

The Power of Informality in the Con-Textual Design of English-for-Specific-Purposes Scripted Role Plays

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Abstract

The study aims to analyze the theoretical underpinning of the design technique of formal-informal con-textual alternation in scripted role-plays for teaching and learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and the practical effects it bears upon the communicative skills of ESP learners at levels above B1 (CEFR) as compared to a traditional predominantly-formal contextual design. The experiment was conducted with 30 adult participants employed in different areas of industry interested in learning Business English among other special varieties like Technical and Legal English. The experiment consists of two teaching modules with order counter-balance of the intervention. The paper focuses on qualitative results based on participants' opinions about the application of the formal-informal design technique for the purposes of teaching and learning ESP. Learners' comments are quoted, categorised and contextualised. Findings of significant importance are described and analysed. One of the important findings is the learners' higher in-class communicative willingness and strengthened confidence in dealing with specialised literature as a result of the applied formal-informal con-textual alternation technique within the ESP scripted role-plays. Another is related with the effect of the design technique on target ESP vocabulary retention rates. An emerging hypothesis based on researcher's observations at this point is that the amount of informality within the scriptural con-textual design is directly linked with the degree of imperceptible learning that takes place.

Keywords: context, confidence, design, informality, scripted role plays, ESP, vocabulary retention;

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Introduction

The motivation for the study is practice-driven. As an ESP teaching practitioner, the researcher has often encountered the problem of students getting tired having to read a typical formal text prolific in terminology, archaisms, complex and long syntactical structures. Thus, the idea of making ESP more entertaining to learn posed as a positive teaching and learning challenge.

The researched technique of formal and informal con-textual alternation in scripted Business English role plays bears a relation to: 1) transformative learning because of the rich learning context it lends to the classroom experience; 2) strategies like using humour in the classroom to create a stress-free learning atmosphere; 3) educational drama, because of the role-play form and the possibility for the participants to act out the text, though passive internal experiencing is also a possible way of learning from the scripts; 4) the story-telling method of foreign language teaching.

1. Conceptualisation behind the Formal-Informal Con-Text Alternation Technique

1.1. Formal versus Informal

In the attempt to fully grasp the essence of the formal and the informal context, the literature review led me to analyse their etymological roots, linguistic, pragmatic and meta-pragmatic implications. Speaking of formal and informal, there came up the question of what is a form, and even further what its counterpart is – the non-form, and if these are the two extremities, then what is in-between may be called the inform. Hence, depending on what the available resources are at each specific point in time, like: time, money, motivation, climate, etc. the perception path may end at each of the stages of non-form, inform or form. The Non-Form could be best defined as the unsuspected unknown, i.e. what one does not even suspect they do not know, but it may well be known to someone else or to no one else. It may also be interpreted as an uncognized inform. The Inform is a form under development or that which is struggling to become a form. It may also be interpreted as an uncognized form. The Form is a cognized notion or object which serves a particular function. As a whole, it is a matter of perception whether we see the world as composed of forms, informs, or non-forms. Perception on its part is dependent on available resources (time, money, effort, etc.) at any one point in time.

1.2. The Formal and Informal Style in Linguistics

Formal Style is characterized by the use of: passive structures; terminology, fixed phrases; polite expressions; long, abstract words, mainly of Latin origin; long, complex sentences; long, tight paragraphs. Overall, in Formal Style linguistic and pragmatic correctness is important.

Informal Style is characterized by the use of: active structures; colloquial expressions; slang; ellipsis, ambiguities; common, general words; loosely-structured and/or short sentences; short, loose paragraphs. Overall, in Informal Style linguistic and pragmatic incorrectness is admissible.

1.3. The Formal and Informal Style in Pragmatics

The Formal Style implies: limited emotional involvement and objectivity; impersonal tone; task-orientedness; clumsy communicative flow. Overall, in Formal Style Communication relationships are fixed and communicative clarity and focus are important.

The Informal Style implies: emotional involvement and subjectivity; dynamics; personal tone; person-orientedness; quick communicative flow. Overall, in Informal Style Communication relationships develop and meanings are constantly renegotiated.

1.4. Form versus Inform in Meta-Pragmatics

If we look further into the notions of Form and Inform, they can be described as: the form being: stationary, satisfied, balanced, settled, comfortable, limited, conditional and hence – capricious about interactions (as it has already found its limits); the inform being: changing, unbalanced, unsettled, uncomfortable, partially limited, quasi-conditional and hence – unpretending in interactions (as it will find its way).

