

READING COMPREHENSION AND COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH THROUGH ESP MATERIALS FOR STUDENTS OF LAW ENFORCEMENT IN VIETNAM

Abstract

This paper presents the results of a study conducted among a large group of senior law students at People's Police University (PPU) in Vietnam to analyze the effects of applying reading through English for Specific Purposes (ESP) materials under the criteria of the communicative approach. The purposes of this study are to demonstrate how specialized ESP reading materials helps students gain a deeper knowledge of their own field of study, to promote students' use of English for debating law topics, and to increase the students' acquisition of vocabulary in the foreign language through reading specialized texts. So, there are 4 research questions: What might be the effects of applying reading through ESP materials by using the communicative approach to a group of senior students from the law enforcement course at PPU, Ho Chi Minh City? In what way does reading under ESP materials help students to gain better knowledge of their own field of study? How does reading under ESP texts enable students to discuss topics of law? How does reading about topics of law contribute to students' acquisition of specialized vocabulary? Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, the students' oral and written samples and the researcher's journals. Findings show that reading ESP materials motivate students to increase both vocabulary and knowledge about their own field of study and also encourages them to use English in everyday situations.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, communicative approach, reading comprehension

INTRODUCTION

All students and professionals over the world feel a need to learn English to be competitive in their studies and in their careers because it popularizes rapid globalization. In addition, we are living the age of specializations. People are experts in different fields of knowledge; the best way to obtain such knowledge is through being familiar with different languages, especially English because it is one of the most commonly used languages around the world. About this issue, according Butler-Pascoe (2009) "Today with the emergence of English as the prominent language in our increasingly technological and global society, the study of ESP has assumed a sense of urgency, especially in countries that are attempting to restructure the manner in which students learn and perform English."

The previous statement encourages teachers to think about the possibility of including English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as a tool for students who want to delve deeper into specific fields of knowledge and who want to improve their abilities in the foreign language.

As a teacher at PPU, I have seen students interested in working in such varied careers as law, investigation, and other fields, which is what motivated me to conduct my research with a group of senior students in the law enforcement course at PPU, following the criteria of the descriptive case study.

Implementing ESP materials under the parameters of the communicative approach allowed students to practice reading as the primary activity that motivated them to find more information of interest. At the same, they had the opportunity to develop other skills, such as listening to their partners, talking about common topics, discussing and arguing according to their own thinking, and writing their own summaries and opinions from the readings.

The main purpose of this study is to analyze the effects of applying reading through ESP materials by using the communicative approach, with a group of senior students at PPU who are at the A2 level of English to help them gain a deeper knowledge of their own field of study, to encourage students' use of English for debating topics which relate to law enforcement, and to increase the students' acquisition of vocabulary in the foreign language through reading texts in ESP materials.

From the purposes above, there are 4 research questions in this study: What might be the effects of applying reading through ESP materials by using the communicative approach to a group of senior students from the law enforcement course at PPU, Ho Chi Minh City? In what way does reading under ESP materials help students to gain better knowledge of their own field of study? How does reading under ESP texts enable students to discuss topics of law? How does reading about topics of law contribute to students' acquisition of specialized vocabulary?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

Background and Characteristics of ESP

ESP might be described as a specific branch of English as a foreign language on the training of students in specific areas, Anthony (2007) points out that English can be used in academic studies or the teaching of English for travel or professional purposes, which represents a population of professionals who are involved in their own fields of study; hence, they need to delve deep into specific topics, and the ESP approach can be useful as a learning methodology.

At the same time, Gatehouse (2001) notes that ESP is not only a learning approach but also a means of development because it allows them to gain the knowledge they need to face the world in a productive way.

The characteristics of ESP create a true picture of its fundamental nature and its benefits for guiding teachers in the implementation of this approach in the classroom. Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998), and Strevens (1988) defined and presented 3 absolute characteristics (learners' specific needs; use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline; centering on the language with grammar, lexis, register) and 4 variable characteristics (designed for specific disciplines, used in specific teaching situations, designed for adult learners or professional work situations, assumed some basic knowledge of the language system). So, English teachers use an ESP approach as the basis of their syllabus, taking into account the learners' needs, the reasons for learning and also the students' personal specialized knowledge, such as using English for communication.

