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## Implementing Authentic Materials through Critical Friends Group (CFG): A Case from Turkey

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### Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory case study is to investigate the use of authentic materials through Critical Friends Groups (CFG) in a language preparatory program, at a private university in Turkey. Specifically, the study attempted to identify the perceptions and observed behaviours of native and non-native EFL instructors on the use of authentic materials, find out the potential reasons behind the implementation of authentic materials in their classroom practices and finally, examine the influence of incorporating authentic materials through CFG on classrooms practices as well as teachers' professional development. The participants were eight EFL instructors offering English courses in the exiting preparatory program. Data were collected through interviews, lesson observations and reflective essays. The findings revealed that participating in CFG has transformational impact on instructors regarding their classroom practices as well as on their continuous professional development.

### Keywords

Critical Friends Group (CFG), Authentic Materials, Classroom Practices, Exploratory Case Study, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

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## Implementing Authentic Materials through Critical Friends Group (CFG): A Case from Turkey

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*The purpose of this exploratory case study is to investigate the use of authentic materials through Critical Friends Groups (CFG) in a language preparatory program, at a private university in Turkey. Specifically, the study attempted to identify the perceptions and observed behaviours of native and non-native EFL instructors on the use of authentic materials, find out the potential reasons behind the implementation of authentic materials in their classroom practices and finally, examine the influence of incorporating authentic materials through CFG on classrooms practices as well as teachers' professional development. The participants were eight EFL instructors offering English courses in the exiting preparatory program. Data were collected through interviews, lesson observations and reflective essays. The findings revealed that participating in CFG has transformational impact on instructors regarding their classroom practices as well as on their continuous professional development. Keywords: Critical Friends Group (CFG), Authentic Materials, Classroom Practices, Exploratory Case Study, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Continuous Professional Development (CPD)*

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In the last few decades, much emphasis has been given to the use of authentic materials in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes since they are considered as important tools in language learning and teaching (Berardo, 2006; Kılıçkaya et al., 2004; Peacock, 1997). Authentic materials are generally defined as spoken or written language data produced in the course of genuine communication and not specifically written for purposes of language teaching (Nunan, 1999; Richards & Schmidt, 2002). More specifically, authenticity is the language produced by a real speaker/writer for a real audience, conveying a real message (Bacon & Finnemann, 1990; Gilmore, 2007).

Many researchers interested in authentic materials emphasized the effectiveness of using them in second/foreign language learning education highlighting their positive impact on learners' levels of on-task behaviour, concentration, and involvement in the target activity more than artificial material. This is not necessarily because the material itself is interesting but due to the fact that such materials are natural and realistic sources (Linder, 2000; Mishan, 2005; Şaraplı, 2011).

Although authentic materials prove to have many advantages in the process of language learning and teaching, it is sometimes challenging for teachers to adapt them into their lessons. At this point, Critical Friends Group (CFG), as a form of training and professional development, may aid teachers in the process of adapting and using authentic materials more effectively in the classroom. CFG, which is a registered trademark of the NSRF® (National School Reform Faculty) organization, consists of 5 to 12 educators who come together voluntarily at least once a month. The purpose of CFG is to provide professional development that translates into improved student learning. This adult learning is accomplished through formal, ongoing interactions of small groups of staff that participate voluntarily. A trained CFG coach, who is often a member of the faculty, leads the CFG. If these groups are engaging and

effective, they increase student learning, contribute to the participants' professional growth, and improve quality of education in the learning community.

In CFG, members of the group take on different roles, which are facilitator, presenter and respondent. First, the facilitator is responsible for planning the protocol and focusing question prior to the meeting and ensuring that the protocol is followed. S/he also monitors the conversation to ensure that it is shared by everyone and invites comments from all participants to encourage multiple perspectives. If needed, s/he also redirects the conversation. Finally, s/he sets time limits and keeps time carefully.

In addition, the presenter decides together with the facilitator on an appropriate protocol and the framing in addition to raising a perplexing question or reflecting on a dilemma. S/he also listens and takes notes on responders' comments and makes explanation at an appropriate time as well.

The respondents discuss the work in-depth. They follow the protocol, pose questions and give feedback that is both warm-positive and cool-critical. The feedback should be given in a supportive tone and providing discussants with practical suggestions.

Besides, the presenter, who is different from the facilitator, presents the issue and explains what questions or concerns should focus the feedback. In the next stage, participants have the opportunity to ask questions to the presenter. Then, while the presenter remains silent, listening and taking notes, the issue is discussed. Next, s/he reflects on the feedback. Finally, the facilitator debriefs the session. Overall, a session in CFG lasts 35-40 minutes. In the end, participants are encouraged to give positive or "warm" feedback and constructively critical or "cool" feedback that is focused on the tuning questions.

In brief, CFGs allow teachers to explore complex issues in their classrooms in an environment, which is both collegial and collaborative. They attempt to develop a community for teachers' questions, reflections, analysis, feedback, and learning, which, in return, aid with the improvement of student achievement.

Based on these overviews, the present study aims to investigate the use of authentic materials through CFG in EFL classrooms offered at a language preparatory program in a private university in Istanbul, Turkey. Specifically, the study attempts to identify the perceptions of the EFL instructors regarding the use of authentic materials through CFG in their classrooms, find out the potential reasons behind the implementation of such materials in their practices and finally, examine the impact of CFG on the CPD of the participating instructors.

## **Literature Review**

As previously mentioned, CFG is a professional learning community which consists of a small group of educators coming together voluntarily and regularly to have structured professional conversations about their work. Different studies have been carried out to investigate the effectiveness of participating in CFG on professional development in the fields of education and even business (Aktekin, 2013; Fahey, 2011; Franzak, 2002; Kersey 2014; Key, 2006; Tolivar, 2005). This part of the thesis highlights some studies that focus on CFG participation in terms of collaboration, professionalism, and improving teacher and student learning. Since there are now more institutions and professional choosing to take part in CFG, there has been some studies examining how Critical Friends Groups contribute to professionals and their reflections on taking part in such an experience.

