

The Advantages of Authentic Materials in the ESP/ EFL Classroom: Newspapers

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Abstract

The paper is divided into two main parts, i.e. a theoretical and an applicative one. The first part deals with the theoretical background of authentic materials, focusing especially on newspapers. In order words, this section presents different kinds of authentic materials and discusses the importance and the consequences of using authentic materials in the ESP class, with a special focus on the advantages of using newspapers as an aid during the ESP classes. The second part consists of an experimental case study, in which we taught the same language or grammar structures to a control group (by traditional methods) and to an experimental group (by “the newspaper method”, i.e. teaching based on newspapers). The results of our experiment highlight the efficiency and even the necessity of using authentic materials (especially newspapers) in the modern ESP classroom.

Key words: authentic materials, newspapers, ESP, experiment, teaching

J.E.L. classification: K00

1. Introduction

Newspapers have been part of our lives ever since the early 17th century, when written periodicals took the place of hand-written newssheets. They have been an economical and accessible source of information and that is why schools started to use them.

Having in view that newspapers display a wide variety of styles, fonts and shapes and that they debate/ present a great range of subjects, pieces of news and all sorts of information accompanied by pictures, illustrations, drawings, crosswords, and they are a valuable resource for teaching. Americans have implemented the *Newspaper in Education* system since 1930, considering the newspaper as a “living textbook” and the program has been extended to other countries, too.

The need for using newspapers in an English language classroom appeared as a necessity that education should become the accurate mirror of a changing society and that the new methods of teaching a foreign language should accompany or replace the old ones. Since authentic materials have taken the place of literary texts in the English textbooks, we believe that the authentic language used in newspapers can provide students with a wide range of both vocabulary and grammar structures needed to improve their skills. In addition, the topics discussed in articles may be of great interest to the students (see Cook, 1981). As far as the four basic skills are concerned, newspapers can be successfully exploited in the English classroom by asking the students to read an article and then solve some text-based tasks which should check their understanding, by writing tasks that could stem from a newspaper article, by listening to an authentic interview and then discussing it (Grundy, 1993).

Moreover, in order to pass prestigious examinations such as Cambridge and IELTS, students are required to deal with newspaper articles in order to prove their reading skills, while in the writing section they are asked to produce functional texts such as articles, reports, proposals, reviews or letters (see Mehta, 2010). Therefore, by being constantly exposed to such types of materials,

students should be able to develop their capacity of coping with materials designed for native speakers, regardless of their degree of difficulty. In addition, there are more and more students who choose to study abroad and the contact with authentic materials in English classes might be an important help in getting them acquainted with new environments, cultures and mentalities presented in authentic materials.

2. Theoretical background: the advantages and disadvantages of using newspapers in the English classroom

Newspapers can be used as authentic materials, dealing with a wide variety of themes/ subjects, from different fields, such as economics, politics, social life, entertainment, etc., representing thus a precious and "renewable" source of vocabulary and grammatical items and structures. In addition, since articles may be written in different styles, they can be an excellent example of formal, semi-formal and informal style (see Aiex, 1988). In order to analyze the broader picture, more light should be shed on authentic materials in general and on newspapers in particular.

Nowadays, the emphasis is put on whether the language used in such materials sounds partly or entirely authentic, and on whether students are likely to hear or read it in real situations. Thus, the term authentic could mean anything a native speaker hears or reads, such as newspapers, magazines, leaflets, time tables, programs, etc. Consequently, not being designed for EFL students, the authentic materials may differ in the degree of difficulty and accessibility and that is why they require a careful selection on the behalf of the teacher in accordance with the purpose of the lesson. Moreover, the same piece of material may be used for different levels because it is not the text the one which should be altered, but the task should be designed so that it should meet the requirements and necessities of the students.

According to Gebhard (1996), authentic materials can be broadly classified into audio (Authentic Listening-Viewing Materials), visual (Authentic Visual Materials) and printed materials (Authentic Printed Materials). In addition to these three categories, Gebhard also includes realia (real-life objects). Speaking of audio materials, Maroko (2010, pp. 71-87) groups them into three main categories which involve "television programming including commercials, quiz shows, interactive talk shows, cartoons, news, and weather forecast reports"; "radio programming", such as "interviews, interactive talk shows, and radio advertisements"; the third category refers to "taped conversations, including one-sided telephone conversations, meetings, short stories, poems and novels". In his turn, Gebhard's (1996, pp. 103-104) list includes: "silent films, TV commercials, quiz shows, cartoons, news, comedy shows, dramas, movies and soap operas; radio news, dramas and adds". The third category of authentic materials is represented by authentic printed materials, which, according to the same above-mentioned author, include:

"newspaper articles, cartoons, advertisements (...), astrology columns, sports reports (...), advice columns; travel magazines, science, math, and history books; short stories, novels; books of photographs, lyrics to (...) songs; restaurant menus, street signs, postcards, currency, cereal boxes, candy wrappers, tourist information brochures and tourist guidebooks; university catalogs; department store catalogues; telephone books; world, city and relief maps; TV guides, driver's licenses; comic books; greeting cards; business cards; bank checks and deposit forms; grocery coupons; hotel registration forms" (Gebhard, 1996, pp. 103-104).

