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## **THE EFFECTS OF TEACHING THROUGH AUTHENTIC MATERIAL ON EFL LEARNERS**

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this report lies in identifying how teaching through authentic material to intermediate learners can be made more effective and primarily learners' views of the use of authentic material in language learning. The subject at hand is English Language and while teaching English may span several dimensions of language learning such as grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, literature, and so forth, the main focus will be on comprehending the wider array of authenticity for language teaching, why it may or may not be useful and what methodologies can be relied on to improve the learning experience for the learners. This paper reports the findings of a descriptive survey focused on the perspectives of pre-intermediate level students at the British Council across the Middle East on the use of authentic material in language learning.*

### **Keywords**

*Authentic, Material, Authenticity, Language Learning, Intermediate Learners, Graded, Textbook*

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## **1. Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate how authentic material for pre-intermediate learners of English can be used and ultimately how students of this level feel about learning English through the use of authentic material. Specifically, this research is carried out at the British Council across the Middle East, where students who are not native speakers of English are taking English language classes. Most of the students are from Arabic backgrounds who are learning English for various reasons such as for studies, work, travel, or out of personal interest in the language.

The use of authentic teaching material as opposed to graded learning material has long been an issue often debated in terms of their respective advantages or disadvantages and particularly effectiveness. The use of authentic material generally refers to communication-based English for example newspapers, real magazine articles, cooking recipes etc. While it is generally agreed in large that using authentic materials is the most beneficial method of effective English teaching, there exists uncertainty in terms of when to use such material and how it should be used in the context of an English language-based classroom setting.

Authentic material is defined in a number of ways across literature however, one interpretation that holds significance is that authenticity of teaching material relates to ‘exposure to real language and its use in its community’ (Heitler, 2005). While the benefits of relying on authentic material are diverse, it must be considered that for the purpose of teaching pre-intermediate learners that come from different regions and whose native language is not English, dealing with day-to-day English conversations or writings may be a more complex task than anticipated. Hence, it is important to take into consideration both sides of the coin: using authentic material for teaching and conversely, creating specific material for the purpose of instructional teaching of the language. Authentic material is thought to be beneficial to language learners considering they provide a real experience of the language in its native context, tend to impact learner motivation more positively, and most importantly can be related to learner needs more closely.

## **2. Literature Review**

The ever-important debate of when to introduce authentic materials-based teaching to language learners has been surrounded by dispute. On one hand, researchers such as Kilickaya (2004) and Kim (2000) state that authentic materials can be used for intermediate and advanced

level students only. These researchers are of the view that the use of authentic materials at lower levels causes a sense of demotivation and frustration (Kim, 2000) in students since, at these levels, they largely lack knowledge and understanding of many lexical items and structures used in the target language (Kilickaya, 2004). According to Guariento and Morley (2001), *'At lower levels, however, even with quite simple tasks the use of authentic texts may not only prevent the learners from responding in meaningful ways but can also lead them to feel frustrated, confused, and, more importantly, demotivated'*. Kim (2000) further reasons that authentic material may not expose students to comprehensible input at the preliminary stages of learning.

However, others argue that the use of authentic materials should ideally begin in the initial stages of learning (McNeil, 1994; Miller, 2003), stressing that early familiarization with such material will aid students in developing more complex strategies for future language learning tasks (McNeill, 1994). In an examination of high school students that had taken up German as a foreign language, Bernhardt and Berkemeyer noted that students from all levels were able to work with authentic texts (Otte, 2006). Similarly, Allen et al (1988) studied the use of authentic material on 1500 students at high school that were of three different levels of language learning. The results showed that all students were able to comprehend some meaning from all of the texts, even at the beginner's level. As per these studies, less proficient students can derive value from authentic materials.

## **2.1 Making the Choice of Usage of Authentic Material**

Berardo (2006) suggests three-pronged criteria for choosing on what authentic texts to use: content *suitability, exploitability, and readability*. Suitability of content refers to whether the text can create interest in the students while still being appropriate according to their needs and capabilities. The material should also be culturally relevant to the experiences of the learners. Furthermore, (Lee, 1995) mentions that *'a careful and wise selection of materials focused on learners is a must if we want a positive response from them'*. Moving on, exploitability relates to how the text can be used to enhance the students' proficiency in the language and how the text can be exploited literally for teaching purposes. Last but not least, readability refers to the language of the text, including the structural and verbal complexity as well as the degree of new vocabulary and grammatical forms used in that text (Berardo, 2006).