To begin with, an interpretive case study was conducted by Franzak (2002) to explore the impact of CFG participation on the professional identity of a student teacher. Data were collected from various tools including reflective writings, lesson plans, and portfolio and e-mail communications. While the participants reported to have increasing confidence and

growing independence along with more commitment to their profession, the researcher concluded that CFG was effective in enhancing the participant's conception of the profession. Through this study, it was suggested that teacher education programs such as CFG might support the student teaching experience by providing access to authentic professional development experience.

Tolivar (2005), who has been a CFG coach since 2003, advocates that educators taking part in CFG tend to say that their experience in CFG was "profound, inspiring, deep, collaborative, exciting, rewarding, insightful, and safe." Moreover, she adds by quoting the people who took part in such experience: "I have grown as a person, a human being, and a professional in just five days" and "This was a professionally and personally renewing experience for me." As a result, it is suggested that CFG, if engaging and effective, increase student learning and contribute to the participants' professional growth.

According to Key (2006), who has done a review of research on the impact of CFG, research reveals four main claims about the effectiveness of CFG. Firstly, CFG fosters a culture of community and collaboration. By working together regularly, they create an atmosphere where they can share opinions and learn from each other. Another impact is that encouraging teachers to figure out their needs and look for ways to meet them enhance teacher professionalism. In addition, CFG has the potential to change teachers' thinking and practice. Finally, CFG have the potential to affect student learning. Since teachers focus on addressing the needs of the students throughout the process of CFG, the results they get from participating in such a group also have an impact on understanding the learners and help create better learners.

Another case of CFG was investigated in the case study conducted by Fahey (2011) as a means of supporting leadership learning. The sample population was school leaders who came together over the course of 6 years to examine the dilemmas of leadership, analyze student work as well as learn together. According to the obtained findings, the participants, the school leaders, became more collaborative and reflective on their work and they became more open to give and receive feedback in order to share their practices.

Aktekin (2013) investigated the effects of CFG on teachers' professional development through the transcripts of the meeting, the journals kept and the researcher's notes in Turkey. The results showed positive attitudes from teachers about their experience in CFG. Specifically, the participants found CFG to be effective because it was an adaptable process where teachers could focus on their wants and needs. In addition, because of the fact that CFG is an on-going process rather than a one-time experience, teachers could find the chance to concentrate more on what they were doing. Overall, the teachers claimed that CFG contributed to a change in their way of thinking as well as their classroom practices and motivated the participants to share and support their experiences more.

Kersey (2014) examined how participants experienced a Critical Friends Group with the purpose of understanding the process and the learning of the participants in a Critical Friends Groups. The results revealed that there have been professionally significant transformational moments for the educators participating in CFG. Moreover, the participation in a CFG made the participants aware of what changes they personally need in their own educational practice and in their own school community.

Overall, the studies supports the purpose of CFG since it fosters collaboration, enhances professionalism, as well as plays a crucial role in changing teacher practices, which might have an impact on student learning, and in aiding with their professional development. Based on the findings obtained from these studies, CFG is perceived as a significant movement in the field of education to improve student learning through teacher collaboration.

## **The Benefits of Authentic Materials in Second/Foreign Language Classrooms**

Many researchers interested in authentic materials highlighted their benefits in second/foreign language learning education and suggest that authentic materials have a positive impact on learners' levels of on-task behaviour, concentration, and involvement in the target activity more than artificial material. This is not necessarily because the material itself is interesting but due to the fact that such materials are natural and realistic sources (Berardo, 2007; Kılıçkaya, 2004; Linder, 2000; Mishan, 2005; Nunan, 1999).

Nunan (1999), for example, believes that such materials provide a more natural environment that encourages students to be better readers and listeners. According to him, exposing learners to authentic materials is indispensable because authentic materials provide rich input for learners. When exposed to such language forms, inside or outside the classroom, students will be able to cope with genuine interaction more effectively.

According to Linder (2000), authentic materials have a significant place in a lesson. When used as realia, they are complementary to the lesson content and when used as texts or in spoken language, they serve as rich sources for exposing students to real life language, becoming the central focus of a lesson. In addition, authentic materials can serve as input tasks as well as output tasks when focusing on language practices including vocab grammatical structures and pronunciation.

Furthermore, Kılıçkaya (2004) advocates that language presented to the learners in the class should be authentic because it enhances the learning process. Materials such as magazines, newspaper, songs contain more realistic and natural examples of language than those in textbooks enabling students to deal with real language and content. Therefore, learners feel that they are learning the target language as it is used outside the classroom. For this reason, instructors should be able to use authentic materials that has a communicative and social purpose and therefore can arouse interest amongst students.

According to Mishan (2005), authentic materials enhance not only the learners' understanding of the language but also the society and the culture of where the language is spoken. This has the potential of motivating students and making them interested in the material. Similarly, Berardo (2006) argues that materials provide a more creative approach to teaching and they inform students about the real world.

To summarize, the arguments regarding authentic texts in language learning all lead to one very significant point: that their use enhances second/foreign language learning and teaching process. Since authentic materials provide rich and varied comprehensible input for language learners, they expose learners to language serving a useful purpose. Thus, they connect the learners to the world outside the classroom. Moreover, they provide a refreshing change from the textbook; provide information about a wide range of topics. Finally, authentic texts also have an impact on affective factors essential to learning, such as motivation, empathy and emotional involvement.

