

POTENTIALITIES OF USING TRAVELOGUES AS A RESOURCE IN THE ESP CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The article proposes the incorporation of travel writing as a linguistic resource in teaching English for specific purposes (ESP). Introducing generic variety into a language lesson is supported by the principles of communicative language teaching. Travel writing is also proven to be both a vehicle of relevant content and a powerful stimulus for students' involvement in the lesson. Taking social constructivism as its second vector, the article discusses travel writing as a mediatized resource for making sense of the world. Recent publications of travel experiences in Bulgaria are read through the lens of critical discourse analysis seeking to identify travellers' levels of engagement with the Bulgarian heritage. Focus on the construction of Bulgarian heritage could stimulate critical thinking by alerting students to the fact that communication is never innocent of ideology and travelogues are often instrumental in popular geopolitics.

Keywords: communication, discourse analysis, heritage, language, travel writing

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Introduction

In our practice as teachers of English we are invariably astounded by the natural capacity of the English language to absorb influences as it spreads globally as a dominant medium of communication in every international context. The recognition of English as a lingua franca is largely attributable to its infinite mutability and its ability to transcend the native speakers' normative standards. Scholars suggest that, given the extensive use of English by L2 users, "ownership of the language and the norms of communication through English will no longer be solely under the authority or influence of those users from its Anglophone origins" (Baker, 2015, p. 6). In other words, being able to function in an English-speaking environment no longer requires command of English comparable to a native speaker's standard.

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That said, teaching English for specific purposes (ESP) involves training learners to the standards of linguistic behaviour in institutional professional settings. This implies a process of instruction where communication is regimented by rigid teacher-student roles and is focused on mastering a limited set of prescribed generic patterns – a narrow (if specialized) perspective on language training. This narrow perspective on language training is in stark contrast to the variability of English which becomes even more obvious with the advances in digital communication where once rigid national and social boundaries are crossed. Language learners nowadays are digital natives. Being immersed in social media, language learners do not shy away from self-expression, self-reflection, self-actualization on social media. Students are aware of the potent images of digital nomads who engage in lucrative businesses while avoiding the formality of a traditional professional environment. ESP learners are also aware of the phenomenon of migration which has come to dominate our lives in so many ways. In short, language learners are aware that the world of work is in flux, always on the move, always changing. There is a perceived need for space in an ESP lesson that would allow for a momentary breakaway from normative academic routine. The article aims to address this gap by putting forward a teaching proposal revolving around the incorporation of popular genres into the classroom to provide a brief respite from normativity and, hopefully, a boost to students' engagement with the lesson.

The article proposes introducing generic hybridity in teaching ESP and examines possible outcomes of the experiment. It is organized as follows. First, the theoretical framework on which the proposal rests is described. Next, the proposal is presented and justified in the light of methodological expediency. Finally, some conclusions are drawn on how the proposal could enrich classwork and reinforce students' critical thinking.

Theoretical Framework

The teaching proposal laid out in this article rests on the interface of modern genre theory, discourse analysis and communicative language teaching.

“Genre” is a concept notoriously hard to define. Educationalists define genre as “a highly structured and conventionalized discourse which occurs among the members of a community” (Bonyadi, 2012, p. 86). Research into the importance of genre-knowledge posits that ESP learners can participate in a specialist communicative event if they acquaint themselves not only with the communicative goals of a particular discourse community, but with the specific use of genres as well (Bhatia, 1997). As Bhatia points out, „before learners undertake any goal-driven communicative activity, they need to become aware of appropriate rhetor-

ical procedures and conventions typically associated with the specialist discourse community they aspire to join” (Bhatia, 1997, p. 137).

Modern genre theory, however, takes a different view. It points to the imperfect fit between the ideal notion of a prototype-genre and its realization in practice. Genres are not to be conceived of as moulds for clear-cut shaping of communicative acts. According to modern genre theory, since the social situations from which genres arise are intricate and ambiguous, study had better focus on genre as a dynamic, enacted process rather than a static, formal category. In Derrida’s words “it makes little sense to hold genres to stricter rules of logical classification than we apply to those social situations. Second, it is more productive to think about texts as participating in rather than belonging to genres” (Derrida, 1980, p. 56). It follows, then, that making sense of texts is an active process of making connections between texts and possible genres, rather than sorting texts into categories. Modern genre theory acknowledges the permeable boundaries of genres, their transformation and permissiveness regarding hybridity.

