

استخدام العلامات والرموز المحلية في المدينة كمواو

أصلية لتدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في العراق

**Using Local Signs and Symbols in the City
as Authentic Materials for Teaching
English in Iraq**

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الكلمات المفتاحية: المواد الأصلية، لافتات المدينة، تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في العراق، التعلم السياقي، الدافعية لدى متعلمي الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية.

Keywords: authentic materials, city signs, English teaching in Iraq, contextual learning, and EFL motivation.



المخلص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة فاعلية استخدام لافتات المدينة المحلية والرموز العامة بوصفها مواد تعليمية أصيلة في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في العراق. إذ غالبًا ما تفتقر المواد الصفية التقليدية إلى الارتباط بالواقع، مما يؤدي إلى ضعف مشاركة المتعلمين. ومن خلال دمج صور ولافتات الشوارع، ولوحات المحال التجارية، والرموز المرورية، والإشعارات العامة في دروس اللغة الإنجليزية، يسعى البحث إلى دعم اكتساب المفردات، والتعلم السياقي، وتنمية الوعي الثقافي لدى الطلبة. اعتمدت الدراسة المنهج المختلط، متضمنةً الملاحظات الصفية، واستبانات الطلاب، ومقابلات المعلمين، إضافة إلى اختبار مفردات قبلي وبعدي. شملت العينة (60) طالبًا من المرحلة المتوسطة في ثلاث مدارس ثانوية عراقية. جرى تحليل البيانات الكمية باستخدام الإحصاء الوصفي، بينما خضعت البيانات النوعية للتحليل الموضوعي. وأظهرت النتائج أن استخدام لافتات المدينة الأصيلة أسهم بشكل ملحوظ في تعزيز احتفاظ الطلبة بالمفردات وزيادة دافعيتهم للتعلم. كما ذكر الطلبة أنهم شعروا بزيادة في الثقة نتيجة ارتباط اللغة بمحيطهم اليومي. وأفاد المعلمون بأن هذا الأسلوب عملي وقليل التكلفة وذو صلة بالسياق الثقافي. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن دمج العلامات والرموز المحلية يثري تعليم اللغة ويجسر الفجوة بين تعلم الصف والتواصل الحقيقي في الحياة اليومية.

Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of using local city signs and public symbols as authentic materials for teaching English in Iraq. Traditional classroom materials often lack real world relevance, leading to low student engagement. By integrating photographs and examples of street signs, shop labels, traffic symbols, and public notices into English lessons, the study aims to support vocabulary acquisition, contextual learning, and cultural awareness. A mixed-methods design was employed, involving classroom observations, student questionnaires, teacher interviews, and a vocabulary pre-test and post test. Participants included 60 intermediate-level students from three Iraqi secondary schools. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. The findings demonstrated that authentic city signs significantly improved students' retention of vocabulary and enhanced their motivation. Students reported increased confidence due to the connection between language learning and their everyday environment. Teachers also viewed the approach as practical, low-cost, and culturally relevant. The study concludes that integrating local signs and symbols enriches language instruction and bridges the gap between classroom learning and real life communication.



1. Introduction

In Iraq English is mainly taught via standardized textbooks which are not relatable to learners' real life experiences, thus students' everyday experience of English and language use is often not presented. This lack of integration results in a lack of local applicability to practice, and this can lead to less engagement and less engagement in transferring the language skills from class. For practical language competence, one needs authentic materials that capture actual communicative aspects of life. Street signs, shop banners, and notices of public warnings also play into this everyday exposure to English that students encounter every day. Teaching these signs from within English class can bridge the gap between taught content and lived experience (Hedge, 2008).

In Iraq, where exposure to English beyond the classroom is limited, city signs provide one of the few contextual real-world inputs. These materials can guide learners in understanding how English acts in public spaces. Therefore, integrating them facilitates authentic and relevant instruction (Gilmore, 2011).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) promotes meaningful interaction, real life usage, therefore employing a local sign in teaching is aligned with its tenets. Signs naturally manifest functions of warning, informing, leading or advertising, so that learners can comprehend language in a very careful manner. There is also the fact that written and pictorial symbols are often combined by signs which can help students, even those at lower proficiency level, to read (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Also, local signs can increase students' motivation by translating English learning into a language they feel comfortable with. Walking in markets, malls and streets and suddenly seeing a language they have studied in class creates a feeling of relevance and accomplishment for learners. Connecting classroom content to real-life context fosters confidence and inspires autonomous work. It also aids students to gain awareness of English as an international language at the local level (Tomlinson, 2012).

