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Vocabulary Acquisition for Future Nursing Staff: authenticity in the classroom

Abstract

Research suggests that many ESL teachers either modify or supplement the set textbooks they use in class, or develop their own materials for classroom use. Indeed, in recent years, the internet in particular has opened up a rich and at times perhaps baffling array of resources for those ESL practitioners who wish to incorporate authentic materials into their teaching. While the benefits of authentic materials are well-documented, their use is, however, not entirely unproblematic, and as research into the field of material (authentic or otherwise) development grows, this raises a number of issues as to the form these materials should take and how they can best be employed. This article presents a set of vocabulary building activities for future nursing staff; these activities are in use at the Faculty of Health Sciences in Maribor. The article explains the rationale behind them in light of the theoretical framework of language acquisition that underpins them.

Keywords: ESL teachers, vocabulary acquisition, authentic materials, trainee nurses, theoretical framework.

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is often described as the cornerstone of language learning (Lewis, 1993). Without vocabulary, learners would be unable to form the simplest of utterances, and therefore unable to communicate at even the most basic level. Vocabulary acquisition is therefore often prioritised in the learning process by students and teachers (Knight, 1994). Those learning English for a specific purpose could be seen as facing a dual challenge: not only are they expected to display a solid command of “general”

language, but they must also acquire a set of specific terminology for use in their chosen field. In the case of our students at the Faculty of Health Sciences in Maribor, learners are expected to attain the Common European Framework level B1/B2¹ and demonstrate a knowledge of professional vocabulary in key areas of nursing. The specific aims of the English course they undertake are discussed later in this paper.

There are a number of well-documented ways in which English language learners (ESP or otherwise) can acquire vocabulary. For example, Tumolo (2007) points out the effectiveness of reading as a vocabulary building task (for ESP learners, of course, field-related topics are of particular interest), especially when accompanied by tasks such as note-taking (Mohseni-Far, 2007), while the use of dictionaries and glossaries, both in their traditional print form and in on-line versions, can be extremely useful tools in this regard (Hunt and Beglar, 2005). As methods vary, so does the location of learning. Vocabulary focused exercises are a staple of the language classroom, yet, as reflected by the demands of the Bologna programme, learning that takes place outside the walls of the classroom is being increasingly recognised and rewarded, in the form of tasks based on language learning portfolios, self-access materials, etc.

As approaches to vocabulary acquisition and language learning in general diversify, in terms of methods and location as described above, the nature of classroom materials designed for that purpose has also changed, with increasing emphasis being placed on the notion of authenticity. This paper addresses some of the main questions relating to authenticity in the language classroom, pinpointing the salient benefits of authentic materials and tasks, highlighting some of the considerations for teachers and, finally, reflecting on our experience of creating and implementing authentic materials for vocabulary acquisition according to Tomlinson's (2010a) framework.

2. Authenticity in meeting learners' needs

A number of factors can be seen as having contributed to the increased focus on authentic materials (and indeed authentic tasks) within language teaching/learning. Firstly, the need for authenticity can be seen as a response to two major shifts in recent teaching practice: authentic materials complement the communicative approach (Byram, 1991) and also help meet the need to equip learners with life-long learning skills, another of the key aims of the Bologna programme (Bocanegra Valle, 2008). Secondly, authentic materials are considered beneficial by both ESL learners and practitioners alike; in many respects such materials are seen as a bridge between the classroom and the "real" world outside. This is certainly reflected in the notion of language exposure; teachers can expose learners to what is often referred to as "real" discourse, the target language as it is spoken and written outside the

¹ For a full description of CEF levels, see http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf

classroom walls (generally richer in type, style and variety than the edited language of the textbook). According to Guariento and Morley (2001), this exposure should not only result in increased receptive competence on the part of the learner but also link the learner with a wider community who speak that language, somehow bringing the language to life. Authentic materials also tend to be seen as somehow culturally richer, making them ideal for exploitation in the intercultural language classroom², while teachers may choose to tailor or create the materials they employ to reflect or respond to events in the outside world or their students' particular interests or tastes. Considering these factors, it is perhaps not surprising that learners are more motivated by authentic materials. Research by Richards (2001) suggests that learners find them intrinsically more interesting and motivating than created materials.

3. Authenticity: some considerations

Nevertheless, while authentic materials undoubtedly bring the kind of benefits described previously to both second language learner and teacher, their use is not entirely unproblematic, and the teacher who wishes to incorporate them into their teaching repertoire must consider a number of issues.

