

Extra-Curricular Reading as a Supplementary and Motivational Tool for Students of Economics: A Needs Analysis and Learning-Centred Approach

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This paper describes and analyses a recent pedagogical experience of using the text Lives of the Laureates by Breit and Spencer [Breit, W. and R.W. Spencer, 1990 (1986). Lives of the Laureates. Ten Nobel Economists. Cambridge and London: The Mit Press] as extra-curricular materials and motivational activity for students of 'English for Economists' in a Spanish university classroom. The present paper balances the descriptive approach of needs analysis with a pragmatic and real content based approach supported by the valuable statements put forward by Fuentes Quintana in his personal «apología del economista» and other specialised Economists. The main focus of the paper is on the exploitation of this supplementary materials through reading comprehension strategies as well as the transmission of first-hand social values in the ESAP classroom. This suggests that there may be a need for expanding uses of such materials especially in the case

of non-native speakers living outside Anglophone environments. Moreover, such accounts could provide new insights into genre-based approach and include further interdisciplinary and humanistic materials in line with their academic and professional expectations.

«It is in the real world where the action is; and if we want to interest students of economics, and make economics more relevant, the teaching of economics must reflect the real world, not abstract deductive models that lead nowhere fast, and may lead nowhere slowly.» (David Colander, 2000: 15)

1. Introduction

The debate on the contents and goals to be achieved by students of economics in Spanish universities is an ongoing issue periodically reassessed and updated. It is generally assumed that the study of economics should provide students with insights into how the world around us works, a deeper understanding of the various socio-economic topics we have to face up to, and a rigorous background and training in qualitative and quantitative reasoning. Simultaneously, experts claim that economic tools are increasingly used to analyse contemporary global issues, such as inflation, unemployment, poverty, environmental degradation, overpopulation, gender and race discrimination, international relations, etc. However, it seems to be that there is no adequation between the teaching of economics and the definite reality. It is also a matter of significance for teachers in

Spanish Faculties of Economics to take for granted their learners' competence in the English language and, in addition, their language provision for relevant English terminology within this context. Hence, the deep concern of both ESAP teachers and distinguished specialists in Economics Science with regard to the learners' second language reading performance especially when they are non-native speakers of English studying at non-English medium universities.

We shall examine this issue through the ideas posed by researchers from different but related disciplines, those on ESAP and economists, respectively. The paper begins with the description of the setting, then it focuses on the interdisciplinary perspectives on which this pedagogical experience is based and finally it includes some guidelines for exploiting extra-curricular reading comprehension texts for students of economics used in the classroom.

2. The context

A prerequisite is required to enter into the degree in economics at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration at the ULPGC (Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria), that is to say, students need to get a global mark of at least seven points out of ten. Once admitted, the subject «English for Economists», included on their academic timetable, can be taken either on the first or the second course of the degree, and at least pass mark is compulsory for students to be able to enter in the third course. The subject courses are taught in the national language, Spanish. Our subject is scheduled for two-hour sessions twice a week.

The total intake of learners is divided into two groups with around eighty students each. At that particular academic year their degree of English language proficiency was upper-intermediate in general terms. Such a large audience involved the possibility of meeting different

previous personal learning experiences and types of personality. Participation was a common factor in both groups. Where timing is concerned, there is a hard competition for available space on the timetable among the various Departments conforming the curriculum, which does not allow time for further pedagogical considerations. Otherwise, the prevailing idea of extra preparation is largely grounded together with that of the individual effort on the students' part, and the aggravating factors of the extra cost implied and the lack of specific courses on «English for Economists». Within such a context we cannot expect our students to be independent and self-sufficient readers of English written materials versing on economics.

3. Rationale for the study

The present study balances the descriptive approach of needs analysis with a pragmatic and real content based approach supported by the valuable statements put forward by respected economists.

