

## **Textbooks vs. Flipboard**

**Igor Rižnar**

University of Primorska, Faculty of Management, Slovenia

*igor.riznar@fm-kp.si*

*Abstract.* This article is about using Flipboard in a higher education setting for teaching business English to undergraduate students. In addition, the use of the application, which enables users to curate content from other e-magazines or websites, is compared to the use of textbooks in English language courses in post-secondary education context.

In higher education, the use of technology and software continue to expand rapidly, with students and teachers becoming more and more immersed in the digital ecosystem. Flipboard is helpful when encouraging students to read, summarize and speak about what their foreign language teacher considers important for the development of different language skills.

Our previous research showed that, by using the application, students not only spend more time reading and summarizing, but may also considerably improve their speaking skills and, due to the nature of the curated content, also increased their knowledge and skills needed for effective learning.

On the other hand, textbooks, a key component that serves as the basis for much of the language input in most language courses, can represent a ‘problem’ (Swales, 1980): the principle of assembly line in the presentation of topics, texts and exercises, the lack of reality in the materials, quasi-authenticity and the absence of a clear increase in vocabulary difficulty, to mention but a few. In addition, textbooks often maintain the status quo by offering students traditional set of similar topics and an unrealistic picture of the language that is actually used.

Our study is significant, because it provides insight into the use of a social-network aggregation application in a higher education setting for learning business English. Finally, by providing useful and relevant texts and promoting student-centred approach to learning we avoided textbook based sadistic teaching methods in foreign language learning.

*Keywords:* business English, Flipboard, higher education, pseudo-teaching, textbooks

### **1 Introduction**

In most language programmes, textbooks are a key component that serves as the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom. For learners, textbooks very often provide the major source of contact they have with the language apart from the input provided by the teacher. Textbooks certainly contribute to some measure of uniformity of course content, but at the same time inhibit curricular change, because they are perceived as benchmarks of what should be taught in a certain course. In addition, textbooks rarely consider the unique elements of different classrooms:

teachers and their attitudes, emotions and experience, the mix of students and their emotions, attitudes and experience, the place and time where the learning is going on.

This paper is also about how a social-network aggregation software can be used in language teaching. Among many uses (keeping up on current issues, collecting useful materials related to a project, as a resource guide on a single topic, for curating relevant reading materials, etc.) one might be considered particularly useful, namely, Flipboard can be helpful when encouraging students to read, summarize and speak about what their foreign language teacher considers important for the development of different language skills.

Below, we shall discuss some advantages as well as serious flaws of textbooks and offer a slightly different approach to teaching business English in a higher education context.

## 2 Literature review

The study of languages for specific purposes (ESP) has had a long history. Speaking about Business English textbooks Arthur (1983:167) noted that because the term Business English is rather ‘nebulous’, there had been disagreement over what form the materials should take. In one of the most important books on English for specific purposes, Hutchinson & Waters (1980:181) stated that ‘there is no justification for subject specific ESP materials’. Robinson (1991) mentioned a certain generality of Business English course books, whereas Pilbeam (1987:119) believed that »published ESP materials must always be a compromise«. Skela (1993) argues that textbooks still represent the most important teaching aid, which should, because of that, be thoroughly analysed and assessed. Business English materials have, to name but a few, been summarised in Robinson (1991), Dudley-Evans & St John (1996), St John (1996), Johnson (1993), Brieger (1997) and Flinders (1998). Powell (1996) attacked the use of intuition in Business English materials, arguing that “the list of instances where the materials writers intuition has proved false is almost endless” (1996:5). He especially criticised the language of textbooks used for teaching meetings, presentations, graphs and telephoning, claiming that all of them present an unrealistic picture of the language actually used. Ma (1993) studied the difference between a corpus of 50 business letters and published materials for its teaching and noted several differences, for example, use of the PS section of letters was not covered in the materials, but widely used in real-life. Research has also been carried out comparing real-life lexis and the lexis found in EFL textbooks. Ljung (1990), created a one million-word corpus of TEFL textbooks used in Swedish schools and compared it to several corpora, notably COBUILD. It is important to note that he found discrepancies between the ‘real’ vocabulary found in the natural language corpora and the materials used for teaching.

St John (1996:9-14) gives perhaps the fullest account of Business English materials:

1. *Materials for business communication skills*: Books such as those in the *Longman Business English Skills Series*, for example, *Negotiating* (O’Connor et al. 1992), *Socializing* (Ellis & O’ Driscoll 1992), and *Telephoning* (Bruce 1992) belong to this group.

