

Alexey Tymbay*

Technical University of Liberec, Czech Republic
alexey.tymbay@tul.cz

BALANCING AUTHENTIC CONTENT AND “HOT TOPIC” DISCUSSIONS IN AN ESP CLASSROOM

Abstract

The article is based on a feedback survey and the author’s teaching experience in finding a balance between authenticity and acceptability of study materials used in ESP courses for International Relations students. The results of the survey conducted among the students of the “Borders and Migration” Bachelor’s course demonstrate that authentic articles and video clips on the current issues of foreign and migration policy agenda, although entailing engaging discussions, may trigger certain resentment and uneasy feelings. A survey among the course teachers also shows their awareness of the possible unexpected reactions when dealing with authentic materials on “hot topics.” Nevertheless, both survey groups state that they prefer authentic materials to excessively edited texts and videos as they believe that “censored” papers may eventually distort the true vision of political realia and impede the formation of students’ professional competencies. As a result, it is suggested that an ESP (International Relations) course should encourage an open discussion as a way of overcoming possible culture and expectation differences. It is also recommended to devise appropriate tasks for developing students’ critical thinking skills. Additionally, ESP practitioners are instructed to organize a range of follow-up integration activities and carefully consider the balance of opinions presented to neutralize the adverse effects of the inciting content.

310

Key words

authentic materials, mixed background ESP classes, inciting content, emotional response.

* Corresponding address: Alexey Tymbay, Studentská 1402/2, Liberec 1, Czech Republic.

1. INTRODUCTION

English for International Relations courses traditionally include plenty of materials coming from a wide range of authentic sources, including official web pages of governmental institutions, news outlets, and various media agencies. ESP practitioners resort to authentic texts and videos as a source of "in-house" materials when they experience a lack of up-to-date ESP textbooks that would satisfy the needs of their students (Bocanegra-Valle, 2010). This is particularly true for the newly developed ESP courses or when the situation in the field of studies changes rapidly and requires constant updates (Lesiak-Bielawska, 2015: 20).

For effective language instruction of students aspiring for jobs in international humanitarian organizations, the Technical University in Liberec (TUL) (the Czech Republic) devised a special English program – "Borders and Migration" – covering the topics of the problematic areas of international cooperation, which is aimed at educating global citizens capable of assisting in the solution of various migration crises. Since the geopolitical situation in this field changes relatively fast, the ESP materials for the course have to be regularly updated to reflect the current state of international affairs. However, in the current geopolitical crisis, the syllabus creators face an extra challenge that the very choice of new study materials has become problematic as most authentic English texts on the topics of bilateral and multilateral relations with Russia (Russia – USA, Russia – UK, Russia – EU) contain severe anti-Russian rhetoric. With the number of Russian students in the Czech universities being traditionally high, there is now an open question of whether this overt criticism of Russia belongs in the classroom.

Understandably, since the situation concerning Russia is just unfolding, there is not much research data on the Russian students' reactions to the "hot topics" discussed in ESP (International Relations) courses; however, general sociological studies of minority groups describe a whole range of potentially negative emotions that can arise in mixed background environments, ranging from self-distancing and ethnocentricity to feeling threatened and hurt (Gregurović, 2018). With the arrival of Ukrainian refugees, the scope of the students immediately impacted by the geopolitical events has widened considerably as many English courses all over the Czech Republic also include a relatively high number of students coming from Ukraine. Thus, there is now a mix of students of different origins in every TUL "Borders and Migration" class whose feelings and emotions can be potentially affected by inappropriately selected content.

Teaching practices have proved that total avoidance of authentic topics largely demotivates students as the study content loses its immediate topical relevance when it is distant from the students' future professional objectives (Breeze, 2017; Jernigan, 2017). At the same time, the overuse of critical narratives in mixed-background ESP classes may trigger students' resentment and nationalist feelings caused by the belief that their country of origin is unfairly treated. Finding a balance

between authenticity and acceptability of the content was the task realized in the “Borders and Migration” one-semester KON (conversation) course where the course creators employed such methods as minimizing the amount of controversial content, rephrasing the overtly offensive rhetoric, and designing sets of tasks modeling a possible response to the radical sentiments by seeking and providing mediation, or clarifying the parties’ stance on the problematic issues.

The primary assumption of the current research is that well-balanced authentic content in combination with a set of specially designed tasks can mitigate the potential risks of hurting the affected students’ feelings. In relation to this assumption, several research questions were set: 1) When do students find the course content inappropriate? 2) Is the premeditation of the negative (critical) authentic content a necessary precondition for avoiding the students’ negative emotions? 3) Would the students/teachers opt for a higher/lower degree of adaptation of the authentic content? 4) What is the role of follow-up activities in ironing out the difficulties arising from the potentially inciting content?

To verify the hypothesis and answer the research questions, the present study uses the results of the survey taken in January 2022 at the end of the ESP (Borders and Migration) KON (conversation) course to explore a variety of emotions that the specially selected study materials aroused in the classroom. The present paper also aims to combine the ESP literature review with certain classroom experiences to assist the ESP practitioner in designing the tasks meant to avoid the arising problems.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

2.1. The role of authentic content in an ESP classroom

Classroom research proves that authentic content is indispensable for ESP lessons since it “reproduces an immersion environment and provides a realistic context for tasks that relate to learner’s needs” (Benavent & Sánchez-Reyes Peñamaría, 2011: 89). Real-life assignments “encourage students to be their authentic selves, thereby increasing confidence and enthusiasm for learning” (Jernigan, 2017: 281). Apart from having a positive motivational impact (see García-Pinar, 2019), authentic materials and realia in ESP courses expose students to natural language and problems, making them part of their future professional community.

The authenticity of an ESP course “refers not only to the form, contents and the communicative goal of the texts but also, and most importantly, to the purpose of reading” (Sznajder, 2001: 390). Ideally, the material selected for studying should combine language development with further professional development. Students and teachers can use authentic materials as a means to “link the formal, and to some extent artificial, environment of the classroom with the real world... [where] the students will eventually be using the language they are learning” (House, 2008: 55).