2. The Formal and Informal Con-Text in the Experimental Script

The term ‘con-text’ is used in the current research to explicitly refer to the context generated both on the linguistic and pragmatic (pragmatic and meta-pragmatic) level, while ‘co-text’ refers to the surrounding text on a pure linguistic level and ‘context’ is used in its traditional pragmatic sense of ‘situational environment’.

The March Hare Cafe Script written especially for the purposes of the experiment employs the formal-informal con-text alternation technique. In the text, on the one hand, there are long paragraphs containing terminology, often in untypical informal linguistic context, used in a humorous manner and on the other, there are entirely *informal* passages of text and entirely *formal* passages part of a humorous discourse. Furthermore, love is present linguistically (as a word and its signified), pragmatically (as a theme) and meta-pragmatically (as hovering with the informal con-text). Meanwhile, humour and absurdity play havoc with pragmatic and linguistic expectations contributing in this way to the increased informality in the con-textual design.

It is of interest to compare the BOG index of the two scripts in StyleWriter. The BOG index indicates the degree to which the text bogs the reader down. Some legal writing, for example, can get a score larger than 1000. The StyleWriter analysis of the two scripts’ designs shows that the formal-only script is almost twice more “difficult and boring” than the formal-informal as seen from the BOG readability index or in other words the formal-informal ratio in the March Hare Cafe script is approximately 50:50. Both scripts’ BOG indexes fall within the excellent range of the BOG index (0-20), whereas the BOG value for the March Hare Cafe is 0/20 while the formal-only is 17/20. This is another way of looking at the formal and informal ratios within the scripts, assuming that the higher the BOG the higher the formality inherent in the text is.

3. Types of Con-Text Alternation

A role transformation occurs within the first two parts of the March Hare Cafe Script – the client and the bartender turn out to be managers and owners of big businesses and in Part 2 already they are not only a client and a bartender but also franchise negotiators. The absurd franchising conditions put forward by the March Hare Cafe owner provide a suitable co-text environment for embedding terminology as well as humour into the con-textual design.

The interweaving of typical formal-con-text terms into an informal textual and/or situational discourse is at the heart of the design tested in terms of its effect on the communicative skills of ESP learners. It is worth noting that formal-informal alternation can be on the level of words, sentences, paragraphs or larger sections, between situations only or between discourses and sociolinguistic situations. In other words, alternation can be seen as linguistic or textual (at the level of words, sentences, etc.), pragmatic (at the level of social situational context) or as linguistic– or textual-pragmatic (where the linguistic aspects crisscross with their respective counter-pragmatic aspects, i.e. a formal text contextualised in an informal situation or vice versa). As far as stylistics is concerned, the alternation does not produce an erratic style but rather offers different frequencies of contextual co-occurrences. All specialised vocabulary is used in a linguistically correct context and co-text, only that it is highly untypical pragmatically in a sociocultural aspect.

The alternation possibilities thus provide a flexible creative ground for experimentation on the part of the study texts author. Variables that have to be kept in consideration while designing learning materials based on context alternation can be among others: density of the specialised terms within a text; occurrence of complex low-frequency words and idiomatic expressions; sentence structure and length; target proficiency level, learners' cultural and other specifics.

4. Initial Speculations about the Benefits of the Formal-Informal Con-Textual Alternation Technique in ESP Learning

The main theoretical suppositions governing the choice of the research hypothesis and the experimental design were that the Formal-Informal Con-Textual Alternation Technique will yield the following effects: it will offer a wholesome ground for communicative learning interaction by encompassing all communicative skills necessary for interpersonal communication, both linguistic and pragmatic; it will engender learning about the difference between formal and informal target language and culture-specific ways of its socially appropriate use; it will induce creativity in language use due to the polarity of the two-style discourse; it will reduce the stress and strain typical of formal-style-related situations and allow for a fuller learning interaction to take place between the learners as individuals and the learning environment.

5. Similar Materials Design for Learning English for Specific Purposes

Traditionally ESP is taught in formal-only or predominantly formal con-text of the reading study materials. Humour is hardly ever found in traditional reading texts for Legal English, Business English, Technical English, etc. Humorous phrases or

idiomatic expressions occur most often in listening excerpts as samples of real-life speech. The described formal-informal con-text alternation technique is partially inherent in the teaching approaches of non-traditional courses which offer a more 'natural' and informal speech discourse or aim for a humorous and friendly language-learning environment. "ELT Comedy" by Nick Michelioudakis (Michelioudakis, 2014), "Instant English" by John P. Sloan (Sloan, 2010), and "Read with pleasure" by Ina B. Lozanova (Lozanova, 2006) are among the English Teaching courses which employ the informal contextualisation and bear resemblance to the scripted role-play text type. There are a number of online resources created for the purposes of learning English in a fun way, e.g. www.teacherjoe.us (English Vocabulary through Jokes, 2005) which offers jokes for studying vocabulary from different thematic areas, Business English being one of them. However, the effects of informal contextualisation in ESP learning and teaching materials remain largely unstudied.