2. *Materials for business contexts*: Examples of this are the Business Management English Series by Brieger and Comfort, which include books with a relatively high ‘business’ content such as *Personnel* (Brieger and Comfort 1992a) and *Finance* (Brieger and Comfort 1992b).
3. *Materials for business studies*: Textbook examples include *Portfolio* (Howe 1987) and *Case Studies in International Management* (Sawyer-Lauçanno 1987).
4. *English materials in a business setting*: Most of the Business English materials available today fall under this category. Examples of these in wide use are *Business Opportunities* (Hollett 1994), *Business Objectives* (Hollett 1991) and *Insights into Business* (Lannon et al. 1993).

Johnson (1993) takes a slightly different approach to categorising teaching materials. She follows what is basically a chronological approach, starting with the early approach of looking at specialist lexis and ending up with the latest books concerning business skills. Published materials for Brieger (1997) are not stressed or discussed directly, however, he does categorise the books under eight headings: course books, language, listening, communication skills, vocabulary, professional context, activities/case study/role-play and reading. Flinders (1998) suggests that there has been a shift from 1980 to the present day in that there has been a move from using authentic materials to using ready-made published materials. He presents definitions of Business English materials by suggesting five main course components: language knowledge, communication skill, professional context (subdivided into companies, business areas and countries), cross-cultural area and management skill.

Among the advantages of textbooks, the following were the most frequently mentioned: they provide the core or the syllabus for the programme, they contribute to some measure of uniformity of course content, they are often accompanied by workbooks, teacher books, CDs, videos, CD ROMs, additional online resources, etc., they save teacher's time, they are visually appealing and they are real money makers for publishers.

The following disadvantages are often mentioned in literature: they contain inauthentic language, they present an idealised view of the world, they fail to present real issues, they often do not correspond to the interests and needs of students, because they are written for the global market, they reduce the role of the teacher to that of a technician whose primary function is to present materials prepared by others, they contain either too much or too little content, they may not be challenging enough for both teachers and students, they hinder creativity, they contain out-of-date texts, they may simply not be relevant for a certain language course, they include activities which are not obvious and uncomplicated, they do not offer enough hands-on experience for the students, they involve exercise types structured according to the assembly line principle, they may inhibit needed curricular change because they are perceived as benchmarks of what should be taught, they are too shallow in the coverage of many topics, they impose a common structure, which is not necessarily the best from a pedagogical point of view and they are expensive.

The above list points to the fact that textbooks are imperfect tools, frequently leading to many disinterested and demotivated students merely wanting to pass the exam.

Flipboard is a social-network aggregation, a software initially released in 2010, which enables collecting content from websites and presenting them in a magazine format. Developed by Flipboard Inc., the software works on the following platforms: Android, Blackberry OS, iOS, Windows, Mac OS and on Windows phones. First the application was launched for the iPad, and was later updated to add support for the iPhone and iPod Touch. From 2012, Flipboard was released for some Android phones and in 2013 for Windows 8. In the early 2015, Flipboard became available on the web. The application's user interface (UI) enables intuitive flipping through content. On the application website (flipboard.com) a reader who is signed in sees Cover stories, which represents the highlights from everything one follows. The second item on the menu is Following where one sees individual magazines one follows and which open once a user clicks on them. The last item on the menu is Explore, which brings into view all magazines curated on the Flipboard by all users arranged in many sections (New & Noteworthy, By Our Readers, News, Business, Tech & Science, Sports, Photos & Design, etc.).

On the right side of the menu one can search for articles by typing in sources, people or topics and check who has reflipped/liked/commented on a topic posted. By clicking on the circle (with or without a photo of the signed in user) on the far right side of the menu a new window opens with data of the magazine curator. Data includes the number of magazines curated, the number of flipped articles, the number of followers and the number of likes. This is also the page where a new magazine can be created and where all curators' magazines are presented. By clicking on one of them, the magazine opens and by scrolling down the content can be seen. When the page opens, you can also see the number of viewers for the magazine, the number of followers for that magazine and the number of articles in the magazine.

Let's go through two of the terms frequently used on Flipboard:

- flip means add what you like into your magazine to read later or to share with others;
- share can mean share via email, via Twitter or via Facebook;

If you click on the Edit tab in the far right bottom corner of the magazine a new window opens, where you can invite others to contribute to your magazine. On the same page, you can determine if the magazine is locked or if everyone can see it. On this page, you can delete the magazine if you want and, by clicking on Stats on the left side see the most important analytics (what was most viewed during a certain period, the number of viewers by day and page flips by day).

According to The Wall Street Journal (2015) Flipboard has 80 million active users, but the competition is fierce (Apple launched its own news aggregation application, Apple News).