There is a broad consensus that being intensive and narrow-focused, ESP programs offer enormous benefits to students' career development since they not only contextualize professional terminology but also develop soft skills required for communicating in a global professional network (Diachkova et al., 2021; Irudayasamy, Souidi, & Hankins, 2020).

However, students' contact with the authentic language can rarely go unassisted. Using authentic materials can be tricky if the methodology is not carefully chosen. The first level of difficulties the student is challenged by is, naturally, presented by the language. Almost any authentic material has to be carefully checked to match the learner's language level (Lesiak-Bielawska, 2015). This way, "the role of the language teacher is not to delude language learners by adapting the text but to prepare them by giving them awareness and necessary skills to understand how the language is used" in the field of their future professional communication (Berardo, 2006: 60). In a thematic ESP course, learners must be provided with a complete "toolkit" of terms and vocabulary items (e.g. topical vocabulary) specific to their study area.

The second, and the most important for the present paper, level of difficulties is contained in presenting the students with the aspects of culture and society that are alien to them or hard to understand due to historical and geographical distance. A multinational audience, in this case, poses a particular problem for the teacher as the number of potential cultural risks is almost endless. Hyland (2017) states that no learning happens in a vacuum, and media rhetoric, in this or that way, is always present in an ESP classroom. It is especially so if the cultural or attitudinal aspects of current media sentiments are directly related to students' backgrounds. "It is, in other words, difficult to separate the teaching of specific skills and rhetoric from the teaching of a subject itself because what counts as convincing argument, appropriate tone, persuasive interaction, and so on, is managed for a particular audience" (Hyland, 2017: 9).

Inclusive learning philosophy (Roth et al., 2011) suggests that if there is no sensitivity on the part of the teacher toward the cultural differences of their students, there will be no communication between them and no effective teaching will occur. However, it can be complicated for teachers to predict what topics will be considered by students controversial or offensive. Keeping in mind the Merriam-Webster Dictionary's definition of *controversy* – "a discussion marked especially by the expression of opposing views" (n.d.) – we would define "hot topics" as the ones creating situations in which students do not feel prepared or are too intimidated by the subject / the mainstream position / the teacher' or the peers' viewpoints to express their own opinions. Thus, the issues that create considerable controversy can vary depending on the topic itself, the ESP class composition, the teacher's attitude, the current political context, and the learners' culture.

Erbaggio et al. (2012) suggest that if controversial topics are treated with sensitivity, their use can improve the learning process as these topics push students

to talk and express their opinions. Reflection and “remedial” work on the contentious issues should often be prioritized over the reading itself, thus turning “classrooms into places where the accepted canons of knowledge can be challenged and questioned” (Pennycook, 2017: 298). Barnhardt, Sheets, and Pasquesi (2015) maintain that students’ involvement in advocacy activities helps them validate their own opinion and, in the end, make them more actively engaged in all types of societal processes, thus augmenting their “civic skills and social responsibilities” (Barnhardt et al., 2015). Finally, engaging with these topics promotes one of the central objectives in the educational process, namely critical and analytical thinking, as they are both “necessary to become aware of communication habits in academia and the professions, and may contribute to expanding one’s learning community through interaction with students from other disciplines in joint inter- or cross-disciplinary team-teaching projects that mirror the complex flow of information in our globalized world” (Breeze & Sancho Guinda, 2017: 216).

To sum up, authentic materials found on the Internet today occasionally contain controversial and disruptive content that can be regarded in some classes as offensive; however, avoiding “hot topics” in ESP lessons will skew the students’ worldview and prevent them from “appreciating the subtleties and complexities of the surrounding world events” (Dalton-Puffer, 2007: 294), whereas higher cultural awareness formed through contact with authentic materials will help future specialists “build effective relationships in today’s globalized world” (Breeze, 2017: 37).

2.2. Assessment of problematic content

Mixed-method media studies suggest that there is no universal approach to media content assessment due to a high subjectivity level and a variety of possible analysis paradigms. Still, for purely descriptive purposes, Steibel and Marinkova (2013) suggest a five-graded content appraisal scale on which an article/a headline or a video report can take one of the possible values: three of them refer to the presence of an explicit appraisal (“positive”, “negative” and “neutral”), and two other values refer to the lack of or impossibility to code an explicit appraisal of the material (“no appraisal” and “ambiguous”). In an attempt to transfer this grading to an ESP classroom we also have to take into account the inclusive learning philosophy (Roth et al., 2011) when much of the content is considered “negative” if it is associated with socio-political and cultural bias that does not match the goals, objectives, and expectations of the course (Ruzai & Engku, 2018). Thus, the same material can be graded differently for various study groups depending on the students’ backgrounds.

In her studies of multimedia resources most suitable for EFL classes, Gareis (1997) lists the subjects that are always difficult to assess in terms of their appropriateness for classroom discussions, since the initial assumptions of the class, including their cultural and social origins, may differ considerably. These topics include environmental issues, gender issues, political issues, human rights, civil

rights, religion, prejudices, stereotypes, and racial and ethnic discrimination. The list of potentially controversial topics remains broad and, ironically, covers almost a complete list of subjects discussed in the TUL "Borders and Migration" ESP classes.

When choosing materials for the KON (conversation) course, we assumed that the problematic matters of international relations may only be presented in the "neutral" and "no appraisal" light. In our opinion, classroom discussions are best supported by objective news reporting, or at least when both sides of the argument are equally presented; as a result, opinionated and skewed authentic materials directly interfering with the students' prior assessments and attitudes were deliberately omitted from the "Borders and Migration" course. We admit that this approach to material selection involves a high level of syllabus creators' subjectivity that largely rests on the ESP practitioner's common sense in what would be suitable for the classroom, but we still recommend avoiding too "positive" or too "negative" issue appraisals when selecting the content for the course.

