

Project Works as Vehicles for Authenticity in the Graduate Business School of Sfax, Tunisia

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Abstract

The objective of the present study is to explore the extent to which the project work (PW) approach, which is one application within Content Based Instruction (CBI), can be a producer of authenticity in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and more particularly in a Business English (BE) course. The researcher assigned group projects to two classes of 25 third year university students studying BE at the Graduate Business School of Sfax, University of Sfax, Tunisia. A questionnaire was given to them in order to get their feedback. The first major finding is that most of the students reported gaining strong interest and a high degree of motivation in using language in the classroom. They also reported great benefits in terms of language and research skills. As for the researcher, he confirms that the project work approach is of great efficiency in ESP and BE. The article concludes with some evaluation and implications of the project work approach.

Key words: CBI, CLT, Project work, ESP, Business English, Authenticity

I Introduction

The field of study of the present paper is ESP and more precisely BE. It addresses the notion of authenticity which is a frequently debated theme in these two areas which are under focus in the paper. Authenticity is differently interpreted in different contexts and by different language theorists and practitioners in the ELT area. Related to authenticity is CBI which is a recent approach within CLT (Communicative Language Teaching). In the ELT community, CBI has been given a lot of interest (Grabe and Stoller, 1997; Fried-Booth, 1986; Haines, 1989) as being a fundamental tenet within CLT. For example, Stryker and Leaver (1997) argue that CBI implies the total integration of language learning and content learning. It represents a significant departure from traditional foreign language teaching methods in that language proficiency is achieved by shifting the focus of instruction from the learning of language per se to the learning of language through the study of a subject matter. Some other researchers (Peachey, 2003; Benitez and Robles, 2009) argue that there are many advantages provided by CBI in language teaching-learning settings.

Similarly, according to Richards (2006), content refers to the information or subject matter that we learn or communicate through language rather than the language used to convey it. It is certain that any language lesson involves content, be it a grammar lesson, a reading lesson or any other kind of lesson. Content of some sort has to be the vehicle which holds the lesson or the exercise together, but in traditional approaches to language teaching content is selected after other decisions have been made. In other words, grammar, texts, skills, and functions are the starting point in planning the lesson or the coursebook and after making these decisions, content is selected. It should be pointed out, however, that CBI has a different starting point. Decisions about content are made first, and other kinds of decisions concerning grammar, skills, and functions are made later. CBI is, thus, based on the following assumptions about language learning:

- i- People learn a language more successfully when they use the language as a means of acquiring information rather than as an end in itself.
- ii- CBI better reflects the learners' needs for learning a second language.
- iii- Content provides a coherent framework that can be used to link and develop all the language skills (Richards, 2006, p.25).

CBI can, then, be used as the framework for a unit of work. CBI need not necessarily be the framework for an entire curriculum but can be used in conjunction with any other type of curriculum. For example, in a business communication course a teacher may prepare a unit of work on the theme of sales and marketing. In conjunction with a sales and marketing specialist, he can first identify key topics and issues in the area of sales and marketing to provide the framework for the course. Then he can proceed by developing a variety of lessons focusing on reading, oral presentation skills, group discussion, grammar, and report writing, all of which are developed out of the themes and topics which form the basis of the course (Richards, 2006).

It sounds that the argument made above about CBI has many benefits for the ESP students and teachers. For the students they learn their specialised courses in English, so they are expected to acquire knowledge of the subject matter course as well as the English skills and some communication strategies, certain types of discourse and genre thanks to the CBI approach which prioritises both the content and the form of the language. I think this is very appealing as a teaching approach and we, as teachers, have to adhere to it and develop it further. Apart from the benefits for the students, the teachers will welcome this theory of teaching and learning ESP. In other words, this pedagogical way of doing things will facilitate their tasks. This is because

teaching a subject matter through English entails using a context. Accordingly, vocabulary and grammar are covered through that context and this may provide an incentive for the students to learn more clearly, easily and efficiently.

As an example of a CBI application within the language classroom is the project work approach (Fried-Booth, 1986; Haines, 1989; Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993) which is at the centre of focus of this article. This approach is particularly of great efficiency in ESP, in general and BE, in particular as it lends itself to: a) text authenticity, b) learner authenticity, c) task authenticity and d) learner involvement and independence (Robinson, 1991). By integrating project work into content-based classrooms, educators create vibrant learning environments that require active student involvement, stimulate higher-level thinking skills, and give students responsibility for their own learning. When incorporating project work into content-based classrooms, instructors distance themselves from teacher-dominated instruction and move toward creating a student community of inquiry involving authentic communication, cooperative learning, collaboration, and problem solving (Stoller, 2002).

II The rationale for Content-Based Instruction

In recent years, CBI has been turned to by language educators and practitioners in order to promote meaningful student engagement with language and content learning. Through CBI learners develop language skills while becoming more knowledgeable citizens of the world. Stoller (2002) states that CBI has been used in a variety of language learning contexts, though its popularity and wider applicability have increased dramatically since the early 1990s. Numerous practical features of CBI make it an appealing approach to language instruction.

