

USE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN THE ESP CLASSROOM

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Resumen

Los materiales auténticos son especialmente importantes para el estudiante de inglés para usos específicos, puesto que reproducen un ambiente de inmersión y proveen un contexto realista en aquellas tareas relacionadas con las necesidades del aprendiz. Los materiales auténticos aumentan la motivación de los aprendices pero son difíciles de adaptar al nivel de adquisición de la lengua de los estudiantes, y más si se trata de principiantes, y es muy importante subrayar que preparar este material es una tarea que puede llevar mucho tiempo. Hoy en día los materiales auténticos deben ponerse al día constantemente, ya que su demanda no deja de crecer en las clases de inglés para usos específicos y para uso académico. En este artículo se ofrece un repaso de las diferentes opiniones a favor y en contra de su utilización en la clase de inglés para usos específicos, de acuerdo con el punto de vista de autores experimentados en el tema.

Palabras clave: realia, materiales auténticos, inglés para usos específicos, inglés para uso académico.

Abstract

Authentic materials are especially important for ESP trainees, since they reproduce an immersion environment and provide a realistic context for tasks that relate to learner's needs. Realia and authentic materials increase learners' motivation but are difficult to adapt to the learners' level of language, especially at the beginning level. It is also important to note that preparing such materials can be very time-consuming. Nowadays, authentic materials must be constantly updated, as they are more and more frequently on demand in ESP or EAP classes. A review of the different opinions of experienced authors and their arguments for and against the use of realia and authentic materials in the ESP classroom is offered in this article.

Key words: realia, authentic materials, ESP, EAP

1. Authentic Materials in ESP

Authenticity has been pointed to by various authors as a relevant feature in ESP methodology (Safont and Esteve 2004: 261-274) and thus, authentic materials constitute an aspect traditionally emphasized in the ESP literature. The learner-centred approach is essential to ESP teaching, and identified learner's needs are not fully satisfied by published texts. These authentic materials should be taken from the real world and not primarily created for pedagogical reasons. Such materials are particularly important for communicative purposes since they reproduce an immersion environment and provide a realistic context for tasks that relate to learner's needs. Authentic materials can greatly benefit problem-solving, project-based learning, case-based learning, role-play, and simulation and gaming methodology. Students and teachers can use authentic materials as a means to "link the formal, and to some extent artificial, environment of the classroom with the real world in which we hope our students will eventually be using the language they are learning" (House, S. 2008: 53-70). This also encourages top-down processing. It is important to bear in mind that the concept of context must be made central to in-class teaching, and therefore, authentic materials may lose much of their suitability when used in a very different context from that for which such material was originally intended. Indeed, authentic materials do not automatically lead to authentic responses, and this must always be remembered. Unfortunately, this conclusion was not self-evident in the early days of ESP, with what has been called "it is the headlong rush to use authentic materials willy-nilly" (Mishan 2005: 13). In fact Triki

(2002) suggests that the need for ESP to access authentic materials is a strong argument for the application of Pragmatics to ESP.

Authentic materials and realia are often found in ESP course books today and are particularly prevalent in Commercial English). They can increase students' motivation and expose them to real language and culture as well as to the different genres of the professional community to which they aspire. Unlike simulated authentic materials, they must be constantly brought up-to-date. However, using authentic materials can be risky if the methodology is not carefully chosen because it is not always easy to use journals, magazines, documents from companies and other real sources, on a daily basis, especially with beginners. This may be due, amongst other things, to the difficulties presented by the language. In fact, such material will often have to be edited (and sometimes even discarded), in order for there to be a suitable match between learner and material learned. Fortunately, ESP learners are not typically beginners in the foreign language, and authentic materials usually provide a good setting for introducing roughly-tuned input in a comprehensible way. In this fashion, such activities as, for example, skimming for general meaning while keeping the affective filter low will be facilitated.