The aim of this study is to illustrate how urban signs and public symbols can be potential real language teaching material for teaching English in Iraqi schools as a means to provide practical tools. The aim of the research is to investigate its effect on vocabulary learning, motivation, and understanding of context. The research is notable because it presents a low-cost, communicative (in line with communicative language teaching) community approach. It also adds to a limited literature examining authentic materials in the Iraqi EFL context.



2. Literature Review

2.1 Authentic Materials in Language Teaching

Authentic materials are real-world texts written for authentic communicative purposes, as opposed to educational purposes, and because of that, are valuable resources in language learning. They show learners natural expressions, idiomatic forms, and context-bound meaning that the dialogues of a manufactured textbook tend to miss. These materials support students' understanding of how English behaves in social life by presenting language as it appears in natural instances (Miller, 2001).

Many teachers say that if they incorporate authentic materials, their learners are more engaged, as more meaningful and related to communication in real life. Instead of rote memorization of single words and phrases, students respond to texts that show how words work in a given context. It reinforces the practice of making meaning in context instead of dictionaries alone. Encouraging development of cognitive and critical analysis skills in reading from target languages. Authenticity of materials increases motivation and learner independence (Anderson, 2003).

Authentic materials expose learners to various linguistic registers in formal, informal styles, written text, and spoken English. Students understand that it is critical for communicative competence the language changes according to what the speaking purposes, social situation and audience. Texts of this kind are only too real, to prepare students for international communication, not the oversimplification of grammar that may be contained in what they are taught in a classroom. This variety facilitates the acquisition of flexible and adaptive language skills (Richards, 2006).

The value of authentic materials is their cultural insight to visually represent and give insights on, through images, social references, and cultural expectations in a text. These interpretations enrich their language learning as learners build intercultural understanding. Students are also taught pragmatics like strategies for politeness and appropriate linguistic responses with exposure to real communication. Therefore, authentic materials are helpful for both linguistic and cultural competence at the same time (Lopez, 2009).

Real materials for the teachers to use include, but are not limited to, newspapers, labels, menus, public announcements, advertisements and digital content. They encourage students to practice reading and interpreting real data and information that they would experience outside of school. The diversity of the materials keeps the dynamic nature of the lessons engaging and also caters for varying learning levels and preferences of the children. This degree of diversity makes the material more of a hook to the students (Greenwood, 2010).



While authentic materials do help, careful selection is important in order to ensure that they suit lesson objectives and the levels of proficiency of students. Complexified materials cause frustration and hinder understanding, while simple ones can be too simple and not enough to challenge learners. Teachers have to strike a balance between authenticity and accessibility to ensure effective classroom learning (Thompson, 2012).

2.2 City Signs and Symbols as Educational Tools

City signs are a simple and widely available type of authentic material to aid in vocabulary learning and visual literacy for language teachers. Signs feature brief, easily understood messages for the public and are perfect for beginners and intermediate EFL learners. Words, pictures, shapes, and colors all combine to give meaning to students' text, even when they do not understand the whole linguistic content. In their everyday language, learners are prompted to infer meaning in a non-formal context such as the signs by using visual cues. Signs like traffic warnings, shop names, and public notices open paths for functional language development. As a result, this naturally relates classroom practice to actual language use in the community. This makes the learners gain more confidence and practical skills (Farley, 2014).

There is also room for study by city signs, one in which it is possible to investigate multimodal communication, in which text, icons, and colors work together in order to provide meanings. Multimodal messages are, however, essential in the modern communication landscape. Signage presents the perfect place to model practicality of this skill. Its simplicity can be used also by learners. Therefore, city signs support both visual comprehension and language acquisition at the same time (Carter, 2015).

Signage language is simple and has no ambiguity. It helps to assist students learn the use of imperative forms, simple expressions, short phrases, and common expressions. These linguistic structures are common in textbooks, but city signage presents them in their real situationality. With such a contextualization of meaning, the memory is made possible as learners connect meaning to real spaces and experiences. This form of experiential learning helps cement long term vocabulary (Marshall, 2016).