When taking into consideration the use of a certain piece of authentic material in the ESP classroom, teachers should take into consideration the advantages and disadvantages of employing such materials and design the lesson carefully so that the disadvantages should not outweigh the advantages.

As far as advantages are concerned, one of the most important aspects is that the students are not only exposed to real discourse but as Martinez (2002) suggests, teachers often use authentic materials for students to listen or read for the gist. Furthermore, they may also benefit from the information contained by the material which has thus an intrinsic educational value. In addition, if the material is interesting from the students' point of view, it may encourage reading for pleasure if it is a text or it may encourage the student to look for further information on the subject. Furthermore, if we are to speak of newspapers, the teacher should take into consideration the novelty of information and catch the students' attention with the latest articles in the field of their

interest. Also, authentic texts may increase motivation as "they are proof that the language is used for real-life purposes by real people" (Nuttall, 1996, p.172).

The variety of texts found in newspapers, books, magazines may be written in styles that are not to be found in textbooks. Moreover, language being a continuously changing system, students may become aware of such changes. Also, being able to decipher an authentic material gives the student the motivation that would make him a better learner. Speaking of newspapers, Heitler (2005, p. 6) states that the more students read articles from a specific field, the more acquainted they become with the vocabulary associated with the field in question and that would enable them to measure their own progress. "Authentic materials from a particular source, such as *The Economist*, tend to work in consistent areas of language, so, after a while, students who practice reading *The Economist* will become experts in reading English language business publications". An advantage for the teacher would be that the same piece of material may be used in more than one occasion and with students of different levels if the task is properly designed and requires different things on behalf of the students such as practicing mini-skills and macro-skills. For example, a newspaper article may be used with students in an advanced class for scanning and skimming and with students in an intermediate class for identifying and underlining different parts of speech.

When being taught language or grammar, students are more likely to remember a new language structure or a grammar issue if it was encountered in a context they found interesting. In addition, students may understand better the target culture if they encounter authentic materials that describe important social and cultural issues. For instance, the teacher could bring them a travel brochure instead of artificial texts with travel vocabulary and ask the students to book hotel rooms, flights, etc. Moreover, the teacher might ask students to access online newspapers, such as *Financial Times*, *The Economist* or *The Guardian*, read together certain interesting articles or news and discuss them in the class (for instance, an article about a country's intention to ban diesel cars might trigger discussions about the influence of this decision on the country's economy and society). Another activity might consist in the discussion of certain idiomatic expressions from the economic field that are often encountered in articles about the stock market, banks, employment, strikes (see Leonte and Istrate-Macarov, 2016).

The unknown words may be deduced from the context and once the meaning has been established, the students may take part in a communicative exercise such as a role play in which they could imagine different situations, such as a booking scene, a board meeting, a telephone conversation between a customer and an employee or between two business partners (see Maruntelu, 2006). In this way, besides acquiring new vocabulary, students are exposed to situations they may encounter in real life based on an authentic material. Also, by using authentic materials, such as newspaper and magazine articles and even songs, the teacher may create a friendly environment that could make the student feel at ease and thus acquire new language without being aware of the learning process.

Moreover, one of the greatest advantages of authentic materials is that they are relatively inexpensive and readily available. An internet search may provide the teacher with the necessary material, but, nevertheless, the material needs extra time for selection and adaptation. To conclude, teaching with authentic materials could be helpful, motivating, imaginative, amusing, relaxing and stimulating.

One of the most important disadvantages of using authentic materials is the degree of difficulty which, according to Harmer (1983), may lead to the impossibility of attaining the teaching goals: being better readers, better listeners, acquiring language, obtaining success. "Demoralization would undermine the very reasons for giving students reading and listening material" (Harmer, 1983, p. 186). Speaking of newspapers, the difficulty may come with the concise titles, abbreviations and specific vocabulary employed by the journalistic style.

Kilickaya (2004) admits that selecting authentic materials may not be an easy task for teachers, as they may contain difficult vocabulary and structures which need more effort to be simplified and explained, in order to make them appropriate for their learners. Moreover, it would be a time consuming activity (Kilickaya, 2004).

