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THE AUTHENTICITY OF BUSINESS SIMULATIONS IN ESP: IMPLICATIONS FOR MATERIALS DESIGN

**ABSTRACT**

In this article we set out how authentic materials for a performance appraisal simulation help MBA students—both full-time and professionals—to acquire the linguistic and management skills that they will need to carry out a practical business task. The simulation was designed for a course in Management Communication that has been taught as part of the MBA course at the University of Antwerp Management School (UAMS) and the Executive MBA courses at the University of Warsaw and the Institute of Business Studies in Moscow. The design of these materials will be explained with reference to the notion of authenticity. For the purpose of this article we shall be considering the material in terms of four aspects of authenticity: text, task, pedagogical, and learner. We demonstrate the fact that because this simulation is designed to mirror a “real world” task, it provides students with the opportunity to practice and to receive tailor-made feedback on relevant managerial and linguistic skills that they will require in their business careers. Firstly, text authenticity is insured because the materials are slightly adapted versions of “real world” documents. Secondly, task authenticity is built into the materials because the tasks of completing appraisal forms and then doing the simulation are as close as possible to “real world” activities. They also involve the use of interpersonal communication skills that are transferable from the classroom to a business environment. Thirdly, pedagogical authenticity is guaranteed because students receive formative feedback on their business writing when they complete the appraisal forms and, by monitoring the learner’s performance during the appraisal interview itself and giving feedback afterwards, constructive criticism is provided concerning their use of appropriate managerial communicative strategies. This insures that the learner is facilitated in his or her attempts to become proficient in dealing with this particular genre of business interaction. Significantly, instructor feedback
not only covers linguistic criteria but also the students’ application of current management theories concerning the conduct of appraisal interviews. Finally, positive feedback from full-time students, and students already in the working world, has demonstrated that they recognized the “payoff” of such materials. This, then, validates the materials from the perspective of learner authenticity. In sum, a simulation can constitute part of the instructor’s repertoire for insuring text, task, pedagogical, and learner authenticity. Authentic materials are thus an excellent device for providing MBA students with the managerial and linguistic tools that are an essential part of any business executive’s portfolio of skills.

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of a global economy, an excellent command of English has become an essential part of a business graduate’s portfolio of skills. One of the many challenges for the materials designer is to write simulations that will enable today’s business students to acquire the requisite communicative competence necessary to carry out practical, business-related tasks in English after graduation. Communicative competence can be broadly defined as the acquisition of linguistic and socio-pragmatic skills that a student needs in order to communicate effectively in a given speech event. More specifically, in the domain of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), communicative competence also includes communicative strategies that are part of a manager’s repertoire of “people skills.”

The notion of communicative competence thus includes, for example, expectations and knowledge of how a manager should talk to colleagues, superiors, and subordinates with differing status and roles, what register and nonverbal behaviors are appropriate in various situations, or when to interrupt or remain silent. In short, the notion of communicative competence includes knowledge of the social/managerial conventions which regulate the use of language in a particular context. Moreover, an ability to use these skills becomes even more important for non-native speakers of English who are, or will be, operating in environments that may be culturally and linguistically foreign. In view of this, it is necessary to investigate both the linguistic and managerial needs of the modern non-native executive and to base course materials on these needs. In this article we set out how this has been done with regard to a business simulation of an appraisal interview designed for the course in management communication aimed at non-native speakers of English and taught as part of the MBA program at the University of Antwerp Management School (UAMS) and the executive
MBA courses at the University of Warsaw and the Institute of Business Studies in Moscow. The design of these materials will be explained with reference to the notion of authenticity. For the purpose of this article we shall be considering the material in terms text, task, pedagogical, and learner authenticity (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Schematic Representation of Authentic Materials Design

AUTHENTIC SIMULATIONS

A simulation requires students to participate in a “real life” situation in the classroom. Rather than acting out a role that has been allotted to them (as in a role-play) they react to the situation as they would in “real life” (Harmer 1991: 132). Simulations have four main pedagogical arguments in their favor.

Firstly, they require students to draw on their personal experience and knowledge to perform the task. This allows them to bring their own skills, background, and personality to the activity. In this way, learning is made more meaningful and motivating. This is especially important to students in executive MBA programs who can draw on their own work experience to make the exercise more relevant to them and to practice and receive tailor-made feedback on their linguistic and management skills in a supportive learning environment.

Secondly, the language that the students use must be appropriate to the social context of the simulation. In other words, not only must the non-native speaker of English have grammatical, textual, and phonetic competence, but their English in use must display sensitivity to, and cultural awareness of, the “norms” of workplace interaction. Misunderstanding and poor communication in a cross-cultural business environment are due less to inaccurate grammatical use than to limited awareness of lexical appropriateness, register, or politeness. For example, Gumperz (1992) illustrates how a misinterpretation of culturally based contextualization cues¹

¹ Contextualization cues can be defined as the way in which speakers signal, and listeners interpret, what “is going on in interaction” and how the utterance is to be understood. They can be paralinguistic, prosodic, or verbal. If the cues are misinterpreted, this can lead to crosstalk (see Gumperz 1979).
can easily lead to misunderstanding in a job interview, and Holmes and Stubbe (2003) demonstrate how different politeness strategies are employed to “get things done at work,” depending on the context of a request. Simulations provide students with a safe and familiar environment in which to practice such socio-pragmatic linguistic skills.