Some of the ideas how Flipboard can be helpful for teachers/students can be found on Flipboard for educators (<https://about.flipboard.com/inside-flipboard/flipboard-for-educators/>) where you can learn about various uses of Flipboard in teaching and learning. Among the many possible uses let us mention the following: for keeping up on the current events, creating a class syllabus, creating a class-project magazine, creating a resource guide on a single topic, curating relevant reading materials, collaboration by inviting other educators to collaborate on a magazine, and for flipping school posts into a magazine.

The basic tutorials can be found on <https://about.flipboard.com/tutorials>, the most important tools can be downloaded from <https://about.flipboard.com/tools>, help and feedback are available here: <https://about.flipboard.com/help-center>, and job updates here: <https://about.flipboard.com/careers>.

In order to collect and share valuable information with my students I created my own magazine entitled *Teaching with brain in mind*.

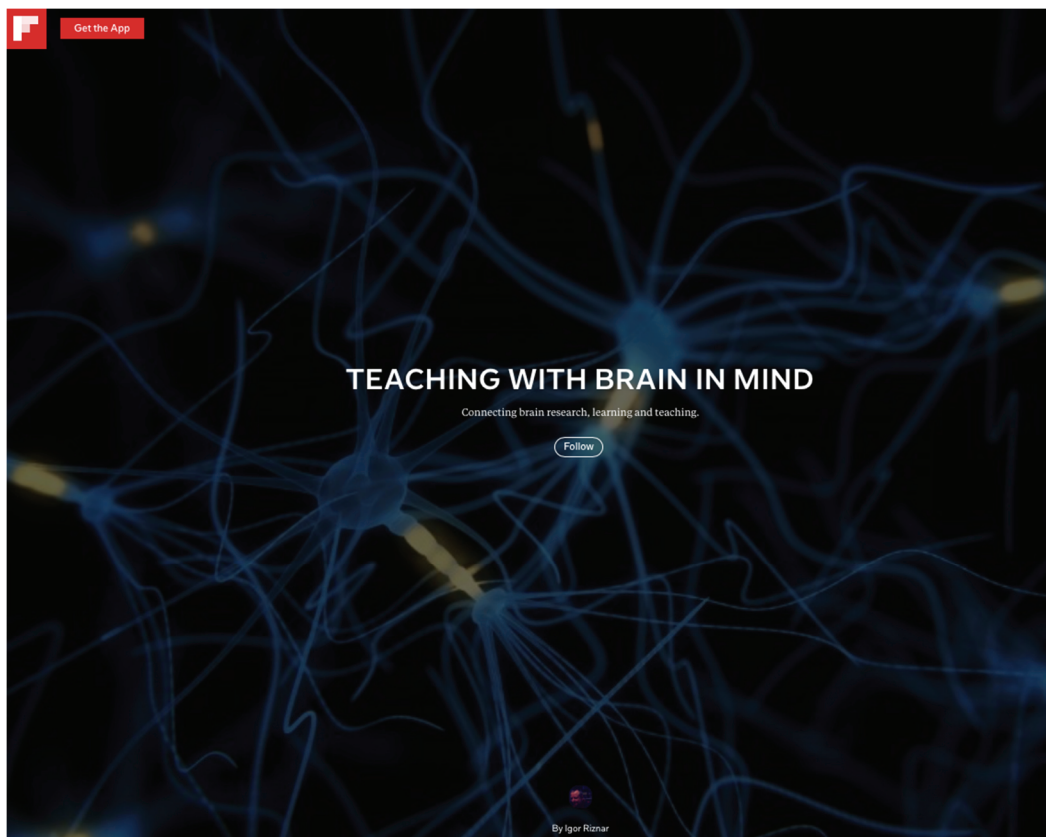


Figure 1: Flipboard magazine *Teaching with Brain in Mind*

The curated magazine has (on October 11, 2017) attracted around 54.000 viewers, has more than 12.000 followers and includes more than 3.400 articles, which were flipped by other Flipboard users 850.000 times. Simply put, the magazine aims at presenting articles from the following interrelated topics: brain research, learning, teaching, learning about learning in general and learning in the age of digital distraction, language learning, what being bilingual does to one's brain, the benefits of exercises to cognition, the importance of sleep in memory formation, damaging effects of multitasking, learning myths and neuroplasticity, creativity, education and critical thinking skills, to name but a few topics.

The sources for flipped articles were, among others: The Scientific American Mind, The Dana Foundation, Neuroscience News, Always be Curious (a Flipboard magazine curated by Aly Juma), Human Brain Project, Brain, Neuroscience, Cognitive Science, Higher Education, Flipboard for Educators (curated by FlipEDU), MIT Technology Review, etc.