In such an approach, the activities of the language class are specific to the subject matter being taught, and are geared to stimulate students to think and learn through the use of the target language (ibid).

Unlike traditional approaches to FL teaching which focus on accuracy through teaching discrete grammatical points and vocabulary items, CLT emphasises a CBI approach which tends to concentrate on the communicative use of language and content rather than form. CBI is likely to set up a context for learning to learners. Such an approach lends itself to the integration of the four skills, the use of authentic materials and students' motivation and involvement (Brinton, Snow and Wesche, 1989). It has been empirically proved that CBI allows for the natural integration of sound language teaching practices such as alternative means of assessment, apprenticeship learning, cooperative learning, integrated-skills instruction, project work, scaffolding, strategy training and the use of graphic organisers (see Grabe and Stoller, 1997 for a developed debate on CBI).

According to Candlin (1987), there is empirical evidence that CBI, in general, and project work, in particular, can be helpful in providing contexts where learners are encouraged to react actively and engage in "purposeful communication". This is because of many reasons: First, this type of work entails the teacher's and students' focus on the communicative use of language and content rather than form unlike traditional approaches to EFL which rather lay emphasis on accuracy i.e., discrete grammatical points and vocabulary items. Second, when learners work on the same topic for some time, they will learn better than when they have reading or writing materials on a different topic every time. Third, it is assumed that that when learners recycle their knowledge by reading from different sources on the same subject, they develop a sense of self-confidence in the project work (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993) and go deeper in the processing

of the materials (Anderson, 1990). Project work, as this study will show, can be associated with real-life preoccupations as well as to the range of academic tasks students will encounter in their future academic and professional life. It is likely to enhance students' interests and motivation and provides them with hands-on experience.

All the factors mentioned above stimulated the researcher to use this particular approach. So, before implementing the project work approach, the researcher was aware of the potential benefits of it.

II Project work as a natural extension of CBI

1-What is project-based learning

Thomas (2000) proposed a definition of project-based learning (PBL) from PBL handbooks as being “a teaching model that organizes learning around projects” and projects as being complex tasks based on challenging questions or problems that involve students in design, problem-solving, decision-making, and/or investigative activities, that give students opportunities to work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time, and culminate in realistic products or presentations (Jones, Rasmussen, and Moffitt, 1997; Thomas, Mergendoller, and Michaelson, 1999). As an extended illustration, Stoller (2006) defines PBL as: (1) having both a process and product; (2) giving students (partial) ownership of the project; (3) extended over a period of time (several days, weeks, or months); (4) integrating skills; (5) developing student understanding of a topic through the integration of language and content; (6) students both collaborating with others and working on their own; (7) holding students responsible for their own learning through the gathering, processing, and reporting of information gathered from target-language resources; (8) assigning new roles and responsibilities to both students and teacher; (9) providing a tangible final product; and (10) reflecting on both the process and the product.

Beckett (2006) adds that the integration of project-based learning into second and foreign language instruction is considered a natural extension of content-based instruction. It originates from Dewey and Kilpatrick's work. According to Stoller (2006), for effective project-based learning to take place, educators need to make sure that project-based learning has a process and product orientation, requires student involvement in topic selection in order to encourage active participation and a sense of ownership in the project, extends over a period of time, is structured in such a way that integration of skills is natural, makes students work both in groups and on their own, requires learners to assume responsibility for their own learning through the process of selecting, gathering, processing and reporting of information acquired from a number of sources (e.g. the World Wide Web, library), results in a tangible end product (e.g. a theatrical performance or multimedia presentation), and concludes with an evaluation of the process and the end product.

2-Benefits of PBL

The modern focus on student-centeredness in language learning has led many teachers to investigate the benefits of incorporating PBL into their English-language classes. A PBL approach enables students to develop and improve their language fluency and accuracy, and at the same time build personal qualities and skills such as self-confidence, problem-solving, decision-making, and collaboration (Fried-Booth, 2002; Stoller, 2006; Beckett and Slater, 2005). Another frequently reported benefit of project-based learning is authenticity of experience, since when students participate in project work, they “partake in authentic tasks for authentic

purposes-both conditions sadly absent from many language classrooms” (Stoller, 2006, p.24). Moreover, in the relevant literature it has been argued that authentic materials, including authentic tasks, help students to develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills, which are very important, since they are life-long, transferable skills to settings outside the classroom (Allen, 2004). Such materials also promote participation in meaningful activities which require authentic language use and can lead to improved language skills (Levine, 2004; Haines, 1989), increased motivation, linguistic development and cultural understanding (Taylor and Gitsaki, 2004). Similarly, in using PBL in their classes, many practitioners often report that students demonstrate increased motivation and engagement, less foreign language anxiety and positive attitudes toward language learning (Lee, 2002; Brophy, 2004; Fragoulis and Tsiplakides, 2009).