6. Similar Research

Rich, informative contexts are the most conducive to acquisition according to a study conducted by Schouten-van Parreren. The study also finds out that occurrence of a word in inconspicuous or ambiguous context is an unfavourable condition in vocabulary acquisition. (Parreren, 1989) However, Mondria & Wit-deBoer establish that rich contexts divert attention from the lexical level and produce little acquisition. (Mondria, 1991) It is interesting to note that R. Zahar, T. Cobb, and N. Spada reach a conclusion that contextual richness was unrelated to learning when typical context is used for the lexical items. (Zahar R., June 2001) 'Natural text' supports lexical acquisition according to Zahar. (Zahar R., June 2001) Furthermore, natural texts meet both beginner and advanced learners' needs of lexical encounters frequency as they are uniform in contextual support levels. (Pinker, 1989) All of these research results point to the controversial situation of contextual richness in terms of vocabulary acquisition. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning the difference between vocabulary acquisition and vocabulary recognition when we talk about language learning as it is the first one that is most important while the second is a stage in the process. Recognising a word (partially or completely) does not necessarily imply that the person has acquired it and is able to use it adequately. Paul Meara writes about the difficulties of drawing a simple distinction between words one knows and words one does not know. Measuring vocabulary acquisition is difficult due to its dynamic nature and the possibility of words shifting from one category into another because of forgetting, i.e. words one knows really well can become partially known, or such that one knows he/she once knew, but does not remember anymore, or words one has totally forgotten, but would recognise if his/her memory is jogged. (Meara, 1989)

Another category of research related with the current study is that about humour and in the classroom and love as an attitude conducive to efficient and stress-free learning. According to Weimer humour in the classroom has established a number of benefits for the learners, such as: higher group cohesion, softened criticism, increased students' evaluation, better stress-coping abilities, and positive response among students. (Weimer, 2013) Patch Adams in his personal-view article "Humour and love: the origination of clown therapy" refers to love as 'a social glue' able to calm stressful situations and comfort countless griefs. (Adams, 2002) Love seen as an interpersonal closeness or a metapragmatic (Dimitrova, 2013, 2014) communicative motivation of personal acceptance inherent in the informal speech register is another

aspect of the informal con-text. Adams gives the example of how clowns in his school are trained mainly through those two attitudes – love and humour. (Adams, 2002)

7. Experimental Design

This is a within-subjects experiment with order counter balance. The sample was formed on the basis of participants': age (over 18), interest in learning Business English, results in the placement test (levels A2 and above). One group do an AB course (or: FIF – Formal-Informal, Formal), the other do a BA course (FFI – Formal, Formal-Informal), where A - implementing the technique, B - without implementing the technique. Different tailored tests were made (3 vocabulary tests and 1 oral test) for each of the two modules - A and B. Two role-play scripts were written: 'The March Hare Cafe' – based on the experimental technique of con-text alternation and 'ABCD Business Talks' – based on a predominantly formal con-textual design. Excerpts for the second script were used from Langenscheidt Kommunikationstrainer "Business English - Meetings" (2002) with the express permission of the publisher. Two sets of role-playing scripts were composed for the two modules with accompanying exercises on grammar, vocabulary, spoken and written practice. The number of tested terms in each module is 130 or 260 for the whole course. The scripts for the experiment were developed (in March 2014) explicitly for conducting the experiment and after its theorisation from a number of perspectives: linguistic, pragmatic and meta-pragmatic. (Dimitrova, 2013, 2014)

Three questionnaires are used: one before the first module, one in-between the two modules and one at the end of the course. The first questionnaire aims to check the learners' habitual language use of general and Business English, attitudes to role-play and self-confidence in FL communication with the aim of drawing conclusions mostly about the pragmatic aspects of the learner's communicative needs and habits in the second language (L2). The second and the third questionnaires are script-specific. Their aim is to establish the participants' subjective learning experience and their personal assessment of the textual design and the teaching methods effectiveness on their communicative skills development.

The vocabulary tests comprise lists of terms and business phrases to be completed into sentences. The sentences are written so that they provide a suitable, unambiguous and adequate context of the word without being explanatory of it. The lists contain 'buffer' vocabulary as well, i.e. words that do not go into any of the sentences. With a view to avoid overtesting the participants, only post-tests were done and learners were asked to circle the words they think they had learned from the listed vocabulary in each test. Altogether there were six vocabulary tests – three in each module.

