The Effect of Authentic Texts on Motivation and Reading Comprehension of EFL Students at Intermediate Level of Proficiency

Amir Marzban

Department of English Language, Islamic Azad University, Qaemshahr Branch, Qaemshahr, Iran

Solmaz Davaji (Corresponding Author)

English Department, Ayatollah Amoli Branch, Islamic Azad University, Amol, Iran

Abstract—This study attempts to explore the effect of studying authentic texts in classrooms on reading comprehension and motivation of intermediate language learners. To address this issue, a quantitative study was conducted on 24 language learners from language teaching institutes. Participants were divided randomly in two groups: authentic group and simplified group. Four online authentic texts with appropriate readability were selected for the authentic group. Simplified group received the simplified form of those texts. A Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ) containing 18 items on eight domains of motivation was also conducted to measure authentic groups' motivation before and after reading authentic texts. Using independent samples t-test and mean of gain scores of groups on pre-post tests revealed that reading authentic texts has positive effect on the reading comprehension of intermediate students. Conducting the motivation questionnaire on the authentic group showed positive changes on four domains of motivation.

Index Terms—authentic texts, simplified texts, reading comprehension, motivation

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, teaching reading has important role in learning English as either second or foreign language. Readings expose students to new vocabularies, syntax, and even new cultures. Most of the new words can be learnt through the reading. "It has long been recognized that the language presented to students in coursebooks is a poor representation of the real thing" (Gilmore, 2007, p. 98) and it is clear that most of the reading texts of coursebooks used in language institutes are un-authentic or simplified. They are designed for teaching new grammatical structures, and not for the aim of specific needs of students. Despite all attempts in teaching reading, it seems that the language learners have lost their interest in reading and become passive in regard to this field. Using authentic texts instead of simplified ones is one of the best suggestions for solving the problem. Authentic texts convey a message produced by a real author to a real audience, such as newspapers, letters, and books (Gilmore, 2007). It is also believed that authentic texts can promote the interest among the learners (Gilmore, 2007). Prevailing of using authentic texts in language teaching systems, teachers are trying to use more authentic readings instead of simplified ones to make the learners interested in what they read and keep them motivated. This study is going to investigate the role of authentic reading materials on motivation and reading comprehension of intermediate students in EFL condition.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Authentic Reading

Reading is one of the four main skills in language teaching which has an important role in language teaching systems. Berado (2006) clarifies the meaning of reading as "…different things to different people, for some it is recognizing written words, while for others it is an opportunity to teach pronunciation and practice speaking" (p. 60). Alderson (2000) considers reading as an "enjoyable activity" which can bring pleasure for the reader (p. 28).

Authentic reading is a term which is more widespread than before in language teaching. Based on Callison & Lamb (2004) authentic means "genuine, real, and true" (p.34). Berardo (2006) considers authenticity as an "… interaction between the reader and the text and not just the text in itself. Reading is considered to be an ongoing interaction, going beyond the physical context of the text, looking for meaning as well as processing information" (p.63). Berado (2006) claimed that non-authentic texts are made for the aim of language learning. The language of this group of texts is unvaried and includes (Berado, 2006, p. 62):
- perfectly formed sentences (all the time);
- a question using a grammatical structure, gets a full answer;
- repetition of structures;

- very often does not "read" well.

Authentic texts, on the other hand, made the readers focus on meaning and content and "learners feel that they are learning a target language as it is used outside the classroom" (Berado, 2006, p. 62). Berado (2006) considers newspapers, magazines, TV programs, movies, songs, literature and internet as some examples of authentic sources. One of the weaknesses of the authentic texts is existence of the unknown words. So, paying attention to the text readability and proficiency level of the learners becomes important. Related to this issue Harmer (2001) says that materials which are selected carelessly make the students de- motivated, because of miscomprehension that is resulted by applying these materials.

In traditional methods of teaching reading teachers asked the students to read the text and focus on its grammatical features and vocabularies. Students were not involved in the processes of comprehension and generalization of language by themselves. Replacing authentic reading materials instead of traditional ones provides a situation in which learners are responsible for their learning process and manipulate their prior and new information.