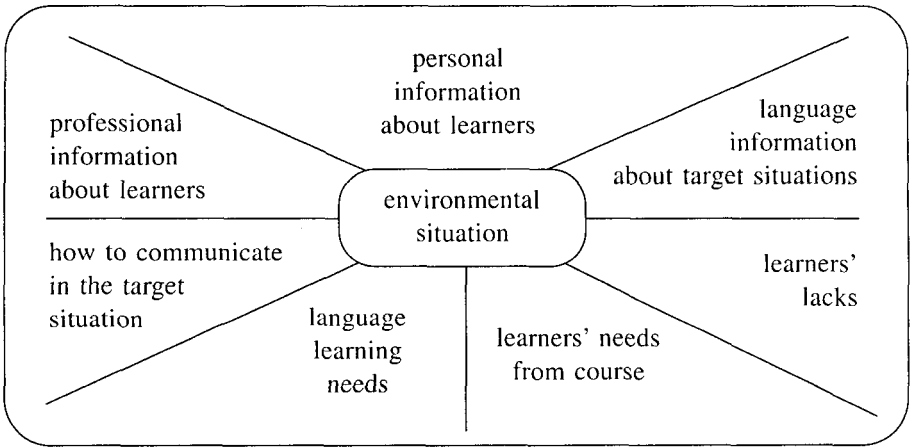
As ESAP teachers we were faced with a number of issues and practical problems which we intended to solve by applying the needs analysis approach posed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and thoroughly developed by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998). This has been one of the most useful methods for determining what to include in ESAP curricula, and it aims to provide descriptions of academic skills that non-native students may encounter in their future and specific courses.

In their discussion of what they term «A current concept of needs analysis», Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, 126) suggest that different aspects pertaining previous approaches throughout the history of ESP be recognised:

The aim is to know learners as people, as language users and as language learners; to know how language learning and skills learning can be maximised

for a given learner group; and finally to know the target situations and learning environment such that we can interpret the data approximately.

All the aspects illustrating this concept of needs analysis are shown in the figure below (op.cit. p. 125):



Considering the suggestions presented by these specialists and the context in which our teaching and our students were involved, we reflected on what their actual needs were, that is, to what extent our students of «English for Economists» at ULPGC needed to use the English language to successfully fulfil their linguistic, cultural and subject-specific needs. We found out that our students were required to deal with supplementary materials provided in the classroom by other subject specialists, look into content-course bibliographies in English and read specialised articles from English-language journals in economics for their academic courses, where the medium of instruction and communication was not English. We realized that our students did lack background knowledge of Economics Science and hence the specific English terminology

required. Consequently, our goal was to help them with the skills and strategies needed to meet their English reading requirements and, additionally, with the economic literature.

We didn't want to confine ourselves just to the textbook followed in the core syllabus for that course, so we made some research on the materials provided in the Faculty resource centre and came across a text on laureate economists which caught our attention. It focused on a corpus of academic lectures collected in the volume titled *Lives of the Laureates. Ten Nobel Economists* that we agreed it could be useful for our purposes. One of the main reasons which spurred us to use this supplementary text was that besides the fact that our students were a lay audience in this specific field, it could offer the possibility of creating a cultural bridge to fill in their actual needs. This necessity is considered by Fisher (Dudley-Evans and Henderson, 1990: 84) when she contends that the area of 'culture' is one of the problem areas requiring the special attention of the teacher because «[t]he English for economics textbooks do not address the problems that non-native speakers may have in understanding 'everyday examples' drawn from a culture different from their own.» Similarly, students could become familiar with some of the ideas, concepts, theories and vocabulary they were studying, and establish a link between the specific English terminology for economics, from the perspective of Nobel economists, and the practice of the English language.

