Enhancing EFL Reading Proficiency through Authentic Assessment: A Case Study on Student Engagement and Learning Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Authentic assessment includes alternative assessments that engage students through authentic tasks with authentic materials. It encompasses performance assessments, portfolios, self-assessments, etc. These types of assessment may help teachers monitor students' learning progress and attitudes. In response to this, the present study aimed to discover students' responses regarding the application of authentic assessment to help them read longer English texts. To achieve the purpose of the study, a case study was employed. Data were gathered from 16 weeks of observation, students' work, and forms of students' self-assessment. The results of the study revealed that despite a shift on the students' motivation and learning behavior, a positive trend was indicated. In the beginning, students tended to show anxiety and hesitance when expressing their interpretation of reading text during in-class discussions. Over time, they gradually invested more effort in demonstrating their thoughts on reading materials. Additionally, the number of students actively delivering opinions increased.

I. Introduction

Authentic assessment emphasizes a learner-centered approach that encourages students' skill demonstration [1], [2]. In EFL reading class, students are highly encouraged to participate in social interactions with peers and teachers through in-class discussions [3]. By actively participating in these interactions, students can enhance their engagement with texts and receive valuable inputs from peers and teacher, which can enrich their perspectives in interpreting reading materials [4]–[6]. Despite these advantages, there is a notable gap in understanding how authentic assessment affects students' reading skills in diverse educational contexts, particularly in vocational programs. Previous studies have primarily focused on traditional academic settings and left a significant gap in vocational education research [2], [7]. This gap is critical as vocational students often have different learning needs and face unique challenges compared to their peers in traditional academic tracks.

Students tend to express varied responses to the application of authentic assessment in EFL reading classes. On one hand, students express excitement about choosing their own reading materials. They find it motivating and stimulating to read materials that are familiar for them [5]. A previous study discovered that students were more inclined to choose enjoyable reading materials [7]. Furthermore, while interacting with texts they are interested in, students could internalize new vocabulary and cultural context embedded in the text [8], [9]. Additionally, the use of familiar reading materials could stimulate students to speak their mind, thus increases their confidence [7].

On the other hand, students find authentic learning challenging. In this case, students discover that authentic reading materials could be challenging when it contains difficult vocabulary and unfamiliar cultural context [5], [9]. Besides, they tend to hesitate expressing their understanding orally due to low English proficiency [7] and personality [9]. These challenges highlight the need for tailored strategies to support students to navigate authentic reading tasks successfully.

The present study aims to investigate the application of authentic assessment in an EFL reading class, particularly within a vocational program. Previous studies indicated that authentic assessment tended to provide interesting instruction for reading, including allowing students to select reading materials they are familiar with, encouraging them to express their interpretation of text in socially mediated settings, and asking for teacher's help when necessary [5], [7], [9]. However, challenges such as difficult reading materials with unfamiliar cultural codes and new vocabulary persist [8]. The differences in students' responses require further research to strengthen the understanding of response patterns, especially in vocational programs.

II. Method

A. Design

The present study employed a case study to examine progress on the students' motivation and learning behavior in an EFL reading class. The study took place in a vocational program at a public university in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia. It involved 24 students, consisting of 6 male and 18 female students and ranging from 19 to 20 years old. The students spoke Indonesian language and/or local language other than English at home, learned and used English as a medium of communication at schools, and never participated in a program abroad. They used English actively during school hours, and several used it for social media interactions.

B. Procedures

Students were enrolled in a fourth-semester reading course. This course was eligible for the ones that had completed elementary and intermediate levels of reading course. In particular, the vocational program involved in this study focused on English for Business Communication so that students were required to have proficient English skill. Consequently, skill courses were incorporated into its curriculum. At the beginning of the course, teacher explained the course outline for a semester. Students had to attend 14 meetings, and do independent reading in between the meetings. For the independent reading, students had to select any books that they were interested in, and report their interpretation of any pages they covered every week. For a semester, they had to finish at least two books.

In-class meetings will include any authentic tasks to improve students' comprehension of texts provided for class activities, and discussions with peers and teacher regarding their independent reading. Students were encouraged to demonstrate their comprehension of text orally. Students' weekly review of independent reading materials was collected every week, reviewed and graded by teacher.