Students attending undergraduate courses at the Faculty of management in Koper study in the blended learning environment in which the majority of activities are carried out during face-to-face sessions while a part of the activities is done in e-Lecture rooms. As the blended language learning endeavors have been explained in much detail elsewhere (Marquis 2004, Rižnar 2009a, Rižnar 2009b, Rižnar and Kavčič 2017), we shall focus here only on benefits offered by the Flipboard application. By constantly rethinking our teaching practice, we try to make learning business English an engaging experience by encouraging a more learner-centered paradigm of learning, in which students are motivated and, consequently, courses more successful. In addition, we firmly believe that learning in general should also involve activities related to learning to learn, which are too often not included in Business English textbooks. On the other hand, our research of Flipboard in higher education context was encouraged by the fact that there are only few studies available about the use of Flipboard in educational settings (Caverly 2013, Green and Green 2014, Hornik, deNoyelles and Chen 2016).

Let us briefly present our research carried out in the academic year 2016/2017 based on the responses of 46 participating students who filled in the questionnaire regarding the use of Flipboard application. At the end of the semester, students in both groups were asked to fill in the questionnaire, which measured the time using the application, usefulness of the application, the increase of reading and discussion time, the improvement of students' reading and speaking skills and their intention to use the application in the future. Students were asked to assess their level of agreement with statements on a 5-point Likert scale. In addition to students' beliefs and attitudes, some demographic factors were included in the questionnaire.

Of the 60 students asked to fill in the questionnaire, 46 responded (77 %), of which 25 (54 %) were second year students and 17 (37 %) were first year students. Four students were postgraduate students and were added to the group of second year students, because they participated in lectures with the second-year students, thus increasing the number of this group of students to 29 or 63 %. The response rate of second year students was higher, because they were familiar with the application and because the instructor provided printed copies of the questionnaire before the exam, whereas first year students were sent the questionnaire via e-mail only.

The results for the first-year students, both Slovenian (65 %) and Erasmus + (35 %), show that students assessed their command of English as good or very good (76 %), with two students considering their command of English as either excellent or good.

Students most often used a smart phone to read the article on the Flipboard (76 %). Only two students used a tablet or a laptop for browsing and reading the articles.

41 % of students spent around an hour a week reading the articles, and 53 % of students spent, on average, between one and two hours for this activity.

58 % of students believed that the content of the articles selected by their instructor was very useful, and the remaining 42 % of them believed that they were at least somewhat useful.

Classroom activities related to Flipboard magazine articles were considered as very useful by 71 % of students and as somewhat useful by 24 % of students.

59 % of students believed that they have considerably increased the amount of time for reading articles due to Flipboard related activities. Another 12 % of them believe that the activities were extremely useful and 24 % of students believed that they were somewhat useful. Only one student disagreed with the statement.

Discussion time was considerably increased for 71 % of students who agreed with the statement, and another 12 % of students who strongly agreed with the statement. Only three students somewhat agreed with the statement about the increase of time for discussing various topics in class activities.

Many students (76 %) agreed that their speaking and reading skills improved due to the Flipboard related activities. The rest (24 %) somewhat agreed with this statement. It is interesting that only two students were thinking of starting their own magazine of Flipboard, while most students remain indecisive about that (82 %).

As for the second-year students, the results are as follows:

Of the 29 students, 76 % were Slovenian students and the remaining 24 % were either Erasmus + students or graduate students.

They assessed their command of English as good or very good (76 %), with 17 % of students believing their foreign language skills are either good (17 %) or poor (7 %).

One half of the students used a smart phone for reading the articles on Flipboard, 38 % used a laptop and 7 % a tablet or a desktop.

On average, second year students were using Flipboard slightly less than an hour (55 %), with 31 % of students using it only between 10-30 minutes a week, and two students for more than two hours per week.

More than a half of second year students believed that the content of articles was very useful (55 %) or somewhat useful (38 %), with two students thinking they were extremely useful.

Two thirds of students in this group believed that the classroom activities related to the Flipboard magazine articles were either very useful (66 %) or somewhat useful (31 %). For one student, they were extremely useful.

Most students either agreed or somewhat agreed (66 % and 31 % of students) that they had considerably increased the amount of time used for reading articles, with only one students disagreeing with the statement and one strongly agreeing with it.

The discussion time considerably increased for 55 % of the second-year students who agreed with the statement and another 17 % of students who strongly agreed with it. On the other hand, 21 % of students somewhat agreed with the statement and two students disagreed with it.

