AMERICAN FICTION AS A SOURCE OF LEARNING AMERICAN ENGLISH

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Abstract

Although the main communicative purpose of fiction is pleasure reading, it can provide a lot of useful information about a language in its written mode to those who are not native-speakers and understand the reasons for being exposed to authentic language. Being written for a diverse, wide-public audience, fiction can cover a variety of topics and provide learners with the use of grammar and vocabulary in real-life situations. In addition, it can be seen as intermediate in that it includes a conversational dialogue of fictional characters. This can enable non-native speakers to be exposed to spoken mode of a target language, yet restricted, as well as written mode. Although contemporary British English is heavily influenced by American English and some contrasts are disappearing, there are still some specific features that characterise American English. The article presents the results of the study, the purpose of which was to find out the extent to which American fiction can support language learning and to offer new insights into communicative language teaching.

Keywords: *authentic materials, American English, contemporary literary prose, group work, information retrieval*

1. INTRODUCTION

The variation between British and American English is considerable; however, most non-linguistically oriented users of English commonly recognise the differences between the pronunciation and spelling that are quite regular. In addition, some words have individually different pronunciations as well as spellings. Classifying lexical differences, Crystal describes three main distinctions: lexemes found only in American English, some only in British English and some that have become established as Standard English. Both varieties use the word *pharmacy*, alongside *drugstore* in American English and *chemist's* in British English [1: 308]. As regards grammar, some typical features of American English such as regularity prevailing over irregularity in the former lists of irregular verbs and the plural of nouns or the use of *have* instead of *have got* are part of trends in Standard English.

American English has become widespread due to the country's position as an economic power, English of American products has started to rule in the world. The USA has become the leading provider of broadcasting services and a dominant provider of film industry. American English has influenced other varieties of English due to its control of the new electronic revolution, the Internet having its American origins [2]. Although famous British personalities such as G. B. Shaw, Oscar Wilde or Dylan Thomas claimed that introducing American English meant dividing two countries by a common language, it needs to be mentioned that Noah Webster's writing of dictionaries was based on the fact that hundreds of words used in the USA were unknown for the users of British English.

Future teachers of English need to aware of the fact that there are other varieties of English their future students might be exposed to and they need to be prepared for being able to explain the main differences or specific examples once they are confronted with them. Although there were many dialect differences due to the number of immigrants from a variety of countries and nationalities, American English has developed to a unified, literary standard that seems to be reasonable to study.

Language is used differently in a particular context and its users conventionally sequence material to achieve their goal, using type of schema and linguistic realisation (lexicon, different patterns of structure and the organisation of the text) appropriate for an intended text (discourse). A continuous piece of spoken or written language is classified as a text that has a distinctive internal structure and an identifiable communicative function [3]. Texts are systemised into text types on the basis of their structure and function. Each genre shares some general structures and distinguishes by specific ones.

Texts are coherent and sentences are connected. While coherence refers to logic determining the order of sentences, cohesion concerns the way sentences are linked together and both aspects contribute to the overall unity of the text. Due to these qualities and language in use realised as text, it seems to be reasonable to use texts in language education.

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [4], language learners are expected to produce smoothly flowing, well-structured discourse, respecting organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices at level C1. To achieve this level of language proficiency, the students whose major is English at the Faculty of Education of Trnava University are trained to improve their language competence in order to be able to function at micro- and macro-levels in spoken discourse and written text. Although each genre is characterised by specific texture and can be used for genre analysis as well as structure analysis, the use of contemporary literary prose provides learners with a variety of useful information that can be noticed reading other texts or listening to spoken utterances. Applied linguists encourage the use of literary texts to integrate skills the learners need to develop or enhance. Although literature is commonly characterised as the exemplification of the features of normal communication, McKay [5] pinpoints that it lacks this purpose and supports Widdowson's claim about the aim of literary texts referring to the way of conveying 'an individual awareness of reality' [6]. However, literary prose extends learners' awareness of how something is said contributes to speakers' achieving their purpose in communication and at the same time their decision of how something is said reveals something about themselves.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Writing literary texts belongs to the category of creative writing. While creating them, the authors shape the medium of them, making grammatical and lexical choices with the intention to define spatial and temporal frames of references. What is more, they negotiate interpersonal relationship with their readers. On the other hand, they look through language to a believed world and leave many things unsaid [5].

