

From Textbook to Screen: Using Online Authentic Materials to Develop Reading Comprehension Skills

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Abstract

The article explores the shift from traditional textbook reading to online work with authentic materials and how this shift can support the development of reading comprehension skills. Authentic texts are understood as real-life online content such as news articles, blog posts, short reviews, and social media updates that were not originally created for teaching. When these texts are used on digital platforms, learners meet vocabulary, grammar, and discourse patterns in a natural context and see how English functions in real communication. In the article, key advantages of online authentic materials are outlined: higher motivation, closer connection to learners' interests, and regular contact with up-to-date language. Attention is paid to simple principles of selecting and adapting texts for different levels, including length, topic relevance, and linguistic difficulty. Examples are given of pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading tasks that can be organised on digital platforms with the help of hyperlinks, glossaries, comments, and interactive quizzes. As a result, online authentic materials can make reading lessons more meaningful and flexible, encourage independent work, and help learners move from decoding separate words to understanding the overall message of the text.

Key words: authentic materials, digital platforms, reading comprehension, EFL learners, online texts, learner motivation.

Introduction

In many English lessons, reading still means working with short adapted texts printed in a textbook. The language in such texts is usually carefully simplified, the topics are predictable, and new vocabulary appears in small, controlled portions. This format is convenient for teachers and fits traditional lesson plans, but it often feels distant from the language that learners meet outside the classroom. On phones, tablets, and laptops, teenagers scroll through news feeds, blogs, comments, and reviews written by real people for real purposes. The contrast between "textbook English" and "live English" becomes especially clear on digital platforms, where authentic materials are one click away.

For this reason, interest in online authentic materials has grown steadily in English language teaching. The idea is simple: instead of reading only adapted passages, learners work with real-life texts taken from websites, online magazines, social media pages, or apps. These texts may be shortened or slightly adjusted, but their core features remain natural. When authentic materials are presented through digital platforms, learners can read them on familiar devices, follow hyperlinks, and take part in simple interactive tasks. Reading then turns into a more dynamic activity that connects classroom tasks with everyday digital experience.

At the same time, using online authentic materials raises practical questions. Teachers worry about overload, unsuitable topics, and the difficulty of choosing texts for different levels. Learners may feel lost when they see unknown words, irregular structures, or unusual layouts. Because of this, the use of authentic online texts in reading lessons needs careful planning and support. The article focuses on how online authentic materials can be selected and used to develop reading comprehension without losing clarity and comfort for learners.

Discussions about authentic materials began long before digital platforms became popular. Widdowson underlined that authenticity is not only a property of texts, but also a result of how they are used in the classroom, and that learners should meet language that serves real communicative purposes. Later, authors such as Nuttal and Grabe showed that reading skills develop best when learners practise with texts that resemble those used by native speakers in everyday life. In this context, authentic materials are seen as a bridge between classroom activities and real-world communication.

Day and Bamford highlighted several reasons why extensive work with meaningful texts supports reading comprehension: frequent contact with print, repeated meeting of words and structures, and the feeling of success when learners understand the general message even without knowing every detail. Berardo and Gilmore drew attention to the special value of authentic materials, noting that they present natural vocabulary, discourse markers, and cultural references that rarely appear in simplified passages. These authors also stressed that authentic texts can be motivating when topics match learners' interests and age.

With the growth of the internet, the discussion moved from printed authentic materials to online ones. Gilmore and Krashen pointed out that digital resources offer a constant flow of fresh, short texts suitable for regular reading practice. Online newspapers, educational blogs, simple popular-science portals, and social media posts can be transformed into classroom tasks. Recent works on digital literacy and multimodal texts show that reading now often includes images, emojis, hyperlinks, and video fragments. For teenagers, this mixed format feels natural and can make comprehension tasks more engaging, provided that instructions are clear and support is available.

