

The effect of authentic materials on the motivation of EFL learners

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This article describes a classroom research project to investigate whether authentic materials increase the classroom motivation of learners, a claim often made but rarely, if ever, tested. A definition of motivation relevant to teachers was adopted—learner interest, persistence, attention, action, and enjoyment. Two beginner-level EFL classes participated, and both used authentic and artificial materials alternately. Results from two observation sheets and a self-report questionnaire indicate that while on-task behaviour and observed motivation increased significantly when authentic materials were used, self-reported motivation only increased over the last 12 of the 20 days of the study. However, learners also reported authentic materials to be significantly less interesting than artificial materials.

Introduction

Many authors have asserted that authentic materials have a positive effect on learner motivation in the foreign language classroom. I propose that research to date on this topic is inadequate, and that further research is justified by the importance accorded authentic materials in the literature—particularly the large number of untested claims that they increase learner motivation—and their widespread use in EFL classrooms worldwide. Many EFL teachers certainly have faith in authentic materials as motivators, and we suggest that testing these subjective impressions will result in better guidance being available for the selection of teaching materials. Learners may or may not be better served by authentic materials, and there is still insufficient rationale for or against their use.

Many writers claim that authentic materials motivate learners because they are intrinsically more interesting or stimulating than artificial or non-authentic materials (by which I mean materials produced specifically for language learners, e.g. exercises found in coursebooks and supplementary materials). Proponents of this view include Allwright (1979: 179); Freeman and Holden (1986: 67); Little and Singleton (1991: 124), who refer to this as the 'classic argument'; Little, Devitt, and Singleton (1989: 26), who add that authentic texts bring learners closer to the target language culture, making learning more enjoyable and therefore more motivating; Swaffar (1985: 18), King (1990: 70), and Bacon and Finnemann (1990: 459–60). Far fewer authors maintain that authentic materials reduce learner motivation because they are too difficult: Williams (1983: 187; 1984: 26), Freeman and Holden (1986: 68), and Morrison (1989: 15).

Two quasi-experimental studies directly address the question of learner motivation from authentic materials. Gonzalez (1990) researched the effect of authentic materials on learners' attitude, motivation, and culture and language achievement. Four classes totalling 43 students studying Spanish as a foreign language took part in her study. She found no statistically significant difference in motivation when authentic materials were used (*ibid.*: 106), though this result was based on answers to only one question in one self-report questionnaire. However, she found from comments in teaching logs that learners reacted favourably to their use (*ibid.*: 118). Kienbaum *et al.* (1986) researched the effectiveness of traditional second language instruction using traditional grammatical methods and texts (*ibid.*: 1), compared with the communicative approach when combined with the exclusive use of authentic materials. Both the linguistic progress and attitudes of participants were tested. Kienbaum *et al.* hypothesized that it is possible to increase motivation toward foreign language study by using the communicative method and authentic materials (*ibid.*: 7). Subjects were 29 American college students studying German or French as a foreign language over 30 weeks. Scores from just three items on an attitude survey were used to assess learners' satisfaction with the 'method used to teach the course' (*ibid.*: 21); they asked if the course was stimulating and if the texts, tapes, and visuals were interesting. There is no other mention in the survey of the materials used. No statistically significant differences between the control and experimental groups were found. Kienbaum *et al.* note, however, that all students were enthusiastic about and very well motivated by the use of authentic materials (*ibid.*: 25-6). However, the content validity of the attitude assessment component of the quantitatively analysed part of the study is called into question by the fact that only 3 of the 23 items used on the survey mention method or materials. The qualitative data collected over a period of 30 weeks give some support to their conclusions, which recommend the use of authentic materials in college foreign language classes. However, only authentic materials are mentioned in their conclusions, not the communicative teaching approach they used along with the authentic texts; it is possible that the favourable learner responses reflect the effects of the former to an undetermined degree.

I conclude that it is certainly possible that using authentic materials has a positive effect on learner motivation in the classroom, and that the large number of assertions that this is or is not the case have not yet been sufficiently tested.

Background to the study Definitions

For this study, 'motivation' is defined in the terms put forward by Crookes and Schmidt (1991: 498-502): interest in and enthusiasm for the materials used in class; persistence with the learning task, as indicated by levels of attention or action for an extended duration; and levels of concentration and enjoyment. I chose this definition of motivation as I agree with them (*ibid.*: 498-500) that no studies so far adopt learner enthusiasm, attention, action, and enjoyment as referents for and

components of motivation, despite the fact that the long hours learners spend in classrooms perhaps make this motivation an important factor in language learning success. Ushioda (1993: 1–3) calls this view of motivation ‘practitioner-validated’, and adds that enhanced learner participation and enthusiasm are significant outcomes in themselves.