University students are trained to analyse discourse and linguistic courses are guided to focus on particular features, commonly the ones that are different from those used in the students' mother tongue. Contemporary literary prose provides proficient users of target language with a variety of patterns of language structure due to the fact that the speech of a narrator is accomplished by speeches of characters that move the plot forward. Despite the fact that varieties of English are currently converging, there are still some significant features of American English students will not be able to recognise due to their ignorance, once being confronted with them. During the process of training future teachers of English, it seems to be reasonable to draw their attention to the distinction of these main varieties as they need to be prepared to answer their future students' questions concerning the differences in spelling, the use of words or grammatical patterns they can discover while working with authentic texts.

The number of the students who were engaged in this study was 34, out of whom 30 students who achieved their bachelor degree at Trnava University had chosen an American English course, in which topics referring to American accent, orthography and some fundamental examples of lexical items and grammatical patterns are the core topics of the course. In this context, it was easier for them to recognise some typical orthographic, lexical and grammatical features. However, the course was focused on phonological qualities of American English to a greater extend with the aim to prepare future teachers of English to use online authentic material (videos and short dialogues) in their future classes.

Since the previously mentioned course was more audio-oriented and based on typical phonological features, in our study students were asked to discover new items in the three layers such as lexical, grammatical and orthographic and systemise them into particular categories in order to be able to present them to their colleagues with the intention to broaden their previously achieved knowledge. To be able to obtain data, they were divided into three groups, each given approximately 35 pages. To accomplish the first task, it was necessary to find out samples, analysing them from a number of

perspectives, while consulting them in British and American dictionaries and grammar-reference books. The second stage referred to working in different three groups with the intention to share their findings and make samples analysed more precisely. The book chosen for this analysis was called *Long Road to Mercy* by David Baldacci as the students had worked with some of the chapters, taken from the book, focusing on different aspects of the target language. In this study, being familiar with the plot and the language used by the writer was considered relevant as it was not necessary to introduce the storyline and main characters.

3. RESULTS

Each group was expected to excerpt approximately 35 pages (from Chapters 50-63, a total of 109 pages) with the intention to focus on the previously mentioned three strata of the language. However, they were instructed that at the end of the first stage of analyses they would be in charge of one stratum and therefore it was important to work systematically and thoroughly, not knowing the stratum they would be responsible for in their forthcoming presentation. Students were expected to mingle in groups in which each former group members would be present, sharing what they had found out. This work pattern was chosen to let them cooperate, collaborating and negotiating meaning in order to achieve a common ground for their classification. After distributing their roles, they were proposed to use dictionaries and grammar-reference books to verify the selected samples and to provide the others with as much information as possible.

3.1. Orthography

In English orthography, the two most recognised variations are British and American spelling. The students were aware of the productive spelling differences such as –re and –er (*amphitheater*), -our vs –or (*color*), -ogue vs –og, double consonants in BrE vs single consonant in AmE, the reduction of syllables or vowels in AmE, e.g. –me in the British spelling of the word programme (*weapons programs*), etc. In the analysed pages, they detected all the mentioned differences with the highest number of problems regarding double consonants. They could discover some rules about doubling consonants in British English in terms of a stressed syllable and adding an inflection, which is not implied in American spelling rules, for example, *Pine had traveled nearly a mile…* [7: 337]. However, American English keeps a double consonant (mostly -l) at the end of a word if it is part of the word, for example, *skillful* or *fulfillment* in contrast with British skilful or fulfilment. In British English, this double consonant drops. One of the typical spelling differences discovered in the samples concerning orthography referred to the prepositions or adverbs that are written with the –s ending in British English and without it in American English, for example, *She hurried toward it* [7: 360].

The second category was composed of words that are written differently in American English, for example, *Jr.* as a counterpart for British *Jnr.* in the sentence *'How's Joe Jr.?'* [7: 332], or the spelling differences in a pair *curb – kerb* in the sample *Pine wave her hand, and Jennifer Yazzie pulled the truck over to the curb* [7: 332] or in a pair *okay – OK*, for example, *'Okay, but then why would the Russians help us do this'? asked Pine* [7: 377].

