D. Base word + suffix

2.2 Read the article again and answer the following questions:

- . Why is the issue of landowner cooperation and social acceptance of the wolf crucial for its recovery?
- . What has happened after this issue went to press?
- . What are some of the causes why these wolves have been very close to extinction?
- . Is this the first attempt to reintroduce this wolf to the wild? Give reasons for your answer.

Results

The results of the study described in this section are related to the first and third stages determined in this research. That is, the diagnostic stage and the assessment stage.

As previously stated, during the *diagnostic stage*, participants were asked to complete three specific tasks. The first one was identifying in the material at least 5 words containing suffixes, 5 compound words, and 2 words with prefixes. The main results obtained in this task are summarised in the following tables.

Table 1 shows that only 53.3% of the sample students of the University of Cienfuegos (UCf) were able to identify at least 5 words with suffixes in the material, while a 45% of the sample students from the University of Oriente (UO) were able to complete the task. On the other hand, 40% of the sample students overall were able to identify from 3 to 4 words with suffix in the material provided, while only 11.4% of the participants were able to complete the task at a basic level. The most common answers to this item included the words: *improvement*, *globally*, *recently*, *approximately*, and *vitality*. Most of them associated to the use of the suffix –ly to construct adverbs in English.

Table 1: Identifying words with suffix

	Total students diagnosed	Identified 5 words with suffix	Identified 3-4 words with suffix	Identified 2 words with suffix
University of Cienfuegos	15	8	6	1
University of Oriente	20	9	8	3
Total	35	17	14	4

Table 2 shows the results of the item related to the identification of compound words, 60 % of the sample were able to complete the task accordingly, identifying as compound, among others, words such as *overseas*, *worldwide*, *crossroads*, *lockdown*, and *coronavirus*. Twelve students were able to identify from 3 to 4 compound words, representing 34.2% of the sample. Only 5.7% of the participants were able to identify 2 compound words, which is a minimum representation of the sample. In general, only 40% of the students were not able to complete the task fully, which indicates this is a lexical aspect that needs attention during the teaching process.

Table 2: Identifying compound words

	Total students diagnosed	Identified 5 compound words	Identified 3-4 compound words	Identified 2 compound words
University of Cienfuegos	15	10	5	0
University of Oriente	20	11	7	2
Total	35	21	12	2

Finally, Table 3 shows the results of the item related to identifying words with prefix. This time, 45.7% of the total sample was able to identify 2 words with prefix, as required in the task, which made 40% of the sample from UCF, and 50% of the sample from UO. Forty percent of the total sample was able to recognise at least one word with the prefix in the material, while only 14.2% of the participants identified no word with prefix at all. The most common words identified were *antiviral* and *postpartum*.

Table 3: Identifying words with prefix

	Total students diagnosed	Identified 2 words with prefix	Identified 1 word with prefix	Identified no word with prefix
University of Cienfuegos	15	6	6	3
University of Oriente	20	10	8	2
Total	35	16	14	5

The second part of the diagnostic test included completing reading comprehension tasks, where students had to read for detail, read for specific purposes and develop intensive reading activities. All these types of reading subskills are addressed to in the Discussion section. The main results from this part are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4: Reading comprehension tasks completion

	Total students diagnosed	Read for details	Read for specific information	Intensive reading activities
University of Cienfuegos	15	12	11	12
University of Oriente	20	14	15	18
Total	35	26	26	30

As Table 4 shows, 74 % of the total sample were able to complete the tasks in which they had to read for details and for specific information. However, the distribution of achievement rates varied from one university to another. The sample students from the UCf were 10 % better in performance during comprehension tasks as such. On the other hand, in relation to intensive reading activities, the performance of students from UO did better. Overall, 85,7% of the sample was able to complete the tasks successfully.