Lee (1995) notes that the material must also be compatible with the objectives of the course, that is, it should improve the language skills in the way that teachers want learners to practice.

Furthermore, teachers must take into consideration the length of the text and adjust their teaching approach accordingly too. Moreover, a myriad of text types or sources must be selected, such as articles, advertisements, weather forecasts, interviews, poems, application forms, train timetables, radio talks, and brochures or pamphlets.

Access to authentic materials (verbal or written) is endless. The most common types of authentic material used are TV, radio, newspapers, novels, poetry, and the internet. Although radio is easily accessible, its aural texts are the most complicated for pre-intermediate and especially beginner-level language learners to comprehend. Miller (2003) claims that '*In order to use radio programs with learners, teachers need to...decide on some global listening tasks for the learners*' (p. 16) since all non-verbal information is missing. Unlike radio, TV and video enable learners to access paralinguistic features of the spoken text and this is why the latter two sources may be easier for the students to understand.

However, according to Berardo (2006), it is the World Wide Web or the Internet that is more commonly used (Berardo, 2006). This is due to the fact that printed materials can get outdated very quickly, unlike the internet which is continuously updated hence information is relevant and current, is interactive to garner sufficient interest, and provides visual stimulation making for a more appealing learning experience. It allows convenient access to limitless types of material. For example, teachers can get hold of useful articles, relevant videos as well as audio clips. However, despite the valuable qualities of the internet, Miller (2003) reveals that a survey conducted via The ESL Magazine website regarding the most frequently used medium for accessing authentic listening materials for ESL/EFL teaching purposes found that television was most frequently used (Miller, 2003).

## **2.2 Role of the Teacher**

The teacher's role in choosing the types of texts and activities varies depending on the level of students. While at lower levels, the teacher must have more control over the materials students are exposed to as well as making students explicitly aware of the purpose of the reading and consciously developing the skills, at more advanced levels, the influence of the teacher should be less dominant. The move between a teacher-centered approach to a more learner-centered one should be gradual as students advance in their level. This shift will ultimately develop student's proficiency in reading and enable them to tackle different types of texts using suitable strategies, making them autonomous learners.

The internet has a massive role when selecting authentic material and while there are many advantages to it, there are also some disadvantages to be considered. The vast variety of texts available on almost any subject being explored is one of the main advantages of using the internet. Materials are available, easy to access, and free (Kilickaya, 2004).

Despite this, there are some drawbacks to consider. One of these drawbacks is the accuracy as well as the quality of text available on the internet which is not easy to control. This is particularly an issue with lower levels when the teacher would need to have more control over how much of the authentic material students should access. Second, reading texts on the internet using multimedia can be off-putting for some learners as not all of them feel comfortable reading off a screen. Finally having a lack of computer skills could disadvantage some learners and in turn, cause them to lose confidence. As a result, choosing to use the internet as a source of authentic material requires sensitivity and consideration to some of the problems highlighted. If used with care, the Internet can open up a world of interesting texts for students to explore and use independently.

The use of authentic material is not only beneficial for learners but developing such material can also be tremendously valuable for teachers themselves. As put forward by Goodmacher & Kajiura, (2005) developing authentic material expands two important skills for teachers. The first skill is the ability to identify and select suitable linguistic aspects that students are weak in such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc. To do this, teachers must know the linguistic needs of their students and find relevant material to help them develop in this area.

The second skill developed is the ability to select cultural information such as customs, beliefs, cultures, etc. presented in authentic material that is relevant or interesting to students. According to Goodmacher and Kajiura, (2005) "Material cultural refers to things people make with their hands or by machines...non-material culture consists of products not made by hand – languages, religions and other beliefs, customs and traditions" (p.8). Hence selecting authentic texts such as a university brochure can expose learners to valuable material and non-material aspects of a culture.

Recognizing material objects usually poses no real challenge for students, however understanding non-material features can be more complex. Thus, devising activities that teach learners to be aware of both sides of another culture will enable them to understand their own culture by comparing it to others.

