Engaging Students in Doing Research – Evaluation of the ESP Course Project Learning Outcomes

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Abstract: The current study seeks to examine the learning outcomes of an ESP course project intended for MA students of Management and Human Resources. The project's aim is to create learning opportunities that are perceived as relevant by students in terms of progress in language proficiency, field subject knowledge, developing professional skills, and personal growth. The main priority is to integrate the current Business English course curriculum (C1) with real-life tasks in real-life settings that are considered authentic and relevant enough to increase student engagement and motivation in learning. The presented study examines the affective learning outcomes (students' perceptions of the project assignment benefits and the experience of doing research), cognitive outcomes (students' perceptions of the language and subject knowledge growth), and behavioural ones (skills and engagement). The project evaluation results will be used to enhance students' satisfaction with the ESP course and improve the project assignment and its procedures.

Key words: authentic assessment, ESP, learning outcomes, project-based learning, student satisfaction, student engagement

Introduction

The current study seeks to evaluate the learning outcomes of the innovated English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course intended for MA students of Management and Human Resources. The innovations are informed by the existing body of empirical studies in ESP/EFL. We draw on those concepts underlying the course design aiming to create the learning opportunities that are perceived by students as relevant in terms of progress in language proficiency, field subject knowledge, developing professional skills, and personal growth. In this aspect, the current study is a practical example of a curriculum evaluation based on needs analysis (NA), as it has been proposed by Zenker et al. (2022)

We decided to address this aim by designing a course project that will engage students in doing a qualitative study on management issues in companies related to their working experience. The main priority was to integrate the Business English curriculum (C1) with real-life tasks in real-life settings that are considered authentic and relevant enough to increase student engagement, and to create opportunities to use C1 language.

The presented study examines the affective outcomes (students' perceptions of the course project benefits and the experience of doing research), cognitive outcomes (knowledge both in language and subject knowledge), and behavioural

ones (skills and engagement) of the course project assignment. Data were collected by doing a content analysis of the students' diaries, presentations of their projects, written reports, and a short survey after the completion of the project. The results of the course evaluation will be used for making improvements to the project assignment and its procedures to enhance the students' satisfaction with the ESP course.

1   ESP and course design

As it has been noted many times, teaching ESP courses is a challenging task for ESP practitioners, especially when teaching homogenous groups of advanced students, already well into their studies, within the framework of their specialist discipline (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Robinson, 1991). First, the course design must meet the specialist needs of these students by getting them involved in activities that reflect their future job tasks. In doing so, it is essential to use topics that are perceived by students as relevant (Hyland, 2021). In other words, methodology in highly specialized ESP teaching contexts must reflect the disciplinary methodology and its genre specifications (Dudley-Evans, 2000). According to Ding et al. (2017), this has a significant impact on the role of the ESP teacher. Usually far from being disciplinary experts, ESP teachers become language consultants for students who already have their own expertise in the subject matter.

Second, the course must be designed to increase student motivation and engagement in language tasks. For example, both Hans & Hans (2015) and Hyland (2021) have found that the more the course content is integrated around disciplinary topics, the more the students are motivated to engage in classroom practices as they can make use of them for both purposes – improving their language performance and increasing knowledge of the disciplinary content. This, however, doesn't mean that ESP materials should be a parallel to the main disciplinary subjects as these would be seen by students as boring copies of the texts (e.g. What is 4 P's in marketing) and not bringing anything new to develop their specialist knowledge. Dudley-Evans (2000) believes that they should always include some new perspectives, taking it beyond the regular and expected content, or integrating the topic with other disciplines that differ from the major specialization.

On the other hand, if students are not career-oriented, or not interested because the course is compulsory on the timetable, Navickienė et al. (2015) and Rodríguez-Peñarroja (2022) recommend focusing on less specific work so as to not demotivate them by too specific work. When both groups with extremely different needs happen to be in the same course, the teacher needs to look for ways to satisfy opposite expectations by finding some common ground.

