

The Use of Authentic Materials in ESP: Benefits and Drawbacks

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Abstract

This article aims to provide a multifold view related to integrating authentic materials in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes. On the one hand, it will highlight the main benefits of this approach, emphasizing the potentially significant impact that activities based on authentic materials can have on helping learners acquire and develop specific transferrable skills and communication abilities that they can later adapt to a variety of professional contexts. On the other hand, it will bring forth a range of challenges involved in successfully selecting and using authentic materials. While the great majority of ESP practitioners do agree that English for Specific Purposes cannot be taught/ learned without exposure to “real” language and contexts, many of them are also aware of the difficulties involved in selecting materials that would fit learners’ expectations and level of experience in terms of proficiency, tastes, interests or background knowledge. The article will explore some of these challenges.

Keywords: *ESP, authentic materials*

1. Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is, as the name indicates, aimed at helping language learners improve their communication skills in well-defined areas of activity. It is based on a learner-centered approach, whose main purpose is to provide support to people interested in improving their language proficiency according to their individual learning styles, while taking advantage of their existing professional knowledge (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998: 25-26). Rather than focusing on how language works, it facilitates the practical integration

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of language in professional communication processes, teaching “the language for getting things done” (Harding, 2007: 6) and having at its core “the idea of relating language *form* to language *use*, making use the main criterion for the selection of ESP teaching materials” (Dudley-Evans, 2001: 22, emphasis in the original). Apart from its main objective, which is improving learners’ use of the English language in specific contexts, ESP is also supposed to foster the development of a wide range of skills meant to enable its target audience to make connections that would allow them to perform well in other domains, not just in those directly related to the specific field of activity for which the language is learned. As shown by ESP researchers and practitioners, one of the main activities included in ESP class design is identifying “sets of transferable generic language and literacy skills that are seen to be applicable in the majority of academic and workplace settings” (Paltridge and Starfield, 2013: 31). Some of these skills include personal development and social awareness abilities such as “competences that help learners to participate successfully in social life”, “competences and attitudes that help learners to develop as critical intercultural individuals and citizens”, “competences that help learners to take responsibility and develop as language users and learners”, or “competences that help learners to acquire new knowledge in their studies in plurilingual settings” (Lenz and Berthele, 2010: 5-8).

Since this specific area of language study is so closely related to particular types of professional expertise, the materials used to facilitate participants’ learning experience need to match a series of criteria, such as exposing learners to language used in context in a wide range of situations, giving them up-to-date information about topics of interest or helping them get a better grasp of how language is used in realistic business settings. In other words, they have to be authentic.

While the need to integrate authentic materials in ESP curriculum design has been recognized for a while now, there are still some debates related to what characteristics are required for sources used in ESP to be defined as authentic. A broad definition refers to authentic materials as “anything created for native speakers of a language, we can use for our teaching purposes. With the changing linguistic boundaries, it is now widely known as materials that include ideas, words, phrases and expressions that are heard and read in real-life situations” (Ciornei and Dina, 2014: 275). These types of sources were initially perceived as a

“reaction against the prefabricated patterns of the textbooks while authentic texts were the non-pedagogical texts used to help learners improve not only their communicative but also their cultural competences” (Ciornei and Dina, 2014: 275). However, things have changed and textbook designers have for a long time integrated authentic written, audio and video materials in their content, with National Geographic Learning taking things a step further and using TED Talks as a starting point in their *Keynote* series (Stephenson, Lansford and Dummett, 2015). According to different views, authenticity is not necessarily a feature of the text itself, being determined by how users relate to the text and by the way in which they choose to interpret it according to their own learning priorities (Widdowson, 1979, 1990; Breen, 1985; Kramsch, 2010). Thus, according to Henry Widdowson, “Authenticity is a characteristic of the relationship between the passage and the reader and it has to do with appropriate response” (Widdowson, 1979: 80). A comprehensive description of what authenticity involves is provided by Alex Gilmore, who offers an overview of different perspectives on the term and concludes that “the concept of authenticity can be situated in either the text itself, in the participants, in the social or cultural situation and purposes of the communicative act, or some combination of these” (Gilmore, 2007: 98). He also states that given the multidimensional nature of the concept, one has to clearly define a set of criteria when talking about authentic materials. In his opinion, a suitable compromise would be to adopt Morrow’s definition, according to which “An *authentic text* is a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort” (Morrow, 1977: 13, qtd. in Gilmore, 2007: 98; emphasis in the original).

In the following sections of this article we will focus mainly on this definition – i.e. authentic materials seen as materials created primarily for native speakers of a language to fulfil a wider social function rather than a narrower language learning purpose for non-native speakers. Most of the benefits and challenges brought into discussion will cover both authentic materials already integrated in business English textbooks and materials specifically selected and adapted by the teachers themselves for classroom use.