3- What project work is

It is argued by many language professionals that we can equate project work with in-class group work, cooperative learning, or more elaborate task-based activities (Stoller, 1997). Hutchinson and Waters’ model (1987) of ESP materials design is an excellent proof of that. It is the purpose of the present paper, however, to demonstrate how project work represents much more than group work itself. It is worth noting in this context that project work is considered “not as a replacement for other teaching materials” but rather as an “approach to learning which complements mainstream methods and which can be used with almost all levels, ages and abilities of students” (Haines, 1989, p 1). In the classroom context, after committing oneself to content learning as well as language learning (i.e., content-based classrooms), the project works have proved efficient as they represent a natural extension of what has already taken place in class (see Appendices 1 and 2). For example, in a BE course, where students are exposed to themes pertaining to the business world, the development of a brochure introducing different departments of a company or describing its products would be a natural outgrowth of the curriculum (the design of a presentation reporting an evaluative study on the company present performance manifested through the SWOT Analysis would be a natural by-product of the lesson) (see Appendix 2).

Throughout my modest experience of teaching BE to undergraduate Tunisian students for five years (at the time of carrying out this action research or case study if it is suitable to call it so), I noticed that most of the students favoured group or team work. This is because they know that individual efforts are not enough and that strength can only be obtained through synergy of efforts. For these reasons, the idea of having some practical research such as a group project work appealed to them. They welcomed it with satisfaction and excitement. These are some of the factors, among others, that stimulated them to positively respond to the challenges of the project work by trying their best to make of it a success.

III Project work as a source of authenticity

1- Authenticity

The notion of authenticity in the language classroom is much debated, but even a cursory reading of the literature will bring to light a confused and contradictory picture (Taylor 1994). It is not surprising that many educators and researchers are themselves completely confused. In part this is because there are different types of authenticity, and these are not always clearly distinguished. In many cases, it is not clear whether we are dealing with authenticity of language, task, situation or learner. For this reason, the present paper will try to clarify each type of

authenticity previously mentioned with the focus led on authenticity of ESP teaching materials round which the central argument of project work revolves.

Breen (1985) distinguishes between four types of authenticity: a) authenticity of texts which is considered as input for learners, b) authenticity of learners' own interpretation of such texts, c) authenticity of the tasks conducive to language learning, and d) authenticity of the actual social situation of the language classroom. Many scholars seem to ignore all these different types of authenticity assuming that there is some sort of global and absolute notion of authenticity which is likely to exist if all the above types of authenticity are simultaneously present. Yet, authenticity is clearly a relative matter and different aspects of it can be present in different degrees. It may be helpful at this point to review a few definitions of authenticity:

i- "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, 1983, p. 46).

ii- "A rule of thumb for authenticity is any material which has not been specifically produced for the purpose of language teaching" (Nunan, 1989, p. 54).

iii- "Authenticity is not a characteristic of a text in itself: it is a feature of a text in a particular context. Therefore, a text can only be truly authentic, in other words, in the context for which it was originally written...we should not be looking for some abstract concept of authenticity, but rather the practical concept of fitness to the learning purpose" (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, p. 159).

iv- "Authenticity is not a quality residing in instances of language but as a quality which is bestowed upon them, created by the response of the receiver. We do not recognise authenticity as something there waiting to be noticed, we realise it in the act of interpretation" (Widdowson 1979, p. 165).

It should be pointed out that it is beyond the scope of this paper to present an extensive and deep review of the literature on authenticity (for an extensive survey of the authenticity trends see Trabelsi, 2011).

As seen from these definitions of authenticity, some think of it as essentially residing in a text while others think of it as being, in some sense, conferred on a text by virtue of the use to which it is put by particular people in particular situations. The other deduction that can be made is that authenticity of texts or materials can be clearly defined, but when we go beyond the text, authenticity is very much a matter of interpretation or interaction with language and it has to do with the appropriate response of the learners

1-1 Text authenticity

Wilkins (1976) argues, in speaking about authentic materials, saying that "such materials will be the means by which he (the learner) can bridge the gap between classroom knowledge and an effective capacity to participate in real language events" (1976, p.79). In other words, the learner should be exposed and be encouraged to deal with similar materials that he will have to encounter in the real world. This is the case for ESP as it demands real-life language use as its model and its goal. Robinson (1980) confirms that by stating that "the use of authentic data is seen as an essential component of an ESP course and also of any communicative syllabus" (1980, p. 35). In the same respect, Lee (1995) argues that a textually authentic document is the one which is not written for teaching purposes, but for real-life communicative purposes. He

adds by saying that “because of their intrinsically communicative quality, textually authentic materials tend to have greater potential for being made learner authentic” (1995, p. 324).

For the case of the project work, it lends itself to the use of authentic data especially in the ESP field. With reference to the present project model, students made use of actual data from many sources such as a company archives, the internet, and interviews with real business people, etc.... These served as an input for the students to process the SWOT Analysis applied on a given company. By carrying out such a project, students started being familiar with in-house materials of companies that they might use in their future career.

