



How Do Updated Localized Materials Affect Students' Study Level and Perceptions in a Discipline-specific English Course?

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Abstract

The present study investigated the effect of updated localized materials on the English language achievement of undergraduate students of Political Science in their English for specific purposes (ESP) courses in Iran. Sixty-five male and female undergraduate students (19-26 years old) from two universities in Iran participated in this study. They were divided into two intact classes consisting of 32 and 33 students, respectively, as the experimental and control group. After ascertaining their homogeneity, conducting the pretest, and doing the treatment, which included exposing the experimental group to authentic updated materials, both groups took the posttest. The results of statistical analysis indicated that the use of localized materials enhanced the achievement scores of the participants in the experimental group significantly. The data was triangulated through an attitude questionnaire and interview. The findings could have pedagogical implications for ESP learners and instructors.

Keywords: English for specific purposes (ESP), Localized material, Updated material

INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is an umbrella term that refers to the “teaching of English to students learning the language for a particular work or study-related reason” (Tomlinson, 2003, p. 307). ESP emerged to address the specific needs of the learners in the context of academic settings. According to Robinson (1991), ESP is considered as one of the major activities in education around the world. Richards and Rogers

(2001) consider ESP as one of the subfields of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP). They define LSP as:

“a movement that seeks to serve the language needs of learners who need language in order to carry out specific roles (e.g., student, engineer, technician, nurse) and who thus need to acquire content and real-world skills through the medium of a second language rather than

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master the language for its own sake” (p. 207).

Need analysis and material development for ESP

Needs analysis is the main underlying principle in terms of designing materials in ESP courses. Hyland (2006, p. 73) defines needs analysis as the techniques for collecting and assessing information relevant to design of a course. This is closely in line with Nunan (1988) who considers needs analysis as a family of procedures for gathering information about learners and about communication tasks to use in syllabus design. In fact, needs analysis plays a role in establishing means of both how and what of a course. Due to the integral role played by needs analysis, Mackay and Palmer (1981) believe that the specific learning and language use purposes of identified groups of students must always be considered when designing a course of language learning. The corollary drawn from this is that because of the immediate relevance of ESP courses to their jobs, ESP learners know specifically why they are learning a language and as Hutchinson and Waters (1992) state it, it is this awareness of learners needs that ESP courses are associated with. Thus, they see students’ needs analysis as a key point in the development of an ESP course. In fact, that is why this approach of language learning is student-centered, i.e. due to the importance of identification and consideration of learners' needs in ESP, Hutchinson and Waters (1992) consider it as an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learners' reason for learning. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), needs analysis relates to the identifying general and specific learners’ needs that can be addressed in developing goals, objectives, and content in a language program. A closely related matter to needs analysis is the authentic materials selected with the intention to address those needs optimally and is closely associated with ESP.

Authentic material in ESP

Some scholars (e.g. Berardo, 2006) have considered authenticity of the materials important as a feature in ESP methodology. Authentic materials, therefore, constitute an aspect traditionally emphasized in the ESP literature. The rationale for the prominence of authentic material is that inauthentic published materials cannot meet learners' needs, which are regarded as the *sine qua non* in ESP. These authentic materials should be based on real life situations and should not be only for pedagogical purposes. 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. Sznajder (2001) asserts that authenticity refers not only to the form, contents and the communicative goal of a text, but also to the purpose of reading. Based on these criteria, authentic materials seem to serve the purpose because as Trappes-Lomax (2006) puts, they are often based on real contexts and used for authentic communicative purposes. This inherent feature of authentic materials enable students and teachers to be able to use them 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, 2008). It is important to bear in mind that the concept of relevant context must be made central in teaching ESP, 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. An important point to remember is that the authentic materials do not automatically lead to authentic or superior responses, but their effect is mediated by the increase in the students’ motivation.

Culture and material development

Scholars in the field of English education such as Chastain (1988), and Stern (1992) emphasize the significance of culture in language pedagogy and material development. These scholars believe that culture and language are inseparably bound

and as Kramersch (1994) puts it, culture and language constitute a single universe or domain of experience. Sumaryono and Ortiz (2004) assert that English language learners could become invisible in the mainstream classroom or even disconnect from the learning process if the teachers do not display sensitivity towards their cultural identity. Because of this, learners' cultural identity might be marginalized if they are exposed to materials, which solely focus on the culture of the target language and leave the learners' native culture unnoticed. Therefore, it is postulated that locally authentic materials can be considered as important tools for use in ESP classes and can encourage the motivation and engagement of learners in specific areas of the target language in which practice is needed.

