The rationale for content based education essay

Introduction

Recently a growing interest has been allotted to Content-Based Instruction (Grabe and Stoller 1997; Fried-Booth 1986; Haines 1989) as being a fundamental tenet within CLT (Communicative Language Teaching). The project work approach (Fried-Booth 1986; Haines1989; Bereiter and Scardamalia 1993) is an example of a CBI application within the language classroom. This approach is particularly of great efficiency in ESP (English for Specific Purposes), in general and Business English, in particular as it lends itself to: a) text authenticity, b) learner authenticity, c) task authenticity and d) learner involvement and independence (Robinson 1991).

This paper tackles the notion of project work in a Tunisian ESP context with reference to Stoller's model of project work (1997) and Hutchinson and Waters' approach to materials design (1987). The paper reviews some research literature on the practical guidelines for sequencing and designing a sample project work and reports an actually practical application of project in a business English context.

The rationale for content-based instruction

Unlike traditional approaches to FL teaching which focus on accuracy through teaching discrete grammatical points and vocabulary items, CLT emphasizes 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 organizers (See Grabe and Stoller 1997 for a detailed debate on CBI). Although each of these teaching practices is worthy of discussion, this paper will content itself solely with approaching project work and its role in CBI format.

Project work as a natural extension of CBI

It is assumed 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 reminding 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, 1).

In the classroom context, after committing oneself to content learning as well as language learning (i. e., content-based classrooms), project work proves efficient as it represents a natural extension of what is already taking place in class (See Appendices 1 and 2). For example, in a business English 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[1]the SWOT Analysis would be a natural by-product of the lesson) (See Appendix 2).

Project work as a source of authenticity

Defining authenticity

The notion of authenticity in the language classroom is much debated and their many approaches that attempted to define in a particular way. Since it is beyond the scope of this paper to review as many approaches as possible to authenticity, Hutchinson and Waters' approach will be used as it fits in with the sequencing of a task-based project work. (See Appendix 1)

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, 159)

For other definitions of authenticity see Harmer 1983; Nunan 1989; Breen 1985; Wilkins 1976; Robinson 1980; Widdowson 1979/1978; Clarke 1989)

Text authenticity

Lee (1995) argues that a textually authentic document is the one which is not written for teaching purposes, but for real-life communicative purposes. She adds by saying that " because of their intrinsically communicative quality, textually authentic materials tend to have greater potential for being made learner authentic" (1995, 324). 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.

For the case of the project work, it lends itself to the use of authentic data especially in ESP. With reference to the present project model, students made use of actual data from many sources such as a company archives, the internet, an interview, etc…. These serve as an input for the students to process the SWOT Analysis applied on a given company. By such a project, students start being familiar with in-house materials of companies that they may use in their future career.

Learner authenticity

As another type of authenticity, 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 on more fifth factor could be added, teacher factor (teacher's attitude and teaching approach). All these are interrelated.

With regard to the present project work, it entails an engagement from the part of students in dealing with a particular theme, it does testify 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 project in which students prove positive and ready to undertake it especially that they consider it useful and complementary to their studies,

interests and future prospects, hence the authenticity of the documents is thus ensured.

Task authenticity (With reference to Hutchinson and Waters' Materials

Design Model 1987, see Appendix 1)

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. Practicaly speaking the crucial task design stage may involve the following consideration in order to ensure authenticity:

The integration of the four skills.

The four skills are practiced in context and for a purpose.

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).

The relevance of the task to the authentic materials.

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 work reported in this paper entails the sequencing of a series of tasks that students have to go through in order to fulfill 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 according to which they may be supposed to replicate them in reality.

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, 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 project, it is rather a joint undertaking between the teacher and the students, i. e., a semi-structured project.

Referring to the project work at hand, it is the students who chose the theme, the data collection instruments, favoured the application on a particular company and followed the steps of developing the project 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 work).

The characteristics of project works:

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

– PW focuses on content learning.

– PW is learner-centered.

– PW is cooperative rather than competitive.

– PW leads to an authentic integration of skills and processing

information from several sources reflecting real-life tasks.

– PW process is crowned by an end-product (oral presentation,

poster session, report...). Its value lies in the processing of

accomplishing it and not its final product. It enhances students'

fluency and accuracy.