C. Data Collection

The present study employed triangulation of data collection techniques, including 14-week observation, students' works including portfolio of weekly reviews and any written work produced during in-class activities, and forms of self-assessment. Firstly, observation was conducted every meeting and video-recorded. Then the video recordings were transcribed. Secondly, weekly reviews were collected every week. It contained students' interpretation of reading materials they covered for a week. Aside of weekly review, any written work produced during in-class activities were also copied, while the original ones were returned to students. Thirdly, students were encouraged to do self-assessment three times, in meeting 4, 9, and 14. Forms of self-assessment filled by students were also copied for research purposes, whereas the original were returned to students.

D. Data Analysis

The purpose of the study was to examine the students' shift of learning motivation and behavior in response to the application of authentic assessment in an EFL reading class. To answer this, the data from observation were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to discover progress of students' motivation and learning behavior. Besides, the students' work was compiled and graded using a scoring rubric to inform the students' improvement in interpreting reading text. Then forms of self-assessment were compiled, coded, and analyzed to find out if students used it to serve its purpose. Analyses from respective data were merged to yield comprehensive analyses.

III. Results and Discussion

Authentic assessment is integrated into instruction by incorporating authentic tasks, authentic materials, and self-assessment. Authentic tasks present activities that encourage students to demonstrate their comprehension of text in spoken and written ways [1]. First, the present study emphasized the use of discussions to facilitate students to share their interpretation of reading materials, thus they were encouraged to do it with peers in the presence of a teacher. At the early meetings, the students tended to look shy and hesitant in expressing their interpretation of the text. They tried to avoid their peers' or teacher's eye contact, and look at the floor, passing the opportunity to speak. Consequently, most of them ended up being quiet during class discussions. Besides, several tried to answer in English with difficulty due to their language barrier. In this case, students struggled not only to understand English reading material, but also to express their interpretations, confirming a previous study's finding that reading presents multiple challenges, from comprehension to interpretation of text [10]. On the other hand, there were the same particular students who frequently expressed interpretation and responded to teacher's inquiry. These students who frequently participated tended to demonstrate a combination of confidence, stronger English skills, and a deeper understanding of the material. Their active participation can significantly enhance their learning outcomes since engagement may positively contribute to academic success [11].

The teacher paid a careful attention during class discussions by stimulating students with questions whenever they showed hesitance in interpreting the text. In this case, the teacher's attempts aimed to encourage students' courage to express their interpretation of text at the same time to cultivate their critical thinking skills through the use of questions [12]. There were times the teacher tried to challenge hesitant or quiet students to respond to the questions. They might usually look flustered and say 'I don't know', but the teacher tried to calm them down and give them more time to think about the response. It encouraged students to push themselves elicit responses, enabling them to use English for communication. While other times, the teacher appreciated the students' active participation by giving them more stimulus to develop their critical thinking skills. Developing critical thinking skills is vital in the reading-writing activity because it plays a vital role in creating an effective communication by having the ability in evaluating and interpreting information, solving problems, and thinking creatively [13]. In particular, posing questions to students could stimulate students' L2 and critical thinking skill development [14] because critical questions could help students build better understanding of materials and think critically and creatively [15].

Another authentic task being integrated into instruction is writing a weekly review. The weekly review was considered as a writing activity that followed up the weekly independent-reading-activity the students had to undertake. It eventually served as a portfolio since it was submitted weekly. This portfolio could be a medium for teacher to monitor students' progress in developing their reading skills [16] as well as for students to monitor their own learning progress [17]. On one hand, it allows teachers to discover if the students made an improvement in expressing their reading comprehension. On the other hand, through writing a review, students could engage themselves in a complex language-learning process. Firstly, the students were encouraged to comprehend the text by decoding vocabulary, parsing syntax, and using metacognitive strategies [18]. This process enables them to generate critical analysis where they could evaluate content, connect it to prior knowledge, and synthesize information with their insights. Secondly, the students had to organize their thoughts, plan the review with coherent arguments and logical flow, and transform these ideas into text with appropriate L2 vocabulary and correct L2 grammar. However, it could be challenging due to their limited L2 proficiency [7]. Thirdly, the revision and editing stages may require the students to reflect, identify areas for improvement, and make adjustments, enhancing their writing skills and language proficiency, thus making the weekly review a crucial exercise for L2 acquisition and literacy development. This complex language-learning process occurred through portfolio as an authentic task, enabling students to develop their linguistic, critical-thinking, and self-regulation skills [17], [19].