Students who are eager to learn typically listen well to the teacher and are generally easier to teach. They absorb what is being taught and subsequently contribute and actively participate in the classroom. Teachers should engage in regular discussions with students allowing them to think about the reasons why learning a language is important and how it can help them. Activities, classroom tasks, and material must be relevant and interesting for the students, for example, allowing students to write or speak about subjects that are particularly

2.3 Authenticity  
Course textbooks should be used as a guide to the language which must be covered as part of the curriculum. However, only using the textbook can make classes extremely dull and repetitive which is why it is useful to integrate authentic material and external sources. Using authentic material adds excitement to learning as well as making the language more relevant. Authentic material could be from pulled from a range of sources such as web pages, books, magazines, brochures, newspapers, multimedia, and so on. Such materials do not necessarily have to be text-based for example, objects can be used as realia or as talking points.

### **3. Research Issues**

A recurring challenge for language teachers is how to stimulate interest while simultaneously creating value for students in a way that motivates them to learn more. For this purpose, the search and development of teaching material that can serve as a supplement to textbook content is an ongoing task for teachers of ESL/EFL all across the world. As a result of this search, more teachers are turning to the use of authentic material in the English language classroom as a way of making learning more meaningful and relevant to learners.

Issues of the use of authentic material in a classroom setup, its advantages, and relative disadvantages, and most importantly, the effectiveness that it can have specifically for pre-intermediate learners will be discussed in this paper. Further ahead, a study will present learners' views of authentic material use in language learning which will ultimately shed light on how teachers can rely on a number of sources and tools that can enhance the learning experience of students.

#### **3.1 Research Objectives**

The main objective of this study is to gain an understanding of learners' perspectives of the use of authentic material in language learning. Understanding learners' interests and linguistic

needs will hopefully enable teachers to plan lessons that are more tailored towards these reported needs.

### **3.2 Scope of the Study**

The study reports opinions of pre-intermediate level students studying English Language courses at the British Council across the Middle East. 100 surveys were randomly given to students of this level. 20 surveys were given to students in Kuwait, 20 to Qatar, 20 to the UAE, 20 to Bahrain, and 20 to students in Iraq. The idea is to get a wider range of students' opinions at this level across the Middle East. The data collected is both qualitative and quantitative, students completed a multiple-choice questionnaire and were also given the option to write comments or suggestions at the end (see Appendix 1).

### **3.3 Problem Identification**

Despite the exposure to 'real' language and the motivation that authentic material is thought to provide learners, the use of authentic materials may inevitably cause some problems. Authentic materials can contain complex language in terms of difficult vocabulary and complex sentence structures that may be more than challenging for non-native speakers of English to comprehend. Conversely, teachers too may find it tough to impart knowledge and language skills through such a medium when the receiving party is having difficulty in grasping what is being taught (Kelly, Kelly, Offner, & Vorland, 2002).

A similar problem can occur with the language used in the survey given to students for this study as it may contain teaching terminology which students may not understand. To overcome this, the surveys given will be in English and students' L1, Arabic.

## **4. Methodology**

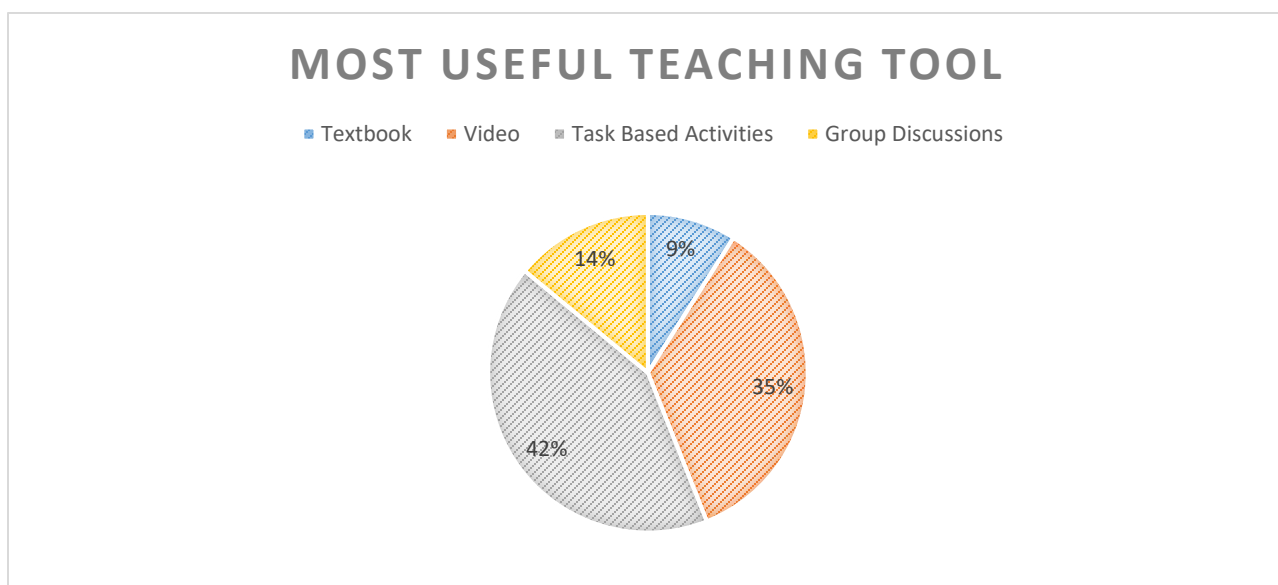
Much of the information used in this paper was derived from extensive secondary research of books, journal articles, online reports, and other web sources. Multiple sources were referred to and both sides of the argument were studied and evaluated.