3.1. How do we define authenticity in the classroom?

First of all, what is authenticity? The notion of what is meant by "authentic" is open to some interpretation, and its definitions therefore vary widely. Some authors see authenticity more narrowly, restricting their definition to the source of the teaching materials: therefore, anything that is not directly intended for pedagogical purposes. Richards (2001) suggests that authenticity can be brought into the classroom through realia, basing language learning tasks and materials on videos or photographs, for example. Tomlinson (2003) argues that, in material development, authentic materials can provide the learner with exposure to texts in which language is used typically. Others give broader accounts, incorporating notions of the learner's relationship to the materials and to the language learning process in general. Breen (1985), for example, suggests that authenticity can actually be achieved as part of the communication process within the classroom. According to him, it is the very act of negotiation itself that is authentic (e.g., learners discussing in pairs or groups how they prefer to work, which tasks they would like to carry out and in which order). Others see authenticity as being rooted, especially in textbooks, in the presentation of what is realistic, and of people who are credible and recognisable as real human beings. Byram and Esarte-Sarries (1991) identify the need for the personality of the individual depicted in materials to ring true, alongside other more global factors,

² See Čebrown (2008) for an excellent range of intercultural exercises aimed specifically at Slovene learners.

such as their socio-economic status, the social environment in which they function, and their geographical and historical location.

3.2. Whose authenticity do we adopt?

An increasingly pressing question in considering authenticity is the matter of whose authenticity we should select. As Crystal (2003) indicates, most English speakers are not native speakers, and within the native speaker category, there are numerous varieties. One other commonly cited consideration in using authentic materials is the level of difficulty they may present to students. The richness of language described by Tomlinson above is, of course, inherently more challenging than the carefully edited language of the textbook. Richards (2001) describes how both the students and teachers in lower-level classes may feel overwhelmed by the difficulty posed by some aspects of authentic texts (e.g., unnecessary vocabulary items).

3.3. Underpinning practice with theory

However, the issues outlined above may be regarded as part of a much broader issue pertaining to material production in general. Although research indicates that many teachers already either, as Samuda (2005: 235) puts it, "re-design" materials by "tweaking, adjusting and adapting," or design their own materials entirely, the field of material production has been somewhat neglected until now in language teaching literature and teacher training curricula. Indeed, as Harwood (2010) suggests, producing materials has been regarded as something that teachers generally learn how to do incidentally and not as something that has needed to be addressed by theory. As Tomlinson (2010) points out, the result of this is that, to a large extent, materials have been developed and governed by what is effective in teaching. Thus materials, whether created for textbook or individual use, could be rendered much more effective if they were more receptive to the research on second language acquisition.

4. Aims of Tomlinson's framework for material preparation

In order to begin bridging the gap between theory and practice, Tomlinson (2010a) has drawn up a framework for material development that aims to synthesise the most important principles of second language acquisition into practical guidelines. He argues that these principles and guidelines can and should act as a reference for textbook writers and teachers in the preparation of materials (both authentic and created). Specifically, the framework aims to produce better quality materials by focusing on four key questions: the relevance of the language to which the learners

are exposed; the meaningfulness of the tasks and activities for the learners they serve; the extent to which the materials engage the learners in the learning process; the presence of opportunities for communication.

In our case, the framework was applied to materials created for use with nursing students at the Faculty of Health Sciences in Maribor. In the first year of study, students are offered English as an elective course; in the second year, language becomes obligatory (a choice is given between English and German). As previously described, our learners are expected to obtain CEF level B1/B2, with an added requirement of specific nursing vocabulary. While these learners' questionnaires display a certain pragmatism in regard to foreign language learning (an understanding that knowledge of a foreign language is just something you have to acquire), the same questionnaires reveal a distinct lack of enthusiasm on the learners' part, a reaction which will be discussed in greater detail later.

4.1. Implementation and effectiveness of the framework

4.1.1. Principle of language acquisition 1

"A pre-requisite for language acquisition is that the learners are exposed to a rich, meaningful, and comprehensible input of language in use." (Tomlinson 2010a: 73)