Authentic materials may contain culturally-bound words and notions that are difficult to comprehend for someone who is not part of the language community and therefore the students might be burdened with unnecessary vocabulary which might not be relevant for their immediate needs.

In case of employing mass media materials, teachers should be aware of the fact that the information presented might be out of date and therefore present little or no interest to students, thus the information presented in the material might be totally irrelevant.

When it comes to listening, using authentic materials that display speakers with different accents and rhythms of speech might often be confusing for students and it would discourage them rather than make them benefit from experiencing a variety of pronunciation models.

Therefore, the counterarguments are: the degree of difficulty (for both students, in terms of vocabulary and notions, and teachers when it comes to choosing and preparing the material), the amount of effort and time allotted to designing class activities, the degree of actuality and also its suitability for EFL students.

3. Methodology

Our research aims at presenting evidence to the following questions: To what extent does the use of newspapers articles during ESP seminars improve the learning and the teaching process? Are the students more receptive when the teacher uses newspapers articles in the ESP seminar? Is this method more efficient in teaching ESP than the traditional methods? In order to answer these questions, we conducted an experiment.

This case study aims at establishing whether the method of using newspaper articles in teaching EFL is as efficient as the traditional way of teaching and whether the new method provides the students with a better understanding of certain language elements and structures. The learners that we selected study English as L1 at the Faculty of Economic Sciences; they have the same number of English classes, i.e. one English seminar every two weeks. For experimental purposes, two groups of students were taught the same lesson, i.e. "*Reported Speech*" (reporting affirmative sentences, questions and other speech acts, such as orders, pieces of advice, exclamations, greetings, etc.; discussing the changes involved by the reported speech in terms of pronouns, word order, tenses, time and place expressions), but using different teaching methods and aids.

The most important instrument of measuring the findings is a test paper applied to all the students in the experiment, which can provide the researcher with the necessary data. The test consists of four subjects, which were designed to test students' understanding of the reported speech.

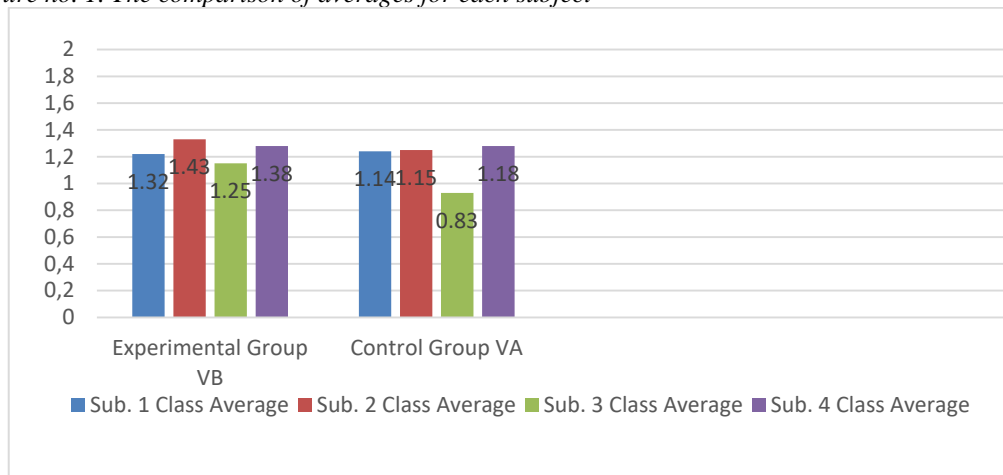
We selected two groups with presumably the same knowledge, background and age. The two groups were taught the new lesson differently. The first group, i.e. the experimental group, took part in the experiment, being taught the new lesson with the aid of newspaper articles, while the students in the control group were taught the new lesson in a traditional manner. In order to check the level of understanding of the two groups, the students were given the same test paper which would establish the results of the experiment. The test aimed at assessing students' knowledge related to the use of the reported speech and consisted of four exercises with objective and semi-objective items.

The first exercise asked students to complete each sentence with words from the box. The aim of the exercise was to test students' understanding of reporting verbs. The second exercise asked students to underline the correct word in each sentence and its aim was also to check students' understanding of the way tenses are used in the reported speech. The third exercise asked students to choose the most suitable word or phrase for each space and the purpose of this exercise was to check students' acquisition of the transformations involved by the switch from the direct speech to the reported speech in terms of pronouns, word order and time and place expressions. The fourth exercise asked students to correct each sentence or question and it was the most difficult one as it required students' attention and thorough knowledge.