Third, there is an ongoing debate about the appropriate proportion of the carrier content and the real content in ESP courses. Disciplinary topics (carrier content) are vehicles to present language in context (real content). Sometimes both contents are so intertwined that is hard to find much difference, such as in writing skills, namely CVs, company communication, reports, or business proposals. That is why some ESP courses are based on the CLIL methodology, which sees the carrier content as a priority (e.g. Arnó-Macià & Mancho-Barés, 2015) and the focus on practicing lexis, language patterns, and skills in CLIL courses is dedicated to language-related episodes (LREs) (e.g. Smit & Finker, 2022).

Lastly, due to the aforementioned issues, there is no wonder that it is rarely easy to find an ESP textbook that can satisfy all the course objectives, especially in the HE environment, as it has been noticed by many textbook researchers or designers (e.g. Swales, 1980; or more recently in the Czech and Slovak HE context: Pecková, 2021; Šulovská, 2016; Václavík, 2017). There are multiple reasons that make a textbook design a challenge. Quite recently, the need for multimodal literacies in the ESP course design has been highlighted by Hafner and Miller (2019) who have been advocating for courses that leave textbooks behind and engage students in project-based learning that integrate language, content and skills development through multimedia channels of the meaning-making. In this perspective Pastia (2013, p. 392) suggests that:

> On the whole, the rapid pace of change from print-based to multimodal representations of information urges an immediate response from language educators. First and foremost, this requires the will to re-conceptualize past practices, which should not necessarily be completely abandoned. It should, however, be acknowledged that implementing multimodal ESP practice is timely for learners who are now surrounded by a technology-saturated and an image-rich environment.

According to this statement, it does not mean that all coursework must be based on the variety of tech-based materials. Innovation may lie in the way how materials are used in the classroom and what skills they develop.

2 Authentic assessments and project-based-learning

From a practical perspective, this may also leave a teacher with no other choice than use authentic materials to create meaningful learning opportunities. It is true that authenticity as a notion is slightly fuzzy. It can refer to the use of unsimplified or genuine texts that were made for other purposes than language teaching, but it can also refer to the text's perceived relevance for the reader (Rets et al., 2022). According to Oliver (2015), a task that is to be perceived as authentic must be designed with a strong degree of proximity that reflects a professional environment that allows students to deal with linguistic, professional, and cultural challenges. Creating such a learning environment can then increase student engagement in classroom practices. This also means that the student's motivation to put

increased efforts into learning and strive for excellent results is a demonstration of the deep approach to learning (Biggs and Tang, 2011; James and Cassidy, 2018; Mičínová, 2022). In addition, such a course design allows aligning methods of learning with the methods of assessment while disagreement between them leads to low satisfaction and lack of interest in learning (the so-called "surface approach to learning"). Most studies agree that authentic assessments have a significant impact on the students' course satisfaction, motivation, and promoting behaviour. For example, Larmer et al. (2015) highlight that authentic tasks provide opportunities to learn practices, behaviours, and skills that are required in the student's future professional careers, which has a positive effect on their engagement and course satisfaction.

There is a great variety of authentic tasks and authentic assessments, with course projects being just one of many of them (Sridharan & Mustard, 2015). Vogler et al. (2018) describe project-based learning as an authentic environment that enables the application of the acquired subject matter to real-life problems, which increases students' willingness to engage more actively in solving the task. In addition, project-based learning is also a natural environment for the development of industry and professional skills, including so-called soft skills, such as teamwork skills. Evaluation of perceptions of project work is, however, often carried out by teachers themselves as part of reflective practice. Diaries reflecting the progress and attitudes of students in the course of the project are frequent tools of this evaluation. These self-assessment tools have the advantage that they describe learning processes in detail, but also capture changes in attitudes and acquired experience. They are a source of knowledge not only for the student but also for the teacher to improve the design of the teaching tool. The analysis of these diary entries together with the evaluation questionnaires show that the majority of students respond very favourably to project-oriented teaching. Harmer (2014) explains that students perceive that they are learning in a way that allows them to better prepare for the demands of the labour market, which, in effect, increases their willingness to spend a greater amount time and effort in completing project-based tasks.