The first principle concerns the language input that materials should contain in order to be effective. Tomlinson (2010b) elaborates on this issue by suggesting that learners need to be exposed to and build up experience of variety – of the language itself and of the purpose of that language. The notions of "meaningful" and "rich" language described above have been guiding factors in the selection and creation of the materials for nursing students. Classroom experience and student feedback indicate that students at the Faculty of Health Sciences tend to regard learning English as a foreign language (especially English for special purposes) as low on their list of priorities; many are happy to admit that they enrolled simply to study nursing and that they view their foreign language learning as something of a burden. Motivating our learners is therefore challenging at times, and it seems of even more vital importance for our learners (and perhaps other ESP learners) to feel that the language tasks and materials we select and prepare for them have some kind of immediate utility, or in other words, that they are pragmatically meaningful for them. To that end, the materials and tasks we select and prepare are firmly guided by the real-life situations our students can expect to face in their future careers and in which they may be expected to use English. The resources we draw upon have a distinctly medical tone: medical journals, clips from YouTube, real-life medical dramas and series, newspaper articles, as well as a growing selection of appropriate textbooks, etc. These selections are exploited to support the aims of their English courses, partly dictated by the demands of their work-practice, during which they are expected to master the following:

- patient-nurse communication (being able to admit and discharge a patient, explain complicated medical vocabulary in layman terms, put a patient at ease or allay anxiety in a patient by being able to use active listening strategies, make empathetic responses, give advice sensitively, soften a request, deal appropriately with aggressive behavior, etc),
- doctor/nurse-nurse communication (being able to understand and use specific medical vocabulary, give handovers, explain patient condition, ask for clarification and/or advice, read charts and reports, work as part of a team, check medication orders for accuracy, pass on instructions to colleagues, attend meetings, etc),
- telephone skills (being able to receive and give patient information, check understanding, contact other staff/doctors/patients/family members, refer a patient, etc).

Feedback questionnaires conducted at the end of the course asked students to reflect on the tasks and activities they had undertaken; many of our learners responded favourably to the fact that their materials dealt with “real-life” situations, either those they had already encountered as part of their nursing practice or situations they felt they would encounter during their careers. This observation was also supported by some of the learners’ in-class responses, with comments such as: *Someone said something similar to me; Yes, I remember, the same happened to me during my practical work.* In some cases, the learners stated that the activities had even encouraged them to reflect on their professional responsibilities: one student commented that watching *House* allowed him/her not just to form an opinion on *House*’s (unacceptable) handling of a patient’s relatives but to anticipate how he/she might react in a similar situation and anticipate issues accordingly.

The other issue connected to this principle is that of “rich” language. Nursing students seem to have had less exposure to the type of variety of language referred to above. This may be partly a result of their schooling, or it could also be attributed to their reluctance to engage in English language activities outside the classroom. The result of this is perhaps best seen in an informal comparison with students studying English at the Faculty of Arts in Maribor: their humanities counterparts³ are more likely to actively use their English beyond formal learning situations and are better versed in the varieties of language use and purposes previously described. Therefore, the materials and tasks for use in the nursing courses must also address this deficiency, drawing on as wide a variety of Englishes, registers, situations as possible. One of the other hopes is that students will be stimulated by the use of authentic materials from resources and sources they recognize to continue their language development outside the classroom walls.

³ Questionnaires completed by English students at the Faculty of Arts point to a number of ways in which they use English outside the classroom: they are more likely to travel to English-speaking countries; to write, read and listen to music and watch movies (perhaps to compare the subtitles with what the characters are saying, or practice spelling, or watch movies without subtitles to practice their listening skills).

4.1.2. Principle of Language Acquisition 2

"In order for the learners to maximise their exposure to language in use they need to be engaged both affectively and cognitively in the language experience." (Tomlinson 2010a: 74)

Tomlinson (2010b) suggests that students need to engage with the materials they are using in the classroom and that, as they carry out activities, they should be thinking and feeling, even if those emotions are negative. In this regard, acquiring vocabulary through watching medical dramas has proven to be extremely effective. The medical drama *Nurse Jackie*, an American series on Showtime, (where the main heroine, Jackie Peyton, is an emergency room nurse, fighting her own drug addiction, working in the ER, and juggling married and family life with an affair with a pharmacist just to maintain open access to the drugs she needs) serves up a rich diet of moral dilemmas to which our students are extremely responsive. There are three main aims of the exercises described below: a) to acquire target medical vocabulary b) to practice complex grammatical structures, such as the conditional and modals c) to discuss ethical issues and dilemmas.