Reading and ESP as a Communicative Approach

Anthony (1997) argues that reading is relevant because it provides learners with the vocabulary and the knowledge that will be used in their professions; accordingly, many educational institutions have adopted ESP reading materials as the basis of their curricula. The goal of reading is to obtain information one needs for specific or personal purposes; thus, reading comprehension involves understanding, decoding, and constructing meaning from a text and reading through a process.

The communicative approach is based on the idea that learning a language successfully comes from communicating "real" meaning; thus, when learners are involved in real communication, their natural strategies for language acquisition are being used, which facilitates their learning to use the language. Accordingly, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) note: "ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning," which means that when the teacher takes into account the students' disciplines to guide class activities, the students are conscious of their process of learning and the importance of learning another language.

ESP Materials

ESP materials are another important aspect of reading comprehension. Accordingly, Torregrosa and Sanchez-Reyes (2011) "authentic ESP materials are important tools to use in ESP classes." Thus, authentic ESP materials permit students not only to have real communication but also to exhibit their language skills and improve their background knowledge as a tool for use in their fields and daily lives.

METHODS

Participants

Forty senior students in course for law enforcement D23S at the People's Police University were selected to participate in this study. The researcher informed the students about the development of this study and received permission from each student in a signed format, as well as from the directors of the university. The site of my research was set at the People's Police University, my workplace. It is one of the biggest universities and it located in District 7 of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The PPU trains their students become police officers who work for the official organization that is responsible for protecting people and property, making people obey the law, and solving crime, and catching people who have committed a crime. The PPU provides graduate and postgraduate levels of jurisprudence for police force in Vietnam.

Research procedures and instruments for data collection

This program promoted the reading of specialized texts under ESP materials and the communicative approach to enhance students' analysis and discussion about law topics of their respective fields of study. There were four procedures, which were carried out during

English classes. The first, the researcher presented the project to students and explained the benefits of participating with regard to experience and knowledge acquisition. The second, researcher given a bank of law texts (including authentic ESP documents and books) was gathered from the library. The third, researcher explained to students, by way of examples, the processes of reading (pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading) and the reading techniques to be used throughout the project. Then, researcher asked students read specialized texts and prepared presentations (written and oral); sometimes they had to read extra information to defend their position in front of the group or the teacher. Moreover, they had to be ready to answer questions that clarified their viewpoints. The last, the topics that generated discussion and analysis among the students included: criminal law, international law, human rights, the consumption of drugs, crime scene, and crime and the justice system in other countries.

Instruments for Data analysis in this study are semi-structured interviews, students' oral and written samples, and researchers' journals. The reasons for researcher chosen the semi-structured interviews: it encourages a relaxed relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee; moreover, this method provides information about students' behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs, and it contributes to understanding the research participants' perspectives or experiences. Accordingly, Silverman (1993): "Semi-structured interviews are conducted based on relevant topics that generate specific questions, which means that not all of the questions are designed before the interview; most of the questions are asked during the interview according to the interviewee's answers." Students' oral and written samples are products of students' work performed in class during the reading sessions. In this study, journals include the teacher's written responses to teaching events. The journals serve to record principal aspects that emerge from the processes of teaching and learning. Burns (2003) notes: "Journals provide continuing accounts or perceptions and thought processes, as well as of critical events or issues which have surfaced in the classroom." In this research, teachers' journals are used for obtaining written registers about students' work during reading activities and also to reveal the students' capacities for solving problems and making decisions about their own fields of study.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The process of data analysis was as follows. The researcher collected the students' written samples, and the students were then supervised in order to identify the use of specialized vocabulary and the management of knowledge about law. The researcher's journal contained the description of all class activities from February to May. The semi-structured interviews were applied to students during the months of May and June, which included the students' impressions about the development of this research according to the questions asked previously by the researcher. After analyzing all the information, it was necessary to triangulate the data.

From the students' comments, we can infer that the readings used in class had motivated students' acquisition of knowledge and helped them to understand specific aspects

of other countries' legislation, which is meaningful to all students. One of the students discussed this issue, as follows: "This reading has helped me understand the regionalisms from other countries and laws that are used abroad; there are things that we can relate to our country." (Interview, Q 2, S 2).

The researcher observed how students reacted to the texts about other countries law; as a result, the students felt that this type of reading was interesting for them because they could compare and analyze the pros and cons between Vietnamese and the other Constitutions. These topics motivated the students to investigate additional information for their own edification, which generated a reading culture in English that manifested in a spontaneous way as the result of the research activities.

