

Using authentic materials in the foreign language classrooms: Teachers' perspectives in EFL classes

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Abstract

The idea of using authentic material in language teaching is supported among references and many professionals in the field of language pedagogy. Authentic material provides the learners with many significant advantages and promotes them with high motivation and interest in language learning and lead to improving communicative competence (Guariento & Morley, 2001; Wilcox et al., 1999). This paper attempted to investigate Iranian EFL teachers' attitudes and beliefs regarding the use of authentic materials at high school level in Iran according to communicative language principles, focusing on both reading and listening skills. Fifty-seven (57) female and male English teachers, who teach in high schools and took apart in teacher training course (TTC) with CLT framework, completed a survey questionnaire for the purpose of this study. The questionnaires were analyzed in terms of frequency and percentage by means of the statistical package SPSS. The results indicate that English teachers have a positive attitude toward presenting authentic materials in the classroom. Recommendations for future research are provided.

Keywords: language learning; EFL; curriculum; educational resources

Using authentic materials in the foreign language classrooms: Teachers' perspectives in EFL classes

1. Introduction

Since the mid-1970s communicative language teaching has considered a consistent need to develop students' skills for the real world. According to educational policy of Iran since 1391 Hegrishamsi (2013), communicative language teaching is used for teaching in high schools. Teachers, therefore, must pass teacher training course (TTC) with CLT framework and they use some real world activities in the classroom (Stern, 1981). To do so, teachers incorporate authentic materials as one of the most important principles in CLT approach in EFL classes.

Rogers (1988) stated "the authentic materials should be qualified in terms of objectives, learners' needs and nature of the meaningful communication" (p. 467). In addition, Dornyei (2003) has demonstrated that students' motivation and, learning achievement are highly influenced by the teachers' attitudes. Besides, scholars argue that the use of authentic materials help students to bridge the gap between classroom knowledge and their' capacity to participate in real-world events. In other words, incorporating authentic materials helps students acquire an effective communicative competence in the target language. Hence, the present study was designed to investigate Tabatkan English Department (TED) teachers' attitudes toward using authentic materials in EFL classrooms in Iran.

2. Literature Review

Definition of Authentic Materials - The term *authentic materials* have been defined in different ways throughout the literature. Nunan (1989, as cited in Adams, 1995) states that authentic materials are not always produced for the purpose of language teaching. Little et al. (1988, as cited in Guariento & Morley, 2001) declare that authentic materials are used for some social purposes in the language context where they are produced. Bacon and Finnemann (1990) also state that authentic materials are those texts which are made by native speakers for non-pedagogical purposes. This paper will assume Bacon and Finnemann's definition because their definition specifies the producers of the text as native speakers, whereas the others do not.

2.1 *The Impact of Authentic Materials on FL Teaching*

Although the use of authentic materials in the classroom has become general practice during the previous 30 years, the issue of authenticity has been one of the most debatable aspects in the ground. However, the need or usefulness of authentic materials has been increasingly recognized especially in non-native countries as Iran. Empirical studies have demonstrated the positive effects of utilizing authentic texts by language learners. For example, some researches show that using authentic materials leads to oral language development (Bacon & Finneman, 1990; Miller, 2005; Otte, 2006; Thanajaro, 2000). Moreover, some other studies have confirmed that using authentic materials has great influence on developing reading comprehension by presenting new words and expressions to students (Bacon & Finneman, 1990; Berardo, 2006). Harmer (1991) points out that these are only authentic materials which actually develop students' listening and reading skills. Furthermore, Allen et al. (1988, as cited in Baird, 2004) mentions that developing students' strategies in comprehending authentic texts will lead to developing their writing proficiency in the target language learning. According to Omaggio Hadley (1993) and Rogers and Medley (1988), if students are to develop a functional proficiency in the language and to use the language communicatively in the real world, they must begin to encounter the language of that world in the classroom. Also, learners need opportunities to practice using the language to cope with everyday situations they might encounter outside the classroom.

Authentic materials can be even used from the first week of the first semester; however, the materials must relate to learners' life experiences and contain appropriate features that enhance comprehension at this level (Rings, 1986; Vandergrift, 1997). Feyten (1991) asserts, learners can handle authentic, unedited discourse although their success in comprehending may range from very little to considerable. Meyer (1984) and Richards and Renandya (1983) suggest providing students with essential background knowledge and simple tasks to perform while listening.