2. Differing Points of View

A brief review of some of the current literature on these and similar topics reveals some interesting, and sometimes conflicting, points. For example, Gilmore (2007:109) considers it is possible to adapt authentic texts to different language levels by constantly varying the tasks. Therefore, the ESP materials designer must have the ability to find authentic texts that fit the students' differing pedagogic needs, solutions to which can be implemented in the course syllabus. Mishan (2005:40) suggests that elementary level LSP (Language for Specific Purposes) students possess background knowledge, an expertise in their subject area that "enables them to cope with TL texts in their specialism which lay native speakers might have difficulty with." One could add that even the language teacher may find such texts difficult, especially if they lie outside a foreign language teacher's speciality. On the other hand, the majority of ESP students are usually more interested in the topic than in the form of language (Webener 2008:139). Lütke and Schwienhorst (2010) carried out a study and concluded that students "expressed more interest in vocational LSP rather than study-related LSP courses." Further, they suggested that "Law, Humanities, and Natural Sciences students (...) [in particular] favour study-related content while Economics and Mechanical Engineering students are more interested in job-related content." Camiciottoli states that an awareness of metadiscourse is also useful in helping ESP learners "with the difficult task of grasping the writer's stance when reading challenging authentic materials." (2003:29)

3. Authentic Materials in EAP: Pros and Cons

In the specific case of EAP, Flowerdew and Peacock (2001:182) find three arguments for and another three against authentic materials. In favour: non-authentic texts cannot represent real-world language use, simplified materials often lose some meaning and the real-world situations the learners will face are best prepared for with authentic texts. Against: any one authentic text may not be authentic for a specific class, just because a text is authentic does not mean it is relevant, and authentic texts are often too difficult linguistically. MacDonald, Badger and White (2000) consider the cons outweigh the pros, since relevant

authentic EAP texts are less motivating than interaction with a speaker, and live simulations of lectures of EAP instructors are more effective than recorded authentic lectures. Gilmore (2007:11) points out that “authentic material is likely to expose learners to a wider variety of grammatical and lexical features but with less frequency than contrived input specifically designed to highlight particular target language.” This makes it necessary to provide ESP students with a large number of authentic materials, many more in fact than the simulated-authentic texts usually studied in detail in language classrooms. This also necessitates a focus on content first, and on form afterwards. In any case, Safont and Esteve (2004) conducted a study that shows the beneficial effect of using authentic material in the EAP classroom, and this is in line with findings from previous studies.

4. ESP and Authentic Materials

In the area of Technical English, Claypole (2010:91) advocates a methodology that places emphasis on subject-matter and authentic, relevant materials while coining the acronym COLT (Content Oriented Language Teaching). According to Trappes-Lomax, authentic materials have currently been given “a new lease of life as a result of the impact (...) of corpus-based language teaching publications.” This happens because the texts on which this input is often based are produced in real contexts for authentic communicative purposes (2006:152).

Reppen (2010:4) highlights the fact that, in recent years, many ELT professionals have expressed a preference for authentic materials in their lessons, using language from natural texts instead of ready-made examples. In this sense, such corpora provide “a ready resource of natural, or authentic, texts for language learning.” ESP students may not be aware that they are using corpus-based products, but in fact they are. This happens when, for instance, they consult dictionaries like Collins Cobuild on CD-Rom which contains five million words of authentic texts from the Bank of English corpus (2010:101). When designing a special purpose corpus, in order to ensure that it contains authentic LSP material, Bowker and Pearson (2002:51) recommend that the author of each text should be an acknowledged subject-field expert. In this fashion, the introduction of authentic texts and materials from different genres of discourse in ESP has coincided with the psycho-pragmatic evolution of communicative approaches (Ruiz Madrid 2009:261).

Preparing authentic materials for use in the classroom can be very time-consuming. Osborne (2005:74) suggests that it is essential to have a clear purpose in mind as well as a personal approach that permits the adaptation of most authentic materials. Likewise, the ESP instructor must always incorporate authentic texts that are locally meaningful.