Materials For the purposes of this research a commonly accepted definition of authentic materials was used: materials produced ‘to fulfil some social purpose in the language community’ (Little, Devitt, and Singleton, 1989: 25)—that is, materials not produced for second language learners. Examples are newspapers, poems, and songs. Among the authentic materials used with the classes in this study were two poems; some television listings; two short articles; an advice column from a local English-language newspaper; an American pop song; and some English-language magazine advertisements.

Learners The learners involved in this study were beginner-level students in two classes at a South Korean university EFL institute. One class contained 16 learners, the other 15. Their average age was 20, and the range from 18 to 24; 18 were male and 13 female. I taught both classes. Most of the students stated that they needed English for future work or study requirements.

Data collection and analysis This study aimed to test the experimental hypotheses, which predicted that when authentic materials were used levels of on-task behaviour, observed motivation, and self-reported motivation would increase (or decrease) significantly. Data was collected over a seven-week term (20 times in each class on 20 different days). Both classes used artificial materials one day and authentic materials the next, as coursebook supplements. Data was collected while learners were working in groups of three. There was no control group. I attempted to use groups as their own controls, reasoning that differences in motivation among the same learners with the same teacher, doing similar activities—but with a different type of material—may be attributed to the materials in use at the time with more assurance than would be the case with differences between two classes. Group-work activities were very similar (though not quite identical) every day. The daily activity consisted of a discussion in groups of three on a topic given to the learners. The possible effects of topic and activity as intervening variables are discussed below.

The first step was to find, adapt, and pilot the three data collection instruments needed to measure on-task behaviour, overall class motivation, and self-reported motivation. Observation sheet 1 was used to quantify learner on-task behaviour. Observers entered ‘1’ if learners were on-task and ‘2’ if they were off-task, until all learners had been observed 12 times (see Appendix 1). A class ‘on-task percentage’ that day could then be calculated. Observation sheet 2 was used to assess overall class motivation generated by the materials in use, as manifested by levels of learner interest, enthusiasm, activity, persistence with the

learning task, concentration, and enjoyment during class (see Appendix 2). Each item was scored on a scale of one (low) to five (high). Observations were made while the activity using the target materials was drawing to a close. A daily total score for each class of between 8 and 40 was thus produced. The third data collection instrument was a highly structured, anonymous, self-report learner questionnaire which aimed to measure levels of motivation generated during class by the materials in use (see Appendix 3). It consists of seven closed items on a semantic differential scale of adjectives expressing motivation (e.g. interesting/boring, enjoyable/unenjoyable, etc.). Questionnaires were completed by each learner at the end of the daily activity. Each item scored from one to seven, making a total of from 7 to 49 for each complete questionnaire. From this total a class mean score for the day was computed. The questionnaire was translated into Korean, the learners' L1, which appeared alongside the English version, to avoid learner misunderstanding. Further (qualitative) data was collected via five-minute post-class interviews (two learners each day), designed to allow learners to give in their own words their views on the materials used that day.

During the pilot study data collection instruments were tried out over a period of nine days. The aim was to detect any unforeseen practical problems in using them, and to collect data to test the reliability of the instruments. Further tests were carried out after the main study, during which a total of 40 hours of class were observed and recorded and 40 each of observation sheets 1 and 2 were collected, along with 516 learner questionnaires (for which the response rate was 100 per cent, as learners filled them out at the end of the activity) and notes from 80 student interviews. The inter-rater reliability for observation sheet 1 was $r = 0.91$ ($p = 0.03$). This coefficient is based on correlation between the independent on-task and off-task frequency counts of a non-participant observer and the class teacher on five days of the pilot study. To assess intra-rater reliability, the whole class were videotaped on three other days while I filled out observation sheet 1. The tapes were viewed again a few days later while three new observation sheets were completed. Intra-rater reliability was computed at $r = 0.97$ ($p < 0.001$, $n = 34$). This coefficient is based on correlation between on-task counts from the two sets of observation sheets. I suggest that these correlations are an indication of a high level of both inter-rater and intra-rater reliability.