1-2 Learner authenticity

As another type of authenticity, learner authenticity is worth reviewing in this respect. Recently there has been considerable interest in the learner’s response to teaching materials irrespective of their nature. Widdowson (1979) argues that authenticity does not reside solely in the text itself, but it is rather created by the ‘appropriate response’ of the learner. He puts it plainly while saying “the learner may simply not feel himself in any way engaged by the text being presented to him and so may refuse to authenticate it by taking an interest” (p. 80). That is to say, text authenticity is created only if the learner identifies with the materials to which he is exposed to and involves himself in responding to them appropriately or rather favourably.

The argument regarding learner authenticity may be clarified by Lee’s (1995) assumption that there four factors involved in establishing it. Pedagogically speaking, these factors can be defined as (a) text factor (materials selection), (b) learner factor (individual differences), (c) task factor (task design) and (d) learner setting factor (learning environment). To these a fifth factor could be added which is teacher factor (teacher’s attitude and teaching approach). All these are interrelated. From another perspective, Clarke (1989) contends that as users of the materials, the needs of the learners should play a central role, and govern factors of text, task, teacher, learner and learner setting. He also points out that learner influence on the language teaching process is potentially significant, both at the macro level of syllabus design and at the micro level of what is done within each lesson or unit.

As the project works entail an engagement from the part of the students in dealing with a particular theme, they did show their willingness and determination to assume their responsibility to proceed with a series of tasks leading them to the creation of a project. This is the case of our sample projects in which students proved positive and ready to undertake them especially that they considered them useful and complementary to their studies, interests and future prospects, hence the authenticity of the documents was somehow ensured.

1-3 Task authenticity

Having ensured text and learner authenticity, project work has another third merit which is the achievement of task authenticity. This results from the attempt to engage the learners’ interest by relating the task to their own life and by providing a purpose for undertaking the activity. This can be manifested implicitly in the information gap or problem solving, role play and simulation. Accordingly, learners may be asked to play themselves in familiar or rather unfamiliar situations or to adopt roles new to them (Breen, 1985). According to Lee (1995) if we like to make tasks be accessible to learners, like materials, then they should be learner authentic, that is, we should make sure that they are both learner and textually authentic. Practically speaking the crucial task design stage may involve the following consideration in order to ensure authenticity:

- i- In reality more than one language skill is employed in order to achieve communicative purposes, hence the recommendation to have an integrated skills approach.
- ii- There should be a context in which the skills are to be practised naturally and meaningfully.
- iii- Task validity must be ensured, that is, both the content and the nature of the task should develop the expected language ability in learners (Bachman, 1990).
- iv- The content of the task should be relevant to the selected authentic materials which are supposed to be used as springboard for the task.
- v- It is the course objectives, the practised skills and learners' preferences which determine whether the task is used as a pre-, practice or post-activity (Lee, 1995).

In fact, the project works reported in this paper entail the sequencing of a series of tasks that students have to go through in order to fulfil the requirements of the project. For example, students have to interview top managers in a company with regard to its present performance, to collect data from its press, navigate in its website to get extra information, compile and analyse the collected data as well as synthesise the whole work in preparation for the presentation stage. These different tasks prepare students for future career needs and requirements.

What the researcher noticed was that the students liked these tasks very much because they were involved in something practical from which they were learning a lot. In other words, they were gaining many skills and a great deal of language.

2- Learner involvement and independence

Robinson (1991) argues that project work is an effective approach especially in an ESP setting because it enhances learner centeredness, that is, it requires personal involvement on the part of the students as they must decide "what they will do and how they will do it" (Fried-Booth, 1986, p. 5). This is the case especially for unstructured projects which are student-based (see Henry's model 1994), but for the case of the present projects, they are rather joint undertakings between the teacher and the students, i.e., semi-structured projects. The effectiveness of this type of projects is guaranteed especially when teachers temporarily relax control of their students and assume the role of guide or facilitator. The teacher can intervene by diligently overseeing the multiple steps of project work, establishing guidelines, monitoring the process and providing instructions in the language when needed.

Stoller (2002) reviewed the literature on the different forms of project work, and concluded that there are particular features that characterise project work, including focus on content rather than language, being student-centered, cooperative and not competitive, integrating skills, being product as well as process oriented, helping students to be attentive to both fluency and accuracy. Last but not least project work is "potentially motivating, stimulating, empowering, and challenging. It usually results in building student confidence, self-esteem, and autonomy as well as improving students' language skills, content learning, and cognitive abilities" (p. 110).

Giving the students freedom to immerse themselves in projects can lead them to become motivated and independent learners (Sheppard and Stoller, 1995). With reference to the present project works, it is the students who chose their themes, their data collection instruments, favoured the application on a particular company and followed the steps of developing the projects but always under the supervision of the teacher who provided his feedback especially in terms of language and not content (this is to remind that the students have been already theoretically tutored on the designing, sequencing and presenting of project works).