For the final part of the diagnostic, students had to use a corpus-based tool (Skell Sketch Engine) to deepen in the different meanings, co-occurrences and usages, of the words with prefixes and the compounds, and determine the meaning and sense that suits the context. Since the task was aimed at analyzing the linguistic use of the words mentioned, based on their meaning and sense in context, the search forms applied in Skell were *sentence context*, *similar words*, and *collocations*. Table 5 shows the results from this part.

Table 5: Corpus analysis

	Total students diagnosed	Recognition of the different word meanings	Recognition of different usages	Identification of meaning and sense suitable to context
University of Cienfuegos	15	8	13	8
University of Oriente	20	14	14	17
Total	35	22	27	25

After conducting the diagnostic and elaborating the proposal for vocabulary acquisition using online authentic materials and language corpus, the researchers assigned students the completion of six tasks (the two sample tasks previously presented are part of them). These tasks were developed using materials selected by professors beforehand, following the requirements theorised in the Discussion section of this article.

The analysis of the application of the sample tasks included in this article is presented hereinafter.

The first task was applied to the same students who were diagnosed at the University of Cienfuegos and the University of Oriente. The pattern followed for the analysis was the same as for the analysis of the results of the diagnostic test. Table 6 summarises the results of the assessment of vocabulary acquisition during this first task.

Table 6: Results from the application of task 1

	Total students assessed	Successfully completed items a) b) & c)	Successfully completed item d)	Successfully completed items e) & f)
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University of Cienfuegos	15	13	15	14
University of Oriente	20	18	20	20
Total	35	31	35	34

The results of the task application were grouped according to the objective of each item. The first column shows an integrated analysis of the performance of participants in all items related to word construction, derivation, and lexis as such, while the second column presents the results of the use of corpus to examine the meaning and sense the co-occurrences indicate in each case. Finally, the last column show the results obtained in the reading comprehension activities.

In relation to lexis and vocabulary recognition through word formation, 88.5% of participants were able to complete successfully the majority of the items, including coherent answers to the identification of derivational and inflectional affixes (prefixes and suffixes). Consequently, 100 % of the students improved their vocabulary acquisition at the time they corroborated and/or looked for new meanings of words using the linguistic corpus provided. Thus, the performance in reading comprehension activities during this task improved 9,6 % over the percent obtained during the diagnostic test. That is, 97,1 % of the sample was able to complete reading comprehension tasks successfully at this stage, while only 87,5 % was able to do it in the initial stage of the research.

The second task illustrated before was also applied. This time, the results obtained were the following:

Table 7: Results from the application of task 2

	Total students assessed	Successfully completed item a)	Successfully completed item b)	Successfully completed items 2.1 & 2.2
University of Cienfuegos	15	12	13	15
University of Oriente	20	17	18	20
Total	35	29	31	35

Completion of the first item related to lexis acquisition was successful at this stage of the research. This time 80 % of the students assessed from the UCf were able to complete the task, while 85 % of the sample from UO provided positive answers. Overall, 82,8 % of the total students were able to complete the chart using examples from the online article. On the other hand, 88,5 % were able to develop a corpus analysis of the vocabulary introduced. During this task item, students were able to exemplify the different notions prepositions could indicate in the text.

Item 2.1 reinforced vocabulary acquisition and help students sort out different aspects of word formation. This item, along with the one devoted to reading comprehension, was completed successfully by 100 % of the students assessed during the study.

Discussion

As theorised by Pan (2017) and Seifert et al. (2017), reading comprehension and vocabulary are strongly correlated. Limited knowledge of vocabulary often limits learners from using the foreign language fluently, and comprehending the main ideas stated in different types of materials. Thus, vocabulary needs to be acquired in a systematic way. According to Abdel-Haq & Al-Hadi (2018),

McCarthy (1990) argued that no matter how well the foreign language learner learns grammar, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in the foreign language could not happen in a meaningful way.

