Food Specifications as a Language learning Tool in ESP Classes

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Abstract

The aim of this note is to discuss *Food Specifications* as a workplace genre and its use in EFL learning contexts. Present results come from ongoing research carried out, between language and content teachers, for the Degree in *Mediterranean Sciences and Health* at the University of Messina, Italy. Food Specifications, regulated by national and EU legislation, have a twofold use in Food Science: they describe foodstuffs' and agricultural products' characteristics to safeguard quality and to guide consumers make informed choices. Although the present discussion originates from a specific learning context, results are shared to foster research on a genre that has not attracted the attention of ESP practitioners and to offer an example to be exploited in EFL classes.

Keywords: Genre, Food Specifications, ESP, EFL, teacher collaboration.

Introduction

In professional domains the use of English as the language of international communication among different mother tongue parties, asks EFL practitioners to consider written and oral workplace practices a core skill in higher education (HE) (Hyland, 2006; Solly, 2008; Widdowson, 2003). The use of specific workplace genres offers substantial benefits to language students, such as the acquisition of professional textual schemata and the means to develop communicative competences in the target foreign language. Additionally, genre-based education allows learners to enter their future communities of practice as skilled experts (Bhatia, 2002; Hyland, 2006, 2009; Jackson et al., 2005).

This paper wants to portray ongoing research carried out in one specific learning environment and to present how a workplace genre, Food Specification, can be used in ESP classes. The present discussion will start with a brief description of the course and its expected learning outcomes; it will, then, introduce food specifications (FS) as a specific workplace genre. In this paper's last section, one FS example is presented as a model to develop EFL activities.

The learning context

The *Mediterranean food-and-wine Sciences and Health* degree is an undergraduate program offered by the University of Messina (Italy). It is a three year interfaculty course established in the academic year 2006-2007 among seven different faculties (Medicine, Veterinary Medicine, Biological Sciences, Pharmacy, Economics, Law, Political Sciences) under the reform of HE promoted by the Italian Ministry of Education University and Research. It is pivoted on the study of food (e. g. chemistry, food-chemistry, biology) and food-related majors (e. g. human nutrition, food production and distribution, Mediterranean food-and-wine traditions, regional and niche products) as well as economics, marketing, Italian and European regulations. It wants to train practitioners in food production and distribution, quality evaluation and control, hazard analysis and food inspection. It also intends to instruct experts interested in starting a career in catering, gourmet journalism or niche-food agents, in Italy or abroad (*University Website*).

The syllabus, organized around foundation, distinctive, cognate and optional disciplines, apart from lectures, is developed in problem-based activities, case studies, seminars and a compulsory placement experience. English classes, scheduled in the freshman year and targeted at the B1/B2 level of the *Common European Framework*, aim at providing language instruction considering future workplace requirements (Cianflone, 2010).

Rationale for language and content teacher collaboration

The highly specific educational context sketched above, puts the acquisition of food-and-wine discourses, practices and genres at the fore-front (Cianflone, 2010), and highlights an issue much debated in ESP literature: ESP teachers' basic training, revolving around ELT practices (Almagro Esteban and Vallejo Martos, 2002; Čepon, 2005), and their engagement with disciplines (Dudley-Evans and St. Johns, 1998).

This educational bias is common to many HE curricula. In our case, it was reduced by blending language and content via ESP and content teacher collaboration in co-joined research on workplace

genres. This solution, acknowledged in ESP literature (Dudley-Evans and St. Johns, 1998) benefits the language syllabus because content specialists can act as informants on discipline-related topics (Jordan, 1997) and can assist language experts in educational fields outside their basic training.

Food Specifications

FS can be considered the identity card of foodstuffs or agricultural products, where the nature, identity, properties, origin and method of production are carefully listed. FSs are the first step to identify quality in food products, and to label the same as PGI (Protected Geographical Indication) and PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) goods. These labels, that guarantee the credibility of food in the consumers' eyes, are also important to producers since they outline a set of rules to be strictly followed along the different productive steps from the field to the table.

FSs are regulated by national Directives set out by single State Members of the EC and by two recently amended EU Laws, namely the Council Regulation No 509/2006 and No 510/2006, which define agricultural products and foodstuffs as PGI and PGO if grown or produced within specific geographical areas. To this aim, these Regulations state that any FS must describe the following items:

- The name of the agricultural product or foodstuff.
- A description of the product and its main physical, chemical, microbiological or organoleptic characteristics.
- The definition of the geographical area where it is produced or grown.
- Evidence that the product originates within a defined geographical area.
- A description of the method to obtain the product, or specific agricultural practices.
- Information on packaging and means of distribution.
- Requirements laid down by the EC and/or national provisions.