There is plenty of evidence that project-based learning is what students appreciate and see as a way to improve their language and other skills (Affandi & Sukyadi, 2016; Frank et al., 2003; Kavlu, 2020; Wahyudin, 2016), but as it has been noted by Vogler et al. (2018) almost all of them are simulations. The "real" real-life projects in ESP courses are a rarity unlike disciplinary projects that are abundant in business studies – and these are of particular interest to this article. For designing the research project that is to be examined in this article we took inspiration, for example, from Helms (2014). She conducted a Conscientious Consumerism Project in an Undergraduate Quality Management Class that asked students to go out and started writing complaints of poor service or a defective

product, approach the responsible company's manager and then design solutions for better staff practices. Another project conducted by Finch and Salzarulo (2011) asked students to find solutions to the problem of a car dealership failing to respond to real customers' complaints. Both projects received high appreciation from their participants who enjoyed working on tasks that were regarded relevant for their language development and professional growth while taking them outside of class and dealing with problems that occur in the daily workings of business professionals.

As we have seen, tailoring language learning in ESP courses to meet students' needs requires more than just the use of authentic disciplinary-based materials which are studied in the class. Creating authentic tasks should also mean that we set up an authentic setting that enables students to engage with the professional practice and prepare relevant learning artifacts helping them to feel like they are already a part of the living business experience.

3   The rationale for the course project

With the aim to increase students' satisfaction with the compulsory C1 ESP 4-term course for students of Management in Aviation and Human resources and their engagement we designed a project that integrates syllabus content with problem-solving scenarios while incorporating language skills and the range of lexis and grammatical structures that are prescribed for C1 level while keeping in mind frequent criticisms that some types of spoken assessments (including high-stakes exams) do not provide opportunities to demonstrate skills at C1 level due to low level of complexity of the selected task and topic (Hulstijn, 2007).

That is why we proposed innovation in learning and assessment practices by introducing a semester inquiry-based project. The topic was the resolution of a given conflict situation in the company based on a fictitious case study (adapted from Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 301–304). First, students individually studied the case, and then in teams discussed the reasons based on their own major subject knowledge and proposed possible scenarios and solutions, including an assessment of the impact on the management structure and decision-making process. Second, they conducted an inquiry in the company of their choice (usually where they were working part-time) by interviewing their immediate manager (usually a line manager). They presented him/her with a fictitious case study, and ask for their analysis of the causes, proposed solutions, and experience in solving similar conflicts in their managerial position. Third, the students processed the results into a report, presented it in the class, and discussed the findings under the facilitation of the teacher who moderated the discussion to point out unattended issues and invited students to question the presented proposals. In the end, we asked

students to write a brief research report and a self-reflection on their project experience.

3.1   Methods

To study the learning outcomes proposed by the extent of literature and reported by the aforementioned empirical studies we utilised the concept of design-based research that is suitable to examine the effects of classroom practices innovations to evaluate student and teacher satisfaction and efficiency of learning/teaching (Anderson et al., 2012). This research method works as a cycle that reflects the learning/teaching process. First, it addresses a problem, then proposes several solutions, tests them, makes improvements to the classroom practices, reflects on them, and makes generalizations.

To evaluate the learning outcomes of the project, we asked students to write a self-reflection diary to capture their subjective perceptions of how they processed the project, and its benefits including their own attitudes. Based on the content analysis of the students' diaries we designed a short survey to get a clearer picture of the students' perceived experiences and views. In addition, we did a content analysis of the classroom presentations and research reports to find out to what extent they provided opportunities for using a C1 language in complex communicative situations.

3.2   Sampling

The course project took place in the academic year 2022/2023 in an ESP class for students of Human Resources ($n = 32$) and Management of Aviation Businesses ($n = 26$) (both MA degrees). The total number of participants was 58 (32 and 26 respectively). 58 participants submitted their research in the form of a presentation, written report, and a diary to pass the course requirements while only 54 participants filled in a survey during the final class session. Data on participants' learning outcomes were collected by means of a 14-item questionnaire which was administered after the project was completed. Participants were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree-strongly disagree) the extent to which each item represented their view in engaging in the ESP research project.

