

HOW ADEQUATE IS TEACHER-MADE MATERIAL FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS?

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The article focuses on the usefulness of *English for Educators* by Marina Marasović Alujević, which is teacher-made material used for the instruction of English at the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Rijeka. The issue of the specific nature of teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is outlined, both as a general problem and in the context of teaching ESP at the named higher education institution. The objective of the research, which was conducted via a questionnaire completed by the first year students of Early and Preschool Education and Teacher Education, was to get feedback on the adequacy of the named teaching material for the students' future professions as well as for the improvement of their proficiency in English. The research results indicate that the students are in general satisfied with the teaching material. They are in particular content with the manner professional vocabulary is covered and the way the teaching material helped them develop their linguistic skills. However, in the students' opinion certain areas require improvement (e.g. some grammatical and lexical categories should be revised, more lexical, grammatical and word-formational exercises added, as well as more grammar exercises and discussion points, while the texts should be shortened). The students evaluated the content of the teaching material as adequate for their future profession. The article can be beneficial for teachers of ESP at institutions of higher education, as well as for public and private language schools since it encourages reflection upon the inclusion of students in creating and improving English syllabi.

Key words: teacher-made material, teacher education study, early and preschool education study, adequacy, professional language

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1 INTRODUCTION

Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) can present a formidable problem for university instructors. English instructors have to cope with the specifics of teaching English to future professionals from diverse backgrounds, thereby enabling them to effectively use English in their future professions. The status of English as a subject taught at higher education institutions which do not include a linguistics component presents another important issue. In this manner Nemec (2009) argues that the trend to understand English as a language that is “accessible” to everyone has been noticeable for quite some time at non-linguistic faculties in Croatia. Thereby many feel that they have “mastered” English in high school and that there is little left for them to learn (Nemec, 2009:222). Such a deprecating view towards English, the author further claims, has resulted in laymen engaging in various activities including translations from and into English, as well as private English lessons, thereby replacing trained professionals (ibid. 223). English instructors, argues Borić (2005), have to deal with the students' incorrect perceptions of their own English, which are based on two presumptions: that students start their university education with an excellent knowledge of English and that English is an “easy” language. In order to speak a foreign language fluently, according to Borić, one has to produce the language correctly and not just understand it. Moreover, students usually familiarise themselves with the complexities of the English language at higher levels of their education, where they usually realise their own limitations in syntactical, grammatical and lexical areas.

English has become the most important language in international communication and it owes its status not only to its linguistic dominance, namely the number of its speakers who speak English as their first, second or foreign language, but also to its economic, technological and cultural power (Balenović, 2008:185-186). It is therefore of crucial importance that English instructors enable their students to communicate in English in various situations. As is emphasised in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001:101), “participation in communicative events (including, of course, those events specifically designed to promote language learning) results in their further development of the learner’s competences, for both immediate and long-term use”. Since they are teaching a multitude of future professionals, some of whom will occupy top positions in diverse private and state institutions, ESP instructors have the important task to help their students master professional language. However, this may not always be an easy task. In most Croatian non-linguistic higher education institutions, English is taught as an obligatory course only in the first (and exceptionally in

the second) year of undergraduate university and professional studies. There are several challenges that the instructors of ESP at higher educational institutions face.

Firstly, English for specific purposes must not be overshadowed by English for general purposes, which is covered in primary and secondary schools, because the subject matter covered in ESP can potentially be a powerful stimulus to taking a step closer to language proficiency. Therefore, English covered at the university level should not be just a mere repetition of high school grammar rules but rather a more advanced and specialized cluster of information which caters to the students' fields of study. Secondly, there is the problem of the students' fluency in English, which is usually heterogeneous and can be attributed to their different educational backgrounds and varied interests and affiliations. Thirdly, the course structure is not always favourable to students since English is mainly taught in the form of lectures and only to a lesser extent in the form of seminars or language workshops. Apart from these challenges, English instructors of ESP at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Rijeka are faced with some additional specificacies.

Students attending the programmes of Teacher Education and Early and Preschool Education at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Rijeka come from different schools: a minority are graduates from grammar schools while most students come from diverse vocational schools. Although an intermediate to upper-intermediate level of knowledge is expected of our students in the first year of their studies, there are some students who are capable of leading a conversation at an advanced level without any difficulty yet there are also those who struggle with the simplest linguistic structures and can barely construct a sentence by themselves. Some students' awareness of the poor English language skills with which they enter higher education seems to obstruct their potential advancement as they rarely engage in any form of verbal communication (Abebe and Deneke, 2015; Gan, 2012; Mahdi, 2015). As a result, not only do these students appear disinterested in the subject matter but they also deprive themselves of the possibility of actually perfecting their language skills. This gap in language proficiency needs to be bridged during their first year of studies. To be more precise, students of Early and Preschool Education have English as a mandatory course during the first semester of their study, while the students of Teacher Education attend obligatory English courses during the first year of their study, i.e. during both semesters of their first year.