– PW enhances students' motivation, stimulation, empowerment

and challenge. It leads to students' confidence, self-esteem and

autonomy. It improves students' skills and cognitive abilities

(Stoller 1997).

The project work steps

Although there does not exist only one way of arranging the project work steps, it is assumed that (Fried-Booth 1986; Haines 1989; Katz and Chand 1993) most experts in this field agree on the eight fundamental step model as suggested by Sheppard and Stoller (1995) who proposed 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. (See Appendix 3)

A sample project
Background

Having situated the project work approach to teaching in ELT in general and ESP in particular in its wider literature, now it is worth mentioning the background of the application of a sample project undertaken by business English students in a Tunisian context. In fact, the students involved in the project reported in this paper are studying Accounting Sciences at the intermediate level at the Graduate Business School of Sfax, University of Sfax, Tunisia. They have been exposed to General English for 4 years at the secondary school level and two years at the tertiary one. Now, in their third year of university experience they are generally taught 3 hours of English a week, with the exposure to English during two sessions, each lasting one

hour and a half during two semesters. The English course is taught in the form of TD (" Travaux Diriges") which means practice work, that is, a kind of lecture-integrated-into-practice work session.

The idea to undertake such a project work in English is inspired by the fact that students are involved in some " exposés" which are presentations of a prepared work outside the class assigned by the teachers of other subjects. This may be accomplished by individuals, pairs and groups. Yet, since most of the other specialist subjects are taught in French, which is L2 for Tunisians, students present all their exposes in French. They have no experience to do so in English. So, as a new undertaking, it is interesting that exploring it is in itself an achievement as it may yield new information on students' degree of proficiency and may serve as a tool of evaluation of their mastery of linguistic structures and pronunciation in English. What motivates as well such undertaking is that these third year business English students will have to use English at work after graduation.

In fact, we are based in a very hectic and dynamic economic pole of the Tunisian country, it is Sfax. It is a very commercial and industrial city in the southern part of the country and considered as the second big city after the capital city of Tunis. Most of its firms and business transactions are made in English especially that they involve foreigners, hence the necessity of Business and especially Accounting Sciences students to have at least the " abcs" or the basics of the English language.

On the light of that, students of Accounting Sciences showed much more interest and determination than other students within the same level of

education as they are generally orally examined at the end of the year. They have to sit for an oral test at the end of the second semester. So, that particular factor motivates most of them to participate to projects. They think that the project will prepare them for the test as it lends itself to their fluency especially the oral one.

To introduce the present project work, students were exposed in theory to the theme of Top Management. Actually, it is the second theme after the Manager's Role. Within this context, we study SWOT Analysis which is 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, students were divided into groups and given the choice to apply SWOT Analysis to any company they may think of (whether locally or universally). After listening to some samples of students' tasks, it was clear that they grasped what SWOT Analysis meant. Students were even assigned to do the same thing individually as homework to ensure their mastery of it.

In due course, the objective was to make them aware of the differences between the components of that analysis and to sort out the maximum of items supporting it stressing at the same time correctness in terms of structures (compounds, singular/plural, present tense, prepositions, and past participles) and fluency while reporting the whole product to the class (See Appendix 2). That is, they have to use cohesive devices (conjunctions/ discourse markers) while listing the four parts of the SWOT Analysis with the emphasis led on the right pronunciation of syllables and words in order to make oneself understood by one's audience.

Procedures

After being introduced to the theme unit of Top Management and its most fundamental vocabulary and concepts, the teacher proposed the idea of undertaking a project work. He introduced it to students as to what it meant and the steps it took. 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 Organizations, on so on. These were dealt with intensively during the course sessions. Students were exposed to these through worksheets including reading comprehension, language and writing tasks. So, students became familiar with the topic of Top Management.

Students were given the choice of what to choose as a topic for the project and were encouraged to form groups so as to share responsibility. Since it was a new experience to them and to the teacher, the idea of fulfilling a project was optional as it was thought of as an exploratory experience or a study to be supported or abandoned according to its results and feedback. There was a group of four students who expressed their willingness to undertake a project on SWOT Analysis. For the sake of encouragement and empowerment the teacher promised the students to help them and decided to have a semi-structured project in order to stimulate their interest and motivation in the process. The teacher thought that that type would be a suitable model of project whereby to start with. Accordingly, a ten-step project was followed (Stoller's Model 1997 was adopted).

