

Using Literature in the Business and Medical English: A Case Study

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Abstract

Literature, Business English and Medical English are most of the perceived as completely different areas. The current study explores how two literary texts, the Australian writer Harry Nicholaides's novel *Verisimilitude* and China Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* can be studied, understood and analyzed by Business and Medical English students. Such a study is necessary to help instructors incorporate diverse and various literary materials into the Special Professional English course curriculum.

Key words: Literary materials, audiovisual, Professional English, proficiency.

Introduction

The National Center for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE 2002) recalls that ESL professionals use audio and video tapes, cameras, overhead projectors and software programs to enrich their instructional activities. Inaam Mansoor (1999) points out that technology and Literature in the ESL classroom motivate learners, build their self-esteem, provide immediate feedback and can address various learning styles and helps build learner strategies. Elisabeth Gareis (1997) demonstrates that few other pedagogical tools offer more intensive, contextualized involvement and opportunities for holistic learning than movies based on Literature manuals. Mayer et al. (1999) show the importance of using audio-visual technology in the Literature classroom. They contend that students are better able to integrate verbal and visual representations when they receive both verbal and visual materials rather than when they receive

only verbal or text materials. Along the same lines, Jelfs & Whitelock (2000) state that the use of audiovisual technology based on Literature gives more feedback to learners and provides a greater level of reality. Lund (1990) affirms that such listening activities like the use of tapes and CDs is an important element in teaching ESL.

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study was to examine how the teaching of literary texts can be combined to the curriculum of Professional English students in order to improve their skills of the students in English. In this case, *Things Fall Apart* which is a canon in Postcolonial Literature was taught to Business and Medical students in Thailand who have not experienced colonization, in order to complicate issues. The second text that was taught, *Verisimilitude* deals with the daily realities of life in Thailand: social life, the vibrancy of tourism, agriculture, farming, and several other topics. Teaching such a class to this population of students is challenging because of the different experiences involved: on the one hand the colonial experience of the Ibo people in Nigeria was new to these students, then and above all, the academic major of these students was Business and Medical Studies. The researcher's aim was to find out if using Literary texts can make English lessons more fruitful or not.

Research Questions:

1. What are students' perceptions toward the teaching of *Things Fall Apart*?
2. What differences the introduction of Literature brings into their learning of English?
3. What challenges do students face in their learning of Literature in the Business English and Medical English class?

Significance of the Study:

Several benefits may derive from this study: Faculty that teach Literature may find it useful to know how Literature can facilitate the teaching of English for Specific Purposes or Professional English. Faculty that teach other subjects might also realize how beneficial allowing English Literature instructors into their classroom could be to students in this Global World. Education administrators could realize through this study how important Literature courses are to Professional English.

Method

Research Design and Participant Selection

This study used qualitative approach to explore the importance of Literature in the teaching of Professional English. An IRB was used to seek permission to conduct the study. Purposeful sampling was used in selecting the participants of the study. Contact with the participants was initiated by way of recruitment letters handed out by one of the researchers during a class visit. Students who indicated their willingness to take part in the study were asked to complete an informed consent. The technological Literary devices were used like: David Orere's movie (1987) on *Things Fall Apart*, a video interview by BBC Book Club (2006) with the author of the book Chinua Achebe, CDs accompanying the English text book *Interchange 3rd Edition* for listening exercises, and the use of the internet and projectors, plus a hard copy of the two books themselves: *Things Fall Apart* and *Verisimilitude*.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data for this study were collected from 10 participants by way of one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The researcher conducted two semi-structured interviews which were approximately forty five minutes long. The first interview was conducted at the beginning of the

semester to determine how much students knew about colonization and post colonial literature and also postmodern writings. *Verisimilitude* was the sample of postmodern writing in the research. The second interview was conducted at the end of the semester to determine what students learned as a result of employing literary materials in their English class. In reporting the data, participant confidentiality was insured by using numbers instead of names. Member checking was used to ensure that the transcribed data reflected the actual responses of the students.

Findings

All the interviews in this study were conducted in the researcher's office. Participants of the study consisted of five LVT (Language and Vocational Training third year students) and five IEP (International English Program first year) students. These first two group of students were majoring in International Business. The results are reported in two phases. The first phase of the results reports data from the first interview, and the second phase reports data from the interviews conducted at the end of the semester after integrating Literature in their programs.

Data in the first phase indicates that Thai students have little knowledge about colonialism, colonial literature and postmodern Literature. The students did not also see how incorporating such literary materials in their program could benefit them. One student said:

I think I can [define] colonialism...but I do not know of any colonial literature

Another said:

That's a big word [colonialism] ...I do not understand literature [written in English] ...I need [to] the learn English first and my Major is Medical Studies which does not have anything to do with Literature.