Our second approach was underpinned by the well-known Spanish economist Fuentes Quintana.¹ In his contribution *La Economía*, he makes two considerations when he comes to state his personal «apología del economista». Firstly, as regards the degree of economics,

¹ Fuentes Quintana is Emeritus Professor of UNED since 1990 and *Honorary Doctorate* by seven Spanish universities.

he points out that every economist should have a very good command of what he terms five 'languages', namely, «English, Mathematics, Accounting, Information Technology and Statistics.» (Fuentes Quintana, 1993: 47). Secondly, Fuentes Quintana is also concerned with the importance of reading in the training of future economists:

Attention should be focused on three categories when selecting readings. First, the one concerning some of the major masterpieces from the past. In every Faculty of Economics there should be a seminar versing on the reading of masterpieces introducing the intellectual figure of the selected economist together with his most prominent work. There is nothing so rewarding and formative as getting to know the life and the way of thinking of an important economist in the milieu that defined his world and how he tried to change or reform it... The second category of reading should be concerned with *Annual Reports on Spanish Economy...* [and the third one deals with] *Cuadernos de Información Económica...* (Fuentes Quintana, 1993: 53)²

With respect to the origins of economics, there seems to be general agreement in considering 1776 its starting point as a separate discipline, when the Scottish philosopher Adam Smith published the first full-scale treatise in this field known as *The Wealth of Nations*. Overall, Economics is usually defined as an obscure and gloomy science. As Kevin D. Hoover in *The Complexity Vision and the Teaching of Economics* (Colander, 2001: 189), puts it, «for many, perhaps most, of our students, the connection between what we teach in elementary and intermediate courses and the world is really very obscure.» Significantly, Duncan K. Foley³ (Colander, 2001: 169) and A. Hewings (Dudley-Evans and Henderson, 1990: 32) express in the same terms when they take up the complexity involved in the teaching of this subject matter:

² Our translation.

³ Duncan K. Foley and Kevin D. Hoover are Professors of Economics in the USA.

Traditional economic pedagogy aims to convince students that they should think abstractly. We ask them to put aside their intuition, based on their real experience of social life, which is complicated, rich, textured, and nuanced, to learn a method of analysis based on abstractions that are in many cases quite unintuitive.

Since early the twentieth century, individuals working on disciplines considered as «Science» have been widely recognized and awarded with the Nobel Prize. It will not be until 1969 that economics is considered apt to be included among these prizes, which are given to those who have conferred a great benefit on society. For Paul A. Samuelson, second Nobel Prize in this science (1970), Economics is the oldest of arts, the most modern of Social Sciences and has raised one of the most fascinating and best financially rewarded professions. It is noticeable that this particular area of study is a social science, and given that most Nobel prizes in this field have been from Anglo-Saxon origin, it is evident the integral and crucial relationship between economics and the English language and culture. Hence, we questioned about the expediency of exploiting this source of input, that is, *Lives of the Laureates*, to enhance the students' learning process and in this way to support their second-language reading competence.

4. Description of the task

As noted by Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 117) when they deal with materials design models in their learning-centred approach, the task «provides a clear objective for the learners and so helps to break up the often bewildering mass of the syllabus, by establishing landmarks of achievement.» Our students, as stated earlier, were required to follow a core syllabus textbook, *Reading and Writing for Students of Economics* (M.R. Bueno and C. Millar, 1995, Level I and Level II). It meant that they were going to deal with unfamiliar

subject materials in the first four-month term and, in turn, this would result in greater demands on their English competence. Once we decided on the supplementary reading task, we worked out an opinions survey among our students. The outcome showed a general acceptance of the idea, which was carried out in the spring term. The class was divided into pair-groups and each group was allotted the lecture of one Nobel laureate, which implied that about eight students shared the same assignment. When developing the supplementary materials in order to implement the task we took into account one of the basic and relevant principles posed by Tomlinson (1998: 9) for the teaching of SLA (Second Language Acquisition). He claims that:

[He prefers] to attempt to build confidence through activities which try to 'push' learners slightly beyond their existing proficiency by engaging them in tasks which are stimulating, which are problematic but which are achievable too. It can also help if the activities encourage learners to use and to develop their existing extra-linguistic skills, such as those which involve being imaginative, being creative or being analytical.

Therefore, in line with his argument we carried out the following classroom task. It consisted of three stages:

1. Reading aloud: Students were required to read aloud one particular section of the corresponding laureate. The purpose of this activity was to reinforce their pronunciation, intonation and fluency. As Dudley-Evans and St John (1998: 26) have remarked, «even though students may only need to read textbooks and articles in their field, it may be that oral practice will help them reach that end.»