Based on what was mentioned above a program was designed to investigate the integration of materials that contain a degree of updated localization. These materials are affected by learners' daily lives in Iran and these were interesting topics for political students such as; sanctions, nuclear case of Iran, which people from various occupations have touched. Therefore, the present study intended to address the following research questions:

1. Does implementation of ESP course books for political science courses with updated localized material have any significant effect on achievement scores (study level) of political science students?
2. What are the attitudes of political science students regarding the implementation of ESP course books with updated localized material?

METHODS

Participants

The participants of the present study included 65 undergraduate Iranian ESP learners studying political Science from two well-known universities (ShahidBeheshti and AllamehTabatabaei) in Tehran, Iran. All of them were Persian native speakers with varying socio-economic status from both genders. Their age ranged from 19 to 26. Prior to

the main phase of the study, thirty other students with the same characteristics of the main participants had been asked to attend in a pilot study.

Instrumentations

Preliminary English test (PET)

PET consists of the four parts of reading and writing (paper 1), listening (paper 2), and speaking (paper 3). Further information on this well-known international test can be found in Cambridge website at <http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams/preliminary/>. Prior to administration, this test was piloted on 30 learners having similar characteristics to the participants of the study and Cronbach's Alpha was calculated to be 0.704 which is a satisfactory index of reliability.

Achievement Test

Another instrument used in this study was a researchers-devised political science achievement test. It contained 40 items based on their course book 'English for the students of political science' by Davarpanah (2006). Three Teaching English as Foreign Language (TEFL) teachers who had about 10 years of experience validated this test and its reliability was measured through test-retest procedures. To assure the internal consistency of the test, it was piloted on 30 participants having the same characteristics as the participants of this study. The Cronbach alpha was .78, which is an acceptable reliability value (Brown, 2007).

Attitude Questionnaire

This questionnaire consisted of 20 items tapping the participants' perceptions towards updated localized material in ESP courses for political science. These aspects were identified by reviewing the related literature. The questionnaire employed a 5-point scale for participants to indicate their answers in Lickert scale. After developing the first draft of the questionnaire on students' attitudes towards updated localized material in ESP courses for political science, in order to assure its appropriateness in the current research context, it was piloted twice. The first pilot dealt

mainly with the issue of clarity and comprehensibility of the items and the second pilot investigated the improvement of the questionnaire due to the changes made in the first piloting in terms of consistency and reliability. The internal consistency of the questionnaire in the pilot using Cronbach alpha was 0.710 which is an acceptable reliability value.

Interview

Ten Participants were also invited for a follow up interview session. The interview sessions took about thirty minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded after getting the verbal consent from the students. To preserve students anonymity and confidentiality researchers used pseudonyms while data analysis.

Procedure of the study

Sixty-five students were divided into experimental (32 students) and control group (33 students). The students were given a brief, informative oral overview of the nature and purpose of the study before implementing the study. First, the PET was administered to both groups to ascertain their level of language proficiency.

In the experimental group, instead of working on the course book determined by the department, the students were asked to study the authentic localized texts provided based on political science. The topics and cultural information contained in such texts provided by the researchers addressed political topics of the day chosen from national newspapers and websites. The formats of the exercises preceding and following each localized and authentic reading comprehension text were kept identical to the mainstream course books so that the researchers could attribute the probable different results in the post-tests to the sole effect of the localized authentic material. Apart from the differences mentioned above between the material the participants were exposed in the experimental and the control group, the classroom activities were the same for both

groups. This included advanced organizer prior to the reading and comprehending text, which involved answering some warm-up questions about the text either in pairs or in the groups of three. The important point and difference, which was revealed at this stage, was that in the experimental group the participants took more time to answer and discuss the questions than the control group, a point that can be attributed to the relevant and interesting topics. Other classroom activities such as using dictionary, the amount of time for reading, skimming and scanning, pair work or group work and strategy instruction were kept the same. Utmost care was taken ensure that even the number of words in each passage and the difficulty level to remain the same as much as possible. The only point of departure was the topic of the reading passage, hence the variable of interest.

