

THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The current study attempts to help our business learners in the Preparatory School of Economics and Commercial Sciences to act effectively in their target language environment. To meet this end, an action research was conducted in three phases. As the first step, three research tools were submitted to analyse the informants' needs, identify their learning gaps and expectations, notably a questionnaire, semi- structured interview and a diagnostic test. Second, training courses were mainly intended to enhance their consciousness of some strategies used to improve their comprehension of authentic business texts. Learners were, finally, tested and interviewed. The results revealed the usefulness of those authentic -based language materials in responding positively to our learners' interests, achievements, cultural awareness, skills and language developments.

KEYWORDS: Business English, Authentic Materials, Consciousness Raising.

INTRODUCTION

Business, science and technology are those key-words that are often repeated today. As a matter of fact, globalization has driven our world to an unusual evolution. This latter challenge the globe and a growing demand for interaction occurs in a variety of discourse communities and English the global language imposes itself to be mass requirement and a prevalent means of international communication. Consequently, academics, scientists, economists and even politicians called for real efforts to provide and deliver courses in English and more precisely English for Specific Purposes (henceforth ESP) that meet the needs of this new challenging world.

The success of one world market cannot be done apart from unifying the language or to a low extent finding a common language that facilitates the task of communication in the commercial sector. To fulfill this task a sub-branch of ESP has been created and labeled English for Business and Economics (EBE). This latter has been imposed nowadays as one among the most required, desirable and impressive ESP courses all over the entire world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Though authenticity plays a significant role in language teaching, there is a general agreement among scholars (Breen, 1985; Mishan, 2005; Newmann and Wehlage, 1993; Lee, 1995; MacDonald et al, 2006) that there is no clear-cut definition. Joining this, Widdowson (1983:30) maintains that "*Authenticity [...] is a term which creates confusion because of a basic ambiguity*".

Therefore, a noticeable split of definitions has been used among those who related authenticity to text (Morrow, 1977; MacDonald et al, 2006); and others who associate it to language use (Widdowson, 1983; Taylor, 1994).

Breen (1985) identifies four types of authenticity:

Authenticity of the texts: different names have been, also, used by other scholars to refer to this type as real text (Morrow, 1977), language authenticity and materials authenticity (MacDonald et al, 2006). It is defined as a text - be it spoken or written- used by native speakers for the aim of communicating ideas rather than educational purposes, it is, also, described as being unique in nature and it represents original context (Morrow, 1977).

Moreover, authentic texts are believed to be used as input data for our learners; as those texts are the source of authentic language which enables students to develop their interpretations.

Authenticity of the learners' own interpretations of such texts: this type, according to Breen (1985), refers to learners' ability to interpret meaning from texts.

Authenticity of tasks conducive to language learning: the idea behind such a type is that authenticity is not only concerned with text of real life communication but the purpose of learning. Authentic tasks are defined as those assignments that the learners may encounter on the work, at home, or other situations (Newmann and Wehlage, 1993). This type of authenticity is acknowledged in language teaching for its focus which is placed upon the needed skills for the learners' academic and professional life.

Authenticity of the actual social situation of the language classroom: the language classroom is believed to provide the social event for the communicative purpose of learning. Breen (1985:68) maintains that "the authentic role of the classroom is the provision of those conditions in which the participants can publicly share the problems, achievements and overall process of learning a language together as socially motivated and socially situated activity"

MacDonald *et al.* (2006) extend Breen's classification; In addition to text and classroom authenticity, they add other types namely authenticity of competence, and learner.

Authenticity of competence is concerned with the three competences proposed by Canale and Swain (1980). They refer to grammatical sociolinguistic and strategic competences. They believe that these latter enable learners become authentically competent, and develop a near-native speaker performance.

Learner competence refers to students' positive attitudes to the language materials and the educational intentions associated with them (Lee, 1995). Learners, then, should be trained to develop a positive feeling and attitudes not only towards the teaching materials but also and more precisely towards the communicative purposes for learning.

Materials play a vital role in foreign language teaching in general and ESP in particular. Moreover, it is worth noticing that the teacher finds himself in a dilemma of using either real-life; adapting available; or rather writing his own materials. This selection requires taking into consideration some important key-parameters such as the time constraint, the availability of materials, the objective the course, the learners' needs and their language proficiency.

Starting from the view that the language which is no more used by its native speakers is no longer taught (Wajnryb, 1988), too much attention is given to provide learners with real-life materials. They are generally known as the use of language in its natural setting by native speakers for non-educational purposes. Morrow (1977: 13) defines it as

“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.”