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

Through discussion and negotiation in class, the students expressed their agreement to tackle SWOT Analysis empirically speaking. They got the support of the teacher who showed his determination to monitor the process and to cooperate with them. This was done on purpose in order to reassure them and build their confidence. Both parties finally agreed to choose a real company located in the region and to apply SWOT on it. The teacher reminded the students of its basic components.

Step 2: Students and instructor determine the final outcome

Both the teacher and students considered the nature of the project, its objectives and the most appropriate means to culminate the project. As a convenient and feasible end-product in terms of requirements of time, effort and materials, it was generally agreed that an oral presentation followed by a written report summarized through an OHP would be satisfying. The designed students would divide roles in collecting, compiling, analysing and reporting information about SWOT of the chosen company.

Step 3: Students and instructor structure the project

After determining the starting and the end points of SWOT Analysis project, came the stage of structuring its body. Accordingly, students were faced with the following considerations: What is the information needed to complete the project? Under the supervision of the teacher, much debate centered round the quality of the data to be collected. Referring back to the lesson on Top Management, students were asked to sort out the maximum of items on the

internal as well as the external factors of a given company. Another preoccupation was how to obtain the information required.

The objective of the project, as the teacher affirmed on many occasions, was to advocate a process of using language in context for a purpose and not necessarily be primarily concerned with collecting a specific kind of data. Simply put, students were asked to use only English during the investigation. After all no one cares about the situation of that company or whether it has strengths or weaknesses, but what is relevant here is how to familiarize students with such an operation that they may be asked to replicate or something similar in their future career.

Fortunately, it was possible to have access to an English speaking company, namely, The British Gas Company in Sfax. It is within the students' reach and has a long experience in its field. Accordingly, students, with the consent of the teacher, agreed that they would collect data by means of interviews, internet search, and document survey. The third consideration concerned how to analyse the gathered and compiled data. Both the teacher and the students found it suitable to classify the data according to the components required. Then, students were concerned with how to share tasks, that is, they were to be supposed to divide activities. Since they were four they decided to do the following:

The first student would survey the press documents of the company and provide a brief summary with reference to SWOT. The second student would be charged with the design and execution of the interview to be addressed to one or two top managers. The third student would navigate on the WWW

in order to look for specific data on SWOT Analysis and consult the website as it may include relevant information on the same subject. The fourth student would compile the three summaries handed in to him by his three colleagues and lay them out in one single report paper which could be ready to be presented at the end of the process.

Seen from this perspective, the students provided a perfect example of a Jigsaw fashion, that is, they were complementary in fulfilling the project. Each of the four students expressed his commitment to the task with which he was entrusted. The last consideration was fixing the time span allotted to the project. Since it was a new experience of an exploratory nature, the teacher reassured the students that they would take their time in doing the project. The project was done outside the classroom because the English course was tied up to a program and certain timing requirements. The project work was incorporated into the theme unit as a post activity. It was introduced in the final part of the unit, which was considered as a starter to the project, but its accomplishment was resumed beyond the class under the supervision of the teacher who held regular meetings with the students for the sake of feedback and consultation.

Step 4: Instructor prepares students for the language demands of information gathering.

In consultation with the group, the teacher determined the language demands of the information gathering stage (5). For each task that the project involves, the students were supposed to need language instruction (language skills and communication strategies), which necessitated the presence of the teacher. For the student responsible for the interview, the

teacher provided him with some tips on questions formation (W/H + Yes/No questions), introduced conversational gambits, stressed the pronunciation and showed him how to take notes (shorthand, abbreviations, symbols, figures, etc).

As for the student concerned with the internet search, the teacher gave him his consent as to how to use this technology, for example, showing him the search engines and how they work starting from entering particular words or phrases search. The student was advised to have his search more and more focused and narrowed down. The teacher dealt with the most useful buttons and icons that the student may use. Concerning the third student entrusted with surveying the company press, he was consented on how to skim and scan documents. He may use the business English dictionary as an aid tool to help him tackling new terms. He was to contact the teacher when necessary. Finally, the fourth student who was expected to compile and classify the data collected was advised to use charts, grids and tables. For the summary, he had to involve only the most pertinent information to SWOT and to exclude generalities. He was to list the items using some grammatical/ structural tools such as compounds/past participles.