At the end of the instruction period, both experimental and control group sat the posttest to investigate the possible effectiveness of incorporation of authentic localized material. The whole treatment period took 12 sessions. Each session took about one and half hours and researchers spent 45 minutes on the treatment each session.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Homogenizing the participants in two Groups in Terms of Language Proficiency

To ensure that there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups in the study in terms of their overall language proficiency, PET was administered to the two groups and an independent samples t-test was run on the scores. Table 1 below illustrates the descriptive statistics including the number of participants, minimum and maximum scores obtained on PET for the control and experimental groups. The skewness statistics are .307 and -.312, which are within plus/minus 1.96 indicating the normality of distribution.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of PET Scores for the Experimental and Control Groups

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
							SE		SE
Control Group PET	33	18.00	35.00	33.12	7.056	.307	1.22	.002	.897
Experimental PET	32	14.00	37.00	32.37	5.987	-.312	1.05	-.041	.987
Valid N (listwise)	32								

Table 2 below illustrates the results of independent samples t-test run on the PET scores of

the experimental and the control groups prior to the main study.

Table 2
Independent samples T-test Results on the PET Scores of the Experimental and Control Groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	PET Scores	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Experimental and Control	Equal variances assumed	.32	.57	-.45	63	.64	-.74	1.62	-3.99	2.50
	Equal vari- ances not assumed			-.46	61.92	.64	-.74	1.62	-3.98	2.49

As Table 2 indicates, the level of significance equals .64, which was higher than the confidence level of 0.05 leading to the conclusion that the two groups were not significantly different in terms of overall language proficiency prior to the main study.

Results of the Pretest

Prior to starting the experiment, the researchers

administered a pre-test based on the course book to the experimental and the control groups. The results were used to make sure that the two groups were not significantly different in terms of their ESP scores before the treatment. Table 3 below shows the number of participants, the minimum and maximum scores, mean scores, skewness, and Kurtosis statistics obtained on the pre-test for the control and experimental groups.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of Achievement Pretest Scores for the Experimental and Control Groups

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
							SE		SE
Control Group Pretest	33	17.00	34.00	24.42	4.00	.204	.409	.00	.79
Experimental group Pretest	32	12.00	34.00	23.18	5.14	-.42	.41	-.02	.80
Valid N (listwise)	32								

As shown in Table 3, the skewness statistics are .409 and -.42, which are within plus/minus 1.96 indicating the normality of distribution.

Table 4 displays the results of independent samples t-test run on the pretest scores of the experimental and control groups and the relevant statistical details.

Table 4

Independent samples T-test Results on the Achievement Pretest Scores of the Experimental and Control Groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper	
Pretest Experimental and Control groups	Equal variances assumed	1.70	.19	1.08	63	.28	1.23	1.14	-1.04	3.51
	Equal variances not assumed			1.07	58.56	.28	1.23	1.14	-1.05	3.53

As it can be seen in above, Table 4 the level of significance is .28, which is higher than the confidence level of 0.05 leading to the conclusion that the two groups were not significantly different in terms of their performance on the pretest. Upon making sure that the two groups were homogeneous in terms of overall language proficiency as well as their performance on the pretest, after administering the treatment, the posttest was given to the participants the results of which were drawn upon to explore the first research question.

Examining the first research questions

The first research question investigated the implementation of ESP updated localized course books for political science courses and their effect on achievement scores (study level) of political science students. To examine this question, an independent samples t-test was run on the posttest scores of the participants in the control and experimental group. Tables 5 and 6 below demonstrate the descriptive statistics and the results of independent samples t-test for posttest scores. Table 5 illustrates the number of participants, the minimum and maximum scores, mean, and skewness and Kurtosis statistics.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics of Achievement Posttest Scores for the Experimental and Control Groups

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness statistics		Kurtosis statistic	
						SE	SE	SE	SE
Control Group Post test	33	18.00	34.00	24.69	3.66	.447	.40	.260	.79
Experimental Group Posttest	32	14.00	38.00	27.15	5.47	-.407	.414	.49	.80
Valid N (listwise)	32								

As shown in Table 5, the skewness statistics are .447 and .414, which are within plus/minus 1.96 indicating the normality of distribution.

Table 6 also shows the results of independent

samples t-test run on the posttest scores of the experimental and control groups and the relevant statistical details.