In addition to the secondary research, a primary source was relied upon in the form of a self-created survey (Appendix 1). The survey was given to students in both English and students Arabic. The purpose of this survey was to identify the preference between authentic and graded material as well as broadly identify areas in which language students feel they need help with and also to pinpoint tools and methodologies that they feel will best benefit them. This survey

represents a needs-based analysis in which the student’s particular needs are catered to and subsequently the teacher can create or rely on teaching material accordingly to generate the most impactful and significant results from their students in language skills. The details of the survey are given in the results and investigations section.

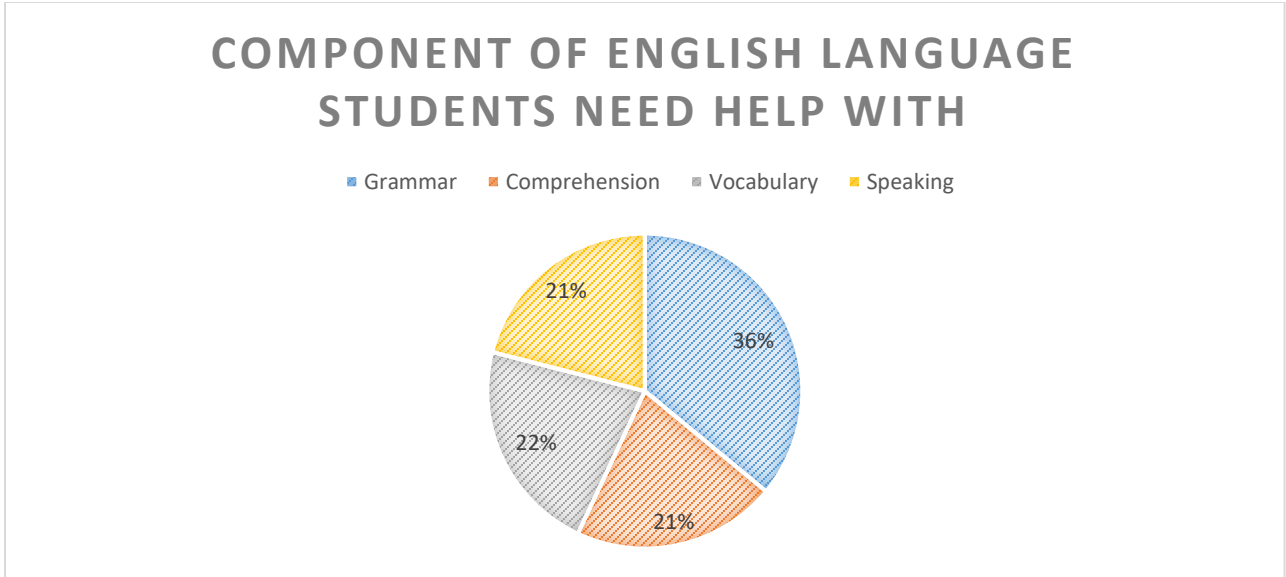
## 5. Results

The following results were collected from surveys given to students from the British Council across the Arabic Gulf, including Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates and Iraq. In total, 100 surveys were given.