Hansen and Jensen (1994) contend that students from all proficiency levels should be exposed to natural speech as a regular part of their listening practice. According to Bacon (1989), less-proficient students can understand and benefit from authentic texts. Schmitt (2002: 206) points out that it is crucial to assist learners approach fully authentic tasks progressively, rather than trying to make tasks lifelike from the start. To determine what needs to be done to prepare students for real-world situations, Joiner et al. (1989) suggested that teachers examine current practices and materials used in language classes so that teachers can determine what students listen to, how much they listen, and how they listen. And also implementing authentic speech in classroom listening allows students to have "immediate and direct contact with input data which reflect genuine communication in the target language"(Breen, 1985, p. 63).

This is an advantage to incorporate authentic materials in teaching a FL and will actually lead to an increase in learners' motivation too. McNeil (1994) and Kilickaya (2004) point out that the use of authentic texts is a way of increasing students' motivation for language learning since the students feel that they are learning the real language. The other empirical studies (Bacon & Finnemann's, 1990; Otte, 2006; Thanajaro, 2000) have confirmed that using authentic aural texts will increase students' motivation and self-satisfaction. However, some scholars are not in favor of using authentic materials. For instance, Clark (1983) believes that authentic materials do not affect learning at all. Kilickaya (2004) further states that, authentic texts are random in respect to vocabulary, structures, functions, content, and length; therefore, they cause problem for the teachers. Teachers sometimes do not have access to authentic materials, the expense of purchasing them, and the time required to find an appropriate authentic text (McNeil, 1994; Miller, 2005). Such issues usually make it difficult for teachers to incorporate authentic materials into the curriculum successfully. In conclusion, the benefits that authentic materials bring to the FL classroom greatly prevail over the challenges.

2.2 The role of authentic materials in FL teaching and learning

The need for authentic materials in the field of language teaching and their usefulness have ever more acknowledged by the teachers and researchers. Many empirical studies have demonstrated the positive effects of authentic materials taken by learners who have opportunities to interact and deal with them. Studies, such as Miller (2005) and Thanajaro (2000), have shown the use of authentic materials which lead to aural language development. In addition, Otte (2006) studied the impact of aural authentic texts on listening comprehension abilities of adult ESL students of an American university. He found that exposure to authentic materials would lead to better listening comprehension abilities and motivation of the language learners. By the same way, the study of Herron and Seay (1991) showed that the language learners listening to authentic radio tapes as regular classroom activities had demonstrated greater listening comprehension than others. Moreover, many experts of language teaching and pedagogy stated that applying authentic materials would improve the communicative ability of the learners (Guariento & Morely, 2001).

Gilmore (2007) studied the effect of using authentic materials compared to textbook materials on developing the communicative competence of the learners during one year experiment. Weyers (1999) worked on the influence of real-life video materials on university language learners, especially on listening comprehension and communicative competence. According to Ur (1996), understanding texts outside the classroom is troublesome for students since the reading materials used in the classroom do not illustrate the language in the real world. She argues: "we want our learners to be able to cope with the same kinds of reading that are encountered by native speakers of the target language (p. 150)". Bantmeir (2008) stated that real life reading comprehension texts

should be used as an essential part of language curriculum. Moreover, Hadley (2001) pointed out:

use of real or simulated travel documents, hotel registration forms, biographical data sheets, train and plane schedules, authentic restaurant menus, labels, signs, newspapers, and magazines will acquaint students more directly with real language than will any set of contrived classroom materials used alone (p. 97).

So, it seems that reading practices by use of different authentic materials is sensible for the students. It is also established that students of all language proficiency levels are able to manage the authentic materials. Maxim (2002) found “the students’ limited linguistic competence did not short-circuit their ability to read authentic texts in class with the support of their classmates and instructor” (p. 29). However, including authentic materials in foreign language classes has other advantages. Professors and experts of teaching language should maintain the enhancing power of the authentic materials (Gilmore, 2007). By using authentic materials students know how to use language in real world and improve their proficiency level in four skills of language learning. McNeil and Kilickaya (2004) found that authentic texts make the language learners to feel learning authentic and real life language.