The additional difficulty that we faced when searching for texts and videos for the course lay in the fact that even before the war in Ukraine, almost all authentic British and American political mass media discourse of recent years (2014-2022) has contributed to the creation of the mainly negative image of Russia "as a hostile, aggressive, unpredictable and dangerous state, alien to principles of democracy" (Posternyak & Boeva-Omelechko, 2018, para. 10). Research shows that in doing so, British journalists choose the negative associations with Russia by "surfacing their evaluative bias" and "exploiting rude metaphorical and ethnocultural associative layers" (Posternyak & Boeva-Omelechko, 2018: 1). In a similar mode, the analysis of metaphorical modeling of Russia's image in the modern US media texts reveals three prevailing trends, namely "the negative image of the Russian leader, the negative image of Russia, and the negative relations between Russia and the United States" (Ilyushkina & Chudinov, 2019: 20). With this negativity prevailing, finding "neutral" authentic content to provide an alternative point of view on Russia was highly problematic.

All in all, we believe that "neutral" and "no appraisal" materials would be the best choice for a mixed-background ESP classroom. A balanced discussion of acute international relations issues is also possible when various viewpoints are equally presented. However, special care should be taken to avoid speculative, situational, and culturally stereotyped reporting.

2.3. Strategies for addressing potentially controversial content

Before any recommendations for teachers on how to manage the challenges of potentially controversial content can be made, it should be remembered that the scenarios of "hot topics" introduced to the classroom may differ considerably. A planned teacher-guided discussion may be easier to manage since it gives the

teacher and the students more time to prepare. If a controversial issue arises unexpectedly, students' reactions to it can be more problematic to handle.

Early ESP research states that in any of these scenarios teachers must create an environment where students are welcome to express their points of view openly. Brown (1997) draws teachers' attention to the idea that students have the right to express themselves freely without being threatened. He states that "learners of the English language must be free to be themselves, think for themselves, behave intellectually without coercion from a powerful elite, cherish their beliefs and traditions and cultures without the threat of forced change" (Brown, 1997: 21). At the same time, teachers should encourage students to consider all possible sides of the subject matter. This way, students gain exposure to varied views and are engaged in critical thinking.

Hess (2009) names the possible avoidance of "unsafe" topics a dangerous and harmful classroom policy and insists that schools in general and language classes in particular include sustained attention to authentic and controversial issues. Rich empirical research shows that purposeful inclusion of controversial subjects can communicate the essence of what makes communities democratic and "build the understandings, skills, and dispositions that young people need to live in and to improve such a community" (Hess, 2009: 5). "Hot topic" discussions thus reach the "local" educational objectives of building students' professional competencies and the "global" goal of creating a more democratic environment.

More recent ESP papers recommend shifting the instruction focus from the "hot topics" themselves to developing students' soft skills as a means of overcoming contentious points in an ESP classroom (Diachkova et al., 2021). Students' ability to get their message across, in the authors' opinion, should become the ultimate measure of the learners' future professional competence in dealing with global issues. Soft skills "represent the aspect of global education that fits harmoniously into foreign language instruction in the ESP context" and the very act of communicating is highly contributing to problematic issues resolution (Diachkova et al., 2021: 394).

Similarly, Kulamikhina et al. (2020) insist that overcoming ambivalence in an ESP classroom is best achieved through a tight combination of communicative teaching and critical thinking development. The authors prove the efficiency of four thinking-based communicative teaching strategies: guided discussions, role-based group work, the use of thinking maps, and creative writing for building up students' professional skills and general cultural awareness. "The thinking and communicative learning environment created through the use of specially selected instructional strategies serves as a key factor in the development of the professional communication skills" (Kulamikhina et al., 2020: 214), which in combination with "global education", collaboration, mediation, and conflict resolution become the "skills most sought after in private and public corporations today" (Diachkova et al., 2021: 394).

Given the ever-changing context of global affairs and international politics, the ability to critically engage with authentic content has become more important than

ever. Thinking-based teaching "explores, provokes, and probes the learning potential of the students in order for them to become self-directed and intrinsically motivated learners" (Yusuf, 2017: 213). When the thinking-based methodology is combined with communicative practice in real-life situations, it allows students "to transfer the experiences they gained into future life" (Kulamikhina et al., 2020: 211). In particular, students whose English classes are somehow related to International Relations have to learn to make these connections to their future professional objectives. In our case, "hot topics" in ESP (Borders and Migration) classes are expected to help them assist in overcoming the challenges of cross-border migration and see through related processes considering the stances of multiple international actors.

All things considered, it should be remembered that understanding the situation's complexity and attending to the needs of mixed-background students is never easy. However, it is possible to turn the awkward classroom moment into an opportunity. Regular invitations to articulate one's experience in a course can do much toward alleviating the pressure placed on the students by the emotionally intense issue, thus helping cultivate an inclusive and democratic environment as well as the practice of self-reflection and self-awareness.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The conversation course (KON) taught at the Faculty of Education of the Technical University in Liberec (the Czech Republic) as part of the TUL's "Borders and Migration" Bachelor's study program covers many controversial subjects deemed useful in the students' future professional careers in international humanitarian organizations, namely, pull and push factors of cross-border migration, the balance of powers, human rights controversies, climate change triggered migration, and others. The course attracts second and third-year students of various nationalities, including Russian and Ukrainian students.

Since the conversation course was designed and taught in the winter term of 2021/22, i.e. before the tragic events in Ukraine, the primary concern of the content creators back then was the reactions and the feelings of the TUL students coming from Russia as the materials used in the course contained opinions criticizing Russia's foreign policy (backing Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria, the blanket veto policy in the UN Security Council), its intelligence methods (the Salisbury poisoning), multiple hackings (the alleged cyberwar against Estonia in 2009, the origins of the Petya virus), and meddling in numerous EU and US elections (Trump-Clinton 2016 elections, Russian "troll factories").