B. Authentic Reading in the Classroom

Today it is emphasized that teachers use authentic texts in the classroom instead of simplified ones, because it is believed that they can expose the students to "real language" (Berado,2006, p. 60). It is also believed that applying authentic texts in the classroom will lead to "… the increase in learner participation in learning, enhanced learner grammar and lexicon knowledge through self-discovery, and the expansion of learner awareness about language and differences between written and spoken mediums (Murdoch, 1999, p. 2). Guariento & Morley (2001) also believe that exposing learners to real language and getting new and real information can increase their motivation.

Comprehending the complex meaning of the text needs learners' involvement in the grammatical relationships in the text so that learners themselves achieve the grammar through self-discovery (Murdoch, 1999). Unfortunately, simplified texts do not contain perfect relationships of grammatical structures because, based on Willis (as cited in Murdoch, 1999), those texts do not exemplify the grammar as it is but in a way the writer thinks to be. One of the sources of authentic data, from which teachers can choose authentic texts to teach, is Collins Birmingham University International Language Database (COBUILD) that is a stored set of English texts on computer for teaching. It offers a worth source for students to enhance their information about the authentic language usage. According to Barlow (as cited in Murdoch, 1999, p. 7), it is helpful for teachers to:

(i) determine the most frequent patterns in a particular domain; (ii) enrich their own knowledge of the language, perhaps in response to questions raised in the classroom; (iii) provide "authentic data" examples; and (iv) generate teaching materials.

In general, using authentic materials in the classroom has some advantages (Berado, 2006, p. 64) :
- having a positive effect on student motivation;
- giving authentic cultural information;
- exposing students to real language;
- relating more closely to students' needs;
- supporting a more creative approach to teaching

C. Motivation

Motivation has an important role in language learning. To begin any discussion on motivation, the first necessary thing which must be done is having a correct definition of the word "motivation", and further of its meaning and role in language learning. According to Dornyei & Ushioda (2011), motivation"…derives from the Latin word 'movere' meaning 'to move'; What moves a person to make certain choices, engage in action, expand effort and persist in action" (p. 3).

In general, motivation refers to the desire to learn a language; what make learners to devote time and energy in language learning. The human beings learn their mother tongue easily and eagerly, because on one hand, it is a part of the process of the growth and on the other hand it is necessary for man to learn it so that it would be used in communication in the society. In contrast, learning a second language is not so much necessary; all can live and communicate in their society without knowing a second or a foreign language. Here the role of motivation in language learners becomes important.

It is claimed that there is a direct relationship between authentic texts and motivation. The number of language teaching books involving authentic texts is increasing every day. It indicates the importance and efficiency of authentic materials in language teaching systems. Floris (2008) highlighted the incorporating of authentic materials in the classroom, because they are motivating and engaging for the learners.

D. Reading Comprehension

Researchers have defined reading comprehension as "…a critical part of the multifarious interplay of mechanisms involved in L2 reading" (Brantmeier, 2004, p. 52). Reading comprehension among language learners may be different from each other. Related to this Brantmeier (2003) says that processing the texts similarly or differently, students may have non-identical interpretation of the texts. It means that, language learners may process the text in similar ways but comprehend differently, or process the texts in a different way but comprehend similarly.

Day & Park (2005) claimed that there are six kinds of reading comprehension which are helpful for the language learners to become interactive readers (p. 62). The first one is "literal comprehension". It "… refers to an understanding of the straightforward meaning of the text, such as facts, vocabulary, dates, times, and locations" (Day & Park, 2005, p.62). Direct answers are required for reading questions of this comprehension. According to Day literal comprehension may be helpful for teachers to know whether students understood the basic meaning of the text or not. The second type of the reading comprehension is "reorganization" in which "students must use information from various parts of the text and combine them for additional understanding" (Day & Park, 2005, p. 62). Reading comprehension questions of this type can made language learners to read the text generally. "Inference" is the third type of the reading comprehension. Day & Park claim that "an inference involves students combining their literal understanding of the text with their own knowledge and intuitions" (Day & Park, 2005, p. 63). Another type of the comprehension, According to Day, is "prediction". Students are supposed to guess the final events and happenings of the text. The fifth kind of reading comprehension is "evaluation". It "requires the learner to give a global or comprehensive judgment about some aspect of the text; … In order to answer this type of question, students must use both a literal understanding of the text and their knowledge of the text's topic and related issues" (Day & Park, 2005, p.64). The sixth type of the comprehension is "personal response" (Day & Park, 2005, p.64). The answers are based on the topic and indicate literal understanding of the text.