Table 6

Independent samples T-test Results on the Achievement Posttest Scores of the Experimental and Control Groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower		Upper
Posttest Experimental and Control	Equal variances assumed	4.40	.040	-2.13	63	.037	-2.45	1.15	-4.76	-.15
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.12	53.98	.038	-2.45	1.15	-4.78	-.135

As Table 6 indicates the level of significance is .03, which is lower than the confidence level of 0.05 proving that the two groups were significantly different in terms of their performance on the posttest. Moreover, as Table 5 displays the mean of the posttest scores for the experimental group (27.15) is higher than that of the control group (24.69). Therefore, the implementation of ESP updated localized course books for political science courses has a significant effect on achievement scores (study level) of political science students.

Examining the second research question

This study also sought to explore the attitudes of the participants towards implementation of ESP course books for political science courses with updated localized material. To this end, an attitude questionnaire and data from semi-structured interviews were used. To further investigate the second research question and gain more insights in terms of learners' attitudes towards localized materials, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 10 participants. To this end, five open-ended questions were developed based on the attitudes of learners towards localized

materials questionnaire and interview sessions were conducted subsequently. The respondents' answers to the questions were transcribed and the emerging themes were double checked thoroughly by all the researchers in an attempt to discover any recurrent themes. To have a comprehensive picture and in-depth analysis of students' attitude towards using localized updated material, the results will be presented in integrated manner.

The first point-sought learners' attitude was the points about the challenging nature of localized updated materials. Learners seem to have positive attitude about this point, but the degree is not impressive (including strong and mere agreement) 55% agreed on this, which indicates rather an ambivalent attitude. Based on the interview result, the cause of this ambivalence might be "learners' unfamiliarity with these type of materials" and the fact that they are exposed to "original materials", as stated by one of the respondents, from the early stage of language learning. The same ambivalence can be observed in other areas too: fifty percent of the learners agreed on positive effect of localized updated material on teamwork and cooperative (again including strong or mere agreement). Based on

the interview data, this is partly due to the point that "teachers teaching these materials did not opt for cooperative learning in the first place". If they did, the students are speculated to have more positive attitude on this point. Fifty one percent of the learners agreed that they wanted to have these materials in the future. This can be indication of their interest and preference for these materials compared to the mainstream course books because "they are more tangible for them due to selection of relevant topics". From another perspective, the mere 50% of agreement in this regard can show general apathy on the part of the other half for whom ESP is only of the "general and only tangentially relevant to their field of study". Usefulness of these materials on vocabulary learning had more agreement rate (56%). Those participants who were interviewed confirmed this by stating, "the most tangible part of these localized updated materials is the vocabulary section" which seems logical due to the significance of vocabulary in general and to ESP in particular. However, as far as motivation is concerned, although 50% agreement might seem low and contrary to our expectation; if the general low motivation level on the part of learners is concerned as confirmed by the interviewees, one can see that it is quite acceptable for a newly launched materials. These statistics shed light on the significant result obtained in the quantitative part, indicating that one should not consider quantitative result conclusive and comprehensive because some valuable information is lost if qualitative data is not taken into account.

Even less rosy picture appears with other points in the questionnaire. Less than half of the learners (37%) agreed (including strong and mere agreement) on the point that localized updated materials made a lot of differences in learning outcome. Similar result can be seen on the positive effect of these materials on the integration of vocabulary and grammar (with 38% agreement), the main reason expressed for this low rate "no interest in grammar" which rallies against the high rate of agreement on usefulness of these materials in learning vocabulary. The low rate of

agreement on the effect of using these materials on reducing anxiety (32% agreement) is point worthy of taking into account. It seems that despite the fact that the quantitative results show the supremacy of using localized update materials, in-depth analysis via the interview shows that it goes more to reducing anxiety than the mere quantitative statistics. I.e. "little relevance is there between the topic of the lesson and anxiety level" as stated by a respondent, which makes sense, since teachers' management strategies and rapport play more important role in this regard. Easily understandable status of localized updated materials and exercise had the agreement rate of 38%, which is explained by "the low proficiency level of most of no-EFL learners at university from which political students are not an exception". The low agreement rate in improving learners' willingness to participate in the classroom (30% agreement) indicates that only localized updated material "cannot be enough and integration of other factors seems to be necessary in this regard". A point, which is difficult to explain, is the one related to the interesting and exciting nature of these materials with the agreement rate of 40%. It can be argued on the ground that these materials was used for the first time and more time as well as more cooperation is required to implement these materials with high level of agreement on the part of learners.

