



Real Objects, Real Language: A Study of Realia in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract. *This study examines the pedagogical role of realia — authentic, tangible objects and materials — in second language acquisition (SLA). Realia-based instruction has been recognized as a powerful approach that connects classroom learning with real-world language use, yet systematic empirical investigation of its measurable effects remains limited. The present research investigates how realia-based instruction influences vocabulary retention, communicative competence, and learner motivation among undergraduate foreign language students. A quasi-experimental mixed-methods design was employed, comparing an experimental group receiving realia-based instruction with a control group receiving traditional textbook-based instruction over an eight-week period. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests, speaking assessments, Likert-scale questionnaires, classroom observations, and a teacher reflective journal. The findings reveal that students in the experimental group demonstrated significantly higher vocabulary retention gains (25% vs. 12%), superior communicative performance, and markedly higher levels of motivation and classroom engagement. Realia also contributed to improved cultural awareness and more spontaneous, contextually appropriate language use. The results are interpreted through the theoretical frameworks of Krashen's Input Hypothesis, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Depth of Processing Theory, and Self-Determination Theory. The study contributes to the growing literature on authentic materials in SLA and provides practical implications for educators seeking to develop more dynamic, learner-centred language learning environments.*

Keywords: *realia, second language acquisition, authentic materials, vocabulary retention, communicative competence, learner motivation, language pedagogy*

1. Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a multifaceted process shaped by cognitive, social, and cultural factors. Over the past decades, scholars have emphasized that language learning is most effective when it occurs in meaningful, context-rich environments rather than through isolated grammatical drills. Traditional approaches rooted in grammar-translation or structural methods often prioritize form over use, which may hinder learners' ability to communicate effectively in real-life situations (Brown, 2007). In contrast, communicative and task-based approaches stress

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the importance of interaction, authenticity, and purposeful language use as central components of successful language acquisition (Nunan, 2004; Richards, 2006).

One of the key concepts supporting this shift toward meaningful learning is the use of authentic materials, commonly referred to as *realia*. *Realia* encompasses real-world objects and texts — such as menus, transport tickets, advertisements, newspapers, and everyday items — that are not originally designed for pedagogical purposes but are introduced into the classroom to facilitate learning. According to Gilmore (2007), authentic materials expose learners to genuine language use, including natural lexical choices, discourse patterns, and cultural nuances that are often absent from simplified textbook materials. This exposure is essential for developing not only linguistic competence but also pragmatic and sociocultural competence.

The theoretical foundations for using *realia* in SLA can be linked to multiple complementary frameworks. Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis posits that learners acquire language most effectively when exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current proficiency level; *realia* provides such input in a contextualized and meaningful form. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory emphasizes the role of social interaction and cultural tools in learning — from this perspective, *realia* functions as a mediating artifact that supports collaborative learning and scaffolding within the zone of proximal development. Additionally, cognitive theories of multimodal and experiential learning highlight the importance of sensory engagement: when learners interact with tangible objects, they activate multiple sensory channels that can enhance memory retention and deepen understanding (Tomlinson, 2011). Depth of Processing Theory further suggests that information encountered through rich, meaningful engagement is more durably retained than information processed through shallow, decontextualized exposure (Craik & Lockhart, 1972).

Despite the theoretical appeal and practical popularity of *realia*-based instruction, systematic empirical investigation of its measurable effects on vocabulary retention, communicative competence, and learner motivation remains limited. The present study seeks to address this gap through a controlled quasi-experimental investigation in a university foreign language classroom, combining quantitative measurement of learning outcomes with qualitative analysis of learner engagement and attitudes.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to enable comprehensive evaluation of *realia*-based instruction. The design included pre-test and post-test comparisons between an experimental group and a control group, allowing for the measurement of learning gains over time. The quantitative component focused on statistical differences in vocabulary acquisition and communicative performance, while the



qualitative component explored learner perceptions, engagement, and classroom dynamics. Triangulation of data sources enhanced the validity and reliability of the findings.