At the end of the course (January 2022), two separate feedback surveys were conducted following the classroom research methodology (Glasow, 2005) to identify the attitudes of the students and teachers to the problematic content discussed in KON classes. The surveys were based on funneling methodology, i.e.

eliciting more details on the issue discussed with every coming question. Both surveys were conducted using online questionnaires (Google Forms) involving 21 students (all Russians, second-year students, B2-C1 language proficiency level) taking the KON course and five teachers who dealt with the material preparation. The questionnaires were then analyzed using descriptive statistics.

The student survey was focused primarily on the students with Russian background because discussing Russia-connected issues in their presence was never easy. The survey questionnaires provided sufficient information to meet our main research objectives:

- to identify the attitudes of the Russian students and KON teachers' views on the use of authentic materials critical of Russia,
- to identify the scope of problematic topics in an ESP (International Relations/ IR) classroom,
- to develop explicit instruction on how to navigate students through controversial content,
- to establish a set of tasks that can help students overcome their negative feelings,
- to assist the ESP practitioner in finding a balance between authenticity and acceptability of the ESP study materials.

The later developments in the international arena have proved that the topics of the international agenda discussed within our "Borders and Migration" program still loom large. They have also demonstrated the limitations of the survey, namely the lack of feedback on the course contents from Ukrainian and Czech students, which would be of great value today. We hope this limitation will be made up for in further research into mixed-background ESP classes.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Students' reactions analysis

The questions aimed at uncovering the general acceptability of authentic materials in ESP (International Relations) classrooms revealed that all the participants of the student survey unanimously agreed that the authentic content used in class (videos, texts, and films) should reflect the current geopolitical situation. The students characterized materials coming from authentic sources as "engaging" (47.6%), "motivating" (23.8%), and "educating" (23.8%). Interestingly, the students mostly disapprove of any kind of censorship that may be performed by the teacher before the material is brought to class. In the majority opinion (85.7%), the authentic content should not be "pre-edited by the teacher" in an attempt to eliminate "negative" or inciting content.

Concerning the particular KON course, the majority of those surveyed (90.5%) confirmed that the materials offered in class were appropriate and suitable for ESP (Borders and Migration) studies even though they contained criticism of Russia. Only less than ten percent of Russian students admitted that they did not want to read/listen to negative things about Russia contained in the KON course materials and would prefer to avoid these topics in future classes.

A set of questions posed to elicit information about the particular feelings the Russian students experienced in the KON classes revealed that 81% of the students did not have any negative emotions concerning the content of the course, with 19% admitting that their feelings were "somehow affected." Follow-up questions coming later in the survey revealed that even a more significant number of students (23.8%) at a certain point found the contents of the course emotionally challenging, which we consider a relatively high percentage for the premeditated course initially meant to promote openness and tolerance.

Further questions meant to reveal the scope of the students' possible reactions mostly supported the initial findings of the survey (Chart 1). Although 47.6% of the students confirmed that the study contents reflected "the true geopolitical situation" and found the criticism of Russia "interesting," 42.9% of Russian students stated that they would like "to respond to the criticism," 19% considered the reports "biased," and 9.5% even "felt resentment" when coming into contact with "the criticizing Russia opinions." It is also important to note here that none of those surveyed said they were "demotivated" by the negative content, which probably means that the discussion activities suggested in the course fulfilled the intended role.

319

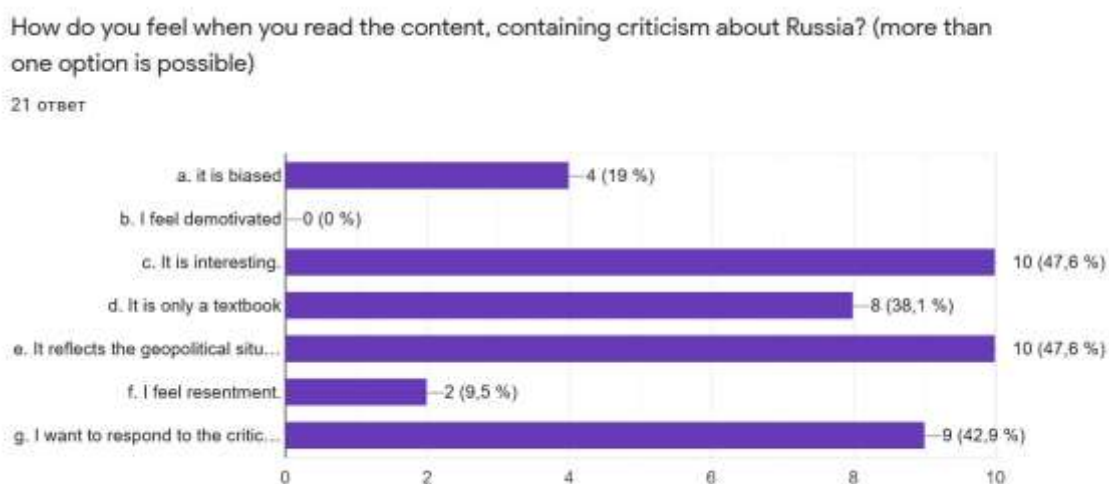


Chart 1. Russian students' attitudes to the criticism of Russia

The goal of further funneling questions (Charts 2-4 in the Appendix) was to link specific cases to the emotional responses triggered. Several quotes from the materials

(both texts and videos earlier presented to the students) with a choice of possible reactions to get their feedback were suggested with more than one option of an answer possible. Generalizing a spectrum of emotions that were evoked by particular comments, it can be said that roughly 30 to 50% of the respondents repeated that they had not experienced negative emotions. The feelings of “unhappiness,” “annoyance,” and “outrage” were shared by a maximum of 23.8%, depending on a particular example.