2. The second stage of the task had two components: vocabulary and translation. As regards vocabulary our students had already used the textbook, so they had had a close contact with specific vocabulary, which paradoxically, they didn't even know in their own language. As a matter of fact, it was the teacher of «English for Economists»

the one that had to define terms, concepts and translate them. Taking advantage of this circumstance we called attention to issues such as verb complementation, tried to make them aware of some existing differences of lexical and syntactic aspects within English and Spanish discourses, previously practised while working the textbook, and of some outstanding informal and formal discourse features. The activities concerning vocabulary involved the definition and translation of specific terms by using the monolingual and bilingual dictionaries suggested in the course bibliography. These activities included: synonyms and antonyms, affixation, partnerships and collocations. With the idea of bringing about our students' creative abilities we proposed them the possibility of choosing and working out by themselves two exercises related to any of the above mentioned activities.

With regard to translation, once the students were familiar with the general and specialist terminology they were ready to start the translation of their respective lecturer. Their condition as non-native learners was a determining factor for this activity in two respects. Firstly, in the sense of the difficulties that many students encounter when reading and understanding the language of economics due to the rhetorical devices underpinning economic ideology, such as the role of metaphors, the abundance of analogies, etc., issues that have been studied by Dudley-Evans and Henderson (1990), Hewings (1990) and Henderson, Dudley-Evans and Backhouse (1993). And secondly, in the sense that the translation could help them to build their self-confidence in handling the language of economics.

3. Reading comprehension: After translating the text we wanted to set some creative writing activities as consolidation. So the students had to prepare a reading comprehension activity, either by producing a multiple-choice exercise, by taking out ten questions from the text

which were relevant for its understanding or by working out a 'True-False' exercise. They also had to provide their corresponding answer.

Many researchers have observed the importance of learning activities which demand the students' investment. This was our purpose when focusing on the type of activities we put into practice to keep up our students' enthusiasm. As Tomlinson (1998: 11) remarks:

It could seem that learners profit most if they invest interest, effort and attention in the learning activity. Materials can help them to achieve this by providing them with choices of focus and activity, by giving them topic control and by engaging them in learner-centred discovery activities.

At this point it would be interesting to underline the possibility of a more thorough investigation into the discourse of academic lectures given the considerable scope in the area of genre⁴ nowadays.

5. Conclusion

Eventually, let us put forward some brief remarks. Reading is one of the major aspects in English for Specific and Academic Purposes in courses designed for students of economics. Giving them extra-curricular materials more akin with their particular needs proved to be a very useful tool when dealing with reading strategies in the ESAP classroom since they provide a wealth of contexts for activities on vocabulary. The results have shown that by using this collection of lectures in the ESAP classroom learners improve their ability in the target language and this allows them an enjoyable relationship with the specialized literature of that tongue. The reason for this is that the task of reading *Lives of the Laureates* entails the

⁴ Further research focusing on genre analysis and examining the different types of discourse has been done by authors such as Dudley-Evans, T., 1987, 1989, 1990, 1994, 2000; Fontanet, S., S. Posteguillo, J.C. Palmer & J.F. Coll (eds.), 1998; Bondi, M. 1999; Robinson, P. 1991; Swales, J.M. 1981, 1988, 1990.

cultural, social and humanistic background conveyed by people who have become widely known as laureate economists. One of our main aims throughout this teaching experience has been to spur our students' curiosity about economics and economists to the extent of making them want to know more.

Arguably, this opportunity of approaching the evolution of these Nobel prizes in Economics Science may have been a passing activity. However, in our opinion, another special interest that these laureates' lives have within an ESAP context could probably be of a more enduring relevance: the possibility that enables learners to think about global cultural and economic developments from insights detached from a traditionally theoretical rationale. Most importantly, even in this respect, occasional explicit links and experiences between the foreign lecturers schooled in the British and North-American academic culture and the students' own, might support the development of cross-cultural understanding and interdisciplinary competence. Indeed, the central purpose was precisely to transcend the mere study of the English language for academic purposes, look outward and see beyond the bounds of class, culture, region, or nation.

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