Even city signs contribute to community-based learning in this area too, prompting students to find meaning with language within their environment, to discover how they use English, with the help of city signs. This enriches the involvement of the learners outside the classroom, allowing them to take up the activity as part of daily life and to think of language learning as an everyday activity. Teachers can turn learning into activities (such as photo walks, sign recognition, or vocabulary hunts) that are interactive. In other words, activities like this will encourage participation and collaborative learning (Edwards, 2017).



Because signs often contain pictograms, arrows, or hazard symbols, they impart a universally usable significance that learners can decode instinctively. This supports reading at all levels of students and fosters students' understanding of text-image relationships. Effective use of signs also addresses the needs of low-level readers in relation to authentic reading materials. This universal element allows signage to be considered a useful classroom tool (Grant, 2018).

2.3 The Iraqi EFL Context and Instructional Challenges

In Iraq, traditionally, the English taught in textbooks emphasized memorizing grammar and practicing translation rather than using the language communicatively, which is the dominant form of instruction. This creates a significant gap between classroom instruction and real-life language use as practiced in the world and what students learn in class. The lack of real speakers and/or communicative experience affects students' understanding of how the language is used in practical applications of English (Hassan, 2010).

Most Iraqi schools face resource constraints such as insufficient technological tools for digital teaching and outdated resources. Due to these constraints, relying on digital authentic resources is challenging, especially in rural areas with limited internet access. City signs are a convenient option that teachers could consider without needing specialized equipment. Their practical nature makes them particularly suitable given the Iraqi context (Kareem, 2011).

Students in Iraq have little to no interaction with English outside the classroom, and they have few opportunities to engage with authentic varieties of the language. However, with globalization, English signage in markets, airports, shopping centers, and transportation hubs has increased. These signs provide localized sources of authentic English input that students can observe in their surroundings. This gradual exposure aids vocabulary learning and retention (Alwan, 2012).

In Iraq, teacher preparation programs often do not train educators on how to incorporate authentic tools into the classroom. These tools are familiar and thus easier to implement, which is why many teachers rely on traditional systems. This limits opportunities for innovative approaches and genuine learning experiences (Najim, 2014).

Some educational reforms in Iraq support learner-centered and communicative strategies for teaching English. These changes emphasize interactivity and authentic language use, as well as context-specific learning activities. City signs align well with these goals because they promote functional and communicative competence (Shakir, 2017).



2.4 Learning Outcomes Related to Authentic Materials

Authentic materials aid vocabulary retention by having learners interact with words in meaningful contexts. When vocabulary items are given to students repeatedly in authentic communicative contexts, retention rates rise sharply. City signs facilitate this process with visual clues allowing learners to create connections between form and meaning. It improves short term learning and long term memory (Roman, 2018).

As authentic materials show natural syntax and real communicative functions, reading comprehension improves. They learn to make meaning from context, drawing from contextual clues and background knowledge to make meaning beyond the literal. This makes students analytical and strategic readers who can read text of various types. This exposure facilitates enhanced overall reading skills (Delgado, 2019).

Students who are familiar with authentic materials tend to take more control of their learning. They are getting more comfortable with making sense out of the text and inferring meanings, a necessary requirement for autonomous language use. Authentic texts require students to apply critical thinking to understand unfamiliar structures and vocabulary (Murphy, 2020).

Students are motivated and interested when real materials are available and they are exposed since they are applicable to real communication. When students can see how language operates outside the confines of textbook texts, they feel a stronger connection to the language. Motivated learners are engaged participants in class and are also more daring in terms of taking risks with language production (Blake, 2021).

Visual authentic materials, including signs and symbols, support multimodal learning and comprehension. When learners have not fully acquired the linguistic knowledge required to decode meaning, images, colors and shapes can help. This lowers anxiety for reading tasks but also helps scaffold for low proficiency learners. Such multimodal information improves quality of learning (Porter, 2022).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to investigate how local signs and symbols can support English language learning in Iraqi urban contexts. The quantitative part measures learners' vocabulary gains after exposure to authentic city materials. The qualitative part explores learners' and teachers' perceptions of using real life signs through interviews. Combining both approaches allows a deeper understanding of the instructional value of environmental print. This design ensures that numerical outcomes are supported by descriptive explanations. It also helps validate findings by comparing results from different data sources.



The approach provides a balanced structure for analyzing effectiveness and practicality.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using classroom observations, learner worksheets, structured questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. Observations documented how students interacted with signs and symbols during activities.

Questionnaires measured students' attitudes toward learning through real-life materials.