Interestingly, a common answer to almost all of the targeted content-specific questions was “I want to respond to the accusations” (9.5–52.4%), which, in our view, underscores the need for an open classroom discussion on “hot” issues to avoid the situation when the students immediately affected may feel that their opinion is ignored. These findings demonstrate that remedial follow-up activities are indispensable for the mitigation of contention points inevitably arising in any ESP mixed-background class. To neutralize the potential negativity students should be given a chance to give way to their emotions, explain their point of view, or state what they find unfair.

The funneling questions also showed that most Russian students treat the authentic materials only as “study materials,” as if distancing themselves from Russia, which in the cases studied was accused of aggression, human rights violations, and spying. Although admitting that they feel “unhappy,” students do not consider themselves to be a target of the verbal attacks. An explanation that we suggest here is that, although asking for a higher degree of materials’ authenticity, students subconsciously view the ESP course content as something which does not directly reflect real life as if choosing a “safer” option “It’s only a textbook” (38.1%) as a protective mechanism.

The questions meant to identify the students’ satisfaction with follow-up activities which in their opinion assisted in mitigating criticism of Russia and other “negative” content, revealed (Table 1) that 38.1% of those asked attribute overcoming classroom negativity to discussion tasks of various nature. In their comments, the students also mentioned that they appreciated “objective argumentation” on both sides of the debate and hoped that positive changes in the Russia – West relations would “minimize the controversial attitudes toward their country.” The second most popular choice was the critical thinking tasks, including mind mapping the texts: 28.6% of those questioned were glad “to be offered a new perspective” through the text analysis. The rest of the students considered KON case studies (14.3%) and vocabulary tools (14.3%) valuable instruments for understanding the political realia and stated that these tools will be “of use for them in their future job.”

ACTIVITY TYPE	THE STUDENTS' RESPONSES
Discussion tasks (verbal jousts, round-tables, debates)	38.1 %
Critical thinking tasks (critical and analytical questions, mind maps, refuting the arguments)	28.6 %
Integration activities (project work, case studies)	14.3 %

Vocabulary development (topical vocabulary, euphemisms)	14.3 %
Other activities (debunking "fake news")	4.7 %

Table 1. Students' feedback on follow-up activities

4.2. Teachers' reactions analysis

The results of the teacher survey show that, just like the students, all the ESP practitioners see no necessity in "censoring" or editing the original texts and videos unless the editing is concerned with shortening or adapting the level of the text.

The vast majority of the teachers involved in the KON course (80%) did not consider the materials collected somehow "inciting," "nationalistic," or "potentially dangerous for discussion" in a mixed-background classroom. It should be noted, though, that 20% of the instructors still admitted they felt "uneasy" throughout the course and were afraid that "negative" content and open criticism of Russia coming from the authentic texts could trigger "unpredictable" students' reactions.

The majority of the teachers (80%) did not observe any unexpected, surprising, or adverse reactions from the students during the lessons. Those who did mainly cite "laughter" as the most common "emotional response." No negativity or outright aggression during the material presentation or discussion was recorded.

Further funneling questions proved that the teachers did not mind presenting the ethnically mixed classes with authentic materials containing criticism of Russia as long as their sources were clearly stated (40%–100%, depending on a particular case). Moreover, the teachers were quite satisfied with bringing these materials to the classes since, in their opinion, they always provided valuable "grounds for further discussion" (60%–100%, depending on a particular case) and made the lessons more "engaging" (40%–80%, depending on a particular case).

Regarding the need for follow-up activities, twenty percent of the ESP practitioners surveyed believed that certain comments and assessments presented in the KON course could not be considered totally "neutral" and required "special treatment." In the teachers' opinion, such remedial work was effectively realized in the KON course through the presentation of "a balance of opinions" (20%) guaranteed by the presence of articles representing both sides of the issue, different forms of "follow-up discussions" (40%), "critical thinking tasks" (20%), and "integration activities" (20%) that facilitated the expression of students' opinion on the issue.

5. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The feedback from the KON (conversation) course demonstrates that despite the occasional discomfiting moments, the majority of the students and teachers were

satisfied with the inclusivity that the “Borders and Migration” course initiated. We believe that the welcoming character of the discussions held in class was partly achieved through the follow-up tasks given to students. Before making the conclusions about the study results, it seems relevant to go into some detail and list specific activities that proved beneficial in “hot topic” discussions.

As recommended by Hess (2009) and Kulamikhina et al. (2020) the mitigation of contentions points in the KON classroom was achieved through open discussion combined with *critical thinking tasks*. In such tasks, the learners are typically asked a list of thought-provoking questions and identify the article’s topic and the thesis, which is only possible if they follow the author’s logic and understand their insight. We believe that these tasks are better given after contrasting texts when two or more articles (or rather an article and a video clip) differ considerably.

Analytical thinking task-based activities like mind-mapping the texts seem to be another strategy to help students see through the author’s logic. Graphic organization of the text’s reasoning is instrumental when students are asked to identify the inconsistencies of an approach or a theory. Visualizations simplify the search for logical fallacies or other errors (e.g. insufficient or excessive exemplification or off-the-point arguments). Additionally, a great advantage of mind maps is that students can later use them as ready-made drafts when writing argumentative essays and having verbal jousts.

A student-centered variation of this follow-up activity demands learners search for contrasting ideas to oppose the ones presented in the original text’s mind-map. They have to go beyond the course content and contribute to course expansion in their search. The idea behind the task is to teach students that the opinions expressed in the articles can and shall be challenged in class. This exercise also teaches learners to refocus the narrative by taking into account other cultures’ comprehension models (Breeze, 2017). The skill of recognizing the opposite viewpoint proves central to students’ ability to cement their own thoughts and as the results of the survey demonstrate, students appreciate the variety of opinions presented, claiming that even “negative” content can be regarded as food for further discussion.

Authentic content in an ESP for International Relations students class often covers the latest press releases and statements made by public officials, including political leaders’ addresses. Most of these statements require particular discussion and can be used for further classroom analysis of possible implications. As stated in Jernigan (2017), *analytical interpretation* of topical events helps students learn to read “between the lines.” What is more, short follow-up role-plays when one of the students represents the politician and others play the roles of the journalists give them a chance to understand the situational political context better. As the survey showed, such activities also provide students with a much-sought opportunity to “respond to the criticism.”