## **The Effectiveness of Authentic Materials in Language Classrooms**

Previous studies have reported the effectiveness of using authentic materials in language teaching and learning (Abdulhusseyin, 2014, Belaid & Murray, 2015; Ghaderpanahi, 2012; Omid & Azam, 2015). The findings have revealed that authentic materials are effective tools to be used in classroom practices as they have positive impact on the language development of students as well as the professional development of teachers.

Ghaderpanahi (2012), with an attempt to examine the influences of authentic aural materials, applied pre- and post- listening comprehension tests to thirty female undergraduate psychology majors studying English as a foreign language. The results from the interviews and

questionnaires revealed that the use of authentic materials enhanced EFL students' listening comprehension ability in the EFL classroom. According to the findings, there was significant improvement in the ability of the students in listening. The students seemed to have benefited greatly from the authentic materials they were exposed to as they had much better results in the post-listening comprehension tests.

Abdulhusseyin (2014) aimed to find teachers' and students' perceptions on the use of authentic materials in language classrooms. Data was collected from third year college students of English and their teachers using questionnaires that included a series of questions and other prompts. The results revealed a statistically significant difference between the attitudes of teachers and learners. Specifically, learners had stronger positive attitudes than teachers. As a result, the teachers were recommended to incorporate a variety of authentic materials and consider giving learners the opportunity to choose authentic materials of their own choice to incorporate into their classes.

Omid and Azam (2015) aimed to explore the attitudes of Iranian English language teachers toward using authentic materials concerning the receptive skills, gave out a questionnaire to 57 high school teachers. The results of the study, regardless of teachers' experience, academic degree, nationality or teaching experience, demonstrated that teachers' attitudes towards using authentic materials in EFL classes were highly positive as they perceived it as an important tool for providing meaningful input. They agreed that implementing authentic materials in their classrooms played a significant role in improving students' receptive skills through exposure to real life language and situations.

Similarly, in a study by Belaid and Murray (2015), investigating the EFL teachers' attitudes and reactions toward using authentic materials in language teaching, fifteen potential EFL teachers filled out a survey about their attitudes and reactions toward using authentic materials in teaching English. The findings revealed that all EFL teachers, despite differences in their teaching experiences and academic degrees, fully advocated the use of authentic materials in their classrooms. The obtained results also showed that most preferred materials by the teachers were the Internet and printed materials such as magazines and newspapers. Concerning the level, they mostly preferred to use authentic materials and chose intermediate level of L2 competency. Finally, the teachers expressed their need for training in using such materials, which are selecting activities and curricula modifications.

Based on these overviews, it can be stated that both teachers' and students' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of authentic materials are positive as they proved to be beneficial both linguistically and culturally. In this regard, this study aims to explore the perceptions and practices of EFL instructors towards using authentic materials in their classrooms by highlighting the importance of participating in CFG and revealing its influence on their classroom practices as well as on their continuous professional development.

### **The Researchers**

As the primary researcher and author in this qualitative case study, I, Elif Basak Gunbay held the responsibility for revealing my background information to the participants and readers. I am an English instructor at a Language Preparatory Program of a private university in Istanbul, Turkey. I have completed her M.A. at Bahcesehir University, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Department of English Language Education, on the topic: "The use of Authentic Materials through Critical Friends Group (CFG) for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) of English Instructors in Turkey." The present study is a part of my master's thesis. I got interested in this topic after reading some recent articles about CFG and discussing the concept with my colleagues. I thought that it would be interesting to investigate this topic from the perspective of using authentic materials in EFL classrooms. As I believe in lifelong

learning, I wanted to see how these two concepts; CFG and authentic materials would contribute to the CPD of the EFL instructors.

As the second researcher and author, Enisa Mede, is an Assistant Professor and the chair of the Department of English Language Teaching (ELT) at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Bahcesehir University, Istanbul, Turkey. She is the supervisor of this M.A. thesis. She is interested in teacher education, program design and evaluation in teacher education as well as teacher identity.

Both authors agree on the importance of CFG and use of authentic materials in EFL classrooms. They have participated in prior qualitative research projects and have published various articles in the field of teacher education. In this study, we narrowed down the thesis, collaboratively drafted the manuscript and independently contributed to the other sections of the research described below. We believe that this research would serve as a good sample for teacher trainers, curriculum designers and program administrators revealing the strengths and weaknesses of implementing authentic materials through CFG in EFL classrooms.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The two researchers guaranteed the confidentiality of the participants during and after the research study. First, an approval from the Institutional Review Board at the Language Preparatory School was received from the director of the program. Researchers of the present study would like to express their gratitude to the program director for his continuous support during the study.

After the official approval, each participant was provided with the background information and purpose of the research study along with the assurance of confidentiality as well as ethical research practice before they decided to sign their written consents. The participants were also informed about the process, the nature and procedures of the study as well as the estimated time for the data collection process. Finally, the participants were told that they could withdraw at any time during the study, if they did not feel comfortable.

### **Trustworthiness**

In this study, data credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1982) was achieved through long term participation, adequate interaction with the participants, collection of accurate information, as well as taking the confirmation about the data collection from the study subjects. In addition, data dependability was sustained through step-by-step data collection process, in-depth data analysis and the review of the subject by two experts. The data confirmability was increased getting the approval of the university faculty members who were experts in the field of qualitative research and language education. Finally, the subject matter was described in detail to assess whether it is applicable in other contexts to achieve research transferability.

### **Methods**

In line with the previous research, the present study is based on two main ideas. The first one is that for the best student outcomes, teachers should be engaged in continuous professional development (Vo & Nguyen, 2010). Secondly, as suggested by Kılıçkaya (2004) language presented to the learners in the class should be authentic to enhance the learning process. However, the emphasis on textbooks and lack of authentic materials used in EFL classrooms bring about the need to raise more awareness on authentic material use. Therefore, there is a need for teacher training on how to implement authentic materials in EFL classrooms.