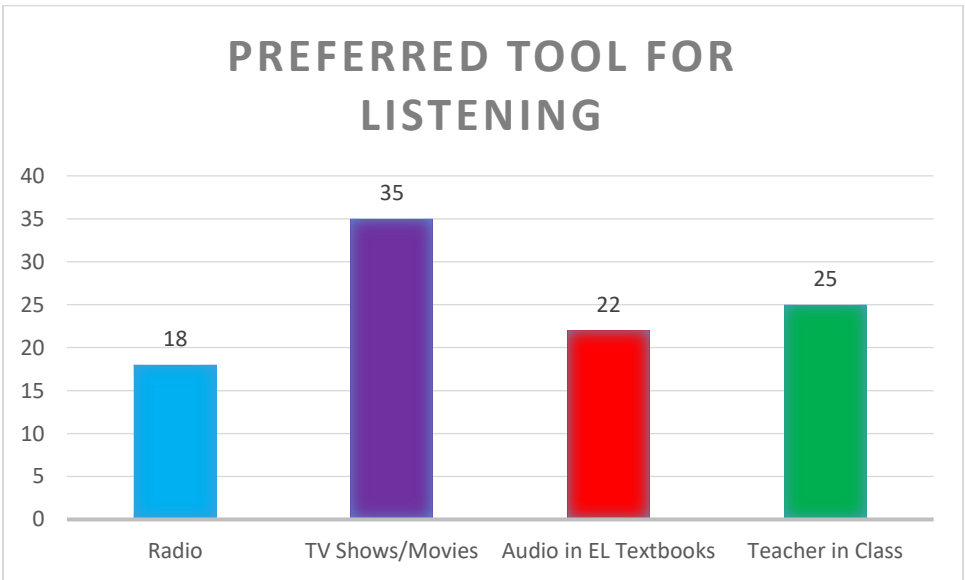


**Figure 1:** *Teaching Tools, British Council; Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, UAE, and Iraq*

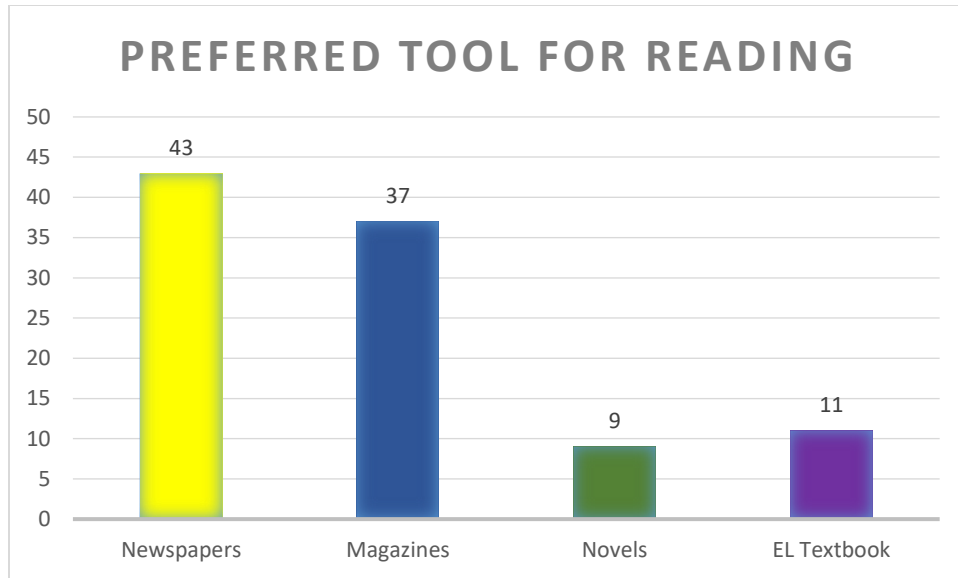




**Figure 2:** *Component of English Language, British Council; Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, UAE, and Iraq*



**Figure 3:** *Tool for Listening, British Council; Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, UAE, and Iraq*



**Figure 4:** Results; Tool for Reading, British Council; Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, UAE, and Iraq

## 6. Analysis & Discussion of Results

The target of the survey in terms of sample size was to get a minimum of 100 responses through various platforms such as email, social networks, and even face-to-face questioning. This target was achieved and thus the results were a more representative sample especially considering respondents belonged to different regions of the Arabic Gulf.