If genres are admittedly diverse, heterogeneous and essentially fluid, establishing them as fixtures in academic or any other discourse should be interrogated.

The second rationale for importing popular genres into academic settings is the recognition that language teaching methodology is becoming “cautiously eclectic in making enlightened choices of teaching practices” (Brown, 2001, p. 40), while being solidly bound to certain principles. Brown points out that currently there is a generally accepted norm in language teaching and that is communicative language teaching (CLT) which revolves around pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. The pragmatic aspect of language teaching should be secured by a focus on the learner’s needs. In that respect, the concurrent study of a language and a degree subject (content-based language study) is essential. Authenticity should come from immersion in “whole-language education” rather than fragmented linguistic features. The functionality of language teaching should be accounted for by producing language for genuine real-life situations that are relatable to the learners’ lived experience. The meaningful purposes materialize in the lesson in the shape of interacting with interlocutors to identify a problem, explore approaches and find a solution. As long as teaching practices stay on course to meet these requirements of methodology, they should be deemed serviceable in the ESP classroom.

The question, then, remains, is there any room for incorporating the popular into an academic setting? There are already enthusiasts whose answer is affirmative, and their arguments are well-aligned with the principles of communicative language teaching i.e., pragmatism, authenticity, functionality and meaningful purpose. They argue that importing popular genres into academic settings bridges the gap between learners’ funds of knowledge from popular culture and knowledge

they encounter in an academic environment (Gutiérrez, 2008). According to the proponents of popular generic variety in classwork, students are encouraged to use everyday experiences to build academic knowledge. Moreover, references to the popular reveal the potential relevance of academic knowledge to the students' everyday lives. This approach undermines the perception of schooling as a site of struggle between an authoritative source of knowledge and disempowered (or uninterested) learners who might be feeling alienated from a rigorous academic setting. The inclusion of the popular redefines what counts as knowledge and has a great emancipatory potential for learners. It is essential, however, that the inclusion of the popular should go hand in hand with a critical consideration of popular culture, so that learners become aware that popular culture reiterates the premises of traditional culture.

This takes us to the third theoretical underpinning of the article: discourse analysis. Discourse analysis has long been one of the major influences on scholarly research. In social science it focuses on identifying discursive structures that can be detected because of the systematicity of the ideas, opinions, concepts, ways of thinking and behaving which are formed within a particular context, and because of the effects of those ways of thinking and behaving (Mills, 2001, p. 17). In linguistics, discourse analysis is a departure from merely describing language as a system to focus, instead, on language in use. Discourse analysis attempts to answer the question, why do members of specific discourse communities use the language the way they do? Could their linguistic behaviour reveal the underlying social structures of which the communicators are part? The answer requires input derived from close examination of the social context in which communication arises, the position of the communicators and their communicative purposes. Analysis in the framework of discourse studies brings to light the opaque workings of social structures encoded in social practices (e.g., language use) which are engendered by power relations and which in their turn reconstitute power relations.

What is to be gained from this investigation by students of social sciences? For anyone pursuing a degree in political science, economics, or media studies, focusing on the discursive aspects of popular texts could yield the insight that images created through language use are profoundly important in shaping patterns of representing the world and responses to global events. One example of how the popular has come to be viewed as a legitimate object of study is to be found in critical geopolitics. Research there has highlighted the way popular culture and its conventions contribute to the context in which our ideas about people and places are framed and interpreted (Dodds, 2005, pp. 74-78). Critical geopolitics has pointed out the role of the popular in constructing geopolitical significance/ insignificance for places and regions which can be linked to wider material in-

terests. Other stimuli for rethinking the potential of the popular to shed light on patterns of representation have come from Said's "*Orientalism*", Todorova's "*Imagining the Balkans*", Wolf's "*Inventing Eastern Europe*" – there is a whole tradition in research unravelling the knowledge systems that support the state of the world. This tradition has brought to light the ways in which the popular draws places and people into the socio-political space of others and involves them in complex interactions at grassroots level, not at the level of statesmanship. It is due to the popular that the workings of the social order are taken for granted by the man in the street.