4   Project assignment – procedures

These are the following steps in conducting the student research project. Step 1 includes a project assignment and an analysis of a given case study from a company context.

4.1   A case study analysis (Step 1)

Somewhere in the Czech Republic, a middle-sized aircraft spare parts supplier and aircraft servicing company is struggling for profitability. Spare parts, imported from Europe, or both Americas, are expensive and numerous. The company offers a full range of spare parts such as avionics and navigation equipment, rotatable components, engine accessories, actuation systems, hydraulics, pneumatics, landing gear, wheels, brake systems, APUs, etc., but only some of them are manufactured in the company's factory while the majority is not on-the-shelf inventory. This means that some customer requests cannot be satisfied within a reasonable time because deliveries may vary according to the particular manufacturer or supplier.

The company is run by a general manager, to whom three functional managers report: one for sales, one for manufacturing and servicing, and one for finance and personnel. The total workforce is about 250.

The working climate in the firm is often disturbed by conflicts between the sales manager and the manufacturing and servicing manager. The manufacturing and servicing manager has only one interest in maintaining a smooth delivery process with minimal delays. He prefers grouping orders into larger batches that he can fit within one or two stable and verified suppliers from abroad. Rare models of aircraft that require untypical spare parts are difficult to obtain, which is a nuisance as this requires extra time and effort. There are also problems with longer delivery dates which add to the total time that is spent on handling a particular order. The manufacturing and servicing manager view these orders as slowing down deliveries and lowering the financial performance and productivity.

The sales manager tries to satisfy every customer because they operate in a highly competitive environment. Aircraft operators always push on the earliest dates and lowest prices. Some orders are very small and unlikely profitable, but the sales manager hates to say no because the customer might go to a competitor, spread the word of mouth that the company is not able to satisfy special demands, and also he hopes that positive feedback would bring more orders in the future or more prominent clients. He also promises customers to make the delivery on almost impossible dates, which creates extra pressure on the servicing and supplies team. The worst are rush orders – emergencies that play havoc with the already agreed-upon servicing plan. As a result of this, staff are often asked to work overtime or over weekends to meet the deadlines.

As a result of this, there are frequent disagreements between the two managers over whether a certain rush order or special order should be taken into servicing or not. The conflict is not limited to the department heads: servicing personnel publicly questions the competence of the sales manager and vice versa. In the company cafeteria, the servicing workers and salespeople never sit together, although they have known each other for years

4.2   Individual student analysis and classroom feedback (Step 2)

Step 2 includes two questions to be answered first individually, then discussed in the class under the guidance of the teacher.

Task 1 What is the main problem in this case study?

Task 2 How would you solve it if you were one of the managers, or the general manager himself/herself?

4.3 Doing a deeper analysis – using the theoretical framework (Step 3)

In Step 3 the students were presented with three different solutions based on cultural differences as presented by Hofstede et al. (2010, p. 304). According to him, company solutions are influenced by national preferences, which is why the French see the company as "the pyramid of the people", the Germans as "the well-oiled machine", and the British as "the market village". These culturally-rooted concepts are believed to have a profound impact on company practices and decision-making processes. The students were asked to read the following analysis of the problem and make comparisons with their previous solutions wherever relevant.

This story describes a banal problem of a kind that occurs regularly in all types of organizations. As with most organizational problems, it has both structural and human aspects. The people involved react according to their mindset. Part of this mindset consists of people's ideas about what an organization should be like. Organizing always requires answering two questions: 1) who has the power to decide what? and 2) what rules or procedures will be followed to attain the desired ends? The answer to the first question is influenced by cultural norms of power distance; the answer to the second question is influenced by cultural norms about dealing with uncertainty or rather avoiding uncertainty. There are two more dimensions: individualism and masculinity, but these affect mainly the thinking about people in organizations, rather than about organizations themselves (taken from Hofstede & Hofstede, 2010, p. 301–303).