In the whole scene, the researcher tried to be a mentor for the whole process. He intervened when things became complicated for the students or when he was called for help. This was done on purpose in order to elicit the students' autonomy and self-responsibility.

IV The characteristics of project work

Many language educators proposed different models of project work and each of them approached it from a different perspective (Fried-Booth, 1986; Haines, 1989; Legutke, 1985; Sheppard and Stoller, 1995), but most of their models share the following features as argued by Stoller (1997):

- i- PW focuses on content learning.
- ii- PW is learner-centred.
- iii- PW is cooperative rather than competitive.
- iv- PW leads to an authentic integration of skills and processing information from several sources reflecting real-life tasks.
- v- PW process is crowned by an end-product (oral presentation, poster session, report...).
- vi- Its value lies in the processing of accomplishing it and not its final product. It enhances students' fluency and accuracy.
- vii- PW enhances students' motivation, stimulation, empowerment and challenge. It leads to students' confidence, self-esteem and autonomy. It improves students' skills and cognitive abilities.

1- Potential configurations of project work

Projects may differ in terms of the degree to which teachers and students decide on the nature and the sequencing of project work activities as delineated by Henry (1994). Projects can reflect real-life concerns and real-world issues. Similarly, they can be linked to students' interests (Legutke and Thiel, 1983). Projects can also differ in data collection techniques and sources of information (see Haines, 1989; Legutke and Thomas, 1991). Projects are also characterised by their difference in the ways that collected findings are reported (See Haines, 1989). According to Stoller (1997), whatever format the configurations may take, projects are generally fulfilled intensively during a short period of time or extended over a few weeks or a full semester. They may be accomplished by students individually or in small groups or as a class. They can take place entirely within the classroom setting or extended beyond its walls into the community or with others via different forms of correspondence.

Regarding the configuration of the projects of the present case study, the students chose performance projects. These are shaped in the form of staged debates, oral presentations, theatrical performances, food fairs or fashion shows. The students also chose oral presentations as one way to report their findings.

2- The project work steps

Project works, whatever configurations they may have, require many stages of development to succeed. Although recommendations as to the best way to develop projects in the classroom vary (Fried-Booth, 1986; Haines, 1989; Katz and Chand, 1993) most are consistent with the eight fundamental step model as suggested by Sheppard and Stoller (1995) who propose it for an ESP classroom. Their model has been refined as a result of being tested in a variety of language classrooms and teacher training courses (Stoller, 1997). The modification of the former model mainly introduces some language intervention steps from the part of the teacher. These additional steps serve to help students complete their projects successfully. They may be summarised as the following:

Step 1: Students and instructor agree on a theme for the project.

- Step 2: Students and instructor determine the final outcome.
Step 3: Students and instructor structure the project.
Step 4: Instructor prepares students for the language demands of information gathering.
Step 5: Students gather information.
Step 6: Instructor prepares students for the language demands of compiling and analysing data.
Step 7: Students compile and analyse information.
Step 8: Instructor prepares students for the language demands of the culminating activity.
Step 9: Students present the final product.
Step 10: Students evaluate the project.

3- A Case study about some projects

3-1 Background

The students reported in the present research study Accounting Sciences at the intermediate level at the Graduate Business School of Sfax, University of Sfax, Tunisia. At the time of carrying out the study, they were in their third year of university study, so they were generally taught 3 hours of English per week. They were exposed to English during two sessions, each lasting one hour and a half on a two semester basis. The English course was taught in the form of TD (“Travaux Dirigés”) which means practice work, that is, a kind of lecture integrated- into-practice work session.

The idea to undertake such project works by all the students in both classes during the English course was motivated by their strong desire to improve their proficiency and their consideration of projects as a tools or means towards their mastery of linguistic structures and pronunciation in English. The second motive was that they would sit for an oral exam which would be a final one at the end of the year, more particularly at the end of the second semester. So, the students of Accounting Sciences showed much more interest and determination than others to be prepared for that occasion. I can confirm, being one of their teachers and one of their future examiners, that particular factor motivates most of them to participate in undertaking projects. They thought that the project would prepare them for the test as it would enhance their oral fluency. The third motive was that these students would have to use English in the workplace after graduation. The students were conscious enough of the challenges awaiting them in the future. They were residents in a very hectic and dynamic economic pole of the Tunisian country, namely, Sfax. This was a very commercial and industrial city in the southern area of the country and considered as the second big city after the capital city of Tunis. Most of its commercial and business transactions were made in English, especially that they would always involve foreigners, hence the necessity of BE.

To present more details about the present project works, students were exposed in class lectures in theory to the theme of Top Management. Actually, this was the second theme after the Manager’s Role. Within this context, the students dealt with SWOT Analysis which was one of the duties of top managers undertaken in order to evaluate the present performance of their company. As a post task to the lesson, all the students were divided into groups of 4 and given the choice to apply SWOT Analysis to any company they may think of (whether locally or universally).