The target language is used in a social context and its use is motivating for learning. Rivers (1987) proved that learners who work with authentic materials are more interested in language learning. Kim (2000) also pointed out that authentic materials provide a mean for overcoming the cultural and social barriers of language learning. However, some experts do not trust the use of authentic materials. Clark (1983) stated that the media has no effect for learning language in any condition and so using authentic versus non-authentic materials is out of question. In the same way, Kienbaum and colleagues (1986) claimed that there is no significant difference in language learning of students who use authentic materials compared to others who learn language with traditional materials.

According to Martinez (2002) using authentic materials may be culturally biased. According to McNeil (1994), Kilickaya (2004) and Ur (1996), lower-level learners may feel frustration and de-motivation when confronted with an authentic text. Guariento and Morely (2001) mentioned that “at lower levels, 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, de-motivated” (p. 347). Kim (2000) believed that at earliest stages of learning real-life materials do not have any impact on learning of the students. All in all, using authentic material in language teaching has been under debate for many years. However, the advantages of using authentic materials outweigh the difficulties. On the other hand, it is possible to overcome the difficulties by using proper task design. Field (1998) stated that “instead of simplifying the language of the text, simplify the task that is demanded of the student.

The positive effects of authentic listening materials are also mentioned in many studies. For example “a Survey of Iranian EFL Teachers’ and Learners’ Perceptions toward authentic listening materials at University Level” done at Guilan university by Zhafarghandi. This study considered the issue of using authentic listening material at university level. According to Zafarghandi (2014), using authentic materials made students interested in language learning. The students’ positive attitudes toward language learning were based on the advantages of authentic materials brought into instruction context. Authentic listening materials cause exposure to real language and are more related to natural needs of the language learners. Real-life listening materials bring the chance of applying a more creative approach toward teaching.

2.3 When should Authentic Materials be introduced?

When to bring in authentic materials is a controversial issue in language teaching. Kilickaya (2004) and Kim (2000) believe that teachers can only use authentic materials in intermediate and advanced language classes. According to Guariento and Morley (2001), authentic texts should not be used with lower level students because it would lead to frustration, confusion and de-motivation. However, other researchers believe that learners should

be exposed to authentic materials in the earliest stages of language learning (McNeil, 1994; Miller, 2005), claiming that exposure to such texts in the earliest stages will lead to developing useful strategies for dealing with complex tasks later on.

2.4 Selection of authentic materials

According to Berardo (2006), authentic texts must be chosen based on: suitability of content, exploitability, and readability. He believes that the content is suitable if it interests the students and is appropriate to their needs and abilities. Bacon and Finneman (1990) also assert that the authentic texts should be culturally relevant to the students' experience. Furthermore, the way the authentic text is used to develop the students' competence and how it can be broken for teaching purposes is called exploitability. Finally, the language of the text and the structural and lexical difficulty refers to readability.

2.5 Sources of Authentic Materials

The sources of authentic materials (whether spoken or written) are endless. The most common sources are newspapers, magazines, TV, video, radio, literature, and the internet. Although radio is easy to use, the comprehensibility of its input is the most difficult for language learners because all non-verbal information is missing... Pictures, movements, colors and body language of TV and video, unlike radio, allow learners to access non-verbal information; therefore, TV and video are easier for the language learners to comprehend. Yet it is the internet that is assumed the most useful source (Berardo, 2006). As printed materials date very quickly, the internet is always updated, is interactive, and provides visual stimulation (Berardo, 2006). Moreover, comparing to the other sources, the internet is more useful. Because, teachers can get articles, audio clips, podcasts and videos from the internet. However, as Miller (2003) states, TV is the most used medium for obtaining authentic listening materials for language instruction (see appendix A). Some studies provided insights about learners' attitudes toward authentic input. In addition, pedagogical research required to provide recommendations for material selection and sources. The study with the aim of eliciting teachers' attitudes toward using authentic materials is rare in Iran. Since the teachers' role in providing authentic input is very important, this study attempts to address this issue.

3. The Study

Purpose of the Study: The essential purpose of this study is to elicit the attitudes of Iranian English language teachers, toward using authentic materials in their classes. The study focuses on receptive skills only (listening and reading).