Teaching proposal

Having acknowledged the popular as an agent in constructing our social world, it is now time to turn to the question at hand – what popular genre could be imported into teaching English for specific purposes? If our choice of resource is to take into account the tenets of communicative language teaching (CLT) i.e., pragmatism, authenticity, functionality and meaningful purpose, then the answer will have to be the genre which affords the highest degree of contextualization of the learning process.

The most important aspect of learning ESP is the acquisition of ability to use language in the context which the learner is going to be part of. Ideally, a foreign language is studied with the goal of being able to communicate in that language's native society – in our case, an Anglophone society. It is necessary to teach the structure of the language as well as the social practices of the target culture. This requirement for contextualization, however, disregards the fact that most ESP learners are likely to operate within their own native socio-cultural contexts rather than in any English-speaking native context. This article proposes a broader understanding of the contextualization of learning. Instead of mimicking the social practices of the language's native culture, which in an essentially unequal world is impossible to achieve, we could aspire for contextualization by enhancing any aspect of the learning environment that ties in with the learner's lived experience. In an English lesson, we can achieve that by resorting to generic content created by a native to the Anglophone social environment who is writing about Bulgaria. We could replenish our resource bank with content from the generic varieties of travel writing: travel diaries, travelogues, travel blogs written by Anglophone travelers or residents in Bulgaria.

There are several factors to justify this choice. First, willing as we might be to use Bulgaria-themed resources from Anglophone media, publications about Bulgaria are few and far between. Work with travel writing content could compensate for the underrepresentation of Bulgaria in foreign mass media. Second, we are working with authentic language, a first-person narrative which

is both informative and aesthetically pleasing – a picture of the world, drawn in words which flow naturally from a native source. Third, a travel narrative about Bulgaria often makes claims to immediate reporting which is interwoven with observations at grassroots level and reflections about the Bulgarian reality. It provokes questions about identity, values, stereotypes. Fourth, travel writing is aligned with the trend in popular culture to use lived experience as a source of creativity. The influence of this trend on youth culture cannot be overstated. Social media abound in first person narratives, unrestrainedly shared for a variety of reasons – self-expression, self-actualization, self-promotion. In the first-person narrative of travel in Bulgaria, ESP learners are faced with a representation of their own lived experience, which is likely to draw some response and lead to a discussion in English.

An ESP lesson could start with asking big questions, questions that potentially project young people’s lives in the grand scheme of things, possibly relatable to the national destiny. We could ask “*How has Bulgarian society changed since the disintegration of the Soviet bloc?*” or *How has Bulgarian economy changed since the country’s joining the EU?* Another question could be: *What should we do with the monuments from the era of socialism?* The latter would be particularly relevant if this country is preparing to hold local government elections. In such circumstances passions run high and we want to divert some of this passion to the ESP classroom, although, naturally, no definitive answers to any of these questions are to be expected.

The teacher could proceed by introducing the learners to select extracts from recently published travelogues about Bulgaria. My selection includes “*Near Varna*” by Graham Field (2020), “*The Cyclist Who Went Out in the Cold*” by Tim Moore (2016) and “*Walking the Woods and the Water*” by Nick Hunt (2014). The extracts selected have a shared focus on the Bulgarian socialist heritage.

Students are invited to read the following extract: “I think Mum should see something significant while she is here so I drive us up the mountain to Buzludzha. It’s not the best of roads on a bike and with four wheels it’s impossible to avoid the potholes. The going is slow but the corner that reveals the surreal flying saucer monument makes it worth the effort. Against the dark blue sky, the Soviet architecture is as striking as the brutal design intended. Sometimes I feel it more than others, but this day doesn’t allow for projection into the dark times of the Iron Curtain” (Field, 2020).