3-2 Procedures

After being introduced to the theme unit of Top Management and its most fundamental vocabulary and concepts, the teacher made a theoretical session on the formation of project works. Meanwhile, he suggested potential topics that may be made into projects such as SWOT Analysis, Top Managers' Roles, The Company Hierarchy, The Company Departments, Business Organisations, on so on. These were dealt with intensively during the course sessions. The students were exposed to these through worksheets including reading comprehension, language and writing tasks. The students were given full freedom of what to choose as a topic for their projects. However, since it was a new experience to them and to the teacher and for the sake of encouragement and empowerment, the teacher promised to help them the students. Semi-structured types of projects were chosen so as the teacher could intervene and monitor the process of the projects' formation in order to stimulate the students' interest and motivation in the process. Adopting Stoller's (1997) model of project work, a ten-step project was followed (see the same steps on page 10 of this paper).

V Evaluation and implications

1- Evaluation

In order to evaluate the whole undertaking of project works as activities in class and adopting a new task-based material design approach, and in conformity with the tenth step of the project, the teacher assigned a questionnaire to the students (see the questionnaire in Appendix 3). The questionnaire was put in French (L2) so as to avoid any ambiguity of words or any misunderstanding. In response to the first question, the students expressed their motivated feelings of strong interest in the communicative language use of English and their desire to break up routine of the class. They were driven by their adherence to proficiency improvement and getting accustomed to research works (investigation, methodology, reporting skills, statistics, data analysis, etc...) and most of all they tried hard to prepare themselves for the final year oral exam of English.

For the second question, the students reported that they had access to language in use in many contexts as they got acquainted with companies' staff and managers. They learned the distinction between what was theoretical and practical (class vs. reality). They acquired presenting skills (in terms of quantity, quality, timing, pronunciation, planning, organising, etc...). They learned how to and what to select among a plethora of documents and data in order to give only the essential and needed output (, i.e., only appropriately sufficient information). Lastly, they satisfied their teacher, thus establishing a good rapport with him and suiting his expectations (material reward). Regarding question 3, the students discovered new lexis, phrases and expressions within business English. They enhanced their communication, research skills and strategies. The project work was an exercise in managing, organising and planning one's data.

In response to question 4, they reported some encountered obstacles. These were mainly technical terms and their translation which were not available in ordinary dictionaries. Some parts of the projects lacked sufficient information (especially data about weaknesses or threats). They lacked internet skills and even if they knew a little, it was time and effort consuming. Students did not have the habit of presenting work in English (that was new to them). They were not also used to working within particular time constraints. They had structural problems (tense/ functions/ forms/ grammar/ vocabulary/ pronunciation). As far as questions 5 and 6 are concerned, the students addressed some tips for their future peers who would be involved in such an activity. They advised them to limit themselves just to necessary information (not caring

about quantity but quality) and to optimise the use of time. They also recommended consulting many sources of information for the sake of reliability and using realia while presenting their works (brochures/ folders/ posters, etc...) in order to impress and attract their audience attention. They made it essential to consult the teacher for feedback. The most essential thing raised was to have self-confidence and work in a group and exchange feedback all the time.

Concerning question 7, the students advised the teacher to assign feasible project topics and especially formerly treated ones in order for students to follow the same principles and guidelines. They wanted the teacher to elicit much more student involvement and motivation in the undertaking. Students recommended having some mini-workshops or mini-seminars so as to sensitise the students to the importance of projects as well as how to deal with them. They asked for more time devoted to presenting and discussing projects. Lastly, they recommended making of projects a necessarily regular class activity within the course or the curriculum. For question 8, the students argued that they were in favour of the teacher's presence as this would facilitate their tasks (a monitor/ guide/ supervisor/ regulator) and would bring harmony to the group with his consultation and feedback when necessary (he clarified what was required from them), i.e., he would set them right. His presence reduced their anxiety and mystery. Yet, it was only a minority who expressed their unwillingness to work with teacher simply because it would disturb their way of thinking and not foster their self-reliance.

Responding to question 9, the students recommended using dictionaries and reading in English and focusing on phonology and morphology. Lastly, they required the consultation and the help of others especially advanced colleagues. For the last item of the questionnaire, which was a kind of a general feedback concerning the PW, most students, despite the obstacles and constraints met, stated that PW was a good oral exam preparation. It was a good initiative that helped them to acquire new different types of skills. It enhanced their self-esteem and personal pride (because of the achievement itself) as for some it was source of self-satisfaction. It was a good method, however challenging it may be, which engaged students in a pleasurable task of presenting a project reflecting students' efforts. It improved their language level and helped them to become operative and not merely recipient language learners. Finally and this was mostly shared by all, English as an international language in the world deserved such an undertaking of PW.