The use of these materials has been increasingly acknowledged in language teaching for their presentation of:

- Original communicative and socio-cultural purpose of the text.
- Original context (e. g. its source, socio-cultural context) of the text.
- Learning activity engendered by the text.
- Learners’ perceptions of and attitudes to, the text and the activity pertaining to it

(Mishan, 2005:18)

Additionally, some scholars (Miller, 2003; Lee, 1995) seem to agree on the fact that providing learners with real representation, specialized terminology, discourse, semantic, syntax and culture of a particular discourse community enable them to feel confident and motivated to learn the language as it is used in its natural context. Moreover, these materials are believed to be useful for improving the communicative aspects of the language. This idea is supported by Shrum and Glisan (2000: 133) who insist on the idea that “*authentic materials provide an effective means for presenting real language, integrating culture, and heightening comprehension.*”

Authentic materials have been proved to be of great benefit to the learners yet; they have been also criticized for being suitable for only advanced students as they have language terms which may go beyond their levels of language proficiency and understanding.

METHODOLOGY

This current research work has been undertaken with a set of objectives in mind. Its main aim is to develop the learners’ performance through the use of authentic materials in the context of business English Teaching at the Preparatory School of Economics and Commercial Sciences. Therefore the process of needs analysis and Identification has been addressed to gather feedback from both practitioners and learners about several aspects related to ESP course design.

To accomplish this investigation, the following central research question has been asked:

- What might be the impacts of making use of authentic materials in EBE courses?

The below mentioned set of inquiries has been reformulated in an attempt to hopefully achieve reliable answer to that already mentioned research query:

- Are the range of the teaching materials and the ESP course objectives fundamentally based on the needs of our Algerian EBE learners?
- Do our EBE learners perform better while learning through authentic materials?
- To what extent does the use of authentic materials along with strategy training promote the learners’ skills, language ability, and cultural knowledge?

To provide answers to those research inquiries, a number of hypotheses have been proposed:

- The range of ESP courses provided at the preparatory schools of economics and commercial sciences does not meet the academic and professional needs of the learners.
- Teaching through authentic materials is believed to be important to ESP learners. It may help them perform better while focusing, at the same time, on the cultural aspect.
- Receiving strategy- training while teaching with authentic materials may help our ESP learners to function effectively in their discourse environment. In other words, they may promote their reading skills; enhance their language and cultural awareness.

Action Research Methodology

Due to the nature of the present study, the choice felt to an action research. This type of research is widely believed to be a reflective inquiry based on the systematic practice undertaken by the researcher who is the teacher at the same time with the overall aim of changing and improving his own teaching and learning process. In this regard, Burns (2010:5) quoted Cornwell's definition (1999:05) of action research:

... a self-reflective, systematic and critical approach to enquiry by participants who are at the same time members of the research community. The aim is to identify problematic situations or issues considered by the participants to be worthy of investigation in order to bring about critically informed changes in practice.

In this present study, the researcher adopted Norton's (2009) view for five steps process of a simple action research known by the acronym ITDEM

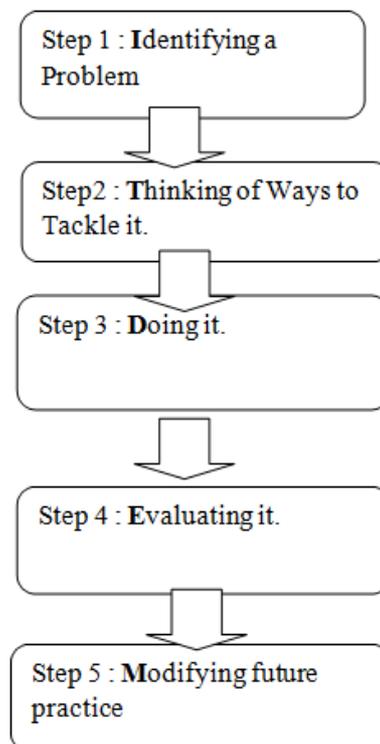


Figure 1: Action Research Model (adapted from Norton, 2009)

Adopting Norton's (2009) action research model, five stages were followed in this research work:

Stage one: this initial step was mainly a diagnostic one, based on the identification of a problem. The researcher, thus, felt the urgent need to bridge the gap between the academic and professional requirements of the second-year students in the Preparatory School of Economics and Commercial Sciences.

Learners in Business educational contexts do not only need to achieve their short-term objectives which currently cover the success in their exams but they were also expected to support their language ability through the use of up-dated materials.

In addition to this, business is considered as a discipline that requires too much interaction on both national and international scales. Thus, for better communication, it is necessary to transmit messages either through verbal or non-verbal interaction using one or more skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). Therefore, whatever skill is performed, learners are required to develop not only the linguistic competence, but also being aware of the cultural aspect that may break down the communication.