At the first few weeks of the semester, the weekly reviews that contained the students' interpretation of reading materials tended to be in low quality. Specifically, they barely wrote interpretation of the text, as indicated by the following excerpt.

Hazel convinced August that they could overcome their hard times together. Then they got back together.

The excerpt above shows that the quality of the review tends to demonstrate a surface-level engagement with the reading material. In this case, the student only recounted what he read without adding deeper meanings, themes, or implications of the text. It was concluded from his tendency to merely summarize the plot, as illustrated by the excerpt. It lacks any analytical depth, and fails to explore the characters' motivations, the significance of their reconciliation, or the broader themes of resilience and companionship that the text might address. The absence of such analysis suggest that students were not engaging critically with the material.

Nevertheless, the students' literary interpretation skills and engagement with reading materials may improve through consistent authentic assessment practices [17]. Aligning to that direction, the teacher provided feedback on the students' weekly reviews. In this case, teacher's feedback could be a defining component to improve student's learning [20]. It may enable students to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses, promoting students to advance their knowledge and skills [20], [21]. Additionally, the combination of using questions and providing feedback could gradually enhance students' motivation and confidence to actively participate in the learning process [12], [22]. Further, learning strategies that engage students in social interaction such as using questions and providing feedback tended to receive positive feedback from students and positively affect students' learning attitudes [21].

In later meetings, other authentic tasks, such as gallery walk, mind-mapping presentation, and many other activities, were employed within the classroom to enhance students' reading comprehension and confidence in expressing their interpretation of text. The authenticity of tasks that underscores students' active participation and interaction with peers through the oral exchange of text interpretations caused the class become lively. It demonstrated that active participation and meaningful social interactions are crucial for language development [23].

Over time, across the meetings, students became more comfortable expressing opinions. For instance, the following excerpt illustrate their evolving engagement:

[1] Don't disclose too much personal information. Because everyone wants to have their own private life, and sometimes it is not necessary for other people to know about it.

[2] For me, I did online dating to have serious relationship, not just for having fun.

[3] I joined the online dating, but I don't want to do that again because my previous partner was annoying.

Compared to the beginning of the semester where students tended to avoid attention, the students became chattier and incorporated details in their opinions, such as their life principle and personal experience. This finding highlights how authentic tasks that create a conducive learning environment by encouraging students to exchange interpretations orally, leading to increased comfort and willingness to express opinions. This transformation from initial reticence to openly sharing detailed personal insights and experiences may indicate improved language skills and confidence. It emphasizes that authentic tasks could promote deeper engagement and the practical application of language skills in social contexts [24].

Further, the gradual increase in students' confidence and their willingness to share personal experiences can be attributed to the supportive and interactive nature of authentic tasks. These tasks may not only make learning more relevant and engaging but also help in reducing anxiety and building a positive classroom culture, which are essential for effective language learning [25]. By providing opportunities for students to practice in real-life contexts, authentic tasks bridge the gap between classroom learning and practical application, thereby enhancing both comprehension and communication skills [26], [27].

Building on this foundation, through a series of stimulating authentic tasks that cultivated students' critical thinking skills, they showed improvement in generating interpretation of the reading materials. Consider the following excerpt:

I agreed with Dr. Schwartz's advice written in page 35 'don't tell little white lies' because we should be ourselves if we want to join online dating. We also should avoid causing our partner disappointed with us by not lying, even not lying for a good sake.

From the excerpt, the student demonstrated a significant progress in interpreting the text by incorporating a personal point of view. This indicates the development of critical thinking skills, as evidenced by the students' ability to decode explicit information "don't tell white lies" and synthesize it into a broader ethical stance against lying for any reason, even with good intentions [28].

Critical thinking in L2 learning involves not just understanding the surface meaning of texts but engaging deeper analysis and personal reflection [29]. The students' response illustrates this by moving beyond mere comprehension to evaluating and internalizing the text's moral implications, a sign of enhanced critical thinking. Furthermore, the student's ability to relate the advice to personal behavior in online dating contexts shows an application of the text to real-life scenarios, which is a higher-order cognitive skill. This shift from basic comprehension to application and analysis aligns with educational theories that emphasize the importance of authentic tasks in fostering critical thinking and deeper engagement [30].