In one study (Stevens, 1973), students of the MBA programme were asked to analyse this problem, and not surprisingly their solutions grouped quite similarly around their nationalities.

The majority of the French students diagnosed the case as negligence by the general manager to whom the two department heads reported. The solution preferred by the French was for the opponents to take the conflict to their common boss, who would issue orders to settle such dilemmas in the future. Stevens interpreted the implicit organization model of the French as a "pyramid of people" (p. 103).

The majority of the Germans understood the case as a lack of structure. The scope of responsibility of the conflicting managers had never been laid down. The solution was to establish procedures such as calling a consultant, nominating a task force, and asking the common boss. The Germans saw an organization ideally as a "well-oiled machine" (p. 104) in which management intervention is limited to exceptional cases because the rules should settle all daily problems.

The majority of the British diagnosed the case as a human relations problem. The two department heads were poor negotiators, and their skills in this respect should be developed by sending them to a management course, preferably together. The implicit model of an organization is a "village market" (p. 105) in which neither hierarchy nor rules but rather the demands of the situation determine what will happen.

These results coincide with the findings received by Hofstede (1964) who studied managers' responses to power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, and uncertainty avoidance as dimensions of country cultures. His results agreed quite well with similar studies (e.g. Mintzberg, 1993). People with international business experience have confirmed many times over that French organizations do concentrate authority more, Germans ones do need more structure, and people in British ones do believe more in resolving problems ad hoc.

Task 3 Decide if any of your views agree with the aforementioned solutions. Which models do you agree with more that would lead to the improvement of the situation?

4.4 Conducting one's own research (Step 4)

The students were asked to interview one or two close managers from their work. They described the problem set given in the Project Assignment and asked about their view on the possible solution. Then they gave them three options described above (Step 3) and asked for their reflection. Finally, they asked if they could provide any examples of managerial conflicts from their own practice. In the class, they reported the summary of the manager's views, their examples and one's own reflection on the solutions. This was done first in small groups to allow maximum of autonomy and time for speaking and practicing C1 language (presenting the findings, discussing opposing views, giving additional or contradicting evidence and argument, and reaching a final solution). Then all the findings were summarized with the whole classroom while the students were taking notes so they could write a final report (around 650 words) and present a short final presentation (max. 10 minutes) with the following structure.

Company's info: name, type of industry, portfolio of products or services, size, managerial structure, short history, economic performance if available

Summary of the manager's views and examples of their own managerial conflicts

Summary of the student's analysis compared with the team's and class analyses.

5 Results and interpretations

The analysis of the student's perceptions of the overall contribution of the ESP course project to learning revealed some interesting findings, some of them more expected, some of them less. First, we will analyse and interpret the learning outcomes, i.e. the cognitive, affective, and behavioural ones. The data is taken from the students' self-reports validated by the teacher's observation notes and the content analysis of the students' artifact performance (i.e. written reports and presentations). Data from the self-reports together with the teacher's observations (mainly what was missing in the students' reports) were clustered to create items for a survey to evaluate the course project and propose changes. First, we will discuss the data from the students' self-reports.

5.1 Analysis of the learning outcomes from the students' self-reports

The ESP course was conducted mainly to increase student satisfaction with the content of the course and its classroom practices. We tried to increase student engagement and give opportunities to practice knowledge and skills relevant to their future career while challenging them with problem-based learning and doing research in authentic settings through the use of C1 language. Now we will deal

with the individual results of the study in the four categories of learning outcomes and illustrate them with samples of data (given in italics).

The category of cognitive learning outcomes as perceived in students' self-reports shows a surprising lack of comments regarding language learning. None of the respondents made an effort to reflect on the language opportunities despite the fact that the project was run as part of the English course. Nevertheless, other cognitive outcomes include an improvement in understanding management issues more deeply and obtaining interesting experiences about real-life problem solutions that appeared quite often. As intended, the majority of reports include positive comments in terms of the newly gained knowledge, such as:

I found this study to be very up-to-date considering that nowadays many goods are in short supply and people have to wait a long time for their delivery. It was also interesting to talk to someone who has experience with similar problems and listen to his opinion. It was surprising to find out that he is dealing with such conflicts only too often.