4. Findings

As far as the experimental group is concerned, the students' average grade was 8.68; the lowest grade was 6.30 while the highest was 9.90. The control group obtained an average grade of 8.22; the lowest grade was 6.10 and the highest was 9.60 points. The following three figures illustrate the average grade of each subject for both the experimental and control group (see Figure 1 and Figure 2) and a comparative view of the class average for each group (see Figure 3).

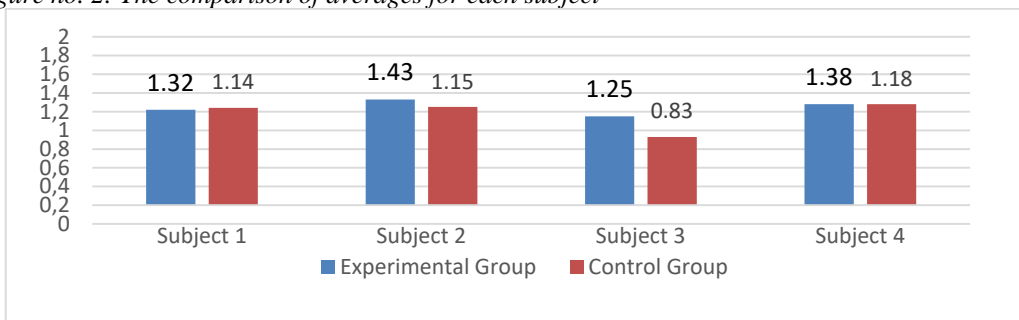
Figure no. 1. The comparison of averages for each subject



Source: the authors' own processing

Figures 1 and 2 show that, as far as the first subject is concerned, the average of the control group was by 0.18 points higher than the one obtained by the experimental group. On the other hand, the average grades obtained by the experimental group at the second and the third exercise were by 0.28, respectively 0.42 points higher than those obtained by the control group. As for the fourth subject, the same average grade obtained by the experimental group was by 0.2 points higher. Consequently, the third subject proved to be the most difficult for the control group as they obtained an average of 0.83 points out of 2 points while their best results were in the fourth subject; the lowest difference between the two groups in terms of average was recorded in the first subject, i.e. 0.18 points. On the other hand, the experimental group had the worst result in the third subject, too, but their average was higher than the others' and they managed to overtake the control group in all four subjects.

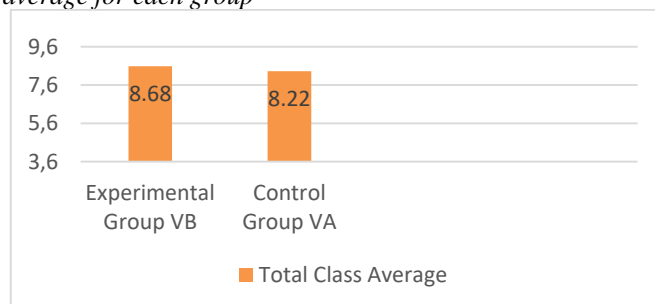
Figure no. 2: The comparison of averages for each subject



Source: the authors' own processing

Figure 3 shows that the experimental group got the average grade of 8.68, while the control group obtained the average grade of 8.22. Consequently, the results of the two groups do not differ significantly; however, the experimental group's results are better than those of the control group, which proves that the experimental method managed to effectively improve the students' understanding, being a valuable alternative to the traditional way of teaching. Moreover, the students reacted positively to the new technique, finding it interesting and entertaining.

Figure no. 3. Class average for each group



Source: the authors' own processing

Overall, most of the students managed to handle the reporting verbs well but the use of tenses in the reported speech, in relation to the tense of the reporting verb and to the type of the speech act (i.e. affirmative sentence, questions, orders, pieces of advice, exclamations, greetings, etc.) should be reinforced for some of them. However, all the students learnt the necessary grammar structures, but some of them encountered difficulties in identifying the correct tense.

5. Conclusions

The use of newspapers during English classes offers the students the possibility to get in contact with 'the real world' through the means of 'real language', eliminating the idea of artificial language or artificial articles created for specific language or grammar purposes. In addition, this method actually contributes to the development of the four main skills as the students read an article, talk about it, listen to other opinions and finally write about it.

As it was shown in the case study, the students in the experimental group found the use of newspaper articles exciting and it helped them understand the new lesson as well as or even better than the ones in the control group. Thus, the newspapers method proved to be effective and pleasant. Furthermore, with the advent of technology, students can use the computer or the smart phone to read newspaper articles, saving time, money and paper. In conclusion, the use of newspaper articles during English classes is a useful, interesting and effective method which grabs students' attention and provides the teacher with countless possibilities of designing interesting activities.

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