Moreover, the integration of authentic assessment into instruction not only bolsters critical thinking and comprehension skills but also empowers students by giving them autonomy in their learning. For example, when the students were allowed to choose their own books, they were motivated to finish reading. In class discussions, several students admitted:

[1] It is a good thing to choose a book I like. I can choose a book that is easy-reading.

[2] When I read a book that I like, I am attracted to read it again and again until I finish the whole book.

[3] I love the idea to choose my own book. I don't like reading non-fiction. It is difficult to understand, and I get bored easily.

The students found self-picked books stimulating and motivating [5]. They expressed that they voluntary found time to read when they loved the book, as shown by the following excerpt.

[1] Read 50 pages of English novel in 2 hours.

[2] Reading without being sleepy and motivated to know more about it.

This supports previous research indicating that students tended to maintain their pleasure for reading when they were given autonomy to regulate their own reading activity [31]. Particularly for students with higher English proficiency, they tended to finish reading faster and find the independent reading activity exciting [5], [32].

The ability to choose their own reading material aligns with principles of self-determination theory, that posits autonomy is a critical factor in motivation and engagement [33]. By allowing students to select texts that resonate with their interests, authentic assessment fosters intrinsic motivation, thus, it could enhance engagement and investment in the reading process. This increased motivation is crucial for L2 learners since it may lead to greater exposure to the language, which is essential for language acquisition in L2 reading activities [34].

Nevertheless, many students revealed that reading could be challenging, as shown in the following excerpts from students' self-assessment.

[1] I think I am not a good reader. It is hard for me to follow the story. And there are many difficult vocabulary.

[2] I am a newbie in reading. I read several times to understand what it means. Sometimes I do not understand many words. I search in dictionary, but I can't find them.

[3] It is weird. I know the meaning of the vocabulary, but I don't understand what it means. I must read the part many times. It exhausted me.

These excerpts shows that students often experienced difficulties in reading English books due to several factors, such as a lack of target language intuition, limited vocabulary, and a lack of cultural and rhetorical knowledge of target language [5], [9], [28], [35]. When students do not have sufficient

target language intuition, understanding the context of the story becomes challenging. Additionally, a limited vocabulary can hinder students from finishing reading the book because it makes understanding the context difficult, consequently decreasing the pleasure of reading.

Thus, while authentic assessment can significantly enhance engagement, critical thinking, and learning behavior, it also highlights the need for targeted instructional support to address the specific challenges faced by L2 learners in reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Effective scaffolding and ongoing feedback are crucial in helping students overcome these hurdles and fully benefit from the autonomy and real-world relevance that authentic tasks could provide [17], [36].

IV. Conclusion

Integrating authentic assessment into instruction through authentic tasks, materials, and self-assessment may significantly enhance students' learning experiences by promoting active participation, critical thinking, and language skills. The use of discussions and interactive activities encourages students to share their interpretations of reading materials, gradually building their confidence and ability to express themselves [1], [12]. Although initial challenges, such as shyness and language barriers, were evident, consistent scaffolding and teacher's feedback played a crucial role in overcoming these hurdles and fostering engaging and supporting classroom environment [20], [21]. The present study demonstrated that students became more comfortable and articulate over time, showing significant progress in their ability to interpret texts and engage in meaningful social interactions [23], [24].

The present study contributes to authentic assessment theory by empirically validating its effectiveness in enhancing students' learning achievement, engagement and behavior. It underscores how authentic assessment not only deepens students' engagement but also cultivates critical thinking skills that are crucial for academic performances [37]. Emphasizing the role of teacher's feedback and scaffolding reinforces the importance of supportive instructional strategies in authentic assessment [36].

Methodologically, the present study offers a comprehensive approach to implementing and evaluating authentic assessment in classrooms. It highlights the need for diverse tasks and activities to accommodate various learning styles and proficiency levels. Future studies should continue to explore the boarder impacts of authentic assessment on student outcomes and engagement by tailoring approaches to different educational contexts and student demographics. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how authentic assessment influences student motivation, retention, and overall academic achievement over time.

Acknowledgment

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