It is clear that background knowledge has an important role in text processing. Background knowledge helps the language learners to pay attention to the input during reading, have a rich text analysis and comprehension, and also better memory performance (Ellis, 2001). Pulido (2004) mentions that "knowledge emerges in the course of reading as the reader constructs a text base primarily via bottom up processing, or decoding, of the textual input" (p. 476)

For Nassaji, (as cited in Pulido, 2004) the proposed meaning of the text "becomes integrated into the reader's global knowledge, forming a coherent mental representation of what the text is about". Therefore, the knowledge is "generated through activation patterns initiated by the textual information and the progressive upgrading of previously established associations in the text". And the action of the stored information from text in working memory acts as a "signal in an associative manner to all the information stored in long-term memory" (p. 476).

Therefore background knowledge can be activated as a response to signaling mechanism and has an effect on the construction of meaning representations (Pulido, 2004). The quality of text base has an effect on the role of background knowledge. This quality is affected by the students' text processing efficiency such as the use of rhetorical knowledge structures, and sentence parsing (Pulido, 2004). In an investigation about the vocabulary gain through reading done by Pulido (2000), it was found that the amount of vocabulary gain can be increased when participants read narratives which have familiar topics for learners.

In interactive theories of reading, second language reading is considered as a cognitive process in which learners by using their background knowledge, and interaction with information, construct the meaning (Pulido, 2004). Stanovich (1992) claims that the processes in reading are not limited to interactive process, but also compensatory process in a way that when a component of processing is absent, other components of processing can be compensated for.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study was intended to investigate the effects of authentic reading on intermediate students' reading comprehension and motivation. For this study, two main questions were addressed.
1. Do authentic texts have an effect on reading comprehension of intermediate level students?
2. Do authentic texts have an effect on intermediate learners' motivation?

A. Participants

In this study twenty four participants were chosen from an English teaching institute in which they studied English as foreign language. Nine of the students were male and fifteen were female. Language learners were teenagers between thirteen and eighteen years old. Half of the language learners were chosen randomly as the simplified group and the others were placed in the authentic group. Students in the authentic group were given authentic online texts and those in the simplified group were presented by simplified forms of texts given to the authentic group. In addition to authentic materials, all of the learners in authentic group received a questionnaire to measure their motivation at the beginning and end of the course.

B. The Instruments

Placement test: is an instrument written by the Colchester English Study Centre to determine the language proficiency level of students. In this study it was used to choose intermediate level students as participants. It consists of 80 multiple choice items. The questionnaire had been piloted by the researcher on ten students. After an interval of two weeks, the test was retested on the same students. Pearson Product Moment Coefficient was used to measure the correlation between the test-retest results. Its reliability was 0.86. The validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by two experts.

Reading comprehension test: In this research, reading comprehension test is an instrument which is going to show the amount of comprehension of the students in reading. It has 20 items with three choices. It was piloted by the researcher

on ten students by test re-test method. Pearson Product Moment Coefficient was used to measure the correlation. Its reliability was 0.66. The validity of the three proficiency tests was evaluated by two experts.

Motivations for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ): It is developed by Dr. Allan Wigfield and Dr. John Guthrie from University of Maryland in 1997. Wigfield and Guthrie used the MRQ on a sample of students at one mid-Atlantic state school during administration of Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction. Factor analyses conducted by Wigfield and Guthrie proved the existence of construct validity which supports eleven factors for the total 53-item in this MRQ .There was a positive correlation of most parts of reading motivation with low- to high levels. They also claimed that their questionnaire has a reliability range from .43 to .81. In this study the researcher had chosen 18 items of the total 53 items in the questionnaire because only eight domains of total eleven domains of reading motivation were considered to measure. They are: reading efficacy, reading challenge, reading curiosity, reading involvement, importance of reading, reading word avoidance, social reasons for reading, and reading for grades.

Authentic texts: They are a group of online authentic texts derived from the internet that should be presented to authentic group to measure their influence on reading comprehension. They were selected based on the level of the students. The title and readability of texts are in this order: "Top 4 Islands" (62.1), "Earthquakes" (59.7), "What Causes Global Warming?" (49.4), and "What to Eat to Stay Healthy" (59.1).