The inter-rater reliability for observation sheet 2 was $r = 0.80$ ($p = 0.009$, $n = 9$). This coefficient of equivalence is based on correlation between the scores of a non-participant observer and the class teacher, who independently completed identical sheets on the nine days of the pilot study. Additionally a split-half reliability check was carried out to check the internal consistency of the observation sheet, correlating totalled scores on items 1, 2, 3, and 7 against items 4, 5, 6, and 8 over the nine days. The reliability for the full instrument was $r = 0.91$ ($p = 0.004$) using the Spearman-Brown prophecy formula (Hatch and Farhady 1982: 246), suggesting that a high level of both inter-observer and internal reliability occurred.

The internal reliability of the learner questionnaire was evaluated during the main study by item analysis and by a split-half reliability check. An item analysis was first carried out to check the questionnaire's internal consistency—that items were correctly understood and used by learners. Correlations between scores for all items were computed, based on the 516 forms completed. Significance levels were $p < 0.001$ for correlations between all items, indicating adequate learner comprehension of the meaning of all items. The split-half reliability check correlated total scores on items 1, 2, and 4 against items 5, 6, and 7. The reliability for the full instrument was $r = 0.91$ ($p < 0.001$, $n = 516$) using the Spearman-Brown prophecy formula, suggesting a high level of reliability.

All the data from observation sheets 1 and 2 and the learner questionnaires were analysed separately via repeated-measures multivariate analysis of variance, to investigate whether type of material (artificial or authentic) had a greater effect on motivation than class (A or B), day, or activity.

Results
On-task behaviour

Overall, learners were on task 86 per cent of the time when using authentic materials, and 78 per cent of the time when using artificial materials, a result indicating that authentic materials significantly increased learner on-task behaviour. The difference in mean percentages by type of materials was very significantly at $p < 0.001$ —that is there is less than one chance in a thousand that the difference occurred by chance.

Figure 1 reveals a time effect—the difference by type of material becomes very marked only after Day 8 of the study, perhaps indicating that learners took time to adjust to the unfamiliar idea of using authentic materials. It also shows that over the term on-task behaviour decreased on days when artificial materials were used, and increased on days when authentic materials were used.

Overall class motivation

Results indicate that overall class motivation significantly increased when the learners in this study used authentic materials. Mean scores over both classes were 29 out of a maximum possible of 40 when using authentic materials and 23 when using artificial materials, a result indicating that authentic materials significantly increased overall class motivation. The difference in mean total scores was very significant at $p < 0.001$.

Figure 2 shows a clear difference by type of material. As with on-task behaviour, there is a noticeable time effect—the difference by type of material becomes very prominent from day 8 of the study, perhaps indicating that the class was more motivated by authentic materials, but only adjusted in the second week to the novel idea of using them.