Following Berardo’s (2006) call for a larger inventory of ESP utilities, providing students with the necessary topic vocabulary is another thing that plays great importance in their ability to work with authentic materials and project viewpoints in classroom discussions. It is crucial to organize *focused topic vocabulary instruction*

before the students encounter the authentic materials. Provided that they get essential topic vocabulary practice, they can form the skill of seeing through the original feature articles’ metaphors and euphemisms. Students’ acquisition of topic vocabulary can also considerably liven the debate.

Guided by Diachkova et al.’s (2021) advice on soft skill development for overcoming cultural and conceptual differences in the classroom, regular vocabulary practice on the given political topics was combined in KON classes with argumentation practice in the so-called *verbal jousts*, much appreciated by the students. Verbal jousts teach the participants to provide well-structured reasoning and help the students voice their message. In these tasks, the students can choose one of the roles suggested by the teacher or select a random role card. This way, they will learn to prepare the arguments for the stance even if they do not personally support it.

Additionally, verbal jousts instil the so-called “multimodal” learning as they encourage students to resort to the arguments they have previously read in the news articles or learned from the authentic videos and other digital and multimodal genres (Xia, 2020). It should be noted, though, that “the instructors are required to provide the students with guidance on how to manipulate the digital and multimodal resources in their construction of digitally-mediated multimodal genres” (Xia, 2020: 156).

As the results of the teacher survey show, ESP instructors do not mind presenting controversial material in class as they believe that authentic materials provide additional grounds for discussion. Indeed, *critical assessment* of information from various sources is an essential professional skill for ESP students, especially those majoring in IR. It presupposes that the students become responsible for double-checking the knowledge they bring to/from the classroom. An exciting task that can be given to students to practice their analytical, argumentation, and speaking skills is to let them spot and refute fake news. In this activity, any news item they distrust can be designated as “fake” as long as enough argumentation is provided.

Further speaking tasks (e.g. briefing the delegation, reporting to a senior official, ranking the points of importance) can be a good combination of problem-resolution activities and a source of student-generated content, which eventually assist the teacher in upbringing a *field-independent learner*, capable of developing valuable professional skills (Mažeikienė, Valūnaitė-Oleškevičienė, & Kavaliauskienė, 2010). Students have to do some individual preliminary research to provide their informed opinions on the subject. This way, the productive engagement of students in content creation animates a lot of local, national, and cultural issues. Another task’s objective is to blur the borderline between the students’ information search for purely educational purposes and instilling a habit of regular fact-checking for their future professional goals.

Finally, *collaboration and integration activities*, recommended by Diachkova et al. (2021: 394) as a part of a soft skills development program for “global education,” such as project work on a sensitive topic, a case study of a contentious issue, a panel discussion, and formal class debates also serve multiple purposes. On the one hand,

they put together the recently learned language skills; on the other, they partly imitate the students' future jobs. But most importantly, they give the learners true freedom of expression and an opportunity to be heard.

To sum it up, a model task capable of reconciling diverse classroom backgrounds is the one that, in one way or another, challenges students' critical thinking. It guides their understanding of authentic material, pushes them to do a more significant share of analysis, remediates arising differences in opinions, and stretches them to generate additional content (mind maps, reviews, etc.).

6. CONCLUSION

The first obvious conclusion that can be made from the data obtained in this study is that the active engagement of students in the discussion of problematic issues is an essential pre-condition of an inclusive ESP classroom. It instills the atmosphere of openness and contributes to effective problem resolution, which may prove useful in the students' professional careers. The survey results proved our primary assumption that specially designed follow-up activities and student-led discussions seem to be the best way of balancing sensitive materials' authenticity and the ESP agenda. It has also become evident that studying the language of International Relations is impossible without immersing the class in the current media content.

Answering the study's research questions, it should be stated that students tend to perceive "negative" content mainly through the lens of its informative and educational value, which partly explains the fact that even the most disturbing topics cause only a limited amount of unpredictable emotional responses. The content is perceived as inappropriate when it is considered offensive or unfair, but mostly when reporting is biased or skewed towards one particular point of view. Although most teachers prefer to distance themselves from the censor's role and stand up for greater authenticity of the content as long as an alternative point of view is provided, we believe that some premeditation of the ESP courses is necessary to avoid one-sided political coverage or strongly biased discussions of current events. When avoiding sensitive topics is difficult, balancing the controversial content can be managed with the help of special tasks as expounded in the Pedagogical implications section.

Finally, respectful and productive classroom communication creates an opportunity for reflection and the ability to weigh the evidence in and outside the classroom, including broadening students' consideration of other people's perspectives and enhancing their professional skills.

[Paper submitted 4 Mar 2022]

[Revised version received 7 May 2022]

[Revised version accepted for publication 2 June 2022]

Acknowledgements

The author sincerely thanks his colleagues – Alieva Tatyana, Kuzmichova Oxana and Yablokova Tatyana, for assisting in conducting the surveys.