CONCLUSION

The results of statistical analysis indicated that the use of localized materials significantly enhanced the achievement scores of the participants in the experimental group. Concerning the attitudes of the participants towards the use of localized materials, it was found out that the quantitative result must be interpreted with caution even though considerable agreement rate could be observed towards the use of localized updated materials. Theoretically, this goes in line with the principle of particularity propagated by Kumaraivelu (2001) based on which, language pedagogy, to be relevant, must be sensitive to specific characteristics and features of a particular group

of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in a particular socio-cultural milieu. Due to the nature of ESP, which by nature, should be functional, it seems using localized updated materials in ESP classes is an endeavor to reach more alignment in this regard and by the same token meet one of the important features of post-method era.

The findings of the present study are supported partly by Zangani (2009) who evaluated ESP textbooks in Humanity used in undergraduate program at Iranian universities. The factors to be considered in this evaluation were favorability of the textbook. The results indicated that students thought of word formation and vocabulary exercises, vocabulary examples, and reading and comprehension questions ineffective because they were not regarded to be in line with students' needs. Similarly, Baleghizadeh and Rahimi (2011) in an investigation conducted on the book entitled 'English for the Students of Sociology: Social Science Texts', made efforts to evaluate the overall pedagogical value and suitability of the book for its intended purposes. Although the book was found to have some merits; similar to the finding of Zangani, the book was not very suitable for its intended educational objectives. These findings seem to be in line with the qualitative findings of the present study which shows only partial positive attitude towards the points mentioned.

As far as learning vocabulary in ESP materials is concerned, another support in Amirian and Tavakoli (2009) investigated the requirements of the courses to see if this would fit the job-related language objectives of the students. The study revealed the university books under scrutiny were successful in establishing background knowledge technical vocabulary items and reading proficiency of that specific field of study. The second result found out was the fact that university books cannot fulfill all the language needs of the perspective engineers. This can be interpreted to be in line with the attitude expressed by some of the respondents and interviewees in the present study

in pointing out the challenging nature of updated localized materials. It seems logical to stipulate that no materials alone, be it mainstream or updated localized materials, can obviate the bulk of difficulty experienced by most of the EFL learners due to their low language proficiency.

The acceptable level of EFL learners' positive motivation about updated localized materials can be accounted for on the ground of authenticity of these materials for a key notion behind the use of authentic materials in the classroom is to "expose" the learner to maximum amount of 'real' language. Although the classroom is not a 'real-life' setting, authentic materials are of central importance to it. Authentic materials also give the reader the opportunity to gain real information and know what is going on in the world around them. Most of the times, they have something to say, either giving information or a review. In addition, they create a sense of accomplishment for the reader. Gaining real information from a real text in a new or different language could be very motivating, therefore enhancing students' motivation for learning by exposing them to 'real' language (Paltridge, 2001). In the same line, Otte (2006) and Thanajaro, (2000), for example, observe that learners' self-satisfaction and motivation improved after using authentic texts in the classroom. Guariento and Morely (2001) also consider that authentic materials help motivate students learn the language by giving them a feeling that they are learning the real language.

Learners' boosted motivation, though negligible apparently but significant in the prevalent education ambience, in the present study, gains support from Hyland (2003) stating that one of the most significant benefits of using authentic materials is that it enhances learners' motivation and creates a positive environment for the learning process. In other words, students learn the language better when teachers use authentic materials as a teaching aid. Moreover, the authentic materials are useful in developing learners' reading skills. In the absence of authentic materials, while exposing learners to EFL situations, it is

not easy to predict the way learners' performance in the real situations. Several reasons for using authentic materials in the classroom are offered by Tirth and Peacock (1997 as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The reasons include: (1) they prepare students for real life, as it was its case in the present study in which all of the texts in the experimental study were selected from tangible issues in learners' own environment, (2) they meet learners' needs, (3) they affect learners' motivation positively, and (4) they offer authentic information regarding culture. Therefore, authentic materials assist learners realize the relationship between the language offered in the classroom and the language practiced in real world situations.

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