3.1 Research questions:

- What are the teachers' attitudes toward using authentic materials in EFL classes?
- Do the teachers prefer to use authentic materials? Why?
- In which levels would the teachers use authentic materials?
- What are the sources that the teachers would use to obtain authentic materials?
- Do the teachers need training in dealing with authentic materials? If so, what type of training?

3.2 Methodology

Participants - The researcher, as instructor of teacher training course had asked colleagues to participate in this study. Initially, 105 female and male English teachers who had passed teacher training course (TTC) in Tabadkan English Department in Mashhad were asked to participate. The participants were randomly selected

without regard to their nationality, teaching experience, or academic degree. Only 57 agreed to participate; all were passing TTC. Four had studied abroad in countries where English is the native language. Their experience in teaching English as a foreign language ranged from nine to twenty- nine years.

3.3 Procedures and Instruments

A quantitative method was employed. The survey questionnaire (was used by Soliman E. M. Soliman, Malaysia, 2013) was distributed to TED teachers in order to find out Iranian EFL teachers attitudes and beliefs regarding the use of authentic materials within their English classes. Besides, the questionnaire consists of selected and open-response items. Both types of items may collect information on (a) personal profile (including years of experience, nationality, academic degree and (b) attitudes toward using authentic materials in class (see appendix B). After passing the last section of TTC, the questionnaire was distributed to all 57 initially selected potential participants. The questionnaire consisted of nine items in the form of multiple-choice questions. Participants were allowed to choose more than one answer according to their opinions. In addition, they were allowed to add their own comments regarding any item. All 57 participants who agreed to answer the questionnaire returned the surveys within the required timetable. Then the questionnaires were analyzed in terms of frequency and percentage by using SPSS package.

4. Results and Discussion

As stated earlier, this study sought to determine TED English teachers' attitudes toward using authentic materials in the language classroom. The outcomes of the teachers' responses to the questionnaire are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Analysis of Teachers' Responses to the Questionnaire

Questions	Answers	Frequency	%
1. Would you prefer to use authentic materials in your classes?	Yes	57	100
	No	0	0
2. Why do not you prefer to use authentic materials?	Time consuming	0	0
	Difficult for the students	0	0
	Syllabus constraints	0	0
3. Why do you prefer to use authentic materials?	Exposure to real language	56	97.3
	Motivate the students	34	58
	Improve the students' skills	57	100
	Administration requirement	0	0
4. In which class(s) would you use such materials?	Listening	55	76.7
	Reading	56	95.3
5. At which level(s) would you use authentic materials?	Beginning levels	22	53
	Intermediate levels	56	98.3
	Advanced Levels	44	78.3
6. What are the sources that you would use to obtain authentic materials?	Newspapers and Magazines	55	85.7
	TV/ Video	56	99
	Radio	15	28
	Internet	50	88.3
7. What criteria of selection would you follow?	Language level	53	92.3
	Length of the text	21	38
	Students' needs and interests	38	67.7
	Course objectives	47	84.3
8. Do you think you need training in dealing with such materials?	Yes	35	63.7
	No	19	35.3
9. What type of training do you need?	Selecting the materials	31	55
	Designing the activities	56	99

As shown in Table 1, the analysis of the data indicated a general concord among English teachers in TED

concerning the positive effect of authentic materials in teaching EFL. In their answers to the first item, all 57 teachers indicated that they prefer to use authentic materials in their language classes. Since all of the participants prefer to use authentic materials, none of them answered item two.

By answers to the third item, all of the participants demonstrated that they prefer to provide authentic materials for students in order to develop their language skills. None of the teachers agree doing so is required by the administration. So; it indicated that the administrative policy in Iran does not encourage teachers to contain authentic materials in the curriculum. The overwhelming majority (97.3%) stated that they would use authentic materials in order to provide the students with the language used in real society. One of the teachers wrote: *"I agree with the use of authentic materials. By using these techniques, the students are related to the real world, communicatively. But may it cause them mixed up, and overwhelmed by the difference between the classroom setting and the real world"*. Moreover, the analysis shows that only 58% of teachers concern about motivating the students in learning the language by using authentic materials. One of the teachers indicated *"I would provide anything that will progress the students' knowledge, they should be able to pass the exam with motivation or without it"*.