References

- Barnhardt, C. L., Sheets, J. E., & Pasquesi, K. (2015). You expect *What?* Students' perceptions as resources in acquiring commitments and capacities for civic engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 56, 622-644. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-014-9361-8>
- Benavent, G. T., & Sánchez-Reyes Peñamaría, S. (2011). Use of authentic materials in the ESP classroom. *Encuentro*, 20, 89-94. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED530013.pdf>
- Berardo, S. (2006). The use of authentic materials in the teaching of reading. *The Reading Matrix*, 6 (2), 64-66. Retrieved from <http://www.readingmatrix.com/articles/berardo/article.pdf>
- Bocanegra-Valle, A. (2010). Evaluating and designing materials for the ESP classroom. In M. F. Ruiz-Garrido, J. C. Palmer-Silveira, & I. Fortanet-Gómez (Eds.), *English for professional and academic purposes* (pp. 141-167). Rodopi. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789042029569_011
- Breeze, R. (2017). Promoting critical cultural awareness in the international university. In R. Breeze, & C. Sancho Guinda (Eds.), *Essential competencies for English-medium university teaching* (Vol. 27) (pp. 37-49). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-40956-6_3
- Breeze, R., & Sancho Guinda, C. (2017). Genre-based strategies for integrating critical and creative thinking in engineering and journalism. *ESP Today*, 5(2), 196-221. <https://doi.org/10.18485/esptoday.2017.5.2.4>
- Brown, D. (1997). The place of moral and political issues in language pedagogy. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 7, 21-33. Retrieved from <https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ajelt/vol7/art2.htm>
- Dalton-Puffer, C. (2007). *Discourse in content and language integrated learning (CLIL) classrooms*. John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/llt.20>
- Diachkova, Y., Sazhko, L., Shevchenko, L., & Syzenko, A. (2021). Global issues in ESP classroom: Challenges and opportunities in higher education. *Arab World English Journal*, 12(1), 388-400. <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol12no1.26>
- Erbaggio, P., Gopalakrishnan, S., Hobbs, S., & Liu, H. (2012). Enhancing student engagement through online authentic materials. *International Association for Language Learning Technology*, 42(2), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.17161/iallt.v42i2.8511>
- García-Pinar, A. (2019). The influence of TED talks on ESP undergraduate students' L2 motivational self system in the speaking skill: A mixed-method study. *ESP Today*, 7(2), 231-253. <https://doi.org/10.18485/esptoday.2019.7.2.6>
- Gareis, E. (1997). Movies in the language classroom: Dealing with problematic content. *TESOL Journal*, 6(4), 20-23.
- Glasow, P. A. (2005). *Fundamentals of survey research methodology*. MITRE. Retrieved from https://www.mitre.org/sites/default/files/pdf/05_0638.pdf
- Gregurović, M. (2018). Minority status effect: Ethnic distance and attitudes towards ethnic minorities in Eastern Croatia and Vojvodina. In T. Lukić, & A. Terzić (Eds.), *Ethnic groups at the beginning of the 21st century* (pp. 42-56). University of Novi Sad. Retrieved from

- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323357634_Minority_Status_Effect_Ethnic_Di stance_and_Attitudes_towards_Ethnic_Minorities_in_Eastern_Croatia_and_Vojvodina
- Hess, D. E. (2009). *Controversy in the classroom: The democratic power of discussion*. Routledge.
- House, S. (2008). Authentic materials in the classroom. In S. Sánchez-Reyes Peñamaría, & R. Durán Martínez (Eds.), *Didactic approaches for teachers of English in an international context* (pp. 53-70). Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca.
- Hyland, K. (2017). English in the disciplines: Arguments for specificity. *ESP Today*, 5(1), 5-23. <https://doi.org/10.18485/esptoday.2017.5.1.1>
- Ilyushkina, M., & Chudinov, A. (2019). Metaphorical modeling of Russia's image in the mass media: The case of the American press. *Язык и культура*, 45, 20-30.
- Irudayasamy, J., Souidi, N., & Hankins, C. (2020). Impact of an ESP course on English language proficiency of undergraduate engineering students: A case study at Dhofar University. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 9(2), 309-320. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v9n2p308>
- Jernigan, C. (2017). Authentic learning and student motivation: Building instructor and student confidence through genuine interaction and authentic classroom materials. In R. Breeze, & C. Sancho Guinda (Eds.), *Essential competencies for English-medium university teaching* (Vol. 27) (pp. 281-294). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-40956-6_19
- Kulamikhina, I., Kamysheva, E., Samylova, O., Balobanova, A., & Rakhmetova, E. (2020). Development of professional communication skills in students in the ESP class: Integration of communicative and critical thinking approaches. In A. Kerimov, O. Tomyuk, & O. Arshinova (Eds.), *Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference on Philosophy of Education, Law and Science in the Era of Globalization (PELSEG 2020)* (pp. 210-215). <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.200723.043> 326
- Lesiak-Bielawska, E. D. (2015). Key aspects of ESP materials selection and design. *English for Specific Purposes World*, 46, 1-26. Retrieved from http://esp-world.info/Articles_46/ESPmaterialsLesiak-Bielawska.pdf
- Mažeikienė, V., Valūnaitė-Oleškevičienė V., & Kavaliauskienė G. (2010). Independent and creative learner in the ESP classroom. *Socialinis Darbas*, 9(2), 107-112. Retrieved from <https://repository.mruni.eu/bitstream/handle/007/11723/936-1753-1-SM.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Controversy. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/controversy>
- Pennycook, A. (2017). *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. Routledge.
- Posternyak, K. P., & Boeva-Omelechko, N. B. (2018). The formation of the image of Russia in the British political mass media discourse. *Acta Scientiarum: Language and Culture*, 40(2), Article 41086. <https://doi.org/10.4025/actascilangcult.v40i2.41086>
- Roth, H.-J. & Duarte, J., Broeder, P., & Stokmans, M. (2011, January). *Methodology for inclusive academic language teaching*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254781978_Methodology_for_inclusive_academic_language_teaching
- Ruzai, S. A. A. R., & Engku, H. E. I. (2018). English language textbooks and portrayal of culture: A content analysis. *MATEC Web of Conferences*, 150, Article 05076. <https://doi.org/10.1051/mateconf/201815005076>