There are three oral tests (1 pre-test and 2 post-tests after each course module), performed on business script-related topics. A criterion matrix is used to evaluate each participant's oral performance.

The scripts role-playing session comprises of a warm-up speaking introduction, a closed scripted role-play reading (with vocabulary elicitation focus), communicative practice exercises and open role-playing practice (i.e. a problem-solving practice in which learners are free to experiment with discourse and situational context within and beyond the session script). At the end of each course unstructured discussions

have been conducted with the aim to compare and contrast the two script designs and establish any other differences or effects that might not have been detected by the tests and questionnaires.

Altogether 16 participants took part in the pilot experiment in 4 consecutive courses and 14 in the 2 testing courses of the experiment. The conclusions draw on data collected from the 6 semi-structured informal group discussions conducted at the end of the experimental course with 30 adult learners. The SPSS results are based on data from 26 participants due to missing information.

8. Effects of the Formal-Informal Alternation Technique on the Communicative Skills of ESP Learners according to Participants' Comments in End-of-Course Discussions

8.1. Pilot testing results:

Several are the major conclusions from the pilot testing of the scripted role-play design technique, namely: learners are empowered to create their own original and compelling stories, their self-expression is promoted and their communicative willingness is encouraged. (Two of the students retold it to friends and colleagues.); learners are confronted with a problematic situation that is absurd, highly implausible and thus creating a safe practice environment protective of their inner feelings; the risk is that the unreal property of the script can be seen by some participants as irrelevant and thus have a negative learning impact as they will feel demotivated to tackle it further; on the whole, learners' self-confidence is fostered as they witness their own progress, i.e. the fact that they can cope with a bewildering con-textual and corresponding textual complexity.

8.2. Testing results:

According to participants: (observed and explicitly confirmed by 3 participants) the predominantly formal scripts promoted vocabulary learning better than the formal-informal ones; (observed and confirmed by same 3 participants as above) the formal-informal scripts made learners focus on the overall plot, whereas the predominantly formal scripts made them pay attention to and remember specific words and expressions; the formal-informal scripts were shared beyond the classroom with people who are unrelated with the study course, such as friends and work colleagues. Two of the students retold it to friends and colleagues. One of them discussed it with other participants and non-participant colleagues of theirs.

According to researcher's observations: the formal-informal scripts promoted learners' confidence and communicative willingness, participants became more active and much braver speakers in the target language; the formal-informal scripts induced a great deal of smiles, laughter and bewilderment. (learners' and researcher's observation); the formal-informal scripts triggered creativity in some of the participants who created their own funny stories by analogy; on the whole the formal-informal scripts were accepted positively with 3 exceptions (out of 30 participants). Two of them blamed themselves for having little imagination and one referred to the texts as 'made-up' and 'unrealistic'. Two participants whose level was A1-2 and whose data is not included in the main sample preferred learning with the formal-only

design. This confirms the result that the formal-only design induces focus on distinct vocabulary items rather than the whole plot and situation in the script. Focus on separate lexical items and their meaning is a much simpler task than making sense of overall meaning, syntactical structures, implicature and establishing interrelations within the plot. One of the most interesting observations which will remain to be tested in further research is the fact that 5 of the participants whose level of proficiency in English is within the range of B2-C2 and whose speaking skills were all quite fluent, kept asking for explanations, definitions and translations into L1 of specialised and non-specialised vocabulary in the formal-informal scripts and later claimed they had had only 1-2 or few new vocabulary items they had learnt from the scripts.

Some possible explanations for the last of the abovementioned occurrences:

The formal-informal alternation contributes to the perception of the texts as easy. The texts flow quickly and induce laughter and fun, so ‘there cannot have been too many words we did not know, we had so much fun after all’? The processes of assimilation and accommodation take place so quickly, almost unnoticeably and this leads the participants to believe they have not been learning because learning is usually something difficult.

The informality boosts learners’ confidence and if they have been noting down in class the words whose meanings they were unsure of, then at the test, they feel so confident of their meanings that they would not admit even to themselves they had learnt the words from the scripts.

Another alternative is that the con-text makes up for the uncertain meanings and engenders their facile recognition and retention, because although implausible it is not incorrect.

Writing down a word, asking about the meanings of words does not necessarily mean that the participant has learned the word from the script in class; it may simply be due to the fact that they felt unsure about the usage or some of the meanings of the word due to the untypical con-text they encountered it in. Thus, confirming the meaning they have always known but got to doubt due to the implausible con-text or some other reason, leads to a heightened confidence.

