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Curtain up for ESP:
Learning Business English in a Theatre Project

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At Reutlingen University in Germany students from different countries and disciplines can learn business English within the framework of a theatre production. In the "Business English Theatre" they work in an international project team staging a play with a business focus and thus improve both their language, social and professional skills.

As a multi-channel approach drama addresses not only the cognitive but also physical, emotional and behavioural levels. In evaluations of the project learners have testified that they improved especially in regard to vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency.

The focus in the project is on preparing a play (written by the director and/or with the students) for performance on campus, thus the approach has a focus on a final product.

In the play learners can "live through" situations from professional life by acting out for example situations like meetings, presentations or job interviews within a fictional world. In contrast to role-plays (a common feature of business English classes nowadays) preparing for a performance students have to work on their roles more intensively and for a longer time, thus increasing identification. Repeated rehearsal of scenes allows a special focus on pronunciation and accuracy, while the use of English as a working language throughout the whole project allows for spontaneous language production and improving fluency.

Apart from fostering language skills, taking over a role and discussing this with peers can further students' empathy. Owing to the transnational set-up of the group and the strong project orientation students have also the opportunity to improve their intercultural competence and project management skills.

In my paper I would like to look at the project's concept and practical implementation and discuss its potentials and limitations. The project is now in its 5th year and with drama-in-education becoming more of a mainstream practice in the German education system, there is hope that remaining institutional limitations

will eventually be overcome and that projects like this will enter the official curriculum.

1. Introduction

Theatre and teaching business English – at first glance these might look two worlds which cannot be combined. However, a theatre-based approach cannot only be used for general language teaching, it can also have its place in teaching English for special purposes (ESP). This paper outlines a theatre project that aims at teaching business English to university students within a full-scale theatre-production. While drama in business education has received occasional attention in publications [1,2,3] the author knows of no comparable theatre-project in the area of teaching business English.

2. The project and its organisational context

The aim of the Business English Theatre project (BET) is to provide an alternative approach to business English to students at Reutlingen University of Applied Sciences, mostly from business and technical programmes. A second group taking part in the project are students from the neighbouring university in Tübingen, mostly from liberal arts and science programmes. The project was founded in 2009 and is offered every semester as an extracurricular activity. In most semesters the composition of the group has been multi-national with 30-50% of the group consisting of international students. The working language throughout the project is English.

2.1 Business English in a theatre project

Based on a review of business English textbooks and other teaching material, for the purpose of the project, "business English" is defined as sets of specific vocabulary (for example from finance, human resources, project management etc.) and sets of discourse types common in business (for example applying for a job, welcoming guests, holding a meeting). Both, vocabulary and discourse types, are practised within the theatre project.

2.2 Project structure and timing

BET is based on a product-oriented approach – a full-length play or a series of short plays written for the project is rehearsed during the semester (ca. 10 weeks), culminating in a public performance on campus. While process-oriented approaches have their advantages, such as less pressure on participants, as Moody [4] points out, a product-oriented approach was chosen because in a test-run it attracted more participants than a theatre-course without performance and

students regard the final public show as a motivating factor (similar: Fonio 2012 [5]).

2.3 Script development

The custom-tailored scripts are usually written by the director and so far two approaches to script-development have been applied:

- Literary approach: adapting a classic text of English literature to a modern business context (Shakespeare plays, Alice in Wonderland), thus not only focusing on the business aspect but also enriching students' cultural knowledge. Even though the underlying pre-text is not studied by the group they at least acquire an impression of its content and often at the beginning of a literature-based script a film-version of the original is watched to familiarise the students with it.

- Topical approach: based on different non-fictional texts or material from popular culture the script is developed (for example a short plays about textile production, or a sketch based on a financial report).

When time allows, students are integrated into script-development, for example by brainstorming sessions at the start of the semester or by letting them improvise scenarios and integrating ideas from the improvised scenes into the script.

3. Benefits for language learning

The general linguistic aim of the project is to improve students' pronunciation and oral fluency. The ESP-specific aim is to increase their business-related vocabulary and to familiarise them with discourse types from business life.

3.1 Living through business situations in a safe environment

The director makes sure that typical situations from business life are featured in the script, such as making enquiries, meetings, presentations etc. Thus the students can 'live through' situations they will likely face in their future working-life within the safe atmosphere of a play. In contrast to conventional role-plays (a common feature of business English classes), in theatre there is a greater emphasis on character, story, and emotions. Combined with the fact that students preparing for a performance have to work on their roles intensively and for a longer time, identification with the roles is more intense than in role-plays, which seems to have positive effects on their motivation and long-term learning.

3.2 Vocabulary

The students are exposed to new vocabulary (business-specific and general) explicitly in their script, less explicitly in interactions throughout the project-work. While in traditional vocabulary learning students still mostly work with lists of words and phrases, vocabulary in a theatre-project is studied in context when students learn the lines of their scenes by heart and listen repeatedly to the lines of their fellow actors.