From the students' responses, the researcher realized that not only do the students need help with learning about postcolonial and postmodern literature, but learning English language. The first phase of data collection helped the researcher to decide the teaching strategies that would help reach the needs of different students. The results reported in the following section are from the second phase of data collection. All the participants found that the use of Literature in this course made the understanding and engagement of colonization, postcolonial and postmodern experience easier, and enables an accurate and profound evaluation of characters in Literature. The respondents also pointed out that these literary materials helped improve their proficiency level in English in general. One of the LVT students stated:

The literary texts chosen made it easier for me to understand the issue of colonization. I was able to understand and analyze Okonkwo's behavior in Things Fall Apart with a lot of details in my English assignments. Seeing how Okonkwo walks on the TV screen enabled me to realize how aggressive this character is.

The students realized that weaving Literature within the Business English curriculum equips them with high listening and comprehension skills that in turn facilitate their discussion of the Business English text. One of the LVT students said:

The use of listening and comprehension CD on Things Fall Apart really helped me. I was able to understand everything people said in the video because our instructor had initially had several listening and comprehension assignments and sessions with us.

Using Literature in this class produced a familiarity between students and the setting of several international events in the world, and the third LVT students rendered that in these terms:

Studying Things Fall Apart enabled me to locate geographically where Africa (Nigeria precisely) and Britain are. I was therefore able to link the areas in Things Fall Apart with the mental map that I acquired after seeing Nigeria and Britain on the screen when our instructor pulled the map of the world from the internet and projected it.

Some medical students also said how Literature (especially the novel *Verisimilitude*) helped them understand their patients' diseases and also enabled them acquire the exact words/terms for the conditions of their patients. The use of the novel *Verisimilitude* in this class also enabled some students to have more understanding of their own society in terms of social structure, regional financial and geographical differences which directly impact their training and profession as Business specialists. One medical student had this to say concerning the relevance of *Verisimilitude*:

Reading about the main source of income of the populations in rural Thailand in the novel Verisimilitude made me realize why we are most of the time confronted with certain types of patients. In the hospital wards I see children who are malnourished several times and I could not understand why, since according to the statistics in the media these are areas that are self-sufficient food-wise. By reading Verisimilitude I realized that the parents and their children eat only rice all year long, with very little additional meals to complete their diet. So this book opened my eyes at that level.

Another Medical student made this reflection:

Reading Verisimilitude enabled me to understand why so many young girls come to us with sexually transmitted diseases, because the novel shows that some tourists lure these young girls and finally transmit diseases to them. The novel also helped me because it names some diseases

like HIV/AIDS, gonorrhoea, syphilis, and terms like sensitization, healthcare, self-protection, prophylaxis, etc. I knew most of these words in Thai language but not in English. So the Literature text Verisimilitude helped a lot improve my medical vocabulary.

One of the Business students had this to say, regarding *Things Fall Apart* and the effect it had on her. Beside the fact that the text helped her with her grammar and vocabulary, culturally it opened her mind:

Seeing Okonkwo in the video enabled me to judge him as a character: his bushy hair made me think that he resembles a spirit, a being that is super human and can even be scary. Being able to see Okonkwo made think that he is a good man: he did not speak much, he was “a man of action” as good men are in Thailand.

One of the IEP students also voiced a similar opinion on the same book:

The movie and the book on Achebe's work was so helpful that it helped me develop a strong personal opinion (beside my focus as a Business student), after reading the book and watching the video: the colonizer was trying to change the “nationality” of the Africans, and nationality is called *sanchaat* in Thai language. Watching the movie on *Things Fall Apart* and listening to Achebe's interview and listening to our instructor as he showed us the map of the world helped me acquire many new English words and expressions like “colonization, brutality, intrusion, usurpation, subaltern, oppression” and several other words that I had never heard or understood before.

The use of Literature in this class empowered the students to such an extent that remarkable and striking inferences were made in their study and discussion of the texts in other English classes like Oral English, Listening and Comprehension class, and Grammar class. The

learners felt that they improved their skills in Literary criticism and beyond that, their overall level of proficiency in English language improved. The fifth student in the LVT class went further and pointed out how combining the use of the literary novels and movies based on the novels can be so helpful to ESL professional students. The student also adds other historical and geographical facts she gathered from the book and its movie:

Watching the video on Achebe's book, and also reading the book itself enabled me to conclude that the missionaries came to Nigeria in search of better living conditions just like the Thai people migrated from China searching for better living conditions. Had I limited myself to reading the book, i would not enable me to arrive at such a conclusion. The book and its movie empowered me as a critic. It gave me an understanding and a confidence that I would not have from the reading of the book only. The fact that we watched the movie and discussed it and listened to CDs a helped me to overcome my limits in the English class.