C. Procedures

The placement test was administrated to the total number of the language learners to identify intermediate level learners. After presenting the placement test, students in each level were randomly divided in two groups: simplified and authentic group. The pre-test was administered to both groups at the beginning of the investigation to determine if the students of these two groups are at a similar level. All of the students in authentic and simplified group were studying artificial texts of the coursebooks during the course. In addition, authentic group in each level received online authentic texts and those in simplified groups received simplified forms of the those authentic texts which are in-authentic, like the texts used in coursebooks. Simplified forms of the authentic texts were used in this investigation because the texts of the coursebooks were different from the authentic ones in their topics. They were syntactically-lexically simplified. Each session one authentic text was given to the authentic group. Before reading, the teacher provides the students with background knowledge and warm up. After reading, texts were discussed by the teacher and the students in the class. Participants in the simplified group received the simplified texts during the course. Finally the same reading comprehension test that was used as pre-test was again given to both authentic and simplified groups as the post-test. For measuring the efficiency of authentic texts on students' motivation, a MRQ questionnaire was given to authentic group before and after reading authentic texts. Language learners were supposed to complete the questionnaire in about 15 minutes.

After gathering the data by administrating the reading comprehension test and the reading motivation questionnaire to the learners, the results were analyzed using SPSS. Independent sample t-test was used to analyze pre- and post-test results and also for comparing their results. It was used on the means of the gain scores that is get from the pre- and post-test of groups. For analyzing the results from the questionnaire, average of the scores at each domain analyzed.

IV. RESULTS FROM LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TEST

After approximately three weeks, the pre- and post-test results on language reading comprehension test were analyzed by independent samples t-test. Pre-test was presented to both authentic group and simplified group. Comparing their pre-test results by independent samples t-test, the researcher proved that mean scores of authentic group (M=11) is close to simplified group (M=10.83) and there is no significant difference between them (P=.87, see Table 1). After giving texts to authentic group, post-test was presented to both groups. Mean scores of the language learners at this level showed that both groups had an increase in their post-test scores (see, Table 2). Authentic group's mean reached to 13 and simplified groups' mean reached to 11.33. Again independent samples t-test was used on the means of the gain scores from the pre-test and post-test. It was resulted that the means of gain scores from authentic group (M=2.00) was higher than the means of the gain scores from simplified group (M= .5, see Table 3).

TABLE I.
MEAN COMPARISON OF THE PRE-TEST

	N	Means	SD	t	DF	Sig. (2 tailed)
Authentic group	12	11.00	2.33	.16	22	.87
Simplified group	12	10.83	2.58			

TABLE II.
MEAN COMPARISON OF THE POST-TEST

	N	Means	SD	t	DF	Sig. (2 tailed)
Authentic group	12	13.00	1.2	1.96	22	.06
Simplified group	12	11.33	2.67			

TABLE III.
MEAN COMPARISON OF DIFFERENCE IN GAIN SCORES ON THE PROFICIENCY TEST

	N	Means	SD	t	DF	Sig. (2 tailed)
Authentic group	12	2.00	1.59	2.04	22	.05
Simplified group	12	.5	1.97			

As shown in Table 3, authentic groups' comprehension was higher than simplified groups' comprehension. The results showed the significance value of .05. So it is proved that the authentic group outperformed the simplified group. This is illustrated in Figure 1 below.
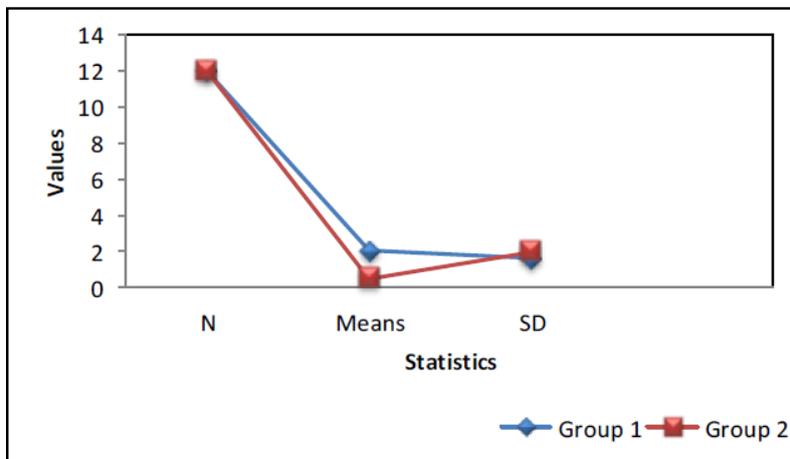