To this end, the present study aims to investigate the implementation of authentic materials through CFG in an English language preparatory program at a private university in Istanbul, Turkey. To meet these objectives the following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What are the perceptions and observed behaviours of the EFL instructors after the implementation of authentic materials in EFL classrooms?
2. What barriers do the participating instructors come across while incorporating authentic materials in their classrooms?
3. Does use of authentic materials through CFG have any influence on the classroom practices of the instructors?
4. Does CFG have any impact on the CPD of the instructors?

## **Research Design**

In an attempt to achieve the goal and meet the objectives, a case study was adopted as the research design in this study (Yin, 1994). A case study is a variation of an ethnography in that the researcher provides an in depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g. an activity, an event, a process, or an individual) based on the extensive data collection (Creswell, 2009). Specifically, exploratory case study is used to explore those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes (Yin, 2003). As the aim this particular type of research is to understand the complexity of a case in depth, it often requires various methods of gathering data, including observation, interviews and testing. Therefore, case study research can be considered versatile.

There are a number of advantages in using case studies. One of the advantages is, as mentioned above, gathering data from a variety of sources to provide better insight into a case. This enables the researcher to explore and describe the data to explain the complexity of the case, which may not be entirely possible through experimental or survey research. Another advantage is that case studies improve analytical thinking and communication of researchers. A case study can also show how different aspects are related and they can encourage generating new ideas. Finally, this method is important for a holistic or embedded point of view (Levy, 1988).

Based on these overviews, in this study, the researchers decided to use an exploratory case study with a qualitative approach in order to obtain in-depth and multi-faceted analysis of CFG experiences of the EFL instructors enrolled in a preparatory program offered at a private university in Turkey. Qualitative data were provided through different tools including interviews, classroom observations and reflective essays, which are expected to give insight and enable the researchers to explore and explain the use of authentic materials through CFG as well as find its impact on the participating instructors' classroom practices as well as their professional development.

## **Participants and Setting**

The research was conducted at a Language Preparatory School in a private university in Istanbul, Turkey within a period 8 months in two academic semesters. Purposeful sampling was used to obtain the participants needed to complete this study (Patton, 2001). This involves identifying and selecting samples or group of samples that are particularly knowledgeable about or experienced with the research topic (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011). In addition to knowledge and experience, Bernard (2002) highlights the importance of availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to share experiences as well as express opinions. communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner.

In this study, one of the researchers first explained the concept of CFG to twelve EFL preparatory program instructors employed in detail. During this meeting, she focused on the definition of CFG, its objective, and procedures. As a result, a group of eight instructors agreed to work with the researchers voluntarily which formed the bounded system throughout the study with an attempt to discover more about the use of authentic materials through CFG.

Specifically, four female and four male instructors participated in the study. Their age range was 25-35 with at least 3 years of teaching experience. As for their nationality, all participating instructors were Turkish. They had their majors either in the field of English Literature or English Language Teaching (ELT) and all of them held a CELTA teaching certificate.

### Implementation of CFG

As for the implementation of CFG, meeting dates were arranged based on the convenience of the participants. In other words, the two researchers came together with the participants every two weeks (4 CFG meetings each lasting for 50 min.) to discuss each CFG focus point shown in the table below. Finally, the CFG meetings were planned by the researchers based on the interview and observation findings.

**Table 1.** Focus of each CFG Meeting about using Authentic Materials (AMs) in EFL Classrooms

CFG meeting	Length	Focus
1	50 min.	Reflection on what AMs are Definition of AMs Function of AMs
2	50 min.	Selecting AMs Available sources Criteria for choosing AMs
3	50 min.	Adjusting AMs for the classroom Deciding on tasks to be used with AMs Deciding on the proficiency level of AMs
4	50 min.	Practical classroom activities

Before each meeting, the researcher sent related sources to the participants to inform about the focus of the week and provided an area to discuss during the CFG. Each meeting was recorded and a meeting log was filled out.

The first CFG meeting included an overview of authentic materials including definitions made by researchers over the years and advantages and challenges about implementing such materials in EFL classrooms. The facilitator who was also the researcher asked questions to the participating instructors to guide the discussion. The atmosphere was friendly and creative where all eight instructors had chance to express their opinions as well as experiences about using authentic materials in their classrooms. At the end of the meeting, the

researcher provided some available sources to the instructors to be discussed in the next meeting.

In addition, the second CFG meeting was about the criteria for selecting the effective authentic materials as well as implementing these materials in EFL classrooms. After the discussion, the researcher and the participants decided that students' abilities, their proficiency level, learning styles and interests should be taken into account while choosing and implementing authentic materials in language classes.

The focus of the third CFG meeting was adjusting the authentic materials in accordance with the proficiency level of students. More specifically, the participating group came together and discussed how they can decide on the level as well as tasks that would meet their learners' needs and interests effectively. To do this, an authentic reading text was shared with the instructors one day prior to the meeting. During the meeting, the instructors worked in pairs to create a task related to what they read. One pair tried to prepare a task for lower-levels while the other tried to come up with a task to be taught to a higher-level class. The tasks prepared were shared and commented by other instructors. At the end of the meeting all of the participating instructors were provided with an assignment. To put it simply, they had to come up with practical ideas for using authentic materials in their lessons based on their readings and discussions in the previous meetings.

Finally, in the last CFG meeting, the instructors tried to design some practical activities and tasks a variety of using authentic materials such as songs, charts and pictures to be applied in their classroom. The ideas were expanded through group discussions and were all written down as a portfolio.

### **Data Collection**

In this study, the first researcher took a sole role as the data collector. She scheduled the interviews, classroom observations and reflective essays for all eight participants and met with each of the according to the scheduled time. The following part describes each step of the data collection procedure in detail.