Such experience of the PW was were rewarding but very challenging at the same time, especially on the part of the teacher. It required a lot of preparation, commitment, intervention, monitoring, control, and feedback. However its success would rest on the determination of the students to undertake it. This is because if they are voluntarily persuaded to do it, they can never be urged to experience it. So, one can deduce that it depends on what type of students in order to see if PW can be a worthwhile or not in a certain context.

2- Implications

The implications that can be extrapolated from the present ESP project work approach experience are the following: First, teachers are advised to consider their students' long-term language needs. Second, they are also invited to identify the social and professional contexts where their students are likely to operate after graduation. Third we, as instructors, have to think of similar projects that require the use of language that our students will be asked to fulfil in the future while considering what is feasible, i.e., what is within our students' reach. Fourth, there is no point in insisting that our students necessarily interview native speakers of English and we should not abandon the idea of forming a project if ideal circumstances are not available as most professional conversations in English may be carried on among non-natives. Fifth, we should not

give up simply because a pool of native speakers or authentic printed materials are unavailable close to hand. Last, but not least, we should be involved in a lot of planning, in other words, before introducing the project, we have to identify topics of possible interests, the educational value of the outcome, corresponding activities and students' material or cognitive needs in conducting the project. In a nutshell, planning is critical.

VI Conclusion

The present paper reports the rationale, the procedures and the findings of a CBI by-product which is a PW undertaken by business English intermediate students in a Tunisian tertiary education context. The thrust of argument is that an ESP project work can be considered as a vehicle for authenticity as it is a source of learner, text and task authenticity, each of which contributes to the ESP learners' involvement and independence which are two advanced steps towards learner autonomy.