In contrast to the fast real-life communication where words need to be at hand within fractions of seconds, working with scripted scenes allows students a sloweddown way to encounter and practise new vocabulary. For scene work, actors need to exactly understand what they and their scene-partners say in order to find a suitable reaction. In rehearsal intense discussion about what exactly happens in a scene is common, and sometimes multiple interpretations might be considered before it is decided how a specific line of text should be played. This gives students the opportunity to intensely and repeatedly deal with new vocabulary, thus giving them an opportunity for sustainable learning.

3.3 Pronunciation

As Fonio/Genicot 2011 [6] outline, a product-oriented theatre project can be more beneficial to pronunciation practice than process-oriented approaches. For a public performance more importance is attached to accuracy in pronunciation and students are more motivated to pay attention to this aspect. Since in rehearsals scenes are practised more than once there is repeated occasion for the correction of particular pronunciation mistakes – as experience shows correcting a pronunciation mistake once is often not enough but repeated correction usually succeeds.

3.4 Fluency

Even though in rehearsing scripted scenes the focus is not on spontaneous speech production, students can nevertheless improve also their fluency. They are immersed in English throughout the project and have to speak English freely and spontaneously for example when giving feedback to other students, asking for help or answering questions from the director and other students. Also in improvisation exercises and warm-up games which are part of the rehearsal process spontaneous language-production is required. Moreover, students are strongly encouraged to use English in phases of small-group work: here the international composition of the group is beneficial as it makes the use of English as a lingua franca more natural than if the group was composed solely of German students.

3.5 Social and motivational aspects

Connected with the linguistic aims are social and motivational aspects, namely to give the students an opportunity to practise project- and teamwork, make intercultural experiences, and increase their language-learning motivation.

As the group has to work for a common goal (the show) and putting on a show is a complex project, team-work skills are practised and also a certain amount of self-management skills (time-planning, learning lines, etc.). Depending on the group's composition, students can also assist with marketing, design or technical aspects (see also Giebert 2014a [7]) and thus have the opportunity to practise skills which they have special talent for and/or which are relevant to their future professions. This can serve as an additional motivator, as Carson (2012) points out [8].

Another aspect which students can profit from for their future professional life are intercultural experiences made within an international project group. Intercultural aspects can moreover be explicitly focused on in the script of the play (see also Giebert 2014b [9]) if the play's topic allows for it. A number of aspects of how drama in general is conductive to intercultural learning - such as change of perspective through role-taking and the focus on all aspects of communication, not only the verbal ones – has been outlined for instance by the contributions in Byram/Fleming 1998 [10].

In regard to motivational aspects it can be said that approaching language learning from a different angle can help learners who have been demotivated by traditional language classes. The projects gives them the feeling that they are part of a group striving for a common aim (and not competing for grades), integrates physical aspects and the students' whole personalities and generally gives them the idea that language learning can be an enjoyable activity.

Moreover, the fact that drama enables students to practise language actively and (to a certain degree) authentically but in a safe environment, can lead to a higher level of confidence among the learners, which can in turn be positive for their motivation to continue learning the foreign language.

4. Evaluation

In 2009, 2010 and 2011 participants were asked to evaluate the project via interviews and online questionnaires and the benefits described above were those confirmed by the participants (for a more detailed report see Giebert 2011 and 2012 [11, 12]). Participants felt an improvement in pronunciation, fluency and vocabulary and they mentioned a gain in intercultural experiences, a greater confidence in using English and a higher language learning motivation as their personal learning outcomes. Most participants felt that their grammar and written expression had not improved through the project. As the evaluation was solely a self-assessment by participants this impression has so far not been validated by actual pre- and post-tests of language competence.

5. Challenges and limitations

As hinted at under point 4, incorporating language tests would be desirable in order to validate the effectiveness of the project but this has proven difficult. As the project is offered as an extracurricular activity with an open entry policy, time and the project's voluntary character are limiting factors in several ways: First, there is only a 10-11 week slot for conducting the project because the students at Reutlingen University study under several differing academic calendars. Secondly, it often takes several weeks until a semester's group is complete which impedes the setting of a pre-test. Thirdly, at the end of a production-cycle it has proven to be virtually impossible to assemble the group for a post-test because at that time the official exam period begins and students are busy studying for their compulsory exams.

6. Conclusion

Despite the limitations outlined above, the project has been running for 5 years now and as drama in (language) education is becoming more of a mainstream practice in Germany there is hope that the project will eventually become more strongly institutionalized. New, interdisciplinary and action-oriented forms of teaching and learning are sought for by German educators and this might eventually lead to the integration of drama projects into the official curriculum, which in turn would open up new horizons also for research projects on this field and for this project.

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