FSs use in ESP classes

FSs are a suitable genre to be used in language classes. They can assist ESP teachers develop, by drawing on specific content, the written and oral skills future experts working in food-and-wine contexts will require in the world of work. Furthermore, language drills taken from university contents enhance language acquisition since learners realize how discourses pertaining to their field of study are – and can be – dealt with in English (Song, 2006; Widdowson, 1978).

To this aim a template in English was developed by the research team to get students familiarize with FSs. The model (Tab. 1) consists of two parts. The left column contains a general description of the items necessary to FSs; whereas the other one contains the entries necessary to describe a product.

Food Specification Template	
Type	*Insert the product's name*
Growing area	*Indicate the geographical location where the product is grown or produced*
Characteristics	*Describe chemical, microbiological figures or organoleptic features*
	Describe main features (e. g. Shape, Peel, Pulp, Size, other)
Consumption	*Indicate its use*
Selling season	*Indicate when the product is sold*
Regulatory framework	*Indicate National and EC laws*
Other	*Indicate packaging details; harvest; other relevant information*

Tab. 1: FS template (adapted for EFL educational purposes)

To combine theory with practice, a further FS (Tab.2) was implemented on a distinctive Sicilian agricultural product: the Sicilian Red Orange (*Arancia rossa di Sicilia*).

This fruit owes its name to the pulp's reddish colour due to antocianins, a powerful anti-oxidant. These Sicilian oranges and their peculiar colouring represent the typical example quality specimens should posses. This specific reddish trait derives from the link between climatic and environmental factors in terms of daily sun exposure and fresh nightly ventilation that increases antocianins' contents. This agricultural variety, in fact, grown under different climates does not assume the same reddish colour.

By a nutritional point of view, Sicilian Red Oranges, excluding the already mentioned antocianins, are rich in vitamin (A and C, among others) and minerals (*potassium*, *calcium*, *phosphorus*).

Apart from consumption at meals, red oranges are used for fresh and pasteurized squashes, liqueurs and marmalades. Candied peel is widely used in Sicilian sweets. The fruit is also exploited

as a beauty treatment (e. g. astringent lotions); whereas the essential oil is employed in perfumes. The selling season is relatively long, as it lasts from December to early June. Ripe fruits are manually harvested by cutting stalks with scissors.

Food Specification: Sicilian Red Orange	
Type	Sicilian Red Orange (*Tarocco, Moro, Sanguinello*)
Growing area	Catania, Enna, Siracusa, Ragusa
Characteristics	Vitamin: A and C. Antocianins Minerals: potassium, calcium, phosphorus
	Features Shape: roundish Peel: orange with reddish dapples Pulp: orange with reddish dapples Size: 60/80 mm
Consumption	Use: squashes; liqueurs and marmalade. Beauty treatment
Selling season	December to June
Regulatory framework	*National*: Gazzetta Ufficiale Repubblica Italiana No 240/1997 *EC*: Council Regulation No 509/2006 and No 520/2006
Other	Packaging: fruits are sold in cases of different weight Harvest: by the hand

Fig. 2 FS of Sicilian Red Orange (simplified for EFL educational purposes)

FSs and their distinctive features facilitate language exploitation because learning activities can be concentrated on different levels. First of all, students can be instructed on FSs as an oral/written model to describe foodstuffs and agricultural products. Then, learners can be asked to look for specific items on the Internet/books on the reading list and describe them following the blank template (Tab. 1). Additionally, FSs can be an appropriate medium leading to field-specific vocabulary development.

In the case of the product in Tab. 2, oranges can be the starting point to highlight the difference between *peel* (orange), *skin* (banana, grape) and *rind* (lemon) or the difference between *pulp* (tomato, fruit) and *flesh* (meat).

Conclusion

The genre presented here, developed within a distinct educational context, was adapted and simplified to answer local needs. Results of this ongoing research are shared to call practitioners' attention on a medium not frequently addressed in genre studies. As shown with the red orange example, FS can give valuable educational input to EFL learners because they can develop professional skill related to their field of specialization.

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Contribution

Authors conceived, wrote and approved the final draft of this manuscript in relation to their own expertise and disciplinary know-how.