According to the results, speaking and reading skills were improved for all students as 21 % of them strongly agreed with the statement, 69 % agreed with it and another 10 % somewhat agreed with the statement.

Finally, only one student is likely to start his or her own magazine on Flipboard, while 28 % of second year students might someday start their own magazine, and the majority (69 %) of students were not thinking of starting their own magazine on Flipboard in the future.

As seen from the above there are some differences between the first and the second year students with regard to the content usefulness, usefulness of classroom activities, the increase in the amount of time devoted to reading, increase in the amount of discussion time and the improvement of speaking and reading skills, the latter being the most notable, as 90 % of secondary students believed that they considerably improved their reading and speaking skills, compared to only 76 % of first year students who thought so.

## **Discussion**

Our 2017 study was significant, because it provided empirical insight into the use of a social-network aggregation application in a higher education context for learning business English and showed that all participants agreed that both the content and related classroom activities were useful, that the students increased the amount of time devoted to reading and in-class discussions and that they believed that they improved their speaking and reading skills considerably due to the application use.

On the other hand, our concept of using the Flipboard in business English lectures needs some rethinking. First, in future students should be encouraged to contribute their own resources towards the Flipboard magazine, because consuming articles is much less active than curating them. Second, the number of the articles in our magazine should be reduced to a manageable size, because students rarely if at all managed to get past the last 50 articles flipped within a week's time, which means that many articles worth reading remained unread. We should perhaps start a new magazine for each semester and not keep adding content to one resource. On the other hand, it often happened that two or three students reported in class about the same article. Third, no matter how experienced the second-year students were, we should occasionally remind them about the benefits of curating their own magazine in order to increase the number of those who may be willing to start their own magazine.

The main limitation of our research is a small number of respondents and the fact that the data was collected only in two courses at one faculty and for one subject.

What remains a mystery is a high number of second year students who were not thinking of starting their own magazine on Flipboard, a high number of first year students who will perhaps start a magazine of their own and a very low number of students who are determined to start their magazine on Flipboard. Future research calls for additional endeavors in this area as well as into many other ways of using the application.

## **4 Conclusion**

The key problems found in Business English materials can be summarised as follows: materials present an oversimplified and unreal picture of the business world, the language found in the textbooks differs from that used in actual business, there is a concentration on politeness and pleasantness that is not matched by real-world experience, there is a concentration on the explicit forms of language use to the detriment of implicit forms, and the language, both structure and lexis, found in Business English materials, is entirely based on the intuition and experience of their authors.



What Flipboard application offers is a more experiential, inquiry-based and hand-on learning approach. In addition, if we agree that students need more choice for choosing their own materials, writing topics, then the application seem to be extremely suitable. Today we realize that learning is not pouring content into heads and that it should not be mistaken with rote-learning and regurgitating. Learning is rewiring the brain by sculpting new pigeonholes and adding connections. Learning happens when one is engaged in challenging activities and is primarily a social activity during which students need multiple senses involved. Students learn in context and when elements are abstracted from context. Equally important, learning should be fun, even though for some students learning is also hard work. Teachers often notice that students learn just in time, only when they need to, thus the measure of students' workload should be appropriate. Finally, learning involves learning to learn, which is too often not included in language learning textbooks. When using Flipboard, the teacher's main role has become the role of a facilitator, who is spending more time recommending and directing students to resources, and helping them to interpret these resources.

The general view is that the Internet has made it easier for teachers to supplement books with a virtually unlimited array of other resources. Taking the above into consideration, how could textbooks that are frequently dull and lifeless, devoid of context, and prisoners of "adoption" processes that value political correctness over quality help students in their efforts to master a foreign language? The findings from our study suggest many interesting implications concerning student use of the Flipboard application. First, all respondents agreed that the content of Flipboard articles was either very useful or at least somehow useful, that the related classroom activities were even more useful, and that they spent more time reading the articles due to the Flipboard magazine. In addition, many students in both groups agreed that they considerably increased the time for in-class discussion that followed the reading of the articles. 90 % of second year students and 76 % of first year students also agreed that they improved their speaking and reading skills due to the activities related to Flipboard use.

We introduced Flipboard to our teaching/learning practice not only to avoid the principle of assembly line in the presentation of topics and texts, but also to avoid quasi-authenticity of materials and to discourage sadistic (foreign language) teaching methods. In addition, we promoted language awareness, brain awareness and effective learning, while at the same time familiarised students with many learning myths (misconceptions about learning styles, left/right brain hypothesis, 10 % brain usage, etc.). Despite some limitations of our research, we believe that Flipboard can be a viable language teaching/learning resource in a higher education context.

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