2. The benefits of using authentic materials in ESP

Using authentic materials in ESP comes with a wide array of benefits. For teachers, a significant advantage is represented by increasingly easy access to authentic sources. On the one hand, high-profile business English coursebooks have included for many years now tasks designed starting from authentic written or audio materials. The *Market Leader* (Cotton, Falvey and Kent, 2011) and *Intelligent Business* (Trappe and Tullis, 2006), just to mention two of those used to teach business English for upper-intermediate university students at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, propose activities based on understanding and interpretation of listening materials such as interviews with business experts or written texts extracted usually from business publications. A recent addition to the list of coursebooks promoting the use of authentic materials is represented by National Geographic Learning's *Keynote* series (Stephenson, Lansford and Dummett, 2015), based on the increasingly trendy and popular TED Talks, which serve as a starting point for tasks aimed at helping learners develop their listening and oral communication skills, as well as their critical thinking and presentation competences. On the other hand, teachers have easy and free access to anything that the Internet has to offer. Thus, they can easily obtain and direct learners towards a rich offer of authentic written, audio or visual materials that may gain learners' interest and help them become better communicators in the target language.

For learners, there are linguistic and socio-cultural, as well as psychological positive effects worth mentioning.

Linguistic and socio-cultural advantages cover areas as improved language acquisition and language use, better understanding of how language works in specific contexts, enhanced communication skills or increased cultural awareness. As highlighted by Ciornei and Dina (2015: 277), "when authentic materials are made available for students, they provide exact examples of how the language is used by its native speakers or of the vast majority of target language users. (...) With authentic texts, learners are provided with words and expressions used in real-life contexts. When students are confronted with similar situations, they manage better in informal, face-to-face communications". It is important for ESP trainers to strike the right balance between their learners' proficiency and the

complexity of language used in the selected texts. It is true that in real life people – especially native speakers of a language – that learners will interact with rarely, if ever, adapt their communication strategy to the level of their interaction partners. From this perspective, complex authentic texts could have the benefit of forcing learners to get out of their comfort zone and strive to understand unknown and difficult language. As stated by Case (2012), “dealing with an unsimplified text you are doing the equivalent of trying to cope with a native speaker making no adjustment for talking to a non-native speaker”. Furthermore, when they are faced with such a situation learners are encouraged to look for unknown terms on their own or simply use their knowledge on the topic to guess the meaning of some words. However, as discussed further in this article, language that is too complex for learners will demotivate them and make them lose faith in their abilities.

Authentic materials can also be an effective channel through which learners are exposed to foreign cultures. Accepted and unaccepted behaviors in a given culture, holidays and ways of spending them, cultural stereotypes about the text author’s culture, opinions expressed by text authors about other cultures (maybe even the learners’) can all be extracted from authentic materials, both written and audio-visual.

Apart from the positive aspects mentioned so far in our article, integration of authentic materials in ESP class design also has psychological benefits, including aspects as increased learner motivation, higher self-confidence when it comes to learners’ ability to improve their language skills and actually use specific language in given professional and academic contexts, a sense of achievement or better independent/ autonomous learning competences.

The link between integration of authentic materials in ESP and increased learner motivation has not yet been clearly established. In an extensive analysis of opinions expressed by advocates and critics of the idea that authenticity leads to higher motivation, Gilmore (2007) shows that there is no clear method to establish this link. However, if the right conditions are met, such materials could raise learners’ interest and encourage them to participate more actively in class interaction. The entertaining value of some of these materials, their up-to-date character, learners’ understanding that their trainers went through the effort of selecting personalized content to meet their needs can improve learners’

reaction to the materials and the activities suggested. In turn, increased participation in the tasks and class interaction, as well as the fact that learners realize they can understand texts written for native speakers of a language can increase their self-confidence.

Exposure to authentic materials also helps students develop their independent and autonomous learning skills, as well as their strategies for coping with language and dealing with language items they are not very familiar with. By comparing different viewpoints from various sources on the same issue and by making use of their background knowledge regarding the story presented in the source material, learners are encouraged to become aware that effective communication does not require full comprehension of every single language item and that personal experience can always be used to fill in the voids. As pinpointed by Gilmore (2007: 109), “authentic materials are seen as both encouraging a tolerance of partial comprehension and enhancing learners’ inferencing skills”. A similar view is expressed by Vaičiūnienė and Užpalienė (2012), who highlight the importance of not over simplifying language and encouraging learners to deal with language difficulties and try to overpass them to extract the information they need. According to the two authors, “Authenticity in the learning environment makes students develop their own strategies for dealing with real language and, on the other hand, prevents them from being reliant on simplified language. Using a wide array of resources, distinguishing relevant information from irrelevant in the process, examining from different perspectives encourages student autonomy” (Vaičiūnienė and Užpalienė, 2012: 192-193).

Despite all these benefits, ESP practitioners and researchers face many challenges when they have to decide how much and what types of authentic materials they should expose learners to. Some of these difficulties will be presented in the following section of this article.

3. The drawbacks of using authentic materials in ESP

As detailed in the previous section, there are multiple benefits to adding authentic materials in ESP class practices. However, drawbacks are not to be dismissed and constitute significant challenges when using this type of materials in class.