Stage 2: this step is considered as a decision-making practice (Tomal, 2003). It was intended to think about the possible ways of data collection procedures. Thus, the researcher had recourse to the use of some research tools depending basically on some important elements such as:

- the time consuming;
- The nature of the research design;
- The purpose of the research tool;
- The sampling size;
- Access to the sample.

Moreover, the researcher thought about the application of some teaching strategies for enhancing the learners' linguistic knowledge and raising their awareness to some cultural aspects through the use of authentic materials. However, this decision was taken for granted as the final one. Results from the pre-training phase were seen to provide interesting feedback on the learners' requirements.

Stage 3: refers to the administration of the research instruments. Pre-training and post- training phases were accomplished through the engagement of both ESP learners and teachers in data gathering activity. Learners' pre- and post-tests, a questionnaire of Needs Analysis and Identification, along with the two interviews were used to cross-check the results.

This phase was launched during the first semester of the academic year 2013-2014. The allotted period for this action research is three hours per week. The reason behind deciding upon the time factor is:

- To have enough intervals between the collection, training, and analysis of data;
- To have access to the sampling, especially the ESP teachers;
- To have enough time for the administration of each research instrument so that learners are not getting bored

to fill in them.

The aim of this present action research is not only for professional improvement, but rather for academic qualification;

Stage 4: this step is rather concerned with the evaluation of the results gained from the three phases through the implication of a mixed method aims to obtain multi-level of analysis, and reaching a near full picture of reality. The combination of the qualitative and quantitative approaches, according to Greene et al., (1989), has a complementary function, they “...are used to measure overlapping but also different facets of a phenomenon, yielding an enrich understanding by illustrating, clarifying, or elaborating on certain aspects”(Quoted in Dörnyei 2007: 164).

Stage 5: refers to the series of practical suggestions and recommendations that felt to be important to better enhance the ESP teaching and learning process

Data Collection Phase

As for the purpose of this study, and to meet the required objective, the researcher opted for a ‘combining approach’ to data collection procedure for its overall aim of collecting and/ or analyzing data, and reaching, at the same time, a thorough interpretation as well as achieving the validity of this investigation under investigation. In this vein, Tashakkori and Creswell (2007:4) define it: “as research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or a program of inquiry.”

This mixed-method approach is characterized by its ability to increase concurrent and construct the validity of the research questions. It also permits the researcher to reduce prejudice (Perlesz and Lindsay, 2003). Arguing in a similar way, Dörnyei (2007) asserts the following advantages:

- Increasing the strengths while minimizing the weakness of each paradigm;
- allowing for several -layer of analysis;
- improving the validity of the research outcomes;
- Claiming the generalizability of the results.

Starting from the premise that drawing on a single method may not almost provide satisfactory results, the researcher had recourse to the use of triangulation of data sources. This technique allows to cross-checking results, hence, it enables to obtain a better understanding and provide a clear picture of a particular phenomenon. This idea has been supported by Cohen *et al.*, (2007: 141) who advocate that:

...triangular techniques in the social sciences attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint and, in so doing, by making use of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Data collection process was carried out through two phases. The pre-training phase was accomplished through the administration of teachers’ semi-structured interview, the learners’ questionnaire and a pre-training test. Data from the final

step were gathered via the use of the post-training test besides, the learners' interview.

RESULTS

Analysis of the pre-training stage results reveals that our ESP practitioners were not trained to teach ESP classes. Facing difficulties with Needs Analysis and Identification while having a limited knowledge related to students' field of study were perceived as two major obstacles faced in the process of ESP course design and during the course delivery. Another main finding was related to the materials selections, informants acknowledged the role of using real -life materials with a special emphasis on the communicative needs of the learners.

Findings gathered from students' semi -structured interview show their dissatisfaction with the range of courses. Their requirements and expectations were not taken into consideration. Results collected from the diagnostic test showed that our ESP learners faced a number of learning difficulties. Some of them were directly associated with their level of language ability. Other issues were related to their lack of specialized business terminology and collocations, and their inadequate use of reading strategies.

Drawing on the results of needs analysis and identification, a set of ESP training sessions were organised around a receptive skill namely reading. Their main objectives were to help our business learners to efficiently attain reading comprehension on authentic materials. In this respect, real -life texts were extracted from various business resources such as journals and books, etc. A stress was placed upon consciousness-raising strategies to improve our learners' language performance in their field of study. Productive tasks were also selected in the form of case studies with a focus on a number of cultural aspects to provide learners with opportunities to use what they have already learnt.