The results show that teachers have positive attitudes toward using authentic materials in FL classes. They consider authentic materials as important input for improving students' skills and exposing them to real language. The findings of this study are consistent with some previous researches that confirmed the positive effects of authentic materials in improving students' reading and listening skills (Harmer, 1991; Miller, 2005; Thanajaro, 2000). The analysis of teachers' responses to item four showed that 95% would use authentic materials in reading classes, while 76% would use them in listening classes. It seems, this difference is because of the lack of technical support that teachers need to provide aural input. Tabadkan English department has only some listening and computer lab in some non- governmental high schools that are not available for most classes.

In regard to item five of the questionnaire, almost all of the participants (98%) believe that authentic materials can be used at the intermediate level, and 78% in advance level, but only 53% advise using these materials with beginners. One of the teachers stated that *"Beginners cannot touch such materials because they lack many lexical items and grammatical structures of English language."* It is clear that the teachers don't advise authentic materials for beginners. The suitable level for starting authentic materials is one of the most debated aspects in language teaching field. According to Guariento and Morley (2001), *"The question now...is not whether authentic texts should be used, but when and how they should be introduced"* (p. 348).besides, one of the teachers in the current study stated: *"I agree to use authentic materials in my class. But we have to notice to some points, as the students' level, Iran educational context, differences between cultures and..... Therefore, I believe that such materials must be designed according to Iranian society in order not to cause a shock for the students"*. As Schmidt's (1994) stated that sequencing authentic materials should be designed according to the incidence of high frequency lexis or structure and peoples need.

Item six was about the sources that teachers use to gain authentic input; most of the participants indicated they would prefer to use TV/video as a main source (99%). In addition, 88% would use the internet, approximately 85% would use newspapers and magazines, and only 28% may use the radio. An analysis of these results show, TV/video is the most common source for obtaining authentic materials as teacher's views and internet is in second level, newspapers and magazines third level, and radio last one. This finding is reliable with Miller's (2003) study at the ESL Magazine site (See Appendix A).

Regarding item seven that asked about the selection criteria, 92.3% indicated that the texts' language level and the objectives of the course (84%) would be the primary strategies for material selection. One teacher wrote *"I prefer to go beyond course objectives, and according to my students level I will try to choose the best authentic materials."* More than half of the participants (67%) would consider their students' needs and interests, and only 38% believe the length of the text. One of the teachers stated *"I expose my students to different forms, contexts and English language materials"*. Berardo's (2006) and Lee's (1995) proposed criteria for selecting

authentic materials that the findings of this study are reliable with them.

An analysis of TED teachers' responses to item eight (Do you think you need training in dealing with such materials) discovered that (63%) believed they need the training for using authentic materials, while only 35% claimed they need no training. According to teacher's official information, responses to this item were not affected by the length of teaching experience. One teacher with 28 years of experience stated: "*I would be glad of any training that would help me to enhance my teaching process and skills*". Concerning item nine, 56 teachers stated that they need the training in designing the materials (99%) and only 55% in selecting the materials. It can be concluded that designing the appropriate tasks due to authentic materials, is more challenging than selecting the appropriate materials.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the attitudes of teachers toward using authentic materials in EFL classroom in Iran. The study was conducted in TED (Tabadkan English Department, one of the zones of Mashhad, Iran). The results revealed that all of the teachers had positive attitudes toward providing authentic input in their classes, regardless of their nationality, teaching experience, and academic degree. The reason for such an attitude was to improve students' skills and expose them to the real English language. In addition, teachers indicated that they would tend to use more authentic materials in reading rather than listening classes. Furthermore, the results indicated that the internet and TV would be the most used sources for obtaining authentic materials. These findings are consistent with the current studies which provided evidence supporting the teacher's positive attitudes toward using authentic materials in their classes as Zhafarghandi investigation and Soliman E. M. Soliman ones. According to this study, the teachers disagreed on the suitable level of students for presenting such materials. Most of the teachers believed that the language level of the text and the course objectives are the guiding criteria for selecting appropriate texts. Finally, most participants indicated a need for additional training in using authentic materials, particularly in designing appropriate tasks. The results of this study could be viewed as a starting point for further exploration into the use of authentic materials in EFL teaching.