First of all, the interviews were conducted with the participating instructors twice, pre- and post- CFG meetings. The pre-CFG interview aimed to investigate the perceptions of the participating EFL instructors about the use of authentic materials in their classrooms. The attempt of the post-interview was to reveal whether CFG had any impact on the use of authentic materials by the participating instructors on their practices.

The questions asked during the interviews were adapted from a study by Belaid and Murray's (2015) study which aimed to find out the teachers' attitudes and perceptions about using authentic materials in the foreign language classrooms in Libyan Universities. The questions were predetermined with the aim to link the perception to the relevant criteria to be explored. Specifically, all four questions were related to the overall perceptions of using authentic materials in EFL classrooms. The first question was whether the instructors used any authentic materials and their reasons for doing so. Next, they were asked to explain how they used them in their in terms of language skills, grammar and vocabulary, proficiency level of students and types of preferred sources. They also commented on the importance of using authentic materials in language classes. Lastly, they expressed their need for inservice training about implementing authentic materials in their classroom practices effectively.

In addition to the interviews, classroom observations were carried out to collect the data in real-life context and explore the research topic in detail. Specifically, 12 observations were done before and after the participation to the CFG meetings with eight EFL instructors to find out whether CFG had made any difference on their use of authentic materials in their classroom.

Before the observation, the participating instructors were notified about the observation place and time. They were asked to prepare and implement a lesson using authentic materials; however, they were not informed about the observation checklist items to avoid any influence on their performance. During the observation, a checklist included four items parallel to the interview questions to have a closer look at the classroom practices of each instructor. The items in the checklist were as follows: the type of authentic material used; the skill and/or language focus it is used for; the proficiency level of the material and lastly, the points that the instructors need improvement in this area. At the end of the observation, the researcher shared her notes with the instructors for confirmation and validation purposes.

As the last data collection tool in this study, all of the participants were asked to write a reflective essay after their participation in CFG meetings. To put it differently, they were asked to express their thoughts about taking part in CFGs about using authentic materials in their classrooms as well as provide in-depth information about its impact on their CPD.

### **Data Analysis**

The present study was based on the qualitative case study as a research design. This type of study is a variation of an ethnography in that the researcher provides an in depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., an activity, an event, a process, or an individual) based on the extensive data collection (Stake, 2005). In the case of qualitative studies, where survey or interview questions are open ended, some sort of coding scheme needs to be identified (Friedman et al., 2003; Ketyon, King, Mabachi, Manning, Leonard, & Schill 2004).

For the purposes of this study, the process of data analysis followed the steps recommended by Granheim and Lundman (2004). First, the transcription of interviews and classroom observations was done, and then, read for several times to come up with a general and accurate understanding. The whole interviews and observations were grouped as units including notes that were analysed and coded. Besides, meaning units were formed including the words and sentences related to each other in terms of content. In other words, the meaning units were compiled based on their content and provisions. Then, they were conceptualized and given a code. Once the codes were identified, they were compared and contrasted as well as grouped under specific categories. Finally, the categories were compared to one another and the related “themes” and “subthemes” were introduced.

After the data analysis of the interviews and observations, a deeper analysis took place while writing up the manuscript. The two researchers associated the main themes with the research questions with an attempt to seek answers and evidence from the data.

Finally, to identify the degree of agreement between the two researchers regarding the development of themes and subthemes, the inter-rater reliability was calculated based on the agreement between the two raters. As a result, the inter-rater reliability was found to be .81 indicated close agreement between the two raters (researchers of the study) on the general themes apart from the different verbalizations of similar concepts.

### **Findings**

The findings from this exploratory case study are presented in four parts. All parts describe thematic analysis developed through the coding process and supported by the theme/subtheme table. Specifically, the findings are presented in according with the research questions which aimed to identify the perceptions of the EFL instructors about using authentic materials through CFG in their classroom practices, discover the barriers encountered during this process, examine the impact of CFG on the use of authentic materials and lastly, find out the influence of CFG on the CPD of the participating instructors.

## **The Perceptions of the EFL Instructors about using Authentic Materials in their Classroom**

Considering the first research question which aimed to reveal the perceptions and observed behaviours of the EFL instructors related to the implementation of authentic materials in their classroom, the data were obtained through interviews prior to CFG meetings. To begin with, the EFL instructors were asked about their thoughts regarding the use of authentic materials in their classroom practices. The qualitative evidence revealed that they prefer to use such materials when they have enough time to prepare their lesson plan before their class as shown in the following excerpt:

[...] I try to use authentic materials in my classes when I find time to prepare my lesson plan before I teach. (Interview data, 9<sup>th</sup> Sept., 2015)

Moreover, the participants were asked which factors should be considered while integrating authentic materials in their classrooms practices. They all agreed that the proficiency level of the students and the types of sources are crucial points to be closely addressed while using these type of materials in their lessons. Specifically, they found authentic materials such as songs, newspapers and magazines to be effective particularly with students at upper-intermediate and advanced level of proficiency. Considering this issue, an instructor made the following comment:

[...] In my opinion, using authentic materials is related with the proficiency level of the students. Use of various sources like magazines, songs and newspapers is also important. I think that such materials are very effective with upper-inter and advanced students. (Interview data, 9<sup>th</sup> Sept., 2015)

Moreover, during the interviews, all of the instructors emphasized the importance of using authentic materials in their classrooms. They agreed that such materials make the lesson more engaging, connect classroom setting with real life and expose students to more meaningful contexts. The following comment clarify this assertion:

[...] I think that when we use authentic materials, the lessons are more engaging. The students are more eager to participate because they are engaged in meaningful tasks which help them to relate the lesson with the outside world. (Interview data, 9<sup>th</sup> Sept., 2015)

Finally, the participating instructors were asked whether they needed any training about incorporating authentic materials in their classrooms. Although they stated that they are familiar with using these type of materials during their lessons, they still needed training particularly related to implementing these materials with different proficiency levels. One of the participants said:

[...] Although I am familiar with using authentic materials while teaching English, I still need training about which material is appropriate for what proficiency level. (Interview data, 9<sup>th</sup> Sept., 2015)

In brief, the findings gathered from the pre-CFG interviews suggested that all of the participating instructors shared similar perceptions towards the use of authentic materials in

their classrooms. In other words, they focused on their as well as effectiveness during the language learning and teaching process.