One IEP student voiced similar concerns regarding the use of books and their video form (movie) for ESL Business and Medical students in these terms:

I tried to read Things Fall Apart but I could barely understand it. The words were so difficult for me that I had to pick my English Thai dictionary almost ten times on each page. When we started to watch the movie, I stopped reading the book and by the time we finished the movie, I had a total understanding of the book.

She goes further to reiterate the numerous and amazing cultural inferences that the movie enabled her to produce in her assignment on *Things Fall Apart*:

The yam festival in Things Fall Apart made me think about Lamjai festival, which is a seasonal festival in Thailand when we enjoy lamjai, a delicious fruit that I

thought is as important to the Ibo people as lamjai is to us, Thai people. I can also compare the jam festival in Things Fall Apart to the OTP phenomenon which means “One Tombon, One Product”, in other words a call for economic self sufficiency.

One IEP student pushed the power of Literature further in terms of comparing societal features to the highest level. Her opinion is the most complex one, and it speaks for itself. She wrote:

*Okonkwo died –committed suicide-to empower his people, just like the Thai **Seub Nakasatearn** who shot himself because his boss would not listen to him in his great effort to protect wildlife in Thailand. She pointed out that after Seub’s death, considerable changes occurred in the protection of wild animals in Thailand. Okonkwo also reminds me of the Thai **Srithanonchai** who was killed many years ago by the ruling authorities(around 100or 200 years ago) because he was extremely smart. The issue of race is also a key aspect herein the picture; Okonkwo is a “black guy” who killed the head messenger in a white man’s court, and the white man’s behavior is “racism”.*

As one of the respondents stated earlier, watching the movie and reading the book enabled the students to grasp certain feelings and emotions that are difficult to capture in a simple reading of the text. The Third IEP student reiterates that in the following lines and she ends her comment with the ease with which she could draw a comparison between her society in pre-colonial Nigeria:

Looking at the arrival of the British colonizers in Nigeria made me realize how aggressive the British were, and I would not be able to notice the accuracy of that

phenomenon if I had just read the book. In fact, the perseverance of the British colonizers made me think about the religious conflict that is currently going on in southern Thailand. I see the Thai Buddhists as the British colonizers in Things Fall Apart: They are trying to impose their religion (Buddhism) on Muslim southern Thai people.

Discussion

The data gathered in this study reveals that using Literature in the form of books and audio visual materials in the Business and Medical ESL English class has a very positive impact on the students' level in English. Beside the application of the grammar rules --the learners see the rules taught by their Grammar instructors being directly are applied in the novel-- and they also improve their vocabulary tremendously by discovering new English words and expressions, which are directly related to their area of expertise (Business and Medicine here) as the respondents said especially in their reference to *Verisimilitude*. Watching a movie on a book prepares students to a more complete and complex reaction to the material and it also generates critical thinking as NCLE (2002) stipulates. The use of listening materials also prepares students and equips them with a better ability and predisposition to understanding and analyzing literary materials as some of the students pointed out in this research. The universal nature of the human experience is expressed best by the use of audio visual materials in the Literature classroom. The spoken word in movies transports students beyond their personal, individual and restricted world to a global world where human experiences mingle and overlap, as the colonial and the non colonial experience intersected in this research. The current study confirms what several researchers (Koskinen, Wilson, & Jansema, 1985; Neuman & Koskinen, 1992) demonstrated in their advocacy of the use of television and closed- captioning in the use of the ESL classroom,

but this research also goes beyond what they said. This research proves that the use of movies or videos based on literary materials, plus listening CDs and the internet help professional ESL students more than the use of television and closed-captioning . This project showed that carefully selecting a Literature-based audio visual material and introducing students to it while placing specific emphasis on vocabulary and prior knowledge factors as Koskinen et al.,(1985) reiterate , facilitates the teaching of English in the ESL classroom.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, the researcher recommends the use of literary texts in the ESL classroom. Literary books and their movie forms encompass several benefits that cannot be achieved when and instructors limit themselves to the print culture. Both ESL and Literature faculty need exposure and training in the use of Literature materials added to their audiovisual forms when those ones are available.

Several questions and issues face the practice advocated in this research and they can be considered as the basis for subsequent research: are Professional ESL programs Business English, Medical English, Engineering, etc. ready to have Literary materials introduced into their curriculum? The second challenge stems from the fact that in most cases, the selected Literary materials will have to be uses alongside their audiovisual form, and that might make the choice of Literary texts a little bit difficult and restrictive, and cost involving, especially for developing countries.

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