Figure 1: differences in means of gain scores on the intermediate reading comprehension test (group 1: authentic group; group 2: simplified group)

In the present study eight domains for measuring reading motivation were considered. Language learners at the intermediate level had positive changes on means of four domains when the questionnaire was given to them after reading. Table 4 presents those domains and their means.

TABLE IV.
MEAN SCORES OF THE READING MOTIVATION DOMAINS

	Reading curiosity		Social reasons for reading		Reading work avoidance		Reading for grades	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Before reading	10.33	.98	3.83	.93	5.66	1.15	3.66	.49
After reading	10.50	.79	4.00	1.59	5.50	.79	3.00	.60

Language learners at the intermediate level had an increase in reading curiosity, importance of reading, social reasons for reading, and decrease in reading work avoidance and reading for grades. Figure 2 presents the positive changes in the means of reading motivation of the students during the study.
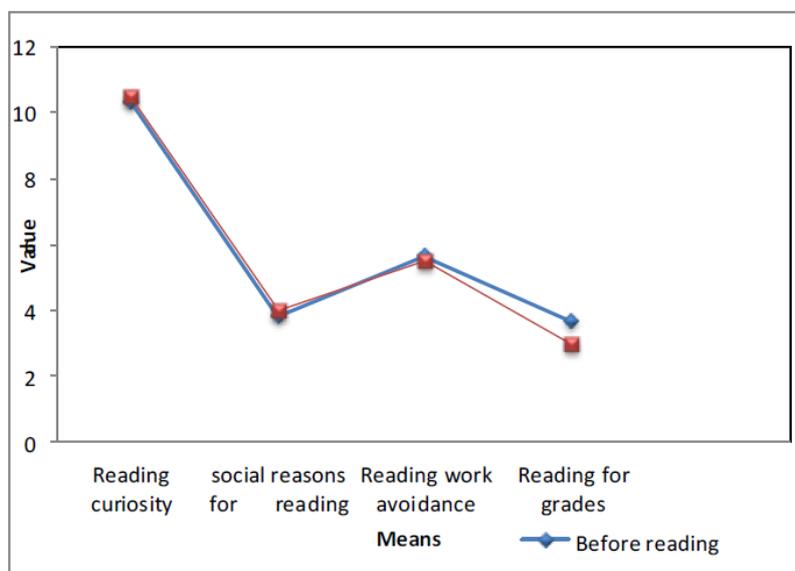

Figure 2: Differences of reading motivation means of intermediate students before and after reading

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

After gathering the data from intermediate language learners by using pre-test, post-test, their means and gain scores were analyzed. Independent samples t-test was conducted. Based on the results, authentic group had more proficiency than simplified group on post-test in reading comprehension.

Intermediate students can use strategies of reading like guessing the meaning of unknown words (Kondo-Brown, 2006). They know how to use context and input to understand the meaning of unknown words. So, according to the results of this study, authentic texts can lead to better reading comprehension than simplified ones for intermediate level students.

Gathering the data by using questionnaire before and after the reading authentic texts, and analyzing them, gave us some results about the effect of authentic texts on the motivation of intermediate students. There were positive changes on the means of four domains of motivation after reading authentic materials. Post-test results indicated a little increase on the mean of reading curiosity. After reading authentic texts, students became more motivated to read about their own favorite topics and new things. Social reasons for reading, is another domain of motivation which had an increase. It affirms the fact that readers not only read the texts for themselves, but also have motivation to deliver the new information they got from the texts to other people. Here, the focus of reading is on the content in which readers make an interaction with the text, and not on the linguistic features of the text. Intermediate level language learners also had a reduction on the reading for grades. It is clear that the intensity of reading for grades reduced on the post-test and motivation for reading texts with real aims increased. After reading authentic texts, the goal of the learners for reading changed.

