BENEFITS OF USING AUTHENTIC MATERIALS IN AN EST CLASS

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There are many references to authentic material in the EST literature containing thorough explanations of why it should or should not be included in lessons and how it is best exploited. And all these authors who support the use of authentic material share the idea of the benefit students get from being exposed to the language in authentic materials. We intend to highlight different ways of selecting appropriate and content rich material for an EST course.

1. DRAFTING THE CONCEPT OF AUTHENTIC MATERIAL

Parallel to the widespread increase of ESP (English for Specific Purposes), in our case EST (English for Science and Technology), there has been a rapid growth of the use of authentic material. There are many references to authentic materials in the ELT (English Language Teaching) literature. Books and journals contain thorough explanations of why it should or should not be included in the syllabus, and how it is to be used or best exploited. But before analyzing these aspects in more detail, let us make a review of what authors consider authentic material is.

Hammer (1991) defines authentic texts -either written or spoken- as those which are designed for native speakers; i.e. they are real texts created not for language students but for the speakers of the language in question. As for Nunan (1989), he considers authentic material as that which has not been specifically produced for the purposes of language teaching. Authentic, following Widowson (1990), refers to materials designed for native speakers of English used in the classroom in a way similar to the one they were was designed for. This author adds that, by supporting the use of authentic material, researchers reject the teaching material designed to highlight some selected structures that are often artificial and never representative of the use of the language in the real world. Finally, according to McDonough and Shaw (1993:43) authenticity can be described as "a term which loosely implies as close an approximation as possible to the world outside the classroom, in the selection both of language material and of the activities and methods used for practice in the classroom."

All these definitions are not very different from what we have inferred through our experience in the EST class. As we see it, university students regard authentic

material as that which is not present in a textbook, but which is found in different sources that are important to them for academic or professional purposes, e.g. printed material like books, manuals, specialized journals and magazines, or multimedia material such as Internet, TV, videos or DVD.

2. APPROACH

At the Polytechnic School of the University of Valladolid (Spain), Engineering Studies have been widening their scope from the most traditional specializations of Mechanics, Electricity, Electronics or Chemistry -currently applied to environmental matters- to the newest technologies such as Computing, Telecommunications and most recently Engineering Design. The English subject, for each degree, is an elective intensive 60- hour course. The number of students enrolled varies greatly and their knowledge of the English language is also heterogeneous. Thus, a great effort is needed on the part of the teacher in order to suitably program and accomplish the students' requirements in such a short period. As a consequence, every single branch of specialization has required the creation of tailor–made English courses. These courses may share the need to develop specific abilities within the skills of writing and speaking, but obviously the specific requirements of a chemical engineer, in terms of language development, have nothing to do with those of a design engineer -not even in terms of the terminology used.

As it is the case with all the areas of ESP, English has become an instrument of expression of the engineering knowledge. Therefore, to the student's eyes, this language has acquired a factual application. But even though students already know the language, they find that they have a gap in their knowledge of English for specific purposes. That is to say, to a certain extent, they are knowledgeable in the field of engineering and in the language but, within this context, they lack fluency and accuracy to use the English language.

When considering the materials to be exploited in this type of classes and for these precise needs, there are no textbooks that explicitly meet the requirements of any particular branch of engineering. There is also a lack of published materials which provide the specificity or in-depth information required at higher levels. On the other hand, authentic material has been demonstrated to essentially meet the students' needs within their scope, involving them in the real world of the English usage within the context of their studies and carrier objectives. Also, and with no doubt, the use of authentic materials in an EST University teaching environment becomes a *sine qua non* condition to catch the students' attention and interests.