Thirdly, because the work of the manager is often achieved through oral communication, a simulation also allows the students to practice communicative strategies that embody “good” business practice.

Finally, a simulation casts the instructor in the role of facilitator so that he or she can monitor the students’ use of communicative strategies that take account of the task-specific nature of the interaction and their overall managerial skills in order to provide individualized feedback based on their performance and needs.

THE MATERIALS—A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The materials discussed in this article (see Appendix 1) were designed to enable the students to participate in a performance appraisal in English from the perspective of either appraiser or appraisee. The choice of theme was based on informal discussions with members of one of the PLATO teams of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Antwerp, Belgium. PLATO is an initiative organized by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry to bring directors of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SME) together on a monthly basis to learn from, and support, each other in a structured manner by inviting outside speakers from consulting companies to discuss a topic defined as important by the SME entrepreneurs themselves. Topics for 2003–2005 have included job interviews, appraisal interviews, and negotiations. Members of PLATO who were surveyed suggested that although many larger organizations now operate a formal performance appraisal system, in smaller enterprises in particular appraisals are often regarded with mixed feelings by both the interviewee and the line manager who conducts them. There was no doubt in the minds of those consulted that such interviews rarely satisfy both parties, not least because of the conflicting goals involved and possibilities for misunderstanding and communicative breakdown.

Both sides in an appraisal need to prepare the interview thoroughly and to clarify objectives. Moreover, in addition to general interviewing techniques, the manager needs to develop people skills particular to appraisals, such as active listening, displaying empathy, and being nonjudgmental. Since appraisal and the giving of feedback on work performance has such an
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important role to play in improving work and team efficiency, it is essential for a manager to develop his or her abilities in this domain. Furthermore, the scope for linguistic and cross-cultural inappropriateness in a stressful situation is exacerbated by the fact that the graduate may be called upon to participate in an appraisal interview in English rather than in his or her native language. This, therefore, makes the need for practicing such skills in English even more crucial.

TEXT AUTHENTICITY

Authentic texts, either written or spoken, are “those which are designed for native speakers: they are ‘real’ texts, designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language in question” (Harmer 1991: 185). This appears unproblematic for the materials designer, given the ease of access to a wide range of documents in English. While such an observation may be true in many cases, in the business world gaining access to a company’s documentation can be a sensitive issue. Furthermore, once permission to use genuine documents has been gained, the materials designer should still exercise discretion. There are a number of caveats regarding the use of genuine texts as teaching materials. The first concerns copyright, which prevents the publishing of such material without permission. The second concerns relevance because, since each company has its own culture and jargon, students may not possess the background knowledge necessary to complete a company-specific appraisal form. As a result, a compromise has to be sought (Harmer 1991: 185–188). A materials designer should therefore devise a form based upon genuine documents, but which has been adapted so as to make it authentic within a pedagogical context (i.e., relevant to the students).

In our own case, the appraisal form that the MBA students were required to complete during the simulation was adapted from a corpus of genuine appraisal forms provided by companies and was based on the most frequently occurring questions in this corpus. All company-specific references and jargon were removed so that all students were able to complete the forms adequately, regardless of their field of business activity or business experience (or lack of it for the pre-service students). However, adapting the genuine documents to make them usable as teaching materials in a class of MBA students from diverse backgrounds and with varying professional experience, created paradoxically the main weakness of the simulation. By making the materials accessible to all students, much of the
contextual richness of their own experiences that executive students could have brought to the exercise was lost. However, at the present time we see no way around this situation besides encouraging the students to draw freely on their own experiences in an *ad hoc* way as they do the simulation.

**TASK AUTHENTICITY**
The authenticity of task reflects the match between the task that students are asked to perform in a classroom environment and the degree to which such activities reflect the “real world” beyond the classroom (Bachman 1990). Tasks for business graduates should thus be designed to help students gain professional experience in a supportive learning environment. As previously stated, work done by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry PLATO team indicates that participating in an appraisal interview is a task that business graduates will almost certainly have to carry out at some stage in their business careers, whether as an appraisee or an appraiser. Moreover, the materials designed for this appraisal simulation provide them with an authentic task for each of the four basic linguistic skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). Students are asked to complete the authentic business writing task of filling in the forms. Since the form will be read by other students doing the simulation, who will then act on the information communicated, the students must pay attention to both the register of written English that they are using and its appropriateness to the audience in order to complete the task successfully. Also, the task provides an authentic reading exercise, as the interviewers are required to read and base their appraisal strategy on the forms completed by their colleagues. The simulation of the appraisal interview itself generates an authentic speaking and listening task.