It was surprising to find out how much of the theory can be found in this case study. I would like to find out more about different company cultures and national priorities. I had no idea about those differences. It was a great idea to do a project on company cultures.

The most important finding for me was the understanding that every situation can have different solutions – sometimes leading to the same successful solution – but the type of company, in the industry is what influences the optimal choices most.

The category of affective learning outcomes includes perceptions of the benefits of the project. Students' attitudes to the project are in general quite positive, saying that it helped them to find increased confidence in learning, to overcome uncertainties, to enjoy sharing results with others and learning from others.

It was interesting to find out that my views agreed with those of my manager with 9 years of experience. I realized that I came up with the right solution.

First, I felt upset about the task, I mean to interview my boss, it's like stepping out of my comfort zone, but in the end I felt really good about the way how I ran the interview and described the results. When I was sharing them with my classmates, I felt proud because I brought a very different perspective of the problem, which was later approved by our teacher. I'm grateful that my manager took her time and explained the problem in depth and came up with a brilliant solution.

The most interesting part of the project came at the end when we were comparing different solutions and similar problems in the class. I learned about so many different types of companies and their problems. It was really practical.

It was amazing to hear about the experience of so many managers. I think it's the best way how to learn about company management – not from the books. It was exciting – it's a better way of learning for me.

The affective learning outcomes are sometimes intertwined with the behavioural ones, especially when students relate to their engagement in class and team discussions when sharing their results and learning from others. The engagement seemed to include even work settings and students' relationship to their managers.

It was very interesting to find out about the problems in the company I'm working for, about the priorities, tensions, delivery problems. I didn't know about them.

Thanks to the interview I could talk to my manager about things we have never spoken, about her problems, about conflicts with other managers. I now feel closer to her, and if I had a problem, I wouldn't have a problem to talk to her.

Many students noticed the difference in learning processes when compared to more traditional ones, such as reading articles. They also appreciated learning that feels more relevant for their future, or when they become part of the learning process.

It was a change from routine. Instead of reading a article, or do some listening activity, we did something on our own, and it was fun. And I learned so much useful information. Now I understand how the job of a manager is challenging. And I'm not afraid of this future career because I find it very entertaining – it's not anything but boring.

I hadn't known about Hofstede's concept of cultural dimensions and I think it's very practical and applicable because it explains many problems and their reasons.

Another surprising outcome that relates to the behavioural outcomes is the ability to conduct an interview, which seems to be a new skill that is considered difficult and to give a presentation which is considered easier because the content had been approved within the team and class discussions.

I also learned a lot from the experience of running an interview, I had to concentrate on her words, on the facts and come up with other questions quickly to find out more.

I hate giving a presentation. I feel like all eyes are on me, and if I say something stupid, they will laugh. This time it was easier because I could try it out in our small team and see if people agree.

What came rather unexpected was the overall limited range of self-reports, usually between 100–150 words. We asked students to reflect on their feelings, difficulties, and views of the presented case and theory, but they wrote mainly about their findings, and the reflection itself came at the end of the text, and was very short. The majority of the students wrote something between 1–3 sentences, saying very little about the way how they went about doing the project, thus giving a very limited view of the issues they might have been dealing with. It seemed like students didn't have a clear idea of what to write. In fact, one student wrote this:

> The biggest problem with this self-reflection diary is that I don't know what you want to hear. What's the point of this?

The manifestation of a lack of ability to reflect on one's own work and its results seems to be a worrying one. It can also indicate that students are not possibly trained to reflect on their learning processes in other field classes. They are used to being given an assessment of their performance by a teacher, but they rarely assess one's performance or one's feelings and attitudes. This led us to design a short survey to find out more details about the students' perceptions to examine their scope and relevance for future changes to the project assignment.

5.2 Results and interpretation of the questionnaire

Data on participants' learning outcomes were collected by means of a 14-item questionnaire which was administered after the project was completed. Participants were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree-strongly disagree) the extent to which each item represented their view in engaging in the ESP research project. The questionnaire was divided into four parts as it is indicated in Table 1. Three of them correspond to different types of learning outcomes, with the last part measuring the overall student satisfaction with the project.