The University is in itself part of the real world where knowledge and experience are being gathered. Therefore the situation in which the authentic materials are being used is authentic too. In this sense, the use in the EST class of

the information students are dealing with in other subjects or will use in their future professional careers will encourage them to apply their knowledge of English. The language will be employed as an instrument for the purpose of expressing themselves, as well as for gathering information; e.g. for the further completion of their degree, as a support in their final project work or in their future area of specialization. Thus the use of authentic material in the EST classroom should not be considered as a choice but as a need in itself; in some occasions it constitutes a useful model and in others it is considered as a very profitable source of information.

3. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF USING AUTHENTIC MATERIAL IN THE EST CLASSROOM

The use of authentic materials in an EST teaching environment, providing the methodology is carefully considered, is significant and highly recommended by a number of authors (e.g. Widdowson, 1979; Kelly et al, 2002). Let us point out some of the reasons why they are considered so beneficial.

To begin with, by being in contact with these materials, students are exposed to real discourse, as in the case of video tapes supplied with Personal Computers with explanations of how to set up the System. These materials can be used in class by asking the students to listen to them and requiring them to number the steps included in a diagram provided. Sources like these and many others, are very useful as class material as "authentic texts will include the type of language which the learner may need to be exposed to, to develop skills for understanding, and possibly even to produce." (Ellis & Johnson, 1994:157)

A second reason would be that these materials are instances of the particular register to which they belong, implying the use of appropriate terminology, expressions, grammar structures and tone, in other words, promoting language awareness. In fact, by using these sources, learners gain accuracy in the use of vocabulary and specific terminology to express technical concepts; this means handling specialized dictionaries, which are also sources of authentic material. Besides, students will have the opportunity of acquiring useful rhetorical functions, grammar applications -e.g. passive voice versus active voice, compound nouns versus noun strings, acronyms, abbreviations, false friends, connectives- and coherence and cohesion -transitional markers, references, substitution and ellipsis. They will also familiarize with the conventions and structure of information in their particular areas of interest, according to different types of documents. Hence, authentic texts may present learners opportunities to make generalizations -"a crucially important and pervading strategy in human learning" (Brown, 1994:91) -

about grammar, vocabulary and language usage, and observe how prior language usage knowledge may be employed or adapted in new circumstances.

Authentic material may also serve to prepare EST students for real target language communicative interaction. Even more, authentic materials reflect the changes produced in language, being both students and teacher updated of such changes, since as Ellis & Johnson indicate "the information conveyed is likely to be more accurate and to have high credibility, and will probably be more up-to-date" (Ellis & Johnson, 1994:158). As a consequence, authentic materials have a remarkable educational value since they keep students informed about what is happening in the world.

Further, the diversity of text types and language styles found in books, tapes, specialized journals, etc, is much broader than that found in most EST published teaching materials, and they also have a number of characteristics that are not usually present in invented materials. For our engineering students, we have realized that the advantage is that the academic-writing engineering style eases the comprehension, primarily because texts are well-structured and technical vocabulary from Latin roots is easily understood. Besides, normalization is one of the common features to all engineering branches, therefore it is also applicable to the use of English language in order to achieve accuracy and readability among other things.

Authentic materials can also produce a sense of achievement, for instance, when students realize that they can follow the instructions to carry out a specific laboratory experiment. This is an extremely positive fact since materials, no matter if they are authentic or published, should serve the process of learning rather than the goal (Kuo, 1993).

Finally, these authentic sources, especially if learners are asked to contribute to the selection of topics, may assist to the creation of a more positive attitude toward learning, since students are gaining knowledge of what really interests them and understand more and more of the authentic discourse. If, on an ongoing basis, students are encouraged to bring in materials -e.g. forms, manuals, memos, faxes, reports- to class, this will help the teacher plan useful and appropriate lessons apart from carrying out a very helpful needs analysis. As for the student, it will imply their further involvement in the learning process. So, as Little et al (1989) put it, the authentic texts are more likely to have acquisition-promoting content than invented or adapted texts since authentic texts focus on content rather than form.