Problems start from the onset of thinking about using such materials. There is sometimes difficulty to access, in terms of the affordability and availability of the ESP textbooks. In fact, in topical instances, it is brought to attention that often teachers need to be trained first in how to use authentic materials (Temizyürek and Birinci, 2016). Further on, other difficulties underpin the process of selection among authentic materials, taking into account length of the text, complexity of grammatical structures, and type of text or shift through vocabulary. Authentic materials may contain complex language structures or unusual vocabulary items and may be culturally biased (Temizyürek and Birinci, 2016; Bedri and Ali, 2017). It is difficult for instructors to prepare these materials, sometimes simplify them in order to make them more accessible. It is also difficult for some students to decode these texts – especially when we are speaking about students with lower levels of language use. All this may pave the road to a demotivated learner (Temizyürek and Birinci, 2016, art. 12). Along with the time invested in selecting proper authentic materials, another problem might be the time invested in preparation of these materials by the language instructor (Sabet and Mahsefat 2012; Rusmawaty et al., 2018). Also, it takes time for students as well to get used to the occurrence of these materials in their practice (Shirai, 2013). In a study conducted in 1997 into beginner-level students at a South Korean university regarding use of authentic materials as motivating factors for learning, Peacock concluded the following:

“(...) on-task behavior and observed motivation significantly increased with authentic materials. However, self-reported motivation with authentic materials only increased over the last 12 of 20 study days probably because the participants gradually became accustomed to using authentic materials, suggesting the effects of authentic materials as a major variant and the importance of time-effect in research; the learners regarded authentic materials as significantly less interesting than artificial ones, which is contradictory to multitudinous advocates’ claim that the reason why authentic materials motivate learners is that they are intrinsically interesting” (Peacock, qtd. in Shirai, 2013: 425).

Moreover, “difficult language, unneeded vocabulary items and complex language structures” (Richards and Renandya, 2002, qtd. in Sabet and Mahsefat, 2012), all require added work to prepare the authentic material for class. Aside from complex language structure, complex grammar items or genre difficulties with written authentic materials, many

issues arise from the use of authentic listening or viewing. Some verbal authentic materials may have different accents and hearing various accents renders some students confused (Temizyürek and Birinci, 2016). Add to the difficulty for instructors to prepare these materials, sometimes simplify them in order to make them more accessible, the difficulty of students to decode these texts – especially with lower levels of language use – and the road to a demotivated learner is paved. Several studies point to this effect, arguing that the difficulties associated with authentic texts (because of the vocabulary used or the cultural knowledge presumed), demotivate learners (Freeman and Holden, 1986; Prodromou, 1996a, 1996b; Widdowson, 1996, 1998, 2003, qtd. in Gilmore, 2007).

The difficulties posed by authentic materials are also re-iterated by Gilmore (2007: 108), who shows that “the high lexical density, idiomatic language, low frequency vocabulary used for satirical effect, and opaque cultural references all combine to make it ‘pragmatically inert’ for most learners”, referring to an example offered by Widdowson (1998: 710).

Another major factor that conditions the use of authentic material which goes beyond the immediate impact of language structure or listening difficulties is the learning goal. As underlined in Shirai (2013: 437), if a student wants to land a job, they need a standardized test score, so they are strongly demotivated to use authentic materials. As detailed further, “the current recession makes college students’ job hunting difficult, and some students in senior classes attempt to obtain a high TOEIC score to have an advantage in landing a job. In fact, the SE class was mainly for 2nd-year students, but a few senior students attended; it can be inferred that their immediate concern with employment affected the results” (Shirai, 2013: 437).

4. Conclusions

As showcased, although the vast majority of studies exert the advantages of using authentic material in ESP classes, there are various drawbacks to doing this and these deserve the attention of language educators and practitioners in order to ensure an efficient integration of such materials in class activities.

The present study takes into account into a unified material both advantages and disadvantages of using authentic resources in ESP classes and offers a more comprehensive and compact look at the disadvantages

associated with authentic materials. Extensive attention has been given to the positive effects of these materials, while disadvantages are mentioned sporadically and in brief observations.

As educators and language instructors it is our duty to look at these phenomena from both perspectives and to look for solutions that would ease the task of using authentic materials in class, such as: time allotted to careful selection of materials, to simplifying these, if needed, especially in written forms; if the resources are difficult, simplify the tasks assigned to students, build on interactive approaches to resource and indicate real-life scenarios where structures and instances encountered in authentic texts can be made effective use of by the students. All the more so, since “authentic learning fosters the development of language and academic proficiency through work that allows ELLs to use language and content in realistic ways” (Zwahlen, 2017: 42).

Most studies analyzed display concern that in many cases trainers and learners focus too much on linguistic competence at the cost of other areas that impact learners’ communication skills (as also shown in Gilmore, 2007). More research should be dedicated to practical ways of integrating linguistic proficiency into daily practices, student-centered approaches that build on communicative competences to be developed in students, integrating class drills into future professional abilities, bridging the gap between formal education and real life circumstances.

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