After identifying the references to socialist heritage and the gradation in attributive use of adjectives (*significant, surreal, worth the effort, striking, brutal*) learners are requested to focus on the last sentence of the paragraph. The task is for them to decide if the author is appreciative, critical, or broadly dismissive of the cultural artefacts from Bulgaria’s not-so-distant past. Learners might find the

author's statement obscure, certainly not approving of the aesthetics or the utility of these cultural remnants, but not disapproving either.

Further discussion and references to other parts of the travelogue supply information about the author's social background and, hence, the motives for writing the travel diary. Graham Field writes with the mindset of "an average Joe" who will not tolerate being either preyed upon or pushed around by business representatives. He suffers at the hands of an insurance company, which is ironically dubbed *European Breakdown*. Field clearly relishes a clever word play and manages to make a larger point: „We are going around in circles and I'm stranded and stationary. *European Breakdown* are not going to honour their policy, not tonight, and I will have to take responsibility for myself like I did riding in Mongolia, Siberia, Iraq, Mexico and all the other places of dubious reputation which are, in fact, full of good people" (Field, 2020, p. 30). Decency resides in places, Field seems to suggest, that are remote from the heartland of big business. Later, he triumphs in social media taking revenge on the predatory, unprofessional insurer by opening the floodgates for similar complaints from other travelers.

The author makes no secret of the fact that he is reaching retirement age, yet, in his native society he is not eligible for secure retirement. Desperately trying to keep a foot on the property ladder, the author finds himself chained to it by a mortgage he cannot service. Instead, at the age of fifty he is faced with "imminent homelessness" – an unpleasant thought he keeps at bay by riding his motorbike. So, he rides his motorbike across European borders until he reaches Bulgaria, where he decides to put down roots, buys some property and settles down. Choosing a name for his house – „Near Varna" – signals the author's readiness to turn away from the illusions of safety of his native society. "Near Varna" is certainly reminiscent of Nirvana, as is the highly suggestive title of the first of his narratives about travel in Eastern Europe – "*Looking for the Greener Grass*". There are many other references that make settling in Bulgaria look like walking into a new life where "the grass is greener". With so many pointers to youth culture and rebellion, albeit from someone whose greener years are long past, Graham Field's travelogue reads as if the author has searched for and found a new purpose in life. Simple, rural life in Bulgaria has restored his self-respect.

Looking back at the reference to the Buzludzha "flying saucer" we can conclude now that the discourse on heritage in Graham Field's travelogue is intertwined with the discourse on freedom – the freedom of the individual to claim respect and recognition in society.

The Bulgarian socialist heritage is a recurrent theme in another travelogue – "*The Cyclist Who Went Out in the Cold*" written by Tim Moore. Here is an extract describing Tim Moore's exhausting ride in the Rhodope mountains in a torrential rain: "A bronze socialist partisan stood guard at the head of the pass; I dropped

the MIFA at his feet and staggered towards the tiny orthodox chapel on the other side of the road. The door was locked so I crouched under the domed porch and began pushing damp wedges of bread and sausage into my mouth, rain clattering the tin tiles like popping corn. Then, beneath God's roof I clicked open a *Strong Hell* and the world fell silent. As suddenly as it had begun, the storm departed "(Moore, 2016, p. 180).

Monuments to deities, be they socialist or Christian, are numerous in Bulgaria, all of them equally inefficient, the author seems to suggest, at sheltering a traveler or guarding his life. What really works, however, in times of desperation is opening a can of *Strong Hell* energy drink. Then everything falls into place – the storm subsides, the traveler is saved. A discussion may lead to the conclusion that in Tim Moore's travelogue the discourse on heritage and the discourse on freedom are intertwined, just as in Graham Field's book. However, freedom here is upheld by the liberal principles of consumer society. It is the freedom to abide by one's lifestyle choices: a discerning consumer of a certain brand of energy drink survives a potentially life-threatening experience in the Bulgarian mountains.