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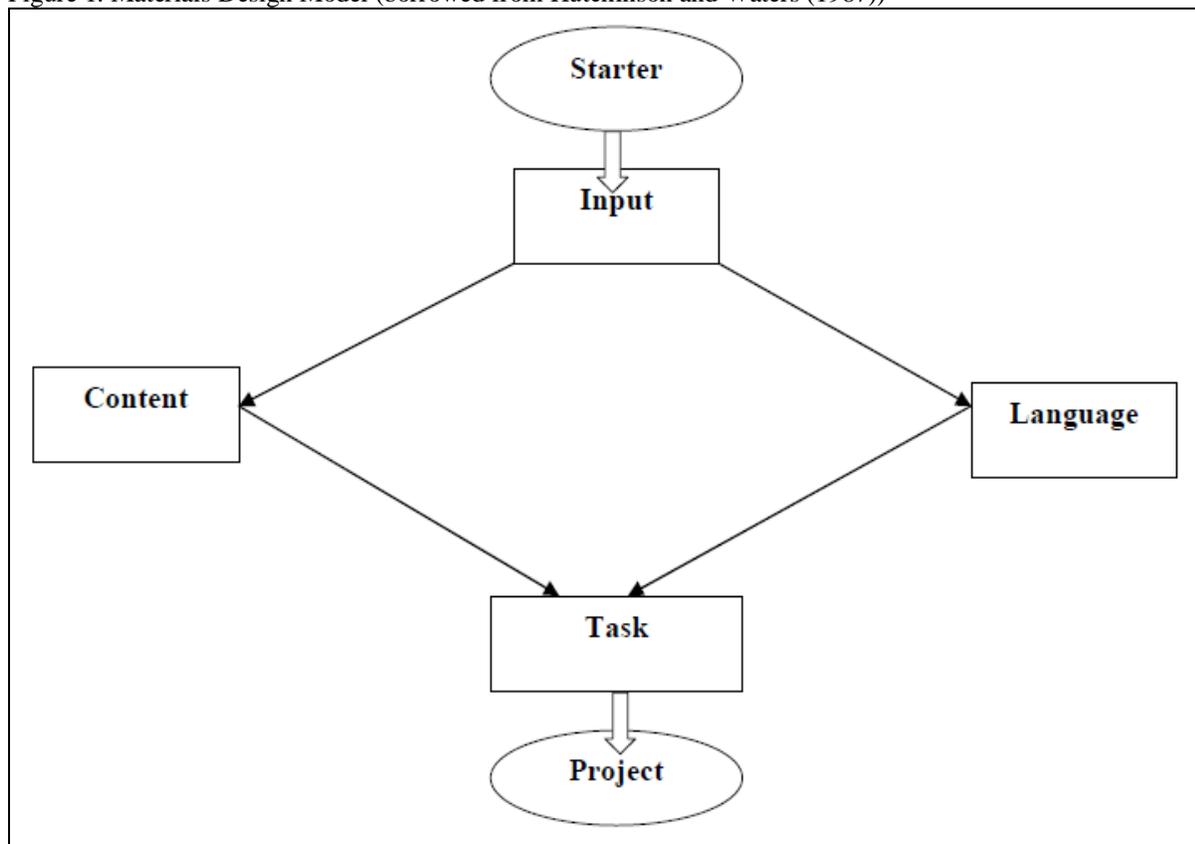
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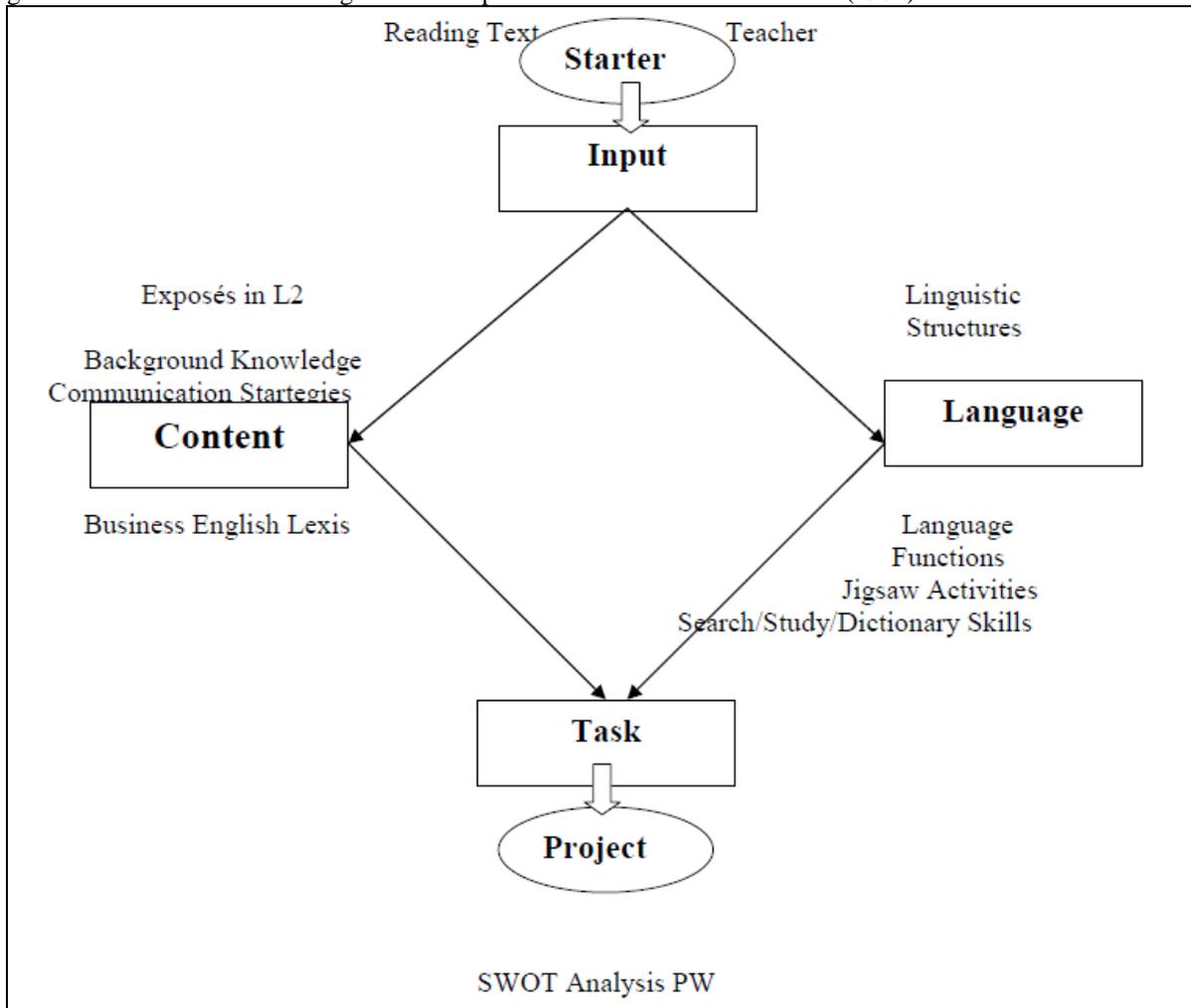
Appendix 1

Figure 1. Materials Design Model (borrowed from Hutchinson and Waters (1987))



Appendix 2

Figure 2. A refined materials design model adapted from Hutchinson and Waters (1987)



Appendix 3

The Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions below concerning the importance of project works in improving students' level of language proficiency. We can assure you that your answers will remain confidential. In case you are interested in the findings we can share them with you.

Question 1: Why did you choose to undertake a project work? (give your reasons)

Question 2: What have you gained from this experience?

Question 3: What are the new acquisitions you got from it? (on both form and content levels)

Question 4: What obstacles have you encountered while working on your project with reference to language, methodology, information availability, information sources, information sufficiency, time constraints and the project presentation)

Question 5: If we propose on you to redo the work, what would you do?

Question 6: What kinds of tips you could address to you future peers?

Question 7: What kinds of tips you could address to your teacher of English?

Question 8: Are you in favour of the teacher's intervention in PW formation?

Question 9: How to surmount the language while undertaking the PW? What strategies and skills you recommend others to do?

Question 10: What is your general feedback concerning the PW experience? Justify your answer.

Thank you for your Cooperation