2.2 Participants and Setting

A total of 60 undergraduate students enrolled in an intermediate-level foreign language course at a university participated in the study. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 22, and they shared relatively similar linguistic backgrounds and prior exposure to the target language. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental group ($n = 30$) and the control group ($n = 30$). Prior to the intervention, a placement test was administered to verify proficiency homogeneity across both groups.

2.3 Instructional Materials and Procedure

The instructional content for both groups was based on identical curriculum objectives covering everyday communication topics including shopping, travel, and social interaction (Babayev, 2021). The experimental group received realia-based instruction using authentic materials — restaurant menus, transport tickets, brochures, currency, clothing items, packaging, and cultural artifacts — to simulate real-world communicative situations. The control group used textbook-based materials, worksheets, and scripted dialogues presenting language in a structured but less contextualized format. All sessions were conducted by the same teacher to minimize variability. The study ran for eight weeks with three 60-minute sessions per week, each following a structured warm-up, presentation, practice, and production sequence. Lesson plans were standardized across both groups, differing only in the type of materials used.

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Multiple instruments were used to collect data. Vocabulary retention was measured through standardized pre- and post-tests including multiple-choice, matching, and short-answer items. Communicative competence was assessed through role-play tasks and oral interviews evaluated for fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and pragmatic appropriateness by two independent raters. A Likert-scale questionnaire measured learner motivation, attitudes, and perceived usefulness of instructional materials. Structured classroom observations recorded student participation, interaction patterns, and engagement levels, and the instructor maintained a reflective journal documenting classroom dynamics throughout the intervention. Quantitative data were analyzed using paired-sample and independent-sample t-tests with effect size calculations. Qualitative data from questionnaires, observations, and the journal were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interrater reliability for speaking assessments was established through consensus scoring, and internal validity was maintained by keeping all variables constant except the instructional material type.

3. Results



3.1 Vocabulary Retention

The quantitative analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in vocabulary acquisition between the two groups ($p < 0.05$). While both groups demonstrated pre-to-post-test improvement, gains in the realia-based experimental group were substantially higher: experimental group learners improved their vocabulary scores by an average of 25%, compared to 12% in the control group. These findings align with Gilmore's (2007) argument that authentic materials provide richer linguistic environments that facilitate deeper processing of vocabulary, and with Tomlinson's (2011) contention that exposure to real-life language increases long-term retention through cognitive engagement and emotional involvement. The association between words and tangible objects appears to create additional memory pathways that strengthen retention.

3.2 Communicative Competence

Speaking assessment results demonstrated that students in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group across all evaluated dimensions: fluency, accuracy, and pragmatic appropriateness. Realia-group learners were more capable of initiating and sustaining conversations and of responding appropriately in context-specific situations. This outcome is consistent with the principles of communicative language teaching outlined by Richards (2006), which emphasize authentic interaction in developing functional language skills, and with Nunan's (2004) task-based learning framework, where real-world materials encourage more spontaneous and meaningful language production. The presence of realia created situational authenticity that enabled learners to simulate real-life communication more effectively than textbook prompts permitted.

3.3 Learner Motivation and Attitudes

Questionnaire data indicated significantly higher motivation and more positive attitudes among experimental group participants. Approximately 85% of the realia group reported lessons as engaging and relevant to their lives, compared to 60% in the control group. Learners also expressed greater confidence in their ability to use the target language outside the classroom. These findings are consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which holds that intrinsic motivation is enhanced when learners experience autonomy, perceived competence, and relatedness — all of which realia-based tasks promote by making learning interactive and personally meaningful. Brown (2007) similarly emphasizes the centrality of affective variables in successful language acquisition.