5.1 Limitations and Recommendations

The present study has several limitations that can be noticed for future researches on teachers and students attitudes toward using authentic materials. First, the small size of the sample population (N=57) sheds hesitation on the validity of the results. The same study may be conducted with English teachers at colleges rather than high schools, elementary, intermediate, or secondary schools. Third, the study focused on just teachers' attitudes. Hence, future research should elicit Iranian learners' attitudes toward authentic input as well. Finally, teachers' opinions about how authentic materials can develop productive skills or how to plan instruction that incorporates such materials effectively are additional aspects of authenticity that can be explored in future investigations.

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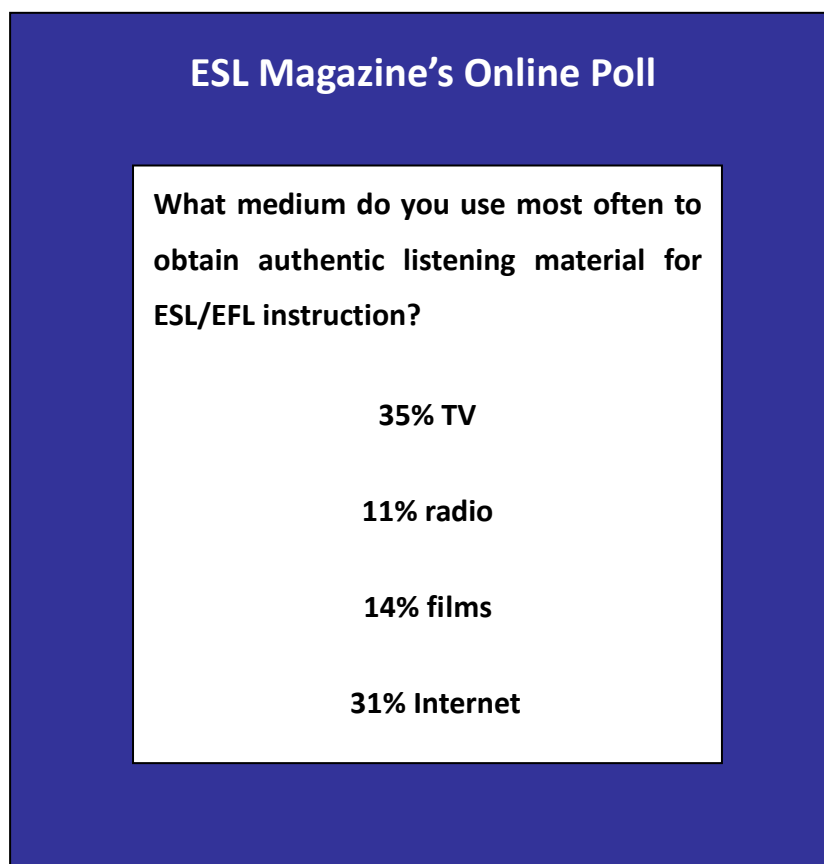
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Appendix A

A survey at the ESL Magazine Site



Adopted from Miller (2003)

Appendix B

The Questionnaire

Name:

Years of teaching English:

Authentic materials are texts produced by native speakers for non-teaching purposes. These materials reflect the real world language. Such materials include TV commercials, films, news items, weather forecasts, radio talks, interviews, articles, train timetables, advertisements, brochures, and application forms.

1. Would you prefer to use authentic materials in your classes?

..... Yes No

If your answer is 'Yes', move to item no. 3.

2. Why do not you prefer to use authentic materials?

..... time consuming (in terms of selection and preparation) difficult for the students to comprehend.
..... due to syllabus constraints.

Others.....

3. Why do you prefer to use authentic materials?

..... expose students to real language motivate the students.
..... improve the students' skills administration requirement.

4. In which class(s) would you use them?

..... Listening Reading

5. At which level(s) would you use authentic materials?

..... beginning levels intermediate levels advanced levels

6. What are the sources that you would use to obtain authentic materials?

.....Newspapers and MagazinesTV/ Video
..... Radio Internet

7. What criteria of selection would you follow?

..... Language level. (Vocabulary & grammar) length of the text
..... students' needs and interests course objectives

Others

8. Do you think you need training in using such materials?

.....Yes No

9. If so, what type of training do you need?

..... selecting the materials designing the activities

Others.....

Comments:

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