**PEDAGOGICAL AUTHENTICITY**
According to Nunan (1988a), a task is judged to have pedagogical authenticity by the degree to which the students learn the skills that are required to perform the task. The fact that students are asked to perform an authentic task is, in itself, an opportunity to put their linguistic skills into practice, learning English through English. As Damhuis (2000: 246) states, the student-centered, self-initiated output that a simulation can provide allows students to make full and flexible use of the target language, which triggers acquisition of the language. Moreover, the freedom of such a simulation, monitored by the instructor, enables the students to further develop socio-
pragmatic skills such as competence in topic shifting, interrupting, turn taking, politeness strategies, and so on. Opportunities to practice such skills may be lost in a more teacher-controlled environment that restricts contributions from students to “classroom” language, without an opportunity to practice situations where linguistic repertoires other than the traditional teacher-student interactional patterns are used. As corpus-based research by Phillips and Riley (2002: 128) shows, “the classroom and the student/teacher identities assumed there provide powerful constraints upon language production.”

The students also have an opportunity to put into practice genre-specific managerial skills such as starting the meeting by reviewing the purpose of the meeting and the issues to be covered, and ending the meeting with a review of the main proposals or decisions that have been made. The students are also provided with an opportunity to practice strategic managerial interaction through the use of active listening techniques, open-ended questions, and supportive backchanneling, which foster an atmosphere conducive to an open exchange between participants in line with commonly accepted norms of good management practice. Finally, a “real life” management simulation not only provides students with an opportunity to learn by doing but also enables the instructor to monitor their performance. The feedback given following the performance provides direct pedagogical input in terms of the student’s managerial and linguistic performance. The instructor thus assumes the role of facilitator. As Dufeu (2001) points out:

The facilitator listens to the participant: she takes her cue from what the participant says; it is up to her to go with the participant’s expressive needs and not the other way round. . . . The participant’s contact with the foreign language develops in resonance with his being (a pedagogy of things offered, rather than impositions). It’s a question of following the participant rather than going ahead of him and then of programming his needs.

Moreover, the task can be organized in such a way that students work in teams of three, with two students carrying out the simulation and a third acting as an observer. This is done in order to encourage peer feedback, which has the notable advantage of encouraging the critical capacities of students, enhancing both their awareness of communicative competence-in-use and managerial strategic interaction. Furthermore, it encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning and that of their colleagues.
bearer Authenticity

As Breen (1985: 63) states, “perhaps the [author’s italics] criteria to guide the teacher’s selection and use of texts . . . resides initially not in the texts themselves but in the learners.” He goes on to say (64) that the “learner may authenticate or give authenticity to a text from his own state of knowledge or frame of reference.” Without this final act of authentication from learners, the text, task, and pedagogical authenticity cannot be validated. The learner must recognize that the material has a legitimate place in the classroom (Nunan 1988b). This is essentially a question of students recognizing that the task which they are performing, and the way in which they are being asked to do so, will be useful to them in a business environment. In other words, the task has “pay-off” (Stevick 1980: 121). As has been stated previously, taking part in appraisal interviews, either as appraiser or appraisee, is a task that a manager is likely to have to perform. Feedback from students has confirmed that they perceive the fit between the classroom activities and the “real world.” Moreover, feedback has also indicated that the students appreciated this student-centered approach to teaching where their individual needs were placed at the center of the learning agenda. Students felt that the opportunity to practice their communicative and managerial skills in English within the context of a simulation rather than a role-play was of benefit to them and that simulations, when combined with peer and instructor feedback based upon their performance and learning needs, constituted an effective way of preparing them for their future business careers.

Conclusion

For materials to be effective learning tools, they must meet the criteria of being authentic from four perspectives. Materials designers should use texts and documents which are based on “real life” interaction. The task that the learner is required to carry out using such documents should be a “real world” task. Materials should be designed in such a way that the opportunities provided for the learner lead to the acquisition of the linguistic and managerial skills necessary to carry out the task outside the classroom. A simulation is thus the ideal tool for bringing text, task, and pedagogical authenticity together to provide materials that are perceived by students as having “pay-off, which validates the materials from the perspective of learner authenticity, fulfilling the fourth criterion (see Figure 1).
REFERENCES


APPENDIX 1
APPRAISAL SIMULATION

Work in pairs. Complete the following forms individually, then exchange them. Allow time for your partner to study what you have written and vice versa, and then simulate an appraisal interview. Student A should be the interviewer, student B the interviewee. A third student should observe and give feedback to both the appraiser and appraisee.

THE APPRAISER’S FORM
What do you see as your priority task over the next year?

Are there any constraints or problems that adversely affect your performance? How can these be addressed?

What do you consider to be your major strengths?

What development or training would benefit you in the performance of your present activities?

APPRAISER’S FORM
Identify any training needs.

Identify contradictions and points of tension and suggest how these should be addressed.

Identify any competencies that need to be developed.

Identify what must be done to maintain or improve performance.