Current pedagogical literature also mentions possible risks. Nuttal warned that authentic texts may overwhelm weaker readers if texts are too dense or culturally distant. More recent authors discuss problems such as distraction on digital platforms, superficial reading, and the tendency to scan texts

quickly instead of building deeper understanding. In the article, these ideas are taken into account and combined with a practical focus on classroom routines. Online authentic materials are viewed not as a replacement for textbooks, but as a resource that can help learners move from controlled exercises to confident, meaningful reading on screen in a foreign language classroom.

Methodology

The methodology section describes how online authentic materials are organised and used on digital platforms to support reading comprehension. The focus is placed on typical conditions of a secondary school English classroom where learners regularly work with smartphones, tablets, or computers. Examples and conclusions in this article are based on lesson plans, classroom tasks, and teacher reflections that show practical ways of integrating authentic online texts into reading work.

First, principles for selecting authentic materials were defined. Texts were taken from open websites, online magazines, blogs, and social media pages that offer short, relatively clear posts. Priority was given to topics close to teenagers' interests, such as school life, hobbies, technology, and everyday communication. Text length was limited to roughly two or three screen pages, and preference was given to texts with clear structure, subtitles, and visual support. Materials that contained aggressive advertising, offensive content, or culturally sensitive issues were excluded.

Second, criteria for linguistic difficulty were outlined. For lower-secondary learners, texts needed to be within the A2-B1 range on the CEFR scale. To check approximate difficulty, online vocabulary tools and frequency lists were consulted, and texts overloaded with idioms or complex syntax were avoided. Where necessary, minimal adaptation was carried out: rare proper names were replaced, extremely long sentences were divided, and footnotes or short glossaries were added for key words.

Third, a model sequence of reading tasks was designed for digital platforms. Each cycle included a pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stage. Pre-reading activities activated background knowledge and introduced essential vocabulary through short polls, pictures, or questions in the platform forum. During the while-reading stage, learners read the authentic text on screen, used highlighting tools, clicked on glossed words, and answered embedded multiple-choice and short-answer questions. In the post-reading stage, they summarised main ideas, reacted to the text in comments, or completed simple creative tasks based on the content.

In addition, the choice of digital tools was specified. The model can be implemented in a learning management system or through a combination of simple services such as shared documents, quiz applications, and class messaging channels. The platform needed to support basic functions: posting links, attaching files, embedding quizzes, and allowing learners to react with comments or emojis. No advanced technology was required; the emphasis stayed on meaningful contact with authentic texts rather than on complicated technical features.

Finally, attention was given to classroom organisation. Work with authentic online texts was planned once or twice a week, with tasks designed for both individual and pair work. Progress in reading

comprehension was monitored through regular short quizzes, learner reflections, and teacher observation of how confidently learners dealt with new texts. The described procedure forms the practical basis for all later discussion in the article.

Results and discussion

Work with online authentic materials on digital platforms brought several noticeable changes to classroom reading. At the beginning, many learners associated English reading mainly with textbook exercises and short adapted texts. Screens were mostly linked with entertainment rather than with careful reading in a foreign language. After several weeks of regular work with online authentic texts, lesson dynamics, quiz results, and learner comments began to look different.

Short diagnostic quizzes based on textbook passages were given before systematic work with online materials and then repeated in similar form after several cycles with authentic texts. The focus was on understanding main ideas, recognising details, and guessing the meaning of unknown words from context. Scores showed moderate but clear growth. In addition, simple questionnaires were used to capture how confident and motivated learners felt when reading English on screen.

Self-reports and classroom observation also demonstrated a shift in attitudes. At first, authentic online texts were often perceived as “too long” or “complicated”. Later, many learners started to treat them as a normal part of the lesson, especially when topics matched everyday interests such as music, gadgets, school life, or sports. Comments in the platform chat became more active; emojis and short reactions appeared even from usually silent students.

The main tendencies are summarised in the table below. Numbers are approximate and serve to illustrate the general direction of change in one typical group of lower-secondary learners.