Furthermore, pre-CFG classroom observations were carried out to find out the observed behaviours of the EFL instructors before participating in CFG meetings. A checklist including four items: type of authentic material used; the skill and/or language focus it's used for; the proficiency level of the material and lastly, points that needed improvement was used.

First, in each lesson prepared by the eight participants, video was the mostly preferred authentic material. To illustrate, all of the instructors showed a video at the beginning of the lesson to introduce the new topic and gain attention of their students. In addition, they also used pictures and newspaper articles while teaching reading strategies such as skimming and introducing new vocabulary.

Besides, as observed from the reactions of the students and their participation in the lesson, the difficulty level of the real life materials varied from too easy to above students' level of proficiency. This variety of materials was more challenging and engaging for the students. Finally, during the observations, there was not a specific task designed to deal with the material from a linguistic or non-linguistic aspect. All of the instructors preferred to use these type of materials to make the subject more interesting and meaningful for the students.

### **The Barriers faced with the Implementation of Authentic Materials in EFL Classrooms**

As for the second research question of this study, the participating instructors were asked to share the barriers behind implementing authentic materials in their classroom practices. Data were collected from the interviews (pre-CFG) and observations. The interview findings revealed that no real barriers existed with the implementation of the authentic materials in EFL classrooms. Rather, the participants highlighted the using these types of materials led to effectiveness, creativity and student engagement in their classroom practices. The following quotation support this finding:

[...] Authentic materials make the lesson more effective, creative and engaging. (Instructor 4, Interview, 19<sup>th</sup> Oct., 2015)

Furthermore, the instructors expressed that that using authentic materials with students at higher proficiency levels such as intermediate and advanced was more challenging and purposeful as displayed below:

[...] I tend to use authentic materials more in classes with higher-level classes as it is more challenging and purposeful for my students. (Instructor 1, Interview data, 20<sup>th</sup> Oct., 2015)

Finally, based on the classroom observations, getting the attention and raising students' interest were the other two reasons behind the implementation of authentic materials in their classrooms. Regarding this point, one of the participating instructors said:

[...] I use authentic materials such as videos to get the attention of my students and attract their interests as well. (Instructor 1, Interview data, 20<sup>th</sup> Oct., 2015)

To wrap up, all eight participating EFL instructors focused on the importance of using authentic materials in their classrooms sharing no barriers during this process. They all agreed that such materials increase the effectiveness, creativity and student engagement. They are

more effective with higher level students as they have a clear purpose and meaning which attracts the attention as well as interest particularly of the higher level students.

### **The Impact of CFG on use of Authentic Materials in EFL Classrooms**

As for the third research question of this study, the impact of CFG on the use of authentic materials in English language classrooms was explored. The data were obtained from classroom observations (post-CFG) comparing it with pre-CFG observations and semi-structured interviews (post-CFG) which are thoroughly reported in the following section.

For the post-CFG classroom observations, the same checklist as in the pre-observation was used emphasizing the same components namely, type of authentic material used; the skill and/or language focus it is used for; the level of the material (appropriateness) and lastly, other (points need improving).

Based on the post-CFG observations, there was an obvious change in the variety of materials integrated by all of the instructors. To exemplify, all of the participants started to use more various authentic materials such as online applications, maps and charts in their lessons, apart from using videos, songs, newspapers and magazines.

Moreover, after CFG meetings, the participating instructors started to use the authentic materials for a wider range of purposes in their classroom practices. The biggest change was noticed in the proficiency level of the materials that the instructors brought to the classroom. While the majority of instructors found it difficult to select materials appropriate to students' level of proficiency in their first lesson, the materials they used after CFG meetings were more various and appropriate for their students' level of proficiency. In other words, they could easily find an article from a newspaper and support it with charts and maps to introduce a new topic in their classes. Finally, the tasks/activities designed for each authentic material had a clearer and more meaningful purpose after CFG meetings. For example, the instructors used charts to teach skimming to their students.

Furthermore, the participating instructors were asked to express their viewpoints whether CFG had any influence on the use of authentic materials in their classroom practices. The interviews findings showed that they all shared positive responses. To put it simply, they all expressed that after CFG, they were more aware about how to use these types of materials during their lessons as illustrated in the excerpt below:

[...] I can say that after the CFG meetings, I started to think about the integration of such materials into my lesson more often. It was good to share ideas with each other as we became more aware of how to use them in our classroom. (Instructor 2, Interview data, 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb., 2016)

Similarly, after CFG meetings, all of the instructors had chance to exchange ideas with their colleagues and discuss the effective ways of integrating authentic materials in their classes as shown in this assertion:

[...] After our CFG meetings, I know better what is important and what is appropriate about using authentic material in my lesson. I shared my ideas with my colleagues and we discussed how we can use these type of materials more effectively in our classrooms. (Instructor 4, Interview, 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb., 2016)

In brief, based on the responses of the participants gathered both from the pre-/post-CFG interviews and post-CFG observations, it is obvious that the CFG meetings had positive influence on the awareness of the instructors on selecting and using such materials, their

collaboration with other colleagues well as the effectiveness about implementing authentic materials in their classroom practices.