8.3. Results Categorisation

Finally, the positive comments about the formal-informal script could be summarised in the following categories: ‘Interesting, Puzzling and Fun’ – memorable, induces empathy, triggers attention and concentration, offers a pleasant way of learning; ‘Stimulates Speaking’ - the focus is on plot rather than words; participants retold the story to other people; participants spoke more in the target language though off-topic at times; ‘More Learning Took Place’ - enriching, transformative content; more participants state they learned more vocabulary, while fewer - more grammar.

The negative comments about the formal-informal script could be summarised in the following categories: ‘Irrelevant’ – abstract, impractical, unreal, a bit crazy; ‘Hard’ - to

understand; to adjust to; demands imagination; ‘Easy’ – “It was so easy, I learnt almost nothing.”

According to researcher’s observations: the formal-informal script made learners speak more in 3 out of 5 groups; in one of the FIF groups, they kept talking off-topic during the formal-only module 2, discussing funny issues and it was hard to get them speak about the formal-only topics; in two of the FFI groups, participants started to behave more empathetically during the formal-informal module; there have been several cases of impressively creative language use, both in writing and speaking.

A question which still remains to be answered in further studies is to what extent imperceptible learning is related to informality and to which aspect or aspects of informality, if any.

9. Individual Cases of Supposedly Implicit Learning

Participant PFIF8 after asking for vocabulary explanations and definitions on a great number of cases throughout the classes on the formal-informal scripts had reported only 2 of the 130 tested vocabulary items as learned from the scripts and because of my great disbelief he had additionally listed 12 items (mostly informal ones) which he had learned from the formal-informal scripts. He had got 11 mistakes in total on the tests for the formal-informal module. Yet, apart from the possibility for implicit learning, there may be other explanations, like: he wrongly believed he had learned the mistaken items; he learned them but forgot them by the time of the test, he had learned them wrongly, etc.

In the fourth pilot testing course two participants PFFI.7 and PFFI.8 who also kept asking for explanations during the course, suggest that the formal-informal script is easy for them and they did not learn much, while, in parallel there are statements by three participants from the third pilot testing course FFI.3, FFI.4 and FFI.5 that the formal-informal design makes learning imperceptible and “serves terminology with a spoon of sugar, so that it does not taste bitter anymore.” Which is truer? – a question whose answer may be confirmed in further research.

There are two questions that remain to be answered in further case studies as far as vocabulary learning is concerned: first, to what extent does this occurrence correlate with the fact that the noted down words are times more than the ones marked as learned from the scripts in general and second, to what extent is there a correlation between the formal-informal design and the number of words participants mark as learned from the scripts as well as the informal-formal design and the far smaller number of words marked from the scripts for those five learners. It is uncertain to what degree the noting down of an item indicates not knowing its meaning, its usage, pronunciation, spelling or just being uncertain about it in one way or another, but whatever the reason, the closer inspection of participants’ notes might reveal regularities worth a further analysis in order to ascertain the number of implicitly learned items. Altogether 5 out of 30 participants stated they did not learn much because the script was easy but had been observed to ask for lexical explanations, definitions and translations very often throughout the course. The number of words noted by them by far exceeds the words they marked as learned from the scripts.

10. SPSS Results about the Influence of the Design Technique on Speaking and Vocabulary Skills

Both modules lead to a significant change in terms of vocabulary and oral test results. The formal-informal design shows a greater change in terms of oral test results. The formal-only shows a significantly greater change in vocabulary test results.

Conclusion

Both modules lead to a significant improvement of vocabulary and speaking skills among learners. The formal-informal module fosters the development of speaking skills more while the formal-only module induces more focus on vocabulary. The formal-informal design preconditions a more relaxed environment which leads to an increased communicative willingness and self-confidence in terms of reading comprehension especially and speaking in the context of English for Specific Purposes and General English as a whole. The untypical blending of formal and informal con-text naturally triggers a meaning negotiation process and therefore promotes not only speaking but reactivates an intrapersonal process for assigning meaning to words and looking for interpersonal and inter-realia clues for confirming their meanings. The formal-informal design induces empathy, laughter and creativity, which according to some participants makes it the more successful script design.

It is difficult to measure at this point what is the amount of implicit learning in both modules and for what kind of learners in terms of factors such as: occupation, language level, age, learning styles among others. Further research is also necessary to establish the interrelation between the design technique and vocabulary retention in a long-term perspective.

The current research results are applicable in English for Specific Purposes and General English materials design as well as in the communicative language learning classroom to help the teacher's more conscious choice of approach when focusing on speaking, reading or vocabulary practice.

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