- **Situation One:** As nurse Zoey helps a child in respiratory arrest before the doctor arrives, only to save his life, the students are faced with the dilemma of what to do in such situations, how they would react, whether they would do the same in a similar situation, etc.
Target vocabulary: expressions associated with breathing: e.g., *respiratory system, respiratory arrest, to intubate, tracheotomy*, etc.
Accompanying grammar practice (conditionals): discuss in pairs what you would do in this situation. What should Zoey have done?
- **Situation Two:** Nurse Jackie suggests the use of illegal drugs (marijuana) to a terminally ill patient who is experiencing extreme nausea, vomiting and pain. None of the acceptable medications has worked (helped) so far. Even though she is warned not to, Nurse Jackie insists on helping the patient outside the hospital, obtaining and helping him ingest marijuana.
Target vocabulary: structures for describing/eliciting symptoms: e.g. *nausea, vomiting, How long have you been feeling this way? Where do you have pain?*
Accompanying grammar practice (past simple/present perfect/present perfect continuous and further practice with conditionals): role-play between doctor and patient eliciting, discussing symptoms; pair discussion of Nurse Jackie's actions.

The follow-up activities in class (role-play and discussion) suggest that the task is effective in engaging learners. In class discussion, students comment that the story line may seem outlandish, but that they can relate to the moral dilemma Jackie faces (and accept that they could also be party to or responsible for making difficult decisions in their personal and professional lives). The eagerness with which learners share their opinions on Jackie's behavior and the fact that their opinions are so varied is perhaps also indicative of their level of engagement. As they report back from their pair work, some describe themselves as "shocked" that she would consider breaking the law, or that she would become so close to a patient that she would visit him at home. Others think her "foolish" to suggest breaking the law in the

presence of the doctor, while many report that they “understand” Jackie, as she is simply supporting a dying patient.

4.1.3. Principle of Language Acquisition 3

“Language learners who achieve positive affect are much more likely to achieve communicative competence than those who do not.” (Tomlinson 2010 a: 75).

Tomlinson (2010b) emphasizes the importance of positivity with this principle. In effect, he argues that students need to feel positive about the language they are learning, their learning situation and the materials they are using to achieve their goals. This is rather a challenging issue, since nursing students tend to suffer from low motivation in regard to their language learning; creating “meaningful” materials and tasks is vitally important in engaging them in the learning process. Offering tasks and topics that are of interest to learners is key in achieving positive affect, yet it would be unrealistic to expect to be able to appeal to all learners in such large classes (the average class size is over 80 regular students). However, one step towards addressing this issue is allowing the learners some degree of control over classroom activities. This can be implemented to a smaller degree through suggestions for suitable topics or materials, or to a larger degree in allowing students control over the curriculum through needs assessment.

In our classes, students are given the opportunity to prepare and present short seminar papers, preferably with Power Point. There are no limits on topic choice, which is central to the success of the exercise. Although many students are reluctant to carry out oral presentations in front of their peers (through lack of practice or lack of motivation), the free choice of topic results in learners selecting a topic they either simply like, or something of which they have experience, perhaps through a work situation (titles have included *The Role of the Nurse in the Intensive Care Unit; Scrub Nurses in Orthopaedics; Nurses and Hospital Hygiene*), or something they have first-hand knowledge of (experience of personal or family medical issues), such as *Patients and Their Families - Coping with Disease; Types of Diabetes and Their Treatment; A Comparison of the American and Slovene Healthcare Systems*). Importantly, students are asked to prepare hand-outs with relevant vocabulary terms; the items of vocabulary they select are then used in the assessment process (final class exam). Results from their exams indicate that students are very successful in retaining the vocabulary items they have presented in this way.

Moreover, selecting the topic is empowering in the sense that students have some control over learning materials, they feel comfortable discussing a familiar topic while carrying out a task they perceive to be difficult, often performing better than they expected in the process. This feeling of self-esteem is also consolidated by the feedback from teacher and students. Instead of focusing on the inevitable grammar and vocab difficulties, questions are aimed at testing knowledge of the topic instead, strengthening the atmosphere of a positive learning environment.

4.1.4. Principle of Language Acquisition 4

"Language learners can benefit from noticing salient features of the input." (Tomlinson 2010a: 76)

The emphasis of this principle here is placed on guiding learners to make their own discoveries and observations about the target vocabulary. The concept of noticing, according to theories of second language acquisition, is the first step in acquiring vocabulary: the process of language acquisition involves learners "noticing" or becoming aware of features of language input that will eventually be synthesized into implicit knowledge.⁴ Tomlinson (2010b) argues that incorporating noticing into our materials will make learners much more aware of language and receptive to its acquisition. Of particular use in this regard are texts from specialized publications, such as the *Nursing Times*, or health/medical related articles from English-language newspapers (such as *the Guardian* or *Sunday Times*).