3.4 Classroom Engagement and Interaction

Qualitative observations revealed substantially increased student participation and peer interaction in the experimental group. Learners engaged more frequently in collaborative tasks, spontaneous language use, and self-initiated questioning. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, these findings can be interpreted as evidence that realia functioned as a mediating tool facilitating



collaborative meaning-making and scaffolding within the zone of proximal development. The interactive affordances of authentic objects prompted learners to negotiate meaning together, co-construct contextual knowledge, and support each other's learning in ways that scripted textbook tasks did not elicit comparably.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide robust empirical support for the pedagogical value of realia in SLA across cognitive, communicative, and affective dimensions. The vocabulary retention advantage observed in the experimental group is explicable through Depth of Processing Theory (Craik & Lockhart, 1972): realia embeds vocabulary within real-life situations, requiring learners to infer meaning through context, visual association, and prior knowledge, thereby generating the deeper semantic processing associated with more durable retention. The tactile and visual properties of physical objects create multiple memory pathways simultaneously, reinforcing lexical encoding in ways that decontextualized word-list study cannot.

The improvement in communicative competence reflects the role of realia in fostering functional language use. Realia-based tasks simulate authentic communicative scenarios that require learners to negotiate meaning, interpret contextual cues, and respond with pragmatic appropriateness — capabilities that correspond to Hymes's (1972) expanded conception of communicative competence extending beyond grammatical knowledge to include sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions. The findings suggest that regular interaction with authentic materials equips learners to transfer classroom knowledge to real-world communication more effectively than textbook-based instruction alone.

From a sociocultural perspective, the increased collaborative interaction observed in the experimental group supports Vygotsky's (1978) contention that learning is mediated through cultural artifacts and social engagement. Realia functions as precisely such an artifact: it provides a shared reference point around which collaborative dialogue can be organized, meaning co-constructed, and scaffolded support provided. This social dimension of realia use extends its pedagogical value beyond vocabulary and grammar into the development of communicative confidence and interpersonal language skills.

The motivation findings align with Self-Determination Theory's core proposition that intrinsic motivation depends on the satisfaction of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Realia-based tasks address all three needs: they give learners agency in meaning-making, provide tangible evidence of growing competence through successful task completion, and create the social relatedness generated by collaborative interaction around shared authentic objects. When learners perceive learning tasks as relevant to their lives outside the classroom, they invest more effort and demonstrate greater persistence — outcomes clearly evidenced in the experimental group data.



Several practical challenges associated with realia use merit acknowledgement. Material selection and preparation require time and institutional support. Cultural interpretation may vary across learner backgrounds, necessitating pre-task contextualization by the teacher. The effectiveness of realia may also vary across proficiency levels: beginner learners may require more structured scaffolding, while advanced learners may benefit from more open-ended authentic tasks. The growing availability of digital technologies offers complementary opportunities: virtual realia — online videos, interactive simulations, and digital cultural artifacts — can extend the range of authentic language input available and accommodate diverse learning contexts where physical realia may be difficult to source.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that realia-based instruction significantly enhances multiple dimensions of second language acquisition: vocabulary retention, communicative competence, learner motivation, and classroom engagement. By situating language within authentic, tangible contexts, realia activates the cognitive, affective, and social processes that research consistently associates with deep and durable learning. The experimental group's superior performance across all measured outcomes provides compelling evidence for the systematic integration of authentic materials into language instruction.

The results suggest that educators should move beyond textbook-centred instruction toward more dynamic, learner-centred methodologies that reflect the communicative realities learners will encounter outside the classroom. While challenges of preparation, material selection, and cultural contextualization require attention, these are manageable through planning, resource sharing, and the strategic incorporation of digital realia. Future research should investigate the long-term retention effects of realia-based instruction, its differential effectiveness across proficiency levels and age groups, and the pedagogical potential of hybrid approaches combining physical and virtual authentic materials. Realia is not a peripheral supplementary resource but a substantive pedagogical instrument with the capacity to transform the quality of language learning experiences.

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