Step 5: Students gather information

After sharing in the discussion on both how to collect data about SWOT Analysis and what language skills and strategies and structures needed to fulfill the mission, students are now ready to administer their methodological tools, namely, the interview, internet search and survey and organize it in order for others in the team can make sense of it. In the project highlighted in the present context, students read course reading and worksheets in

search of relevant data, used the dictionary to face up new terminology; navigated on the web of the company under analysis, surveyed the company press in search for the required information and consulted the teacher whenever they are stuck in an obstacle. During this data-gathering stage, the teacher, knowing the issues and propositions being reached, also enquired about the steps of the process and saw the extent of their advancement.

Step 6: Instructor prepares students for the language demands of compiling and analyzing data

Having successfully gathered information now comes the challenge of organizing and synthesizing information collected by the team members from different sources. At this stage, the instructor can intervene in the process by preparing students for the demands of the compilation and analysis stage by empowering them with ways to deal with data and select only relevant materials and care about quality and not quantity (this is to remind that it is an evaluative and qualitative diagnosis of SWOT).

To apply this step on the present project, the students researching on SWOT Analysis now face the challenge to filter the SWOT elements from the documents discovered. They have to skim and scan through the data and to make a four-column table in order to classify the information as they face some difficulty of new terminology; they have to use a dictionary. Group discussion helped them cross check each other's data and their relevance to the topic. They have to proofread from time to time. All of these procedures take place under the supervision and the eyes of the teacher.

Step 7: Students compile and analyze information

Taking the previous considerations of step 6, students compile and analyze information to identify the relevant data to the project. Each student weighs the value of the collected data, discards some because of their inappropriacy and kept the rest. With reference to the SWOT project work reported in this study, the students have to infer from the documents available to them the SWOT elements, that is, students have to interpret from the data what can be classified as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. They needed the consent of the teacher sometimes when faced with new terms.

Step 8: Instructor prepares students for the language demands of the culminating activity

At this point in the development of the project, the instructor can provide students with the language improvement activities to help them deliver the project work presentation successfully. This may relate to the practice of oral presentation skills, pronunciation, organization of ideas and eye contact. This phase concerns revising and proofreading the data collected and classified for the project work. There may be some inappropriate or exaggerated expressions or phrases. Each student has to bear in mind what he fulfilled and be ready to report to the class how that was done. For the case of the present project, the teacher held a final meeting with the students concerned and put the final touches bearing in mind each member task in order to share in presenting the whole product. What was pointed out was that the message should be conveyed clearly to the class and to show to their peers how the whole thing came into being, i. e., feasible. The objective is to make this new experience continue to exist. It is rather an exercise in

enhancing learners' motivation, self-confidence, cooperation and complementarity.

Step 9: Students present the final product

Having organized a timetable for all the projects presentations, the students had to stick to certain dates according to which each group was asked to present the work. Students only had 15/20 mns to deliver their projects allowing 15/20mns for discussion. They got used to feel less pressed and adapted themselves to the new situation.

Step 10: Students and teacher evaluate the project

(See the evaluation part below)

Evaluation of the project work and its implications: Evaluation

In order to evaluate the whole undertaking of project work as an activity 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 4). The questionnaire was put in French (L2) so as to avoid any ambiguity of words or any misunderstanding. In response to the first item relating to the rationale behind doing the project, 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 to prepare themselves for the final year oral exam of English.

The second question asked them about the gains sought from the project. In response to that, 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, organizing, 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). As for item 3, it concerned the new linguistic acquisitions, 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, organizing and planning one's data.

Item 4 elicited their reaction to the 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).

Items 5 and 6 were mainly about some tips for future peers who would be involved in such an activity. They advised them to limit the focus just on necessary information (not caring about quantity but quality) and to optimize the use of time. They were also advised to consult many sources of information for the sake of reliability and validity. They had to consult the teacher for feedback. They may recommend the use of realia while presenting their works (brochures/ folders/ posters, etc...) in order to impress and attract their audience attention. The most essential thing they advised them on was to have self-confidence and work in a group and exchange feedback all the time.

Concerning item 7, this time students were asked to give some tips to the teacher. As such, they advised him to assign feasible project topics and especially formerly treated ones in order for students to follow the same principles and guidelines. They added th