Items 1–4 evaluate cognitive outcomes in terms of knowledge gains in handling managerial conflicts (1), perceived relevance for current or future careers (2, 3), and the experience of conducting an interview (4). The majority of students see the project as useful by increasing their confidence in understanding managerial problems. They also appreciate the opportunity to learn how to run an interview and analyse its results.

Items 5–7 explore behaviour outcomes in terms of student engagement and motivation. Again, the majority of students believe that the project-based form of learning is engaging because they feel interested in sharing work-related experiences and taking part in class discussions.

Items 8–11 examine affective outcomes mainly concerning students' views on the project's contribution to the development of their language skills which showed unrepresented in the conducted analysis of self-reports. It proved that students see the project-related communicative situation as beneficial as it created opportunities for meaningful language practice.

Items 12–14 look into the overall satisfaction with the class project. Again, the majority of participants indicate high levels of satisfaction, with some students, however, not feeling engaged. This finding can be partly attributed to the number of students who reported that they would like to do some of the traditional language activities. This section of the questionnaire also proved another presumption that arose from self-reports. Most students struggle with self-reflection and have very little idea of what it needs.

To conclude, data from the questionnaire brought a more substantial verification for the findings that rose from self-reports. An overall impression of the research project was positive. There are several considerations for the future modification of the project assignment, but we will discuss them in greater detail in the part of the article.

6   Discussion of results and interpretation

In reference to Table 1, it seems that doing an authentic research project with students is an enjoyable task that provides a range of opportunities to enhance learning, increase student motivation, and develop skills that are perceived as relevant for the student's future career. Doing research that requires students to leave class and enter the world of business by interviewing members of the management on problems that lower the company's efficiency is simply something that matters. So, it is not surprising that the project assignment resulted in higher engagement and satisfaction with its content.

Another group of findings belongs to the level of language performance that the task completion required from students as observed and analysed by the teacher. Both tasks (written reports and class presentations) showed students' ability to perform highly complex tasks in English, which at the same time required advanced specialist vocabulary, grammatical and syntactical structures, ability to comply with genre specifications (writing a report, giving a presentation), engaging in discussions with a high level of uncertainty (creating hypotheses, making assumptions, refuting ideas, using evidence). This was done first in small groups to allow maximum autonomy and time for speaking and practicing C1 language (presenting the findings, discussing opposing views, giving additional or contradicting evidence and argument, and reaching a final solution).

Tab. 1: *Students' perceptions of the PBL's effects on learning outcomes (N = 54)*

	Item	Statement	Strongly agree	Partly agree	I don't know/ Not relevant	Partly disagree	Strongly disagree
Cognitive outcomes	1	Now I understand better how company problems can be solved.	19	31	3	1	
	2	I'm sure I will use some of the newly gained experience in my future career.	38	9	4	3	
	3	It helped me to find out more about the background of the company I'm working at and to understand my managers' responsibilities.	41	5	2	6	
	4	I learned how to conduct an interview and analyse its results.	26	21	3	1	3
Behaviour outcomes	5	I learned a lot of new interesting experience from my classmates.	26	23	1	4	
	6	Sharing experience with my classmates made me listen more carefully.	23	24	1	6	
	7	I enjoyed sharing my results with others because I had something interesting to say.	21	27	1	5	
Affective outcomes	8	I saw team discussions as a good opportunity to practice speaking.	26	21	3	4	
	9	Giving the final presentation to the class was easier because I had been given feedback from my team and the teacher.	12	16	6	12	8
	10	Translating the summary of my respondent's answers was a good practice of this skill.	18	28	3	1	3
Project satisfaction	11	The biggest problem was the self-reflection. I didn't know what to write about.	22	17	1	9	5
	12	Apart from the project, I'd rather do more traditional vocabulary and grammar practice in English.	16	14	6	12	6
	13	The project was a nice change from the routine of language learning (reading articles, doing exercises).	23	26	4	2	
	14	I see no point in doing a project like this in English classes.	6	2	1	6	39