Table 1. Changes in reading-related indicators after regular work with online authentic materials

| Indicator | Before online materials | After several cycles |
|---|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Average score in short reading comprehension quizzes | 62% | 78% |
| Learners who felt confident with online English texts | 23% | 61% |
| Learners reading English online at least 2–3 times per week | 18% | 49% |
| Learners who described authentic texts as “interesting” or “very interesting” | 35% | 72% |

Numbers in the table reflect several important tendencies. First, improvement in quiz scores suggests that regular contact with real-life online texts helped learners move beyond basic decoding and develop more stable comprehension strategies. This result corresponds to the ideas of Day and Bamford,

who stressed the value of extensive contact with meaningful texts for gradual growth in reading ability. Better performance was especially visible in tasks that required identifying the main idea and ignoring unimportant details.

Second, the share of learners who felt confident when dealing with online texts almost tripled. This does not mean that all difficulties disappeared, but it shows that authentic materials on digital platforms became less frightening. Nuttal wrote that one major barrier in reading is the belief that “real” texts are always beyond one’s level. When learners work with such texts step by step, with support from tasks and glossaries, this belief becomes weaker, which can be seen in growing confidence.

Third, there was a noticeable change in reading habits outside the lesson. Almost half of the group reported that they started to read short English posts, comments, or news items on their own several times a week. This seems to confirm the opinion of Gilmore and Krashen that easy access to authentic online materials encourages more frequent, relatively free reading. The digital format plays a role here: links shared in class can be revisited at home on the same phone that is used for social media.

At the same time, classroom experience showed that online authentic materials are not a magic solution. Some learners continued to feel lost when texts contained dense cultural references, unfamiliar abbreviations, or informal internet language. Others were easily distracted by side links, advertisements, or notification pop-ups. These difficulties support warnings found in modern digital literacy literature, where superficial scanning and constant switching between windows are described as typical problems of screen reading.

Teacher reflections underlined the need for careful scaffolding. Pre-reading activities, short glossaries, and clear task instructions were especially helpful for weaker readers. When these elements were missing, authentic texts sometimes turned into chaotic “scrolling” without real comprehension. When they were present, texts became more manageable, and even complicated fragments were handled with the help of peers or digital dictionaries.

In the end, classroom experience with online authentic materials supports the idea that reading comprehension on digital platforms can be developed successfully when texts are chosen with care and integrated into well-structured lesson cycles. Authentic online texts made lessons livelier, brought classroom practice closer to everyday digital habits, and gradually strengthened learners’ ability to understand real English on screen. At the same time, results show that continuous guidance is still needed so that rich digital resources turn into real reading progress rather than into background noise.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this article brings together the main ideas about using online authentic materials to support reading comprehension on digital platforms. Work with one typical group of lower-secondary learners showed that carefully selected online texts can help learners move beyond purely textbook English and start to feel more at home with the language that appears on everyday screens. Quiz scores,

self-reports, and classroom observations all pointed in the same direction: regular contact with real-life online texts made reading tasks more successful, more meaningful, and, in many cases, more enjoyable.

At the same time, the article confirms that authentic materials are not a simple shortcut. Digital texts can easily become confusing or overwhelming if they are too dense, culturally distant, or poorly structured. Experience in class underlined the importance of clear criteria for choosing texts, planning pre-reading and post-reading tasks, and offering support in the form of glossaries, guiding questions, and time for discussion. When these elements were present, learners coped better with difficulties and gradually built up confidence with new types of texts.

A central outcome is that digital platforms and authentic materials work best together when they are treated as tools, not as goals in themselves. Online posts, news items, and short articles become helpful when they are linked to concrete classroom aims such as finding main ideas, scanning for details, or reacting personally to the content. In the end, the experience described in this article suggests that a balanced combination of textbooks and online authentic texts can make reading lessons closer to real life, support the move from word-by-word decoding to genuine understanding, and encourage learners to read in English on their own outside the classroom.

Further classroom work could explore how authentic materials on digital platforms interact with other skills, such as speaking and writing, and how tasks can be differentiated for stronger and weaker readers. Attention to these questions may help teachers design even more flexible lesson models for future use.

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