Another resource of insights about foreign travelers' perceptions of Bulgaria could be the travelogue "*Walking the Woods and the Water*" written by Nick Hunt. The episode below describes the author's walking tour of Bulgaria in the footsteps of another distinguished British travel writer, Patrick Leigh Fermor, who travelled in Bulgaria in 1934: "Now the farmland lay abandoned. Only once did I come across any sign of new investment: a fluorescent-lit concrete barn, inside which hundreds of cows were penned under ceiling fans. The EU flag fluttered outside; I had a vision of future historians pointing it out, alongside Soviet tower blocks, Ottoman mosques and Roman remains, as a relic of another past administrative sphere of influence" (Hunt, 2014, p. 253).

Students are invited to identify the images of the Bulgarian historical heritage (Soviet tower blocks, Ottoman mosques and Roman remains) and to ponder the implication that this is an uneasy co-existence of disparate cultural traditions. One possible conclusion from the discussion might be that, according to the author, the Bulgarian historical heritage is far too complicated to be accounted for rationally. The author seems to suggest that investigating the lineage of Bulgarian culture would be an exercise in futility, as even the artefacts of the present are denied any future significance as a mark of historical achievement. What the present will eventually amount to will be merely "another past administrative sphere of influence".

Students might reach the conclusion that Nick Hunt's travelogue is yet another text which interweaves the discourses of heritage and freedom. This time, however, we should be aware of the implicit lack of freedom. The awkwardly complicated Bulgarian heritage seems to be sufficient reason for a Westerner to

deny the country the freedom of shaping its own destiny. It is important to point out that this is a conservative view, as is obvious from the rave reviews for the travelogue which were published in the *Daily Telegraph*, the Conservative party's official paper: "Walking in the footsteps of Patrick Leigh Fermor from Rotterdam to Constantinople, Nick Hunt found that, 78 years later, everything and nothing has changed" (*The Daily Telegraph*). A focus on the above-mentioned review might underscore the conservative emphasis on fixities and established hierarchies of social order.

In Nick Hunt's view, Bulgaria is forever relegated to the periphery of the European centres of power and culture, a view which aligns well with the conservative mindset supporting the geopolitical status quo. Yet, this stance could be challenged and disproved. The engagement with travel writing reveals that there are multiple perspectives on reality. Although continuities in discourses have the potential to perpetuate social structures, it is the ruptures in discourses that reveal the potential for change.

Conclusion

There are educational benefits in incorporating popular travel texts in the ESP classroom. Bulgaria-themed travelogues provide content which is relatable to the students' lived experience, thereby contextualizing the environment of learning English. In addition, the process of learning appears to be incidental, stimulated by discussion and problem-solving.

Working with travelogues sheds light on travel writing as a mediatized resource for making sense of the world. Teasing out similarities and differences between different texts prompts questions about the authors' motivation, attributable to their social status or political leanings. The discussion of the three travelogues reveals that, although they approach the Bulgarian reality from the juncture of heritage and freedom, the three texts proffer some variety in the treatment of the topic. Graham Field chooses not to delve into the inequities of the Bulgarian not-so-distant past. He is grateful to have found "the greener grass", a new meaningful life in Bulgaria. Tim Moore is preoccupied with the socialist heritage of Bulgaria. For him, overcoming the Bulgarian space is a test of endurance, fortunately facilitated by his liberal consumer values. Nick Hunt's conservative viewpoint constructs Bulgaria as a wasteland whose future lies in subordination to another sphere of influence.

It is noteworthy that Bulgaria is viewed in the context of a changing Europe and a new geopolitical reality. Bulgarian life is observed from the perspective of the English-speaking "everyman" or "the man in the street". This resonates with the learners' lived experience and stimulates their contribution to a lively interaction in English. The travelogues could lead to broad generalizations, but

they could also spark a discussion in the course of which these generalizations are challenged. The ultimate benefit for the students of ESP is that, along with their communicative linguistic skills, they develop their skills for critical thinking by tying media content about Bulgaria to the socio-political contexts and the ideologies of the communicators.

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