- Steibel, F., & Marinkova, M. (2013). Positive, negative, or neutral? The “appraisal” variable in content analysis studies of the media. *E-Compós*, 16(2). <https://doi.org/10.30962/ec.928>
- Sznajder, H. S. (2001). Engineering textbooks: Introducing reading skills for academic purposes in the English syllabus of the first-year technical telecommunications engineering. In S. Posteguillo, I. Fortanet, & J. C. Palmer (Eds.), *Methodology and new technologies in languages for specific purposes* (pp. 389-398). Universitat Jaume I.
- Xia, S. A. (2020). Genre analysis in the digital era: Developments and challenges. *ESP Today*, 8(1), 141-159. <https://doi.org/10.18485/esptoday.2020.8.1.7>
- Yusuf, M. (2017). Infusing thinking-based learning in twenty-first-century classroom: The role of training programme to enhance teachers’ skillful thinking skills. In I. Amzat, & N. Valdez (Eds.), *Teacher empowerment toward professional development and practices* (pp. 211-220). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-4151-8_14

ALEXEY TYMBAY, PhD, is an assistant professor at the English Department of a Teacher-Training Faculty of the Technical University in Liberec (Czech Republic). He teaches English Methodology, ESP (Borders and Migration), and English Phonology. He has authored a number of research articles on political discourse analysis, two textbooks in English pronunciation, and co-authored an ESP textbook for future diplomats “English for International Relations Students” (2021).

Appendix

Excerpts from the student survey

327

How do you feel when you read/hear the following text from the course video: It is what Russia does. They hate being put into spotlight, they hate being held to account whether it's for illegal annexation of Ukraine, whether it's for collaboration with the Assad regime in Syria, or whether it's for the attack in Salisbury

21 ответов

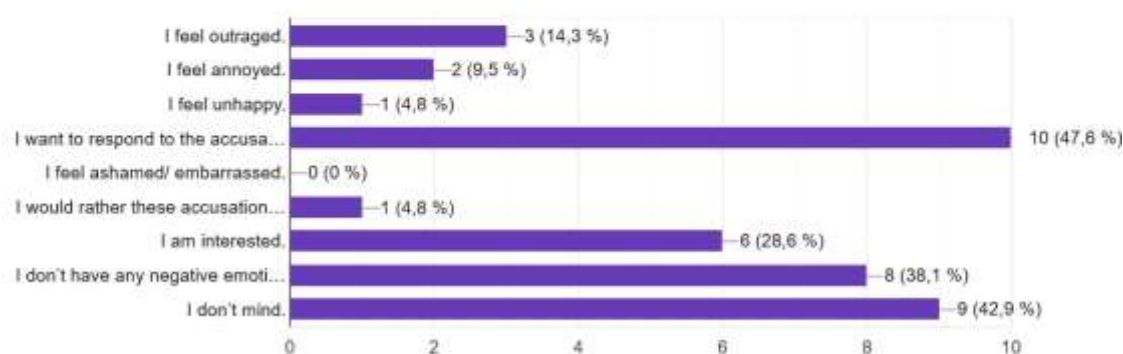


Chart 2. Case study 1: Russia's actions abroad

How do you feel when you read/hear the following text from the course video: We have a fundamentally different view with Russia on the value of the whole international system. The world runs on a set of rules, and the UN is at the heart of those rules, the UN charter really is the embodiment of those rules. Sadly for the people of Syria and many other countries, Russia is breaching those rules.



21 ответов

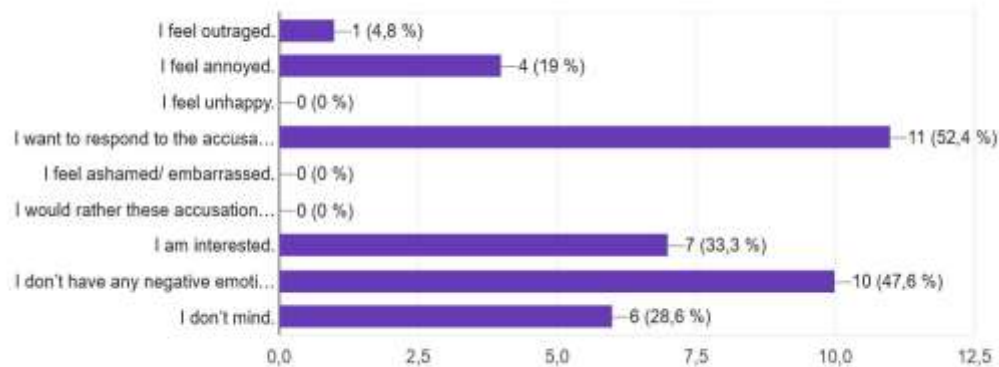


Chart 3. Case study 2: Russia and the UN

How do you feel when you read/hear the following text from the course video: In this instance, we've had to be quite aware of the country we are dealing with, the Russians, so we've had to be very careful about how we communicate. We have not used mobile phones, you know, we've used mechanisms and systems to protect our information.

21 ответов

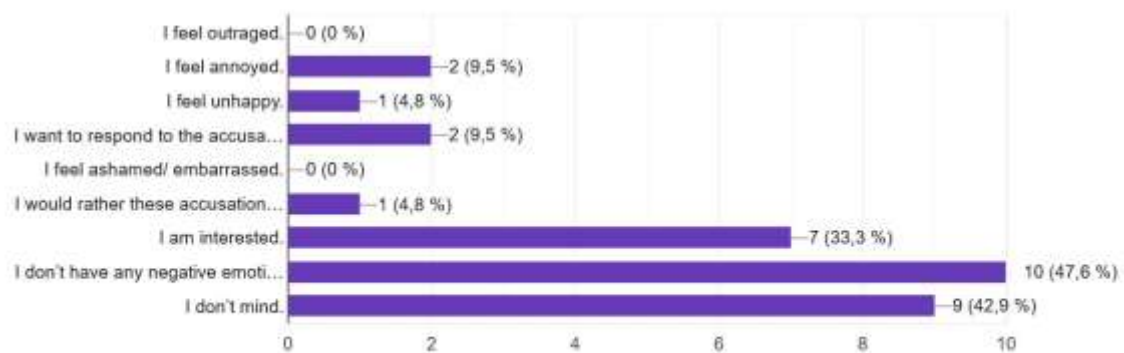


Chart 4. Case study 3: Intelligence issues