Figure 1:
On-task behaviour for all
learners

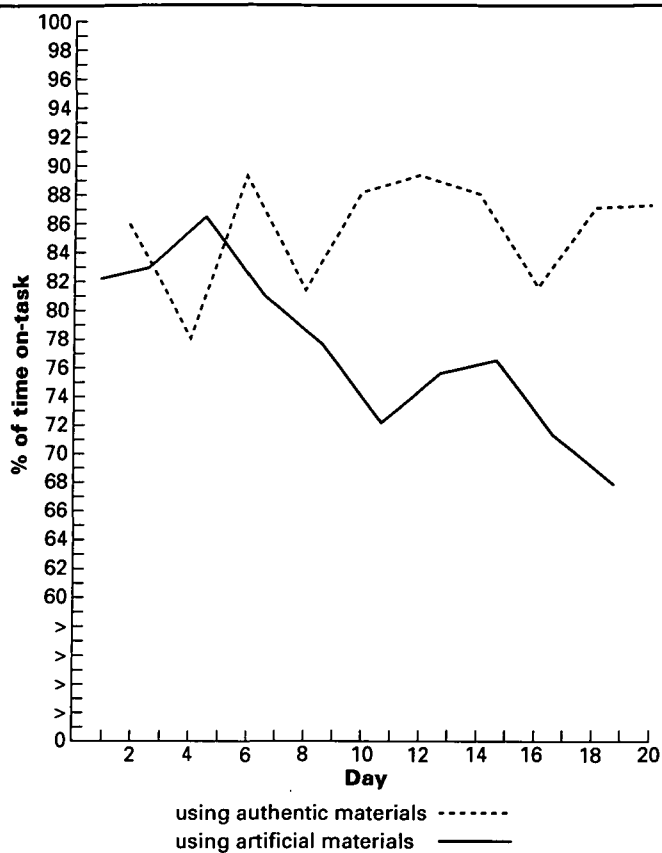
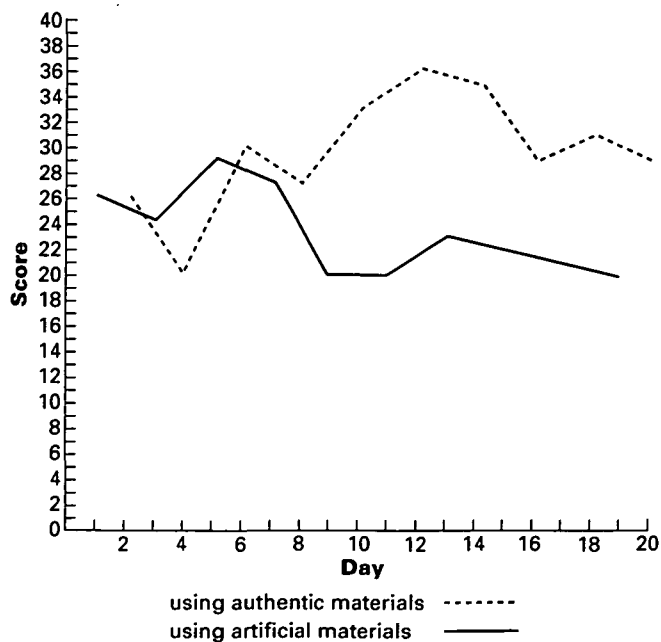


Figure 2:
Overall class motivation
scores for all learners



Learner motivation

Overall results (that is, for days 1 to 20 inclusive) from the learner questionnaires indicate that there was no significant difference in self-reported learner motivation when learners used authentic materials. There was little difference in mean scores between the two types of material; mean scores over both classes were around 38 out of a maximum possible of 49 when using authentic materials, as against around 39 with artificial material. The difference was not significant ($p = 0.308$, $n = 516$).

Figure 3:
Learner questionnaires:
mean scores for all
learners

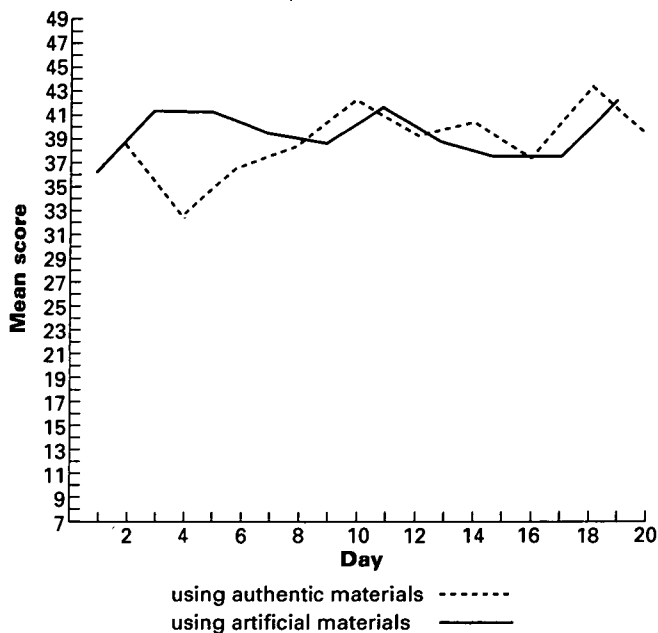


Figure 3 shows data from the daily learner questionnaires. At first sight it too shows little difference by type of material. However, further analysis was done after careful study of Figure 3. It became apparent that a time effect also exists for learner questionnaires, as it does for on-task behaviours and levels of observed motivation. That is, after the first eight days of class a difference by type of material becomes evident, though much less so than for on-task behaviour and levels of overall class motivation. Overall, learners preferred artificial materials for the first eight days, and authentic materials thereafter—for days 9 to 20 inclusive. Questionnaire scores for all learners just for days 9 to 20 were then analysed statistically, omitting data from days 1 to 8. Overall, mean scores were 40.2 when learners were using authentic materials, and 38.7 when they were using artificial materials. The difference in mean scores by type of material is 1.5, which is significant at $p = 0.04$ ($n = 304$); that is, there is less than one chance in twenty that the difference occurred by chance. This probability level is lower than the $p < 0.05$ previously set for the study, and indicates that there was a significant increase in levels of self-reported motivation when learners were using authentic materials from days 9 to 20 inclusive.