The third category was based on word-formation processes. Students could conclude that there were numerous abbreviations they had not been aware of before analysing the text such as *WMDs* for 'weapons of mass destruction', *DD* for 'Department of Defense' or *HRT* standing for *High Risk Target* (US Army), for example, *'I think the DD might be involved in what's going on'* [7: 412]. Another typical feature was shortening, for example, *ammo clips, comm pack* in the sample such as *No squawks from a comm pack* [7: 361] or *creds* for credentials, meaning 'official documents showing that a person is entitled to credit or has a right to exercise official power' [8], e.g. *'I'm FBI. I'm going to show you my creds'* [7: 361].

Students used to be exposed to the British spelling form *per cent* and American *percent* and therefore their orthographic samples included the sentence…*and the exoskeleton's battery-powered features will carry about fifty percent of the load* [7: 389]. However, consulting the online Cambridge Dictionary they could find out only the one-word expression for both varieties [8]. Other dictionaries presented

both spellings and the form *per cent* was labelled as especially British English [9]. The discovery related to one form in the current usage of particular expressions supported one of the conclusions referring to the process of convergence and the decision made about other examples. They had to be excluded due to the fact that they exist in contemporary British English, which is heavily influenced by American English, and do not represent only an American variety.

3.2. Lexical items

The differences in the lexical stratum are various. The group of students decided to present them in a number of categories. The first category embraces words that are clearly labelled as US in the dictionaries, for example, *tarp* (tarpaulin) meaning 'a large piece of heavy waterproof cloth used as a covering' [8] in the sentence *These included good hiking shoes with support and traction soles…..something to sleep in, and a lightweight tarp, plus layers of clothing* [7: 334] or the informal word *goon* (criminal) in the sentence *I put it in after some goon attacked me* [7: 423]. The second category contained words that have their equivalents in British English such as *headlamp*, written also *head lamp*, but in UK English *head torch* in the expression *a battery-powered headlamp* [7: 334]. Another word, defined as slang for bottom mainly in US English in the online Cambridge Dictionary was the word *butt* (buttocks) in the sentence *The breaking dawn, she knew, had probably just saved her butt* [7: 354]. The third category was comprised of the words the meaning of which is broadened in American English such as the word *buddy*. While the online Cambridge Dictionary offers this word in the meaning 'friend' [8], the Meriam-Wester displays it in more meanings, one of which refers to 'partner' [9] as used in the sentence *'You must have had blind faith in your Moscow buddies'* [7: 421]. The fourth category concerned the words that have different meanings in the discussed varieties, for example, the word *smart* with its meaning 'stylish or elegant' in British English and 'intelligent or able to think quickly and intelligently in difficult situations' [8] as in the sentence *'Being out here solo in the Grand Canyon isn't smart'* [7: 380] or 'wise and clever' in the sentence *'It's not smart to hike yourself, you know that'* [7: 333].

One group of words was devoted to the words students were familiar with from their previous academic course such as *vacation* for UK holidays, *truck* for UK lorry, *gas* for UK petrol, *restroom* labelled as mainly US for usually UK *toilets*, for example, *'Along with potable water, restrooms, and shade, there was a thermometer'* [7: 346].

Analysing some sentences in depth, some students revealed that several phrases they had been exposed to watching videos and had thus become familiar with them before this research project were phrases they had not classified as American ones in the first stage of the project, for example, *'It's actually reminds me of my six kids'. 'How so?'* [7: 431]. Consulting the Cambridge Dictionary, the students could not find any reference regarding this phrase. However, the Merriam-Webster provided students with a definition of how so 'in what way, why does one think that' [9], which was completed by the Collins Dictionary that reads an explanation for the phrase in American English as 'how does it happen to be so? why?'[10].

The informal expression *Says you* in the meaning *you said it* was presented in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary in the situations when people want to express complete agreement with something just said [9]. The expressions was not found in the Cambridge Dictionary, but was presented in the online Free Dictionary in the section of idioms. Although this idiom does not conform to standard grammar, it is fairly common in speech and presented in a number of situations, for example, as an exclamation or a declaration of denial, deterring the accusations of others [11]. In the context of the book, it was used in the meaning 'you said it', e.g. *Roth stepped forward. 'It's not armed. It can't go off'. 'Says you,' Joe snapped angrily* [7: 409].

Another idiom that students discussed and had to consult in the dictionaries was the expression *knock yourself out.* In the Cambridge Dictionary, it was used in two meanings: 'to make yourself unconscious by hitting your head' and 'to make yourself ill with tiredness' labelled as an informal one [8]. However, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary contained the phrasal verb *knock oneself out* in its third meaning 'used to tell someone to go ahead and do something', labelled as US [9], which was the meaning used in the book *Joe looked at his wife. 'All right. ….. You cool with that?' he said gruffly.*

'Knock yourself out, Joe' [7: 410]. In addition, the dictionaries presented the informal expression *cool with sth* as 'to be happy to accept a situation or suggestion' in the Cambridge Dictionary and 'all right' in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary [9].