Source: Author

The most satisfying part of the project was the preliminary group discussions and reports from interviews. It felt really authentic as the students got involved in making their point when they reported the results of their interviews because they were talking about the personally relevant and well-known business environment. They showed engagement when other classmates were listening carefully, and pride because they were able to express their meaning – sometimes explaining complicated relations, warning about other issues, or giving an example to support their point. It felt like that whole class was in a meeting where some of the most burning issues are being analysed and possible solutions created. Unlike traditional language learning tasks that ask students to read an article, listen to a podcast, or watch a video (even if they are taken from the media and deal with current topics), the atmosphere in the class was buzzing with activity, interest, and commitment. This means that the authenticity of materials' origin in language learning is outweighed by the authenticity of relevance for the individual learner. The combination of language learning with the performance of real-life tasks, like solving a managerial problem in this case enhances engagement only when the task itself is seen as relevant by the learner himself/herself.

This case study opened some of the less attended issues, such as lack of focus on self-reflection skills not only in terms of language performance but also skills generally belonging to task completion. Another less satisfying part of the project was the final presentations. Their quality was good, but the class didn't seem to be interested – possibly because students had already learned about the interview results in the preliminary class discussions. So, the question remains whether to keep this format of the final presentations for the sake of practicing presentation skills or to look at other ways how to share the final project results.

The results of this study have a number of limitations mainly due to the size of the sample (58/54) and the academic context of a MA degree programme, but we are convinced that the used methodology allows us to make the aforementioned generalisations. We have avoided the main drawback of many studies mentioned in this article as cited by Vogler et al. (2018). In fact, many studies lag in methodology, using one research tool only, popular self-reporting questionnaires or interviews, or not providing enough details about their data and sampling. To overcome these shortcomings, we tried to provide a more complex range of data so that we could compare them and verify their meaning, validity, and reliability. Despite our efforts, we advise that our final interpretations should be only applicable in a similar higher education context, i.e. with students of a similar field subject, personal maturity, and professional experience. In the future, we will use the collection of the student case studies in further teaching as a tool to activate student engagement, and provide an authentic material for a specialist vocabulary and grammar practice, thus easing the problematic nature of teaching ESP courses.

7 Conclusion

The current study sought to evaluate the learning outcomes of the innovated English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course intended for MA students of Management and Human Resources. The innovations were informed by the extant body of empirical studies in ESP/EFL. We drew on those concepts underlying the course design aiming to create such learning opportunities that are perceived by students as relevant in terms of progress in language proficiency, field subject knowledge, developing professional skills, and personal growth.

We decided to address this aim by designing a course project that engaged students in doing a qualitative study on management issues in companies related to their working experience. The main priority was to integrate the Business English curriculum (C1) with real-life tasks in real-life settings that are considered authentic and relevant enough to increase student engagement, and motivation, and to create opportunities to use C1 language.

Doing an authentic research project with students provided a range of opportunities to enhance learning, increase student motivation, and develop skills that are perceived as relevant for the student's future career. Doing research that requires students to leave class and enter the world of business by interviewing members of the management on problems that lower the company's efficiency is simply something that matters and results in higher engagement and satisfaction with the authentic content of language learning because it is regarded as personally and professionally relevant.

Creating a project assignment that is built on problem-solving in a real-life setting is a highly complex task. As such it requires students to use advanced specialist vocabulary, grammatical and syntactical structures, ability to comply with genre specifications, and engage in discussions with a high level of uncertainty, e.g. create hypotheses, make assumptions, refute ideas, or use evidence. This also allows the teacher to make a more objective assessment of the learner's language performance than traditional tasks that lack authenticity. Only such authentic tasks allow the teacher to examine C1 language performance in its appropriate forms, such as presenting findings, discussing opposing views, giving additional evidence, contradicting an argument, or reaching a final agreement. This study is also a contribution to the shift of the higher education language learning and teaching practices toward greater language content relevance and authentic learner needs.

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