The idea of using authentic materials in the EST classroom may sound very attractive, but it can also be rather problematic. In fact, there is an alternative approach to the one so far described, and a number of disadvantages of using authentic materials have been mentioned by different authors (Jordan, 1997; Wood, 1982...). These authors have the general idea that, if selected carefully, published materials can help to give a course structure and direction, precisely because of their predictability. But they also state that authentic materials, due to their specificity,

may be too culturally influenced and therefore hard to understand both by students and teachers. Also, the vocabulary may, in many instances, not be relevant to the student's immediate needs, and besides there is usually a great mixture of structures that can give students a hard time when trying to decode.

Some other facts posed against the usage of authentic materials have to do with the teacher rather than with the students. For instance, we as EST teachers, due to our humanistic background, may find it difficult to understand some of the contents, and will tend to select more general texts which are less interesting for students, not paying attention to their special needs. In addition, when using this type of discourse, special preparation is needed and this is extremely time consuming. Also "the danger exists that interesting-looking authentic materials are used in an uninteresting way because too much of the preparation time has been spent in looking for the materials and not enough in considering their exploitation" (Robinson, 1991:56), as well as in taking into account the audiovisual equipment or other means of presentation.

Donna's (2000) opinion is that authentic materials are not very reliable as sources of teaching material due to their lack of correctness, since such production may not be linguistically or rhetorically appropriate for the sake of communication, or as possible examples to be imitated by our students. In fact, students are not always aware that perfection does not on all occasions match reality, no matter whether it is printed or on the Web.

Finally, other hindrances are that this type of sources can become easily outdated as their life-span is not usually very long, or that students find it hard to understand these texts, when presented in a descontextualized form, since they cannot use the usual clues of a contextualized one.

4. SOURCES OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

There are many different sources of authentic materials which are at the disposal of the EST teacher, e.g. literature, computer software, media, etc. But selecting contents to work with is often a difficult task since teachers are to bear in mind concerns such as students' interests and availability of appropriate material. These learners are generally interested in topics that have to do with their present specialized studies and future professional careers, as it has already been stated. As for availability, in today's globalized world, there are plentiful sources and examples but it is a fact that the teacher often has a hard time finding and working with relevant material; besides, teachers realize that the content of their lessons must be meaningful and the activities engage the students to use the target language to communicate rather than just imitate.

Books and journal articles written by researchers in order to inform professionals of the latest advances in their specific field, or for study purposes, are

a very interesting source of authentic material. Of course, the teacher will have to pick single items such as a specific section, paragraph or diagram of the book or article, since otherwise it would be extremely time consuming when dealing with them in class. Also these materials should be picked in terms of their relevance and interest.

Teachers have at their disposal the WWW as a source of information where cross-cultural awareness plays an outstanding role in the exchange of information. In it there are large amounts of texts and sources which are often very useful but which have to be carefully selected so as to produce attractive and beneficial material. In working with the Web, it is important to design tasks in which meaning is central and not just have students reading any kind of information. In other words, what students are supposed to do with the given material is what often makes the difference.

Ads and TV commercials are specially valuable as sources of EST tasks since they are short and do not contain a great deal of redundancy. Brief, action-oriented commercials can increase understanding because there is sufficient visual support - e.g. body language, facial expressions or other non-verbal clues-which greatly help comprehension. As for ads, these can be exploited in many ways. For instance picking several ads and having students decide which of the jobs he or she could qualify for and why. Afterwards a role-play interview can be carried out.

Brochures are also very useful authentic materials. They are brief, specific and precise, with a great variety of applications; e.g. brochures about products or services may be used to help students design a new one containing specific technical information of a different product or service.

Manuals and written instructions are very typical sources of information for the future professional world of EST students, and are interesting to use in class since they are instances of instructional language sources, so common in the engineering environment.

Finally, specific software can also be used in class since it gives students opportunities to interact not only with the computer but with other students as well. This interaction is an important part of the learning process, and the use of software promotes computer literacy, which is very useful for EST learners.