The entries in the chosen dictionaries were explained slightly differently, for example, *out of line* as 'beyond what is considered acceptable behaviour' in the Cambridge Dictionary [8], and as an informal idiom 'beyond what is reasonable or allowable' with two examples concerning *to be out of line* and *to be way out of line* in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary [9] . Both of them were used in the book *'You're way out of line,' barked the man. 'I'm out of line?' exclaimed Dobbs* [7: 420].

On the contrary the expression *helluva* was found only in the Cambridge Dictionary as an informal word, also used as *hell of a* in the meaning 'extremely or extremely big' [8], while the Merriam-Webster Dictionary labelled the word informal and somewhat impolite, presenting it only in the wording *hell of a* in three meanings: 'used to make a statement more forceful', 'very good' and 'very bad or difficult' [9]. The intensification of the following words is recognisable in the sample *'Not starting a war and killing millions of people on bogus evidence that you trumpeted to the world is a helluva lot better than actually doing so'* [7: 422]. After a thorough analysis, the expression *to trumpet* was discovered to be used differently in its third meaning. In British English, the third meaning referred to 'announce' was labelled as mainly disapproving, in American English it was presented more positively in the meaning 'to make people aware of something important' in the Cambridge Dictionary [8]. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary contains it as a transitive verb 'to sound or proclaim on or as if on a trumpet' [9].

Based on the entries in the dictionaries, it can be concluded that some idioms were the entries only in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, for example, the idiom *there is strength in numbers* used in the book in the meaning 'a group of people has more influence or power than one person' [9], taken from the sample *'Didn't you get the memo, Sam? We're all a little crazy. But there's strength in numbers'* [7: 429].

3.3. Grammar

As regards grammar, the third group of students intensively checked all the patterns they were sure to be considered as American English features in the American grammar-reference book. As mentioned above, the grammatical patterns and constructions were sorted out to several categories. The first one dealt with the omission of prepositions such as *couple hours* instead of British *couple of hours* or *two hours hiking* instead of *two hours of hiking*, e.g. *Because of the rule of thumb as an hour hiking down meant two hours hiking back up, Kaibab was a good choice for the descent phase* [7: 338].

The students were able to find samples in which adverbs that are commonly positioned after the verb in British English preceded the verb in American English. In excerpted samples, adverbs of manner expressed information about how an action is performed and served as adverbials *Pine's hand instinctively went to her Glock* [7: 341]. Collins and Hollo claim that 'English appears to have a preference for placing adverbs inside the verb phrase', which gives English its controversial split infinitive [12].

The use of get in the form *gotten* for the past participle was found several times in the sentences such as *'I've already gotten an earful from the DD about you'* (Baldacci, 2019: 412) or *They'd gotten the knowledge of Roth's plan…from Ben Priest* [7: 353]. Analysing the use of get in American English, the students found out that although *gotten* is used in American English, this rule is not applied in the structure *have got*, for example, *'I've got help coming'* [7: 405]. However, *do*-forms of *have* are common in American English. Once the verb *have* is in its marginal semi-modal status in the expression *have to*, it does not include *got* as found in British English [13], for example, *'You don't have to do this,' said Pine, squeezing his arm* [7: 395].

The difference students could discover due to their prior knowledge referred to the use of the present perfect in American English. They were not familiar with the use of 'just' with the simple past to talk about recent events, which is possible in both varieties. However, in contrast with British English,

when news is given, the simple past is often used in American English, for example, *'I just shot an Army guy, Sam!'* [7: 365].

The online Cambridge Dictionary shows an informal phrase of C2 users of English *get going* in the meaning 'to start to go' [8], which is explained in a list of get phrases in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as 'to make a start' [9]. In the book, it was used in the sentence *'Okay, we need to get going,' said Kettler, firmly taking charge* [7: 388].

Although the excerpted samples did not embrace many examples of this linguistic phenomenon, the students were able to recognise a new feature, which they had not been aware of, referring to the use of the bare infinitive functioning as the object of the verb have, for example, *Pine had one ranger tell her that while he'd been there thirty years, he'd only set foot on a small portion of the Canyon* [7: 350].