In an example text from the *Nursing Times*, entitled "Using a Range of Interventions to Prevent Falls in Hospital", the students are first asked to respond to the title of the article and consider what they know of the issue (Who is likely to be discussed? What is meant by interventions?) and what they expect to read about in the body of the text. After discussing the content of the article, students are then asked to reflect on the language, with some guidance from the teacher. The first step of the vocabulary activities based on this particular text is to ask the students to identify the terms they recognize. Students usually respond that the language is challenging but that they do see some lexical items similar to Slovene terms, since the text contains a rich seam of topic-related vocabulary concerning hospitals and conditions/illnesses with Latin roots. Students asked if *delirium*, *osteoporosis*, *incontinence* and *physiotherapy* had the same meaning as the similar terms in Slovene, and if so, how the English items should be pronounced. An obvious and straightforward follow-up strategy is to ask the students to look for other terms that follow this pattern (Slovene ending -ija / English ending -y) and to develop awareness of false friends (for example, the difference between angina (Eng. heart condition) and angina (Slo. throat infection)).

4.1.5. Principle of Language Acquisition 5

"Learners need opportunities to use language to try to achieve communicative purposes." (Tomlinson 2010a: 76)

The focus of this principle is on allowing students to use the language they have acquired, but with particular emphasis on *interacting*. By being engaged in communicative activities, learners must master a variety of micro-skills, such as elaborating, responding, eliciting or clarifying. Students respond very favourably to the medical series *House*. Part of the character's appeal is his obnoxious attitude to

⁴ For a much more comprehensive account of the noticing concept, see Ellis (1997) and Schmidt (1990).

patients and co-workers; this is also fertile ground for us to exploit in the classroom through dialogues and role-plays.

The following task provides an example of such an activity. Students watch an excerpt from the 2006 series (3.9: *Finding Judas*). House has suggested a course of treatment to deal with a six-year old, but the parents are reluctant to agree. House addresses their concerns: "Sorry, didn't know you wanted your kid dead. Although for a couple of G's, I can still make it happen."

At this point, the students are asked to respond to House's statement and to find more appropriate phrases, which they can then use with their partners in a role-play task: (*I'm afraid I have some bad news ...*, *Would you like to sit down? ...*, *Is there anything I can do to help you? ...*) to interact with the patients, where the focus is on simpler language rather than complicated medical vocabulary (*carpus-wrist*, *patella – kneecap*, *inguinal swelling – a lump in the groin*, *diuretics – water tablets*, *bronchodilator – a substance which causes the airways to open up*, etc.), explaining procedures in layman terms (*thoracotomy – surgical opening of the chest cavity to inspect or operate on the heart, lungs, etc.*, *mastectomy – surgical removal of the breast*, *subcutaneous – beneath the skin surface*, etc.), expressing empathy (*I understand how you feel ...*, *I'm sure it hurts, but it won't be long ...*, *We're doing our best to help you ...*, etc.).

As with the previous activities featuring Nurse Jackie, the character of House is an excellent tool in engaging the students. Their in-class comments reveal how shocked they are by his inappropriate language, and while many students believe that no doctor in Slovenia would address a patient in this way, the activity effectively emphasises the importance of communication and sensitivity, in particular. Again, learners see a connection between classroom materials and real life, recognising that as nurses, they will often act as a bridge between patients, doctors and administrative staff. Both of these factors provide concrete motivation for students to practise communication skills.

5. Conclusion

Our experience of using authentic materials and tasks with students of nursing, in accordance with the systematic framework developed by Tomlinson, conforms to the general findings within the wider research on the issue. From the teaching perspective, we recognize the benefits of introducing and exposing students to the variety of language and purposes embodied in authentic materials and tasks. While from the students' point of view, the materials have been evaluated by them in end-of-semester questionnaires as motivating and interesting, even if their comments still betray a certain reticence. One student comments that the materials based on watching make the lessons "not so boring". Others have responded to the thought-provoking nature of their tasks, with one of the learners commenting: "Dr. House's

attitude is not realistic, it is overreacted but it still makes you think about how you would react in similar (difficult) situations". Often, learners react positively to the relevance of the tasks and activities, commenting on their usefulness "because we write and talk about things we are familiar with". Coupled with their responses, their performance in assessed tasks also indicates that the materials have been effective in aiding students to acquire the vocabulary required of them in our courses. Overall, we can say that the experience of implementing Tomlinson's framework has been positive for us (as teachers) and our students; we hope now to enhance our understanding of material development with further research into some of the issues we have encountered.

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