A further interesting and useful finding was that individual item analysis (for item 1—‘interesting/boring’) of the learners’ questionnaires revealed that, overall, learners found authentic materials to be significantly less interesting than artificial ($p = 0.038$; $n = 516$). The implications of this last finding will be considered below.

Post-class interviews

Pairs of learners were interviewed by the teacher at the end of each of the 40 data collection sessions (20 with each class), making a total of 80 interviews conducted over the seven weeks of the study. Learners were asked their opinion of the materials used that day. Unfortunately the interviews had to be conducted in English, which to a certain extent restricted the responses of these beginner-level learners. Responses varied a great deal, and comprise a useful body of learner comments on and impressions of the materials used. The following is a selection of representative interview quotes from learners talking about artificial materials during interviews, in chronological order:

(material was) typical
 same as other materials
 material didn't (encourage) discussion
 language is too easy
 develops speaking power
 made me thoughtful
 more exciting than other materials
 not different . . . not so good
 very good . . . makes us try to imagine
 makes us think about correct expression . . . its very exciting
 I wanted . . . more vocabulary
 interesting . . . but a bit too difficult for me
 very effective . . . funny
 its not new (too familiar)
 useful for description
 it caused a lot of conversation
 refreshing
 rather impractical
 it was all too much (for me)
 topic is good
 not so good
 somewhat boring . . . practice was OK

The following is a selection of representative quotes from learners talking about authentic materials, also in chronological order:

a good idea . . .
 variety more boring than most (materials)
 hard to comprehend
 We don't know English poem (structure) . . .
 difficult to discuss
 was too hard for us
 (expands our) view of society

Very worthwhile . . . but vocabulary was very difficult
 More difficult but useful . . . I like it
 got useful real information
 same as other materials
 I want more like this
 Interesting . . . because it's different
 less interesting . . . topic is very hard to us
 I prefer it
 It's so difficult
 not so useful
 boring because I don't watch TV
 it was real . . . had meaning to me
 Very impressive
 I don't like this song
 The best this term
 Very exciting . . . but hard to understand (because of vocabulary)
 (very useful) because subject is concrete
 very, very useful material . . . gives us a lot of real information

Discussions and conclusions

In the light of these findings, I recommend that teachers of adult EFL to beginners try appropriate authentic materials in their classroom, as they may increase their learners' levels of on-task behaviour, concentration and involvement in the target activity more than artificial materials. (It is possible to speculate that this would apply equally in intermediate and advanced classes.) They may, however, reduce the levels of learner interest engendered by the materials used. It is important that materials selected for the classroom motivate learners, so one criterion for the selection of materials should be their effect on motivation.

The finding in this study was that, overall, learners reported authentic materials to be significantly less interesting than artificial materials. This stands in direct contrast to the large number of assertions listed above to the effect that authentic materials are more motivating because they are intrinsically more interesting. These findings are a preliminary indication that this is not the case; learners were more motivated by authentic materials, but not because they were more interesting.

These results also indicate that, at least for the learners who participated, interest in the materials in use is quite separate as a component of motivation from levels of attention or action and persistence with the learning task. For this reason it was not possible to say whether authentic materials motivated learners or not. None of the authors who assert that authentic materials motivate learners make this distinction between separate components of classroom motivation. I suggest that in classroom motivation research, treating these two as separate components of motivation would lead to a clearer understanding of the meaning of the construct 'motivation', and a more precise picture of the effects of different materials on learner behaviour in the classroom.

The generalizability of the results is limited by the small scale of the study and the level of the learners, who were all beginners. It could be argued that the topic (and to a lesser extent the activity based on the material, though these were similar every day) might have affected results. I was unable to control for their effects, being unable to reliably isolate and quantify their inherent motivational level. One indication that levels of class interest in the topic or activity did not significantly affect levels of motivation is the fact that after day 8 of the study, the use of authentic materials invariably resulted in higher levels of on-task behaviour and overall class motivation. If motivational levels of the topic or activity was a major variable, this would almost certainly not have been the case. They may well remain as a minor variable.