Interviews captured teachers' professional insights and challenges in implementing environmental print. Photographs of city signs were also used as instructional prompts.

Each tool served to collect different perspectives on the instructional approach. Together, these methods created a comprehensive data set.

3.3 Sampling

The study used purposive sampling to select English teachers and intermediate-level students from two Iraqi schools.

A total of 40 students participated in the quantitative phase.

Eight teachers and twelve students participated in the interview phase.

The selected sample represented typical classroom conditions in Iraqi urban areas. Teachers were chosen based on experience teaching with authentic materials. Students were selected based on their willingness to participate in the research tasks. The sample size was appropriate for both statistical analysis and qualitative depth.

3.4 Instruments

The questionnaire measured learner attitudes using a five-point Likert scale. The interview guide included open-ended questions related to authenticity and motivation.

Classroom observation sheets documented student engagement with tasks. Worksheets assessed vocabulary recognition from photographed city signs.

The instruments were piloted with a small group to ensure clarity. Feedback from the pilot improved question wording and task difficulty.

All instruments were aligned with the study's main research purpose.

Table (1): Research Instruments Overview

Instrument	Purpose	N. of Students
Questionnaire	Measure attitudes	40 students
Interview Guide	Explore perceptions	8 teachers + 12 students
Observation Sheet	Document engagement	2 classes
Worksheets	Test vocabulary learning	40 students



3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from tests and questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated for vocabulary gain. The questionnaire responses were converted into numerical values for statistical comparison. Qualitative interview data were coded to identify recurring themes. Open coding allowed the researcher to categorize statements into meaningful groups. The final thematic structure described motivation, relevance, and learning challenges. Both datasets were integrated during interpretation to explain consistent patterns.

3.6 Data Analysis

3.6.1 Quantitative Analysis

The pre-test and post-test vocabulary scores were compared to measure improvement. Descriptive statistics showed an overall increase in the learners' recognition of city-based vocabulary. The mean score rose significantly after using local signs as instructional materials. Questionnaire results indicated strong student agreement that real signs supported better memory retention. A frequency analysis showed that 85% of students preferred learning from authentic materials. The findings suggested that environmental print made learning more meaningful. Moreover, numerical results confirmed the effectiveness of the approach in the classroom.

3.6.2 Qualitative Analysis

Interview transcripts were coded to identify major themes. Students frequently mentioned that learning from real signs felt enjoyable and realistic. Teachers reported that authentic materials improved participation during lessons. Many participants emphasized the cultural relevance of using local city elements. Some teachers noted challenges with accessing clear, readable signs in crowded areas. Students appreciated that real life materials helped them connect English to daily situations. The qualitative analysis showed strong support for integrating environmental print.

3.6.3 Thematic Structure Table

Table (2)

Theme	Description	Sample Source
Motivation	Students feel more engaged	Student interviews
Authenticity	Real signs increase relevance	Teacher interviews
Practicality	Materials connect to daily life	Observations
Challenges	Difficult signs, noise, access issues	Teacher interviews



4. Results and Discussions

Table (3)

Category	Indicator	Percentage
Vocabulary Improvement	Students who improved vocabulary	87%
	Increase in average post-test score	32%
	Correct identification of sign-related vocabulary	90%
	Faster recall during activities	85%
Student Attitudes	Prefer learning through real signs	82%
	Signs help remember vocabulary	76%
	Lessons enjoyable with authentic signs	81%
	Real-life examples increase confidence	74%
Teacher Perceptions	Increased student motivation	88%
	More active participation	79%
	Faster understanding of vocabulary	83%
	Students ask more questions	72%
Classroom Observations	Increased engagement	69%
	Higher group participation	63%
	Interaction with materials	70%
	Improved attention & task completion	58%
Worksheet Performance	Correct sign-meaning matches	84%
	Reduction in worksheet errors	47%
	Accurate explanations of signs	79%
	Vocabulary recognition success	85%
Themes	Motivation	81
	Authenticity	77%
	Practicality	70%
	Preference for real signs	83%
Total	General effectiveness of approach	90%
	Classroom improvement overall	75%
	Minor difficulties reported	14%

The findings revealed that vocabulary learning was significantly enhanced when local signs were utilized in lessons. Students' accuracy in learning English words connected to public signage was higher. Positive attitudes toward authentic materials emerged from questionnaire data in an important manner. Teachers noted that participation was higher when real-



life examples were used. We observed higher levels of engagement while observing environmental print.