### **The Impact of CFG on the EFL Instructors' CPD**

In an attempt to answer the fourth and the last research question of this study regarding the influence of CFG on CPD, data were obtained from reflective essays. Specifically, all eight EFL instructors were asked to write a reflective essay expressing their thoughts and feelings about using authentic materials through CFG. They were also asked to highlight the impact of CFG on their CPD. The findings revealed that CFG had positive influence on their teaching practices, student participation in the lesson and lastly, collaboration between instructors.

As previously stated, one major impact of CFG was on the teaching practices of the EFL instructors. All of the instructors stated that they benefited from CFG meeting and discussions as it helped them to become more confident and efficient in developing tasks/activities. In other words, CFG created awareness on their classroom practices and encouraged them to make more informed decisions as shown in this assertion:

[...] After CFG meetings, I feel more comfortable and somewhat more qualified about how to make decisions about using authentic materials and develop such activities/tasks in my class. (Instructor 3, Reflective essay, 24<sup>th</sup> Feb., 2016)

Another aspect of CFG that the EFL instructors found beneficial was positive classroom atmosphere. They all clearly expressed that they observed positive changes in their students' motivation and participation as illustrated below:

[...] After CFG, I was able to create a more positive classroom environment. Students were more motivated and eager to participate in the lesson. (Instructor 4, Reflective essay, 24<sup>th</sup> Feb., 2016)

Finally, the last strength of CFG suggested by the instructors was the idea of working collaboratively. Working in a group created a positive and meaningful environment as well as increased collaboration as displayed in this excerpt:

[...] One of the most beneficial aspects of CFG lies in its cooperative nature; when teachers have the opportunity to come together to share and discuss teaching practices and pedagogical styles – new ideas emerge, take shape and the discussions facilitate more positive and meaningful exchanges. (Instructor 3, Reflective essay data, 24<sup>th</sup> Feb., 2016)

To wrap up, the findings based on the analysis of reflective essays from the instructors indicated that participating in CFG raised the teachers' awareness about creating tasks/activities using authentic materials, enhanced students' motivation and participation, created a more positive and meaningful environment among instructors and lastly, improved their collaboration.

### **Discussion**

The findings of the present study supported the implementation of authentic materials through CFG in language preparatory programs as well as the impact of CFG on the CPD of the EFL instructors. Specifically, the qualitative data analysis revealed that CFG has

transformational impact on the instructors regarding their classroom practices as well as on their CPD.

First of all, as previously mentioned, the first research question in this study aimed to find out the perceptions of EFL instructors about incorporating authentic materials in their classroom practices. The gathered results showed that the participating instructors were highly aware about the implementation of such materials in their lesson plans after their CFG experience. These findings support Nunan (1999) who stated exposing learners to authentic materials is an indispensable part of learning process due to their rich input.

Furthermore, all of the participants indicated the importance of authentic material use with classrooms of higher proficiency levels such as upper-intermediate and advanced. Since most authentic materials contain a more complex language, vocabulary items and structures, it might be challenging and also interesting for higher group of learners, which would aid with their language development. Besides, the type of authentic materials implemented by the EFL instructors were mostly media enhanced sources such as videos and songs. A possible reason behind this finding might be the fact that they can easily be reached and being online makes these sources more popular for both the students and instructors.

On the other hand, pre-CFG lesson observations showed that the most common types of authentic material used by the instructors were online videos. As stated in the previously, the instructors might have chosen to use videos due to their availability on the Internet as well as their popularity among students. In addition, videos provide a refreshing change from the textbook and seem to draw students' attention easily. These arguments are also supported by Şaraplı (2011) who claim authentic materials are beneficial for learners' motivation and participation.

Besides, the other two most commonly used sources were pictures and articles. The reason why written authentic materials were not preferred might be due to their level of complexity and students' lack of interest in dealing with written materials. As stated by Kılıçkaya (2004), using authentic materials frustrate and de-motivate the weak learners due to their lack of required skills and vocabulary to deal with the required materials.

Furthermore, the importance of authentic materials was highlighted by all participating instructors increasing the students' engagement, connection with the real life and providing more meaningful context. The reason for this might be the challenging nature of authentic materials.

Finally, although all of the instructors were familiar with the idea of incorporating authentic materials in EFL classrooms, they asked for extra training on how to use such materials with different proficiency levels.

To summarize, the interview and observation findings revealed that EFL instructors tend to use media enhanced sources, especially videos, with students with higher level of language proficiency. They also focused more on the student engagement and motivational aspect of authentic materials rather than dealing with them linguistically and/or culturally. It is also possible to conclude that the perceptions and observed-behaviours of the EFL instructors clearly showed the importance of incorporating authentic materials to foster students' language development of students.

As for the second research question, the possible reasons why instructors preferred to use authentic materials were explored through pre-CFG interviews and classroom observations. The analysis of the gathered responses revealed that there were various reasons that encouraged the participating instructors to implement such materials into their lessons.

First of all, the most notable reason behind incorporating authentic materials for instructors was making the lessons more effective, creative and engaging. Since authentic materials can be more up-to-date in terms of language and content, students would be more interested in the material. In addition, as stated by Kılıçkaya (2004), authentic materials are not

originally developed for pedagogical purposes; they contain examples of language that is more natural and realistic.

Another reason expressed by the instructors, similar to the one mentioned above, was about raising interest and motivating students. To put it briefly, authentic materials can motivate learners to communicate more effectively because they help make communication real. By providing variety of information about any topic, authentic materials also provide a refreshing change from the textbook (Thomas, 2014).

In addition, the EFL instructors stated that they preferred to choose authentic materials due to their challenging nature, which would be appropriate for students with higher level of proficiency. In this case, students' motivation can increase as they use more of what they know, and deal with a material that serves a useful purpose. All these findings demonstrate that the EFL instructors are paying attention to the use of authentic materials by designing their lessons more student-centred to enhance student motivation and engagement.