Linguistic knowledge facilitates comprehension, as well as it represents a useful tool in the acquisition of vocabulary, since it is the process by which lexical information, sentences and discourses are interpreted. Lexical information includes compounding, derivation, and conversion. Compounding refers to the most common type of word-formation in English, which is the combination of two words [free morphemes] to create a new word, commonly a noun, verb, or adjective; while derivation, in descriptive linguistics and traditional grammar, refers to the formation of a word by changing the form of the base or by adding affixes to it. Conversion, on the other hand, refers to the word-formation process, which involves the transfer of the base from a word class to another without a physical change in its form.

Theorists have illustrated instructional techniques to promote the development of the most important and high-frequency words used by students. The authors of this article follow the ideas stated by Pan (2017), who identified and revisited some of the techniques mentioned for vocabulary acquisition. These techniques include:

- working with word pairs in which a foreign language word is matched with the translation in the mother tongue of the student;
- saying the word out loud reinforces it in students' memory with it;
- making correlations between a new word and the text in which it appears emphasising learning from context;

- gaining more comprehension of a word meanings and functions by seeing it several times in different contexts;
- providing collocations and idioms, using prefixes, suffixes, and roots, making semantic maps of words, and
- with the advent of corpora, working with words which tend to co-occur.

The above-mentioned aspects were taken into account by the authors of the current study from the diagnosis stage to the design and application of the proposal for vocabulary acquisition. Accordingly, these aspects were approached using online authentic materials, which were selected following the criteria stated for authentic material selection stated by Alvarez (2007), and revisited by Abreus & Haro (2019). These criteria include:

- learner characteristics
- curriculum goals
- accessibility
- easy to handle material
- learner motivation
- learner implication
- approaches
- thematic field

As stated before, vocabulary is a vital component of reading comprehension (Pan, 2017), and the role of reading in improving vocabulary acquisition is essential. Bright and McGregor (1970) stated that where there is a little reading, there would be little language learning. In regards to text comprehension, Motealegre (2004) states that it starts primarily by lexical representations (nouns, verbs y adjectives), and information-containing lexical and sub-lexical elements. It follows then to determine sense and meaning when these lexical representations are placed in context, where they acquire a mono-semantic character. Therefore, text comprehension goes beyond the literal understanding of each word, to the active processing, elaboration and abstraction of ideas, by which language corpus plays a major role (Escalona, 2017).

Corpus-based activities can be used as a data-driven methodology for large quantities of machine-readable running text. The result of the study hereby presented reveals that online corpus tools prove effective to determine the sense and meaning of words and phrases in different contexts in an immediate way. Corpora provide language learners with a large collection of grammatical patterns, collocation and colligation of words and phrases to aid their semantic analysis in a very short time. Thus, it provides quantities of

authentic texts and update senses of words/phrases for analysis, especially in an open corpus. As stated by Frege (2013), corpora can be assembled ad hoc, selected according to specific language varieties, genres, topics, etc, and the specific function of the analysis for a given application, simply by clicking a button. Consequently, the use of online corpora is of paramount importance in reading comprehension tasks, especially in distance-learning contexts.

On the other hand, all the tasks developed for vocabulary acquisition in this study foster the development of reading comprehension through the development of reading subskills. These subskills, as theorised by Spratt, Pulverness & Williams (2011), involve reading for specific information (scanning), reading for details, reading for gist (skimming), deducing meaning from context, understanding text structure, inferring, and predicting. Furthermore, the tasks designed prompts learners to examine the language used in the online authentic materials. Thus, the aim of these tasks is to make learners more aware of how language is used, which, according to the authors above, is sometimes called intensive reading.

Conclusions

1. *During this research, authors have evidenced the importance of using authentic materials and linguistic corpus to develop skills in English-as-a-foreign-language. Thus, using authentic materials available online has been crucial given the current context worldwide.*
2. *There was a notable advance in students reading comprehension after they started to use authentic texts and corpus to deepen into lexical features of language. The application of authentic materials in English lessons is a need; provided the materials are selected correctly, and respond to the interests of students and their specific needs, the usefulness of them has no limits.*

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