This study found that students, in the post -training phase, developed their overall understanding while reading authentic materials without the guidance of the instructor. This was mainly related to their appropriate use of a set of reading strategies such as: skimming, scanning and inferring. Proficiency test results revealed that learners were also able to raise their linguistic consciousness of the grammatical structures and disciplinary -based terminology. As for the productive task, findings showed that informants became able to notice, compare, discuss some cultural aspects with reference to their own and the target culture, too and were able to pay more attention to the collocations.

At the end of the training sessions, a semi -structured interview was conducted to cross- check the results of the proficiency test. Findings showed that our ESP learners developed their positive attitude towards the language course and the culturally based assignments. Another interesting finding was the positive correlation between the choice of business-based themes of those authentic materials and learners' achievements. Most of them expressed their satisfaction with the course content and placed a central emphasis on the fact that they have developed their underlying content language knowledge in their specific discourse environment.

DISCUSSIONS

In the light of the findings and conclusions collected from different sources using a number of research tools that were submitted in the three data gathering phases, results revealed a positive effect of ESP teaching through authentic materials on the learners' achievement. This was meant to bridge the existing gap between their academic and professional requirements.

The initial question in this investigation sought to determine whether the language course and the instructional materials offered at the preparatory school match the actual needs of the EBE learners or not. Data on Needs Analysis and Investigation unveiled that ESP classes lack a set of significant criteria that may have a negative influence on the students' achievements. Diagnostic test results confirmed this assumption. In this context, the majority of informants' low scores were mainly related to the fact that they face problems among them: skills deficiencies, some of them displayed limited language abilities and were unaware of the efficient use of a number of strategies, besides, their lacks and expectations were not taken into serious consideration.

The second research question intended to examine whether ESP learners enhanced their performance while raising their awareness to use authentic materials or not. Findings of the achievement test showed that the majority of the informants' performances were above the minimum value of the scores. This confirms the hypothesis that raising learners' awareness to a set of suitable strategies when dealing of those materials in an ESP context are important.

The final research question, nevertheless, strived to investigate whether the implementation of real- life language materials with close reference to strategies consciousness raising help learners to function effectively in their target discourse community, or not. Data analysis of different research instruments in the post -training phase showed that authentic materials helped learners to successfully undertake various assignments in their educational discourse setting. In this respect, they developed a positive attitude towards the ESP course, promoted their reading comprehension and skills; enhanced their language proficiency, and especially their cultural knowledge related mainly to the target culture. Yet, it should be added that authentic materials may not necessary ensure skills development if learners, teachers as well as subject -specialists are invited to cooperate, collaborate and outline the content of the language course for a continuous improvement of the rank of ESP teaching.

IMPLICATIONS AND RELEVANCE FOR TEACHING

Based on the findings and conclusions drawn from this research work, a set of suggestions and pedagogical implications have been put forward to improve the ESP teaching quality. The focus needs to be placed on preparing practitioners to be fully involved in the new situations to devise adequate tasks for reading and writing, and to integrate culture in ESP teaching.

Furthermore, the remarks made by the ESP teacher with regard to teaching in a new environment with general language knowledge, call for an urgent need to develop their own theories of teaching and form their own vision about what constitute an efficient language education. In this case, the ESP teacher should act as a strategist to benefit from his previous eventuality to enhance his practice.

NEW RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

Since findings and conclusions drawn from this present study are limited to the small size of the population, future research may include a large group of ESP learners and further practitioners either from the same institution or from other Algerian preparatory schools of Economics and Commercial Sciences to attain what is known as generalization and representation of the results.

This study also opens the door for future researchers and practitioners to work in collaboration with subject- specialists and cooperation with ESP learners to further their technical knowledge in the students' field of study and

enhance their practical ways for the design of adequate ESP courses.

Moreover, ESP practitioners should improve their quality teaching by undertaking training sessions that may include theoretical and empirical practices, intensive and extensive teachers' preparation; pre- service and in-service trainings. Taking the context of the ESP teachers at the Preparatory School of Economics and Commercial Sciences who are trained to teach a General English Language, they should, for instance, attend workshops and seminars to improve their linguistic and pedagogic competences, language awareness and specialized knowledge. (Thomas, 1993; Savas, 2009).

Possible areas for forthcoming investigation on the significance of implementing authentic materials in business English course may cover the impact of video-visual materials on the learners' performance including the improvement of their speaking; listening; and writing skills or more narrowly the development of the learners' intercultural competence especially when the language is required in the occupational context. In this respect, this may also require the inclusion of real-life assignments that promote, in one way or another, the learners' creative thinking.

Future research in this field of study may also examine the role of authentic materials in raising the ESP learners' internal and external motivation to learn the target language and develop their self -confidence.

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