As the researcher noted in the journal: During reading, students were engaged in acquiring information in their own field of study within the context of the United States, such as penal justice, the organization of the government, types of crimes, and the consumption of drugs and punishments, among others.

Additionally, we can see how our students, friends, and people in general build their own schema or prior knowledge through time according to their personal experiences of learning; this information becomes meaningful in the reading process when readers link their previous knowledge with new knowledge, which in turn permits wider comprehension. One student discussed this issue in the interview: "I think it is very interesting because it is strengthening our own field of study and our profession; it is helping us to delve into the topics of our interest, especially this semester because we have seen a lot of vocabulary; the readings have been connected to the issues we are learning about." (Interview, Q 2, S 7)

Moreover, we can see that students used their prior knowledge and acquired new knowledge when arguing about different legal topics. For example, students analyzed the different texts using their prior knowledge of English during classes and their law backgrounds to understand the information of the cases and the relationship of law here with other countries' law, it was reflected in the processes of reading because sometimes the students analyzed the text themselves or asked their partner about a legal situation.

Through oral reports, students gained fluency when talking about the different topics of their own fields of study, such as penal justice, steps in investigation, organize crimes, types of crimes in other countries and in Vietnam. Another student talked in the interview about the improvement of his oral production through reading and speaking practice: "Through reading, I have improved a lot, especially in speaking; we are becoming fluent in the use of English." (Interview, Q 3, Student 11)

Finding in acquisition of specialized vocabulary in this study have showed that students acquired a lot of specific vocabulary and commonly used phrases pertaining to law, which were useful for them in producing oral or written reports. The students applied these techniques (guessing, skimming, scanning, mapping, and outlining) as a way not only to

understand the texts but also to acquire a specialized vocabulary that was useful for when it came time to complete written summaries or oral reports. Two of the students explained this in the interview: “Through vocabulary teacher and the techniques we have learnt (for example, that with a single word we can get the meaning if we do not know another word), we are connecting what we are studying and we are understanding the ideas without using the dictionary. I think that the vocabulary and the topics are very important.” (Interview, Q 2, Student 4, 7)

Finally, through this research, students gained an acquisition of knowledge and had the ability to discuss law topics using reading as the main vehicle of this process, which is a practice that contributes to their lives as students and as professionals. Hence, reading legal topics in English increased the students' self-confidence and motivated them to learn information about foreign countries, which will enrich their perspectives about law around the world. Simultaneously, this study have encouraged students to consciously take risks when reading in English in such a way as to acquire enough tools to learn a specialized vocabulary and to gain knowledge that was useful for their lives. They also learned to express their own points of view and prepare for the exigencies of globalization in their fields.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research show the effects of students' reading under the implementation of ESP materials through the communicative approach. This research encourages students to investigate information related to their own needs in foreign countries, which is useful for their future lives as professionals. Students of law enforcement must learn specific skills as they develop their careers, such as the ability to argue, discuss, analyze, or defend their viewpoints based on their own experience or knowledge. Furthermore, this research motivated the students' use of prior knowledge as a relevant source to defend their ideas in front of their peers, who were their close competitors and judges. In addition, this research was a great opportunity for students to become familiar with reading techniques that permitted them access to topics of law written in English; thus, the reading process approach (pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading) facilitated the acquisition of a specialized vocabulary, which is a relevant tool for reading, writing, and speaking. At the same time, acquiring a specialized vocabulary made students feel self-confident and motivated not only in their own learning process but also in their use of the English language.

Biodata

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APPENDIX

QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEW

1. What do you think about reading texts related to your own career? (Interesting, useful, unprofitable, unimportant.)

2. What benefits do you think you have had through reading issues of your own career? (Enrichment of vocabulary, use of new reading techniques, acquisition of information, greater understanding of texts in English, what else?)

3. Have you acquired any new knowledge through this reading? Which one?

4. Do you think there is a relationship between the topics you read in the English class and those worked in other areas of your career? Explain.

5. Do you improve your English language use in this course? What aspects? (Written and oral production, vocabulary acquisition, which one?)

6. What reading comprehension techniques did you use during the reading process developed in this English course? (Brain storming, looking at visual aids, guessing, cognates, skimming, scanning, mapping, vocabulary analysis, and summary)