This study has presented evidence on a strong relationship between authentic texts and reading comprehension of intermediate learners. Authentic reading can increase not only students' comprehension but also promote other aspects of language learning such as motivation.

Like other studies, this research had some limitations. One of them was that the results of the study came from groups which are homogeneous. It means that they have similarities in their learning experiences and also their culture is same. This homogeneity could make a limitation in generalizing the findings of the study. Another point which is considered as a limitation of the present study is related to the effect of the teacher on the reading comprehension of the learners. Teachers' experiments in providing warm-up, Pre-post reading questions, time devotion for teaching reading in the classroom, and the way of giving feedback when the students encounter a problem during reading, all can have an effect on the reading comprehension of the students.

In this investigation the effect of authentic reading on reading comprehension and motivation of the students was considered. Further studies can be possible to explore its effect on other linguistic aspects like writing and listening. Small group of language learners took part in this investigation. Next studies could involve students in a larger group.

REFERENCES

[1]   Alderson, J. C. (2000). Assessing reading. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[2]   Berardo, S. A. (2006).The use of authentic materials in the teaching of reading. *The Reading Matrix*, 6.2, 60 – 69.
[3]   Brantmeier, C. (2003). Does gender make a difference? Passage content and comprehension in second language reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 15.1, 1 – 27
[4]   Brantmeier, C. (2004). Statistical procedures for research on L2 reading comprehension: An examination of ANOVA and Regression Models. *Reading in a Foreign Language,* 16.2, 51 – 69
[5]   Callison, D. & Lamb, A. (2004, December). Authentic learning. *School Library Media Activites Monthly,* 21.4, 34 – 39.
[6]   Day, R. & Park, J. (2005, April). Developing reading comprehension questions. *Reading in a Foreign Language*. 17.1, 60 – 73
[7]   Dornyei, Z & Ushioda, E. (2011). Teaching and researching motivation. Harlow: Pearson Education.
[8]   Ellis, N. C. (2001). Memory for language. In Robinson, P. (Ed.), *Cognition and second language instruction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 33 – 68.
[9]   Floris, F. (2008). Developing English for general academic purposes (EGAP) course in an Indonesian university. *K@ta, 10(1)*, 53-62. Retrieved from http://puslit2.petra.ac.id/ejournal/index.php/ing/article/shop/16759/16740/ (accessed 21/7/2013).
[10]   Gilmore, M. (2007). Authentic materials and authenticity in foreign language learning. Lang. Teach. doi:10.1017/S0261444807004144.
[11]   Guariento, W. & J. Morley. (2001). Text and task authenticity in the EFL classroom. *ELT Journal*. 55.4, 347–353.
[12]   Harmer, J. (2001). The practice of English language teaching (3rd ed.). Harlow: Pearson Education
[13]   Kondo-Brown, K. (2006, March). How do English L1 learners of advanced Japanese infer unknown Kanji words in authentic texts?. *Language Learning* 56.1, 109–153.
[14]   Murdoch, Y. (1999). Using authentic texts in the language classroom module 2 assignment for: MA TEFL / TESL (ODL) (Centre for English Language Studies Report). University of Birmingham.
[15]   Pulido, D. (2000). The impact of topic familiarity, L2 reading proficiency, and L2 passage sight vocabulary on incidental vocabulary gain through reading for adult learners of Spanish as a foreign language (Unpublished doctoral dissertation).University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.
[16]   Pulido, D. (2004) The Relationship Between Text Comprehension and Second Language Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition: A Matter of Topic Familiarity?. *Language Learning,* 54.3, 469 – 523.
[17]   Stanovich, K. E. (1992). The psychology of reading: Evolutionary and revolutionary developments. In W. Grabe (Ed.), *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 12, 3-30.

Amir Marzban is an assistant professor of TESOL at Islamic Azad University, Qaemshahr branch. His research interests include conversation analysis, L2 reading & writing, CALL, and teacher education. He has published in both Iranian and International journals and also has presented in many international conferences.

Solmaz Davaji attained her M.A in TEFL from Islamic Azad University, Ayatollah Amoli Science and Research Branch, Amol, Iran. She is teaching English in language teaching institutes for teenagers and adults. Her research interests are testing, materials development, and Second Language reading.