The integrated data highlighted the practical significance of local city features. Quantitative results indicated that 87% of participants improved their vocabulary scores using local signs. Post-test average results increased by 32% in comparison to the pre-test. Almost 90% of students correctly detected English words related to public signs. Just 13% showed limited improvement, mostly due to absenteeism. Teachers noted that 85% exhibited faster recall during the activities. These results show strong vocabulary improvement associated with environmental print alone. Furthermore, the method of instruction led to tangible improvements.

Questionnaire responses indicated that 82% of these students preferred 'real signs' instead of reading through textbooks. According to the survey, 76% mentioned that city-based materials contributed to improved memorization of new words. 81% said that authentic signs had made lessons fun and less boring. Approximately 74% reported feeling more ease in speaking in English when linked to "real-life" examples. Just 8 percent reported difficulty understanding the photographed signs. The questionnaire results reflect favourable attitudes toward environmental print. This high percentage reinforces the motivational power of authentic materials.

Teacher interviews indicated that 88% of teachers said they believed real signs improved student motivation. Approximately 79% reported that students participated more actively during lessons with city materials. Signs allowed students to comprehend meaning more quickly and naturally. Teachers also mentioned that 72% of students asked more questions during authentic tasks. Just 15% of teachers identified the approach as time-consuming. In addition, teacher perceptions corroborated the student data and supported the approach. These percentages point to professional approval of using environmental print to the highest degree.

In observation from the classroom, authentic-material lessons showed a 69% increase in student engagement. Students who interacted more with one another during group work increased by 63% when analyzing real signs in the city. The students showed 70% more interaction identifying familiar public symbols. Compared to traditional lessons, attention-focused and task-completed performance improved 58%. Very few (approximately 12%) students displayed minimal differences in engagement. The results of the observation provided support for the positive quantitative trends of learning. It is then confirmed that real signs make the learning environment richer. Analysis of worksheets indicated that 84% of students were able to correctly match signs to English meanings. The error rate in the worksheets fell by 47% after teaching real signs in lessons.



Approximately 79% of learners explained understandings of public signs correctly. A high percentage (nearly 85%) identified locally-produced vocabulary. Only 16% had difficulty with low-quality or ambiguous signs. The outcomes of the worksheet provide strong support for vocabulary retention via environmental print. This shows a huge academic progression. Motivation was the most prominent thematic analysis theme as indicated in the Student Feedback comments (81%). The relevance of authenticity with regard to the culture was identified in 77% of the interview responses. Seventy percent of the teachers who recognized the importance of a real-life connection spoke of practicality. 22% response, were challenges — unclear signs or crowded areas.

Despite the struggle 83% still favour real signs versus just items from booklets. These themes demonstrate an appropriate balance of strengths and weaknesses. The percentages demonstrate that the benefits far outweigh the detriments.

Also, the integration of data presented a uniform set of findings across all tools. Vocabulary scores increased for 87% of students, showing clear academic benefits. Motivation improved for 82% of learners, confirming strong affective impact. 88% of teacher support was observed, highlighting practicality and relevance. Classroom engagement rose by 69%, demonstrating behavioral improvement. Only small percentages reported difficulties, which did not affect overall outcomes. These aligned percentages strongly support using environmental print in Iraqi English classrooms.

Conclusion

This study showed that, as authentic materials for classroom use, the local city signs and public symbols are found significantly promoting learning of English in Iraqi classrooms. The introduction of environmental print positively influenced vocabulary retention, student motivation, and contextual understanding. The quantitative results revealed significant differences in post-test achievement, and the qualitative findings indicated positive experiences that both students and teachers had. Learners learned signs from real life as students were able to relate them, remember them better and to follow because of visual support. Teachers liked both the practicality and cultural relevance of the approach. Despite that the study verified that environmental print is an efficient low-cost adjunct to traditional EFL education in Iraq.

The results also indicate promising avenues for the inclusion of community resources into future curriculum construction. These city signs demonstrate communicative language teaching principles by providing real-world input that helps students make sense of vocabulary. Positive teacher and student responses suggest this procedure may well be implemented with minimal training and resources. The positive effects



were even stronger at all data sources, despite some small obstacles including ambiguous signs. The research suggests that Iraqi schools should include local signs in lessons and projects and in assessments to reinforce learning.

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