Discussing the excerpted samples, the students could recognise the differences between the use of modal verbs in American and British English. The most significant feature was the use of *shall* in the meaning 'to offer to do something' or 'to make a suggestion'. Their samples did not contain any example of *shall* as it is used in British English. Their samples offered other alternatives used in American English, for example, *'Right. When I get better, can we sit and have some more beers like this?'* [7: 429]. Other samples referred to alternatives such as *Should I….?* or *How about…?*

As regards noun phrases, the students could recognise the changes in the order of particular words such as *the Colorado River* in contrast with the River Thames; however, in the analysed pages, the river was addressed each time by the word *the Colorado.*

To conclude this detailed analysis, it is necessary to mention that half of the samples the students had excerpted were excluded from further investigation due to their relevance for both varieties of English. Some features they had learnt as American ones in previous language classes or courses were described in both dictionaries without being labelled as mainly US. Therefore, they could not be part of 170 samples that had been collected after the first round of working on the pages, selected for each group.

4. DISCUSSION

In American English, the tendencies to simplify and regularise orthography as well as the collapse of arbitrary distinctions in British English (practice as a noun and practise as a verb) belong to the features that account for basic distinctions related to the topic referring to the differences between the mentioned varieties. Therefore, it was not the aim of this study. The students focused on the aspects they were not aware of very well or needed to verify their previous background knowledge.

After elaborating lists of samples, each group presented their findings. The group was led by a secretary – a volunteer or a student delegated by group members – to present some basic information referring to the topic (orthography, lexical items and grammar), supported by individual presentations of students who usually chose two or three specific items the use of which was verified in the above-mentioned dictionaries. In such a case, the presenting members of the group emphasised those issues or aspects they considered important or new for their peers, sharing common prior knowledge with them and linking it with new information. When the dictionaries did not provide sufficient information, they used other sources, mostly available on the internet.

The participating students could add any information they were aware of, offering other sources or materials to provide evidence in order to justify the presented information. It was possible to recognise that two-thirds of students preferred working with authentic materials once they were guided by clearly stated instructions or tasks. These students felt motivated to collaborate, being encouraged by the fact that first listeners were their peers who provided them with feedback and recommended further steps in case they had failed.

On the other hand, it is necessary to admit that one-third of students did not work enthusiastically and considered this way of working as time-consuming. Each time they could not find proper answers to

their questions, they felt discouraged and relied on the data obtained by their peers. A significant discouragement was felt mainly in the situations when the students could not achieve information without delay or information collected from a number of sources differed and it was necessary to search for more data or other materials that enabled them to gather sufficient information and retrieve it. However, it seemed to be reasonable to employ authentic materials, mainly with carefully formulated instructions and tasks.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The students considered their tasks challenging and provocative. They were expected to deal with authentic material, with the text that was interesting due to the plot and the development of main characters. Students invested their energy and were awarded with responses to numerous questions. The design of the activities was based on grouping students and at the same time regrouping them, and the tasks made every learner responsible for their contributions. They were delegated many roles and enjoyed their freedom that came with increased responsibility. They were working independently, sharing their findings and cooperating for everyone's benefit. The use of dictionaries and grammar-reference books became reasonable due to their active engagement in the learning process.

Some students were better prepared for task accomplishment than the others due to their regular reading of authentic materials and consulting dictionaries in any case they need it. Based on the following discussion, it can be concluded that these learner-centred activities were time-consuming and students had to be patient in searching for appropriate answers, as it was necessary to check some items more than three times to be able to draw some conclusions referring to particular features. On the other hand, some students expected to be confronted with some aspects of which they were aware but could not find them in the text, for example, clausal patterns with *come* and *go* or the subjunctive common after the groups of particular nouns, adjectives and verbs.

Although using authentic materials is systematic in linguistic analyses, not every student whose major is English prioritises learning language through literature. Moreover, some university teachers do not accept contemporary literary prose as authentic materials students should be intensively exposed to as their preference refers to literature written by the Pulitzer Prize winners. In this context, being involved in a number of studies concerning linguistic properties of any language, good literature is not always good for linguistic analyses. The students should be exposed to everyday examples of language in order to develop their awareness of language. However, the introduction of reading literary texts at lower levels of education should be based on the activities that enhance students' enjoyment in reading literature by encouraging individual interpretations.

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