Not surprisingly the results indicated that students want invigorating and mentally stimulating material to help them grasp the English language better. Such material most popular was represented in the form of authentic material such as movies or newspapers. Looking more closely into this, it is easy to understand why: in watching a movie or a video, student concentration is directed away from dry material and on to somebody that has a good grasp of the language so in turn students unconsciously analyze three things: the accent, the grammar, the vocabulary and the coherence of sentences that are spoken. Such form of language learning material proves to be more interesting than conventional textbook-based learning.

Furthermore, grammar proves to be the most complicated component of English for non-native speakers and learners of the language. All other components come directly under good grammar: reading, comprehension, and especially oral communication. In addition, most students felt that a native teacher's perspective on the language is more significant than a non-native teacher's regardless of the level of proficiency they may have over the language perhaps owing to

their cultural inclination towards the language as well as the accent. Even more interesting were the suggestions were given by students for teachers to incorporate which they believe can enhance their learning experience. The most common suggestion lay in encouraging group-based activity since this is a good motivator for learners to interact and communicate gaining the opportunity to learn from each other and gain more confidence in adapting to the language.

## **7. Conclusion**

Perhaps the most important aspect of the entire paper lies in the true comprehension of what authentic material is and how it can be used in an effective classroom environment to educate non-native speakers of English.

When used effectually, authentic materials help fuse the real world with the classroom and considerably enliven the ESL/EFL class and the entire learning experience. Exposing the students to cultural features and references especially is bound to spawn a deeper understanding of and a sustained interest in the subject. Students improve their ability to zone in on significant information overlook irrelevant details. As students practice their individual strengths, they eventually develop confidence in being able to function and blend in with an English-speaking society.

This is a valuable benefit that encourages teachers to use more authentic material in the language classroom, despite some inevitable challenges that may arise. One of the main challenges of using authentic material is that it can be “too culturally biased” and often contain “difficult language, unneeded vocabulary items, and complex language structures” (Heitler, 2005). Thus, students would need to have vast cultural background knowledge as well as a sufficient degree of linguistic knowledge – a feat not entirely easy for beginner language learners. This is why beginner-level students can quickly be discouraged when faced with such material. Authentic materials can also pose problems for teachers. As the language of authentic materials can be diverse and complex, teachers need to extensively prepare before class which can be time consuming.

An ample amount of preparation is expected to go on behalf of the teacher in any case of methodology whether it is listening, reading, writing, speaking, or grammar and vocabulary. That being said, the outcomes to be generated must focus on increased interest from the students which is what will make them motivated enough to excel in the language. In the world we live in now, sources of material for use in teaching are countless and must be chosen from carefully however,

opportunities present themselves in various tools such as the Web, the media, television, and radio as well as newspapers and magazines. All these sources combined can generate excellent results while adjusting language learners in a normal language speaking environment.

## 8. Research Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is the small sample size used which was limited to only pre-intermediate learners. Thus, the conclusions of this study are largely based on the perspectives of pre-intermediate level students of the Middle East. The non-random selection of the sample also limits the ability of generalization of the results.

## 9. Scope of Future Research

Comprehensive analysis of the opinions of elementary, intermediate, and advanced level students would surely produce more insightful results. Furthermore, analysis of faculty perspectives on the inclusion of authentic material as part of the course curriculum may also provide an understanding of the issues faced by instructors regarding this topic. Further development of the questionnaire design could be further improved.

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## Appendix 1

### Standard Survey from Students:

*Indicate your answer with a tick in front of your chosen option.*

1. What form of teaching tool do you find most useful?
  - Textbook
  - Video
  - Task based Activities
  - Group Discussions
  
2. Out of the following, what has helped most in your development of English language skills?
  - Movies
  - Reading Books
  - Talking with Native Speakers
  - Taking English Language classes
  
3. What component of English language do you feel you need most help with?

- Grammar
  - Comprehension
  - Vocabulary
  - Speaking (Oral Communication)
4. Are you most comfortable with a native English teacher or a non-native teacher who has good command over the language?
- Native
  - Non-Native
5. Out of the following which would you personally rely on as *reading* material to improve your language skills?
- Newspapers
  - Magazines
  - Novels (Fiction and Non-Fiction)
  - English Language textbook
6. Out of the following which would you personally rely on as *listening* material to improve your language skills?
- Radio
  - Television Shows/Movies
  - Teacher in class
  - English Language Textbook audio
7. Are there comments or suggestions that you would give to your language teachers to help enhance your learning process? If so, please briefly mention them.