Sznajder (2001:390) further refines the definition of authentic materials in an ESP course by suggesting that authenticity “refers not only to the form, contents and the communicative goal of a text, but also and most importantly, to the purpose of reading.” House (2008:57) opens up the scope of authentic materials dividing them into two categories: materials which contain language and materials which stimulate the production of language. Pérez Cañado and Almagro Esteban (2005) first suggest evaluating the authenticity of ESP materials; then they elaborate a very complete checklist as part of their authenticity evaluation proposal for the area of Business English. The checklist includes headings such as: context and target situation; the student; the teacher; and contents, which include linguistic aspects, sociocultural aspects, notional-functional aspects, topics, organization and activities. Douglas (2002:72) further emphasizes the importance of authentic materials for LSP assessment by suggesting that “test developers can enrich the

contextual variables in their tests to exploit the richness of the authentic materials that characterize LSP tests.”

Wegener (2008:137) sees three functions that authentic texts serve in ESP courses: “First, inviting authentic materials from the learners’ work environment to the classroom the teacher offers assistance (...) Second, the ESP teacher always looks for texts that are as close to the learners’ target situations in their jobs as possible (...) Third, authentic texts serve as sources of information for the teacher and may already be collected during the needs analysis period.” Long (2007:121) is clear in his defence of authentic materials for, as he says, “texts in language teaching materials bear little resemblance to the genuine target discourse samples learners encounter in the world outside classrooms.” This means quite simply that “every study in which language teaching materials –even supposedly LSP materials- and genuine texts have been compared has found the former to be unrepresentative in important ways.”

Vaicuniene and Uzpaliene (2010:95) distinguish three broad categories of ESP authentic materials: daily objects such as business cards, bank leaflets, photographs, receipts, catalogues, currency, reports, financial statements, instructions, bank accounts, application forms, pictures, registration forms, letters/emails, diagrams, agreements, etc; broadcast texts such as newspapers, journals, TV and radio programmes, films, documentaries, general or special literature, etc; and websites. The internet is a wonderful and very much up to date source of authentic materials for LSP learners, “providing ESP practitioners with a diversity of ‘take-away formats’ (video, audio, pictures and texts)” (Bocanegra-Valle 2010:150) all of which are relevant to the students’ field of study. This combination of availability and relevance makes their learning process more meaningful (Arnó et al. 2006:252) and allows the students to access real-life input of specialist contents and genres while engaging them in tasks involving interaction with an authentic audience in a constantly up-to-the-minute environment which, due to its topicality, could never occur in a printed textbook. (Wegener 2008:139). The drawback is that, even online, authentic materials can become obsolete very quickly and the teacher will have to spend a lot of time finding new samples of authentic texts for ESP lessons which, in turn, will have a short exploitation period. Involving learners in the production of their own authentic materials can solve this problem especially when the students work in close cooperation with their teachers. When this happens, subject-experts can act as facilitators and consultants and their task will be to assist “the ESP teacher to select authentic texts and tasks” (Hyland 2007:399).

As an aside, it should be noted that although there is no one-to-one resemblance, connections between ESP and CLIL can easily be drawn (Dalton-Puffer 2007) for both are more closely related than is often realized (Carrió-Pastor et al. 2009). Even so, CLIL explicitly places a greater emphasis on the content than ESP (Bongartz et al. 2010) because in this case teachers have joint content and language expertise that ESP practitioners commonly lack (Smit 2010).

Richards (2007:94) makes an interesting observation regarding the fact that publishers are aware of the need for authentic materials in ESP, although this can only be applied to “front stage encounters” or front region behaviour, and not to “backstage encounters” in professional performance, backstage being defined as those unreserved moments where conventions of decorum in the front region are suspended, and which are not presented in commercial ESP materials, but left to the local practitioner.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, authentic materials are important tools for use in ESP classes for, as we have clearly shown, they motivate and immerse learners in specific areas of the target language in which practice is needed. As we have tried to demonstrate, authentic materials can be obtained from many different sources but there is a growing tendency to take them from the internet as teachers need to renew their materials constantly and to adapt them to the changing needs of students. Finally, it is important to point out that while ESP learners often have radically different levels and standards of language ability, the higher their level of language, the more will they profit from their learning process.

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