5. CHOOSING AND DEVELOPING MATERIALS

There are several important aspects to keep in mind when selecting material to use in class. It is a fact that EST students need to develop their writing and reading skills more than they need to speak or listen. Therefore, in this section we will concentrate in the selection of materials for developing these two skills. Also, the teacher should be careful as to use updated materials, e.g. when using a brochure of an Expo, which includes prices or wages, such data should remain contemporary.

A good way of exploiting an authentic text is using discovery techniques to help students detect and process the different rhetorical structures. Learners should look at various examples of a specific type of text with different degrees of difficulty, and try to find similarities between them in how they are organized - information structure, rhetorical devices, or even language patterns, such as paragraphing. This should help the learners to detect if they see a resemblance in structure; it is also important to talk with the students about what they are discovering and how texts are organized depending on the genre they belong to.

Authentic writing from books, journals, manuals, etc.., can be used in class analyzing the model with the teacher's help, pointing out macro organization -e.g., the purpose of each paragraph- and the micro organization -the structures used to convey the message. Together, the class can develop a list of useful structures for stating opinions, degrees of agreeing/disagreeing, showing contradiction, cause and effect, hypothesizing, etc. Sentence starters or "restatements" should also be emphasized.

It is a fact that poor writing is often a result of the student not being able to synthesize all the input of "parts" received in class, with what they read, the ideas to be conveyed, cultural factors that shape it all, and the purpose for writing. To help with synthesis, teachers should use a variety of techniques in exploiting authentic texts-e.g. direct and indirect, highly structured exercises. And of course, students need to have access to level-appropriate interesting materials for reading. It is hard to imagine a good writer who does not enjoy a good read.

As for the tasks directed to develop reading skills, pre-reading activities such as brainstorming or asking questions are essential for centering students in what they are about to read. Once learners have read the text they should be asked three types of questions that range from initial easy questions which make them feel confident about the task, to more complex and demanding ones. The first type are easy multiple choice or fill-in factual questions; these questions expose students to a variety of question types gaining also an overview of the material they are working with. The second type of questions are those that can be used to bring attention to cultural differences or personal choice. Within the third group, there are those questions that are more challenging and time consuming. By answering these, students often begin to compare their progress to that of their neighbours, and also, since these questions take more time, they permit slower students to catch up with the rest.

Vocabulary is also a very important aspect which should be considered when exploiting authentic texts. Mastering a good vocabulary will help students with every aspect of communication; it will improve their reading and listening comprehension and will enable them to speak and write better. It will also help them succeed in any profession. When they first study a language, they learn everyday words that are repeated so often that they soon become part of their permanent vocabulary. However, after they have acquired a basic vocabulary, there

is always a decline in vocabulary growth rate. Reading and speaking the language will increase their fluency but will not automatically increase their vocabulary, since the words they are learning appear less frequently and are thus more difficult to remember. At this stage of language development, they must make a special effort to acquire new words, and the use of authentic materials is an indispensable way of helping them in this effort.

The tasks are expected to be interesting and stimulating enough to catch the learners' attention and make them aware of something new. The aim of these exercises, in terms of linguistic proficiency, is that the English produced by students is functional as a communicative tool. The teacher should give a brief explanation and point out the importance of the different sections of the text, as well as draw the attention to small print and other parts of the material that are easily missed.

Finally, as for the organization of the tasks, having students work in pairs is a better approach than making them work individually, because in small groups they tend to be more enthusiastic and work harder. Also, usually the student with the stronger command of English is not necessarily the one who is able to extract the most information from the material. In fact, students of different abilities tend to complement one another.

6. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed some aspects of the use of authentic materials in the EST classroom. Those who support the use of authentic material do so since they reject the teaching materials designed to highlight some selected structures which often are artificial and never representative of the use of language in the real world. Our point has been that using authentic materials complements English classes, helping to bring the real world into the classroom, enlivening it and creating a more positive attitude toward learning.

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