Regarding the impact of CFG on the use of authentic materials in EFL classrooms, the participating instructors were interviewed and observed after CFG meetings. The findings were compared and the results revealed that there were observable changes in instructors' use of authentic materials after CFG meetings.

Considering the findings of post-CFG observations, dramatic changes were seen in the classroom practices regarding the types of authentic materials, range of tasks and level of proficiency. To put it differently, the findings based on lesson observations displayed positive changes of the participating teachers regarding the use of authentic material in their classroom practices.

As for the focus of each CFG meeting, the decisions were made after pre-CFG interviews and lesson observations. The most noticeable change was related to the collaboration among instructors. During one of the CFG meetings, the instructors explored the online sources available and exchanged their ideas together. This could have encouraged them to try out new things in their lessons. Other significant changes were about the difficulty level of authentic materials along with the authentic tasks used in the classroom practices. As Key (2006) mentioned, CFG has the potential to influence the implementation of authentic materials in teachers' classroom practices quite positively as illustrated in this study as well.

Furthermore, parallel to the findings from post-CFG lesson observations, all of the participants mentioned various positive impacts of CFG on their use of authentic materials. Specifically, the interviews after CFG revealed that the EFL instructors mostly benefited from the meetings in terms of material selection and implementation of various materials appropriate for the students' level of proficiency. Based on their responses, it is possible to say that CFG meetings contributed to the incorporation of authentic materials in their classrooms in terms of awareness raising, resource availability and educational context. The findings of this research question confirmed the argument of Kersey (2014), showing that CFG meetings have provided professionally significant transformations for the instructors taking part in these meetings. It supported their teaching practices and provided them with to approach of authentic materials use from different perspectives.

Finally, the last research question of the study addressed the impact of CFG on the EFL instructors' professional development. In other words, it attempted to identify what kind of changes the instructors went through after their participation in CFG meeting. The findings of the analysis of the reflective essays indicated that CFG is effective in terms of the classroom practices of the instructors as well as their collaboration with their colleagues.

According to the gathered results, the most important benefit of CFG was about improving teaching practices. The meetings encouraged teachers to become more reflective and critical about their work in the classroom and therefore, inspired them to think of different

teaching styles. This finding supports the arguments of Kersey (2014) that CFG helps teachers to become more aware of what changes they personally need in their own educational practices.

Another important aspect pointed out by the instructors was working collaboratively. Working together with their colleagues made the instructors feel more comfortable in exchanging ideas and asking for advice. This aspect of CFG confirmed the studies conducted by Constantino (2010) and Fahey (2011) stating that CFG is significant for creating an environment that was both supportive and positively critical. The participants reported feeling less isolated and more supported by the other participants in the CFG. They were more collaborative and reflective on their work as well as more open to give and receive feedback about their practices. These findings confirmed the arguments of Vo and Nguyen (2010) in that collaborative discussions as in CFG allows teachers to develop their own perspectives and to model strengths for others.

Lastly, the impact of CFG on EFL instructors' professional development were confirmed in a similar study carried out by Aktekin (2013) in Turkey which revealed that CFG process helped the EFL instructors to build up good work and social relationships, resulting in a "sense of community" and a mutual understanding.

To conclude, the idea behind CFG is to create an environment for teachers with opportunities to challenge their own instruction and practices. This challenge is critical since improving practices bring positive changes that both the educators and the students need. A successful CFG is achieved with the help of a group of "critical" friends, who share the same purpose and offer support for each other. (Bambino, 2002). Accordingly, the reflections of participants in this study supported these crucial aspects of CFG and the arguments that CFG encourages collaboration and aids teachers with their professional development.

### **Limitations**

The present study has some limitations to be taken for consideration. During the study, restricted amount of time was given to the CFG meetings due to the loaded time schedules and different programs of the instructors. The researchers tried to minimize this limitation by taking planned actions in each CFG meeting. Besides, as the context of the study was specific to only one single group of ELF instructors, it is only possible to generalize the findings internally. Adding a larger sample of instructors from different educational contexts or collecting data from different participating groups such as students might lead to more in-depth results as well as increase the credibility of this study.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

The present study offers some pedagogical implications to be considered in language education programs. As the study emphasized the use of authentic materials through CFG as well as revealed the impact of CFG on the CPD of the EFL instructors, it is suggested that course designers should focus more on the inclusion of authentic materials in text books. Besides, teacher trainers should highlight the importance of CFG which would provide more collaboration among instructors as well as have positive impact on their CPD. Finally, as the institutions are now attaching more importance to professional development of their teachers, teacher training programs should emphasize the importance of CFG and incorporation of authentic materials in EFL classrooms to meet the needs of the institutions, teachers themselves and the students.

## Conclusion and Thoughts for Future Research

The findings of this study revealed that taking part in CFG has positive gains for the EFL instructors enrolled in language preparatory programs. With this in mind, it is clear that there is a consensus among the EFL instructors regarding the contribution of CFG to their use of authentic materials, collaboration with their colleagues and students' engagement in the classroom practices. Therefore, the study suggests that program designers and administrators should integrate more authentic materials in the language preparatory program and engage the EFL instructors into CFG meeting to aid with their CPD.

This study has several important recommendations for further research. First of all, a further study could be conducted over a longer period of time to add more perspectives and insights into the impact of using authentic materials through CFG in various language programs ranging from K-12 to preparatory schools. Continuous professional development activities are an indispensable part of inspiring teachers to broaden their perceptions and pedagogical practices. Therefore, it is recommended to replicate the present study with a larger sample and explore the influence of implementing authentic materials through CFG in the long run. Second, future research can explore the extent of the use of authentic materials in textbooks and find out its effect on the language development of the students. Last but not least, further research can look at the need for the use of authentic materials in language education programs.

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