I suggest that the classes were representative of South Korean university-level EFL classes. Also, the fact that the finding that classes did not differ significantly from each other in levels of on-task behaviour, observed motivation, or scores on the post-class learner questionnaires, allows one to speculate with more assurance that the effects are possible in other classes.

Although classes were not the same every day—varying by activity, absences, weather, day of the week, and term—I propose that the main variable in the study was the type of materials, thus making it possible to ascribe differences in motivation more surely to this factor.

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Appendix 1

Observation sheet 1 On-task behaviour
(adapted from Hopkins 1985: 95)

Observer _____ Dates D _____ M _____ Y _____
Teacher _____ Time of class _____
No. of students present _____ Level of class _____
Type of materials (circle one): artificial / authentic
Description of materials _____
Activity _____

Instructions

- 1 These observations are designed to measure levels of learner motivation generated by the materials in use.
- 2 Do not participate in the lesson. Place yourself in an unobtrusive position in the classroom.
- 3 Start the observation when the students have been working together in groups or pairs for two minutes.
- 4 Observe students one by one, consecutively, clockwise around the class. Identify students by name.
- 5 Every 5 seconds write down the category best describing the observed student's behaviour at that moment, then pass on to the next student.
- 6 Write the numbers in sequence down the data sheet.
- 7 Continue until all students have been observed 12 times, then complete Observation Sheet 2

Student number	Scan number											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1												
2												
3												
4												
5												
6												
7												
8												
9												
10												
11												
12												
13												
14												
15												
16												

Categories 1 = student on-task; 2 = student off-task
'on-task' : engaged in the pedagogic work of the day
'off-task' : a complete lack of attention to the set task

Appendix 2

Observation sheet 2 Overall class motivation
(adapted from Nunan 1989: 110)

Observer _____ Date: D _____ M _____ Y _____
Teacher _____ Time of class _____
No. of students present _____ Level of class _____
Type of materials (circle one): artificial/authentic
Description of materials _____
Activity _____

Observation focus Levels of student motivation generated by the teaching materials in use. 3 is an average mark for any one item.

Instructions

- 1 This sheet is for observing the class as a whole, not individual students.
- 2 Complete this sheet when the activity is drawing to a close.
- 3 Circle ONE number for each statement below.
- 4 Add final comments at the bottom of the sheet if you wish.

- 1 Mark how involved in the learning task the students are.
not very involved 1 2 3 4 5 very involved
- 2 Mark the level of student concentration on the learning task.
low 1 2 3 4 5 high
- 3 The students are enjoying the activity.
not really 1 2 3 4 5 very much so
- 4 The students are paying persistent (extended) attention to the learning task.
not really 1 2 3 4 5 very much so
- 5 Mark the students' activity level (effort/intensity of application)
low 1 2 3 4 5 high
- 6 The students find the teaching materials interesting.
not really 1 2 3 4 5 very much so
- 7 The materials in use are challenging for the students.
not really 1 2 3 4 5 very much so
- 8 The materials in use are appropriate for the students.
not really 1 2 3 4 5 very much so

Comments:

Appendix 3

Learner questionnaire (adapted from Gliksman *et al.* (1982: 646))

Teaching materials _____

Do not write your name on this sheet. Fill it out and give it back to your teacher.

The purpose of this questionnaire is to assess the value of the above teaching materials which were used in class today, *not* to assess the performance of you or your teacher.

This is not a test. There are no right and wrong answers; we want your own ideas and impressions.

Please mark ONE 'X' on each scale to show how you rate the following concepts. Use the scales as follows:

If the word at either end of the scale very strongly describes your ideas and impressions about the concept, you would place your checkmark as shown below:

boring X : : : : : interesting
boring : : : : : OR : : : : : X interesting

If the word at either end of the scale describes somewhat your ideas and impressions about the concept (but not strongly so), you would place your checkmark as follows:

boring : : : X : : : : : interesting
boring : : : : : OR : : : X : : : interesting

If the word at the end of the scale only slightly describes your ideas and impressions about the concept, you would place your checkmark as follows:

boring : : : : : X : : : : : interesting
boring : : : : : OR : : : X : : : interesting

Mark ONE 'X' on each line:

interesting : : : : : boring

unenjoyable : : : : : enjoyable

meaningless : : : : : meaningful

exciting : : : : : dull

unsatisfying : : : : : satisfying

unappealing : : : : : appealing

absorbing : : : : : monotonous