Throughout their studies, students of both study programmes are given the opportunity to attend elective English courses in subsequent years of their study. These include *English in Preschool Education* and *Integrated Language Skills* (for students of Early and Preschool Education) and *Integrated Language Skills in English, Anglo-Saxon World* and *Children's Literature in English* (for students of Teacher Education). A considerable number of students do not even take into consideration participating in the English courses on offer because any situation in which they are likely to expose their lack of more advanced foreign language skills could be embarrassing. This foreign language anxiety (Howitz, Howitz and Cope 1986), which seems to be present in the academic environment, appears to be very closely related to the fear of negative evaluation, which in turn prevents our students from achieving the level of knowledge of which we believe they are capable (Shabani, 2012; Aydin, 2008). However, at the end of their university education these same students, regardless of their English skills, will be expected to be able to consult and analyse scientific articles and books during the process of writing their BA and/or MA theses.

2 THE STUDY

In order to take a step closer to understanding the needs of our students, we were curious about their opinions regarding the teacher-made material which specifically targets their professions. Thereby we would like to emphasise that we are aware that no teaching material could ever satisfy every student's need no matter how well it is structured. We also wanted them to provide feedback about what to change in our work with future generations, because we believe that we can make our classes more useful for our students only by acknowledging their comments and implementing their suggestions in our language workshops and lectures.

The course material which has been used at the Faculty of Teacher Education is *English for Educators* (Marasović-Alujević, 2003). It is a 64-page-long teacher-made publication which covers some of the basic grammar units (such as verb tenses, passive voice, indirect speech, etc.), i.e. all the basics which are usually covered in high school textbooks and which are covered again in the first year of studies as a means of revising the already acquired knowledge, plus it also elaborates these units through texts which focus on topics relevant for this target group (such as guidelines for effective cooperation between teachers and parents, the introduction of the names of animals, colours and various shapes and forms into the classroom, the interaction between parents and their children, etc.).

However, the grammar and vocabulary basics which are covered here are, unfortunately, not a mere revision for a substantial part of our first-year students as they often lack the basics, which should have been mastered during their high school education. We therefore had to consult other study materials, such as *Early Childhood Education* by Tina Bruce, *The Teaching Assistant's Handbook: Primary Schools* by Louise Burnham and *Advanced Grammar in Use* by Raymond Murphy, in order to be certain that the majority of the students have fully mastered certain grammar and lexical units.

2.1 Research questions

We were of the opinion that the teacher-made material, *English for Educators*, seemed to lack a variety of vocabulary and grammar exercises which would encourage the students to think critically and creatively about topics relevant to their future professions. We felt that the language skill that the teacher-made material especially targeted was reading, and that the language skill that the students developed the least was writing. Therefore we felt that this particular teacher-made material did not contribute to an equal development of all of the students' language skills. However, instead of focusing solely on our professional opinion of the teacher-made material, *English for Educators*, we wanted to gain an insight into our students' opinions about the aforementioned course material so as to hopefully gather valuable information on what the students might want and what they believe they need to improve their English language skills. We therefore attempted to answer the following questions:

- 1: Do the students think that the teacher-made material, *English for Educators*, contributes to the equal development of all language skills?
- 2: Do the students think that the teacher-made material, *English for Educators*, provides them with enough creative exercises which would enable them to apply their knowledge to different linguistic contexts?
- 3: Do the students think that additional emphasis should be placed on texts and vocabulary relevant to the profession of future primary and preschool teachers?

3 METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was administered to the first-year students of the Early and Preschool Education and Teacher Education study programmes towards the end of the first semester of the academic year 2015/2016. The students were

asked to evaluate the relevance of the offered items relating to the teacher-made material, *English for Educators*.

3.1 Sample

Sixty-nine students took part in the questionnaire, 37 students attending the Teacher Education programme and 32 students attending the Early and Preschool programme.

3.2 Instrument

The students were presented with a questionnaire which contained fifteen items: eight statements accompanied by a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = *I strongly disagree*, 2 = *I disagree*, 3 = *I neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *I agree*, 5 = *I strongly agree*), five open-ended questions, and two yes-no questions. By providing answers to the open-ended questions, the students were able to emphasise those language skills which they believe have been improved with the help of the teacher-made material, and also to specify those aspects of the teacher-made material which in their opinion need improvement.

4 RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teacher Education students' assessments indicate that they are generally satisfied with the manner in which the teacher-made material covers professional vocabulary (see Table 1 below). A total of 40.5% of Teacher Education students agree with Item 1, "I am satisfied with the way the teacher-made material covers professional vocabulary", while 32.4% of them strongly agree with it; this is followed by 24.3% who are not sure. As many as two-thirds of the students do not agree with Item 2, "The teacher-made material gives too much emphasis to particular linguistic areas"; 35.1% of the students strongly disagree and the same percentage of the students disagree with this item, while 24.3% of them neither agree nor disagree with it. By contrast, only 2.4% of the students agree and 2.4% strongly agree with this item. The majority of the students (56.7%) agree with Item 3, "Particular linguistic areas have been adequately developed," while an equal number of students (18.9%) strongly agree with this item, but also neither agree nor disagree with it. A total of 32.4% of the students agree and 35.1% of them strongly agree with Item 4, "Professional texts are appropriately long," while the majority (51.4%) and (43.2%) neither agree nor disagree and agree, respectfully, with Item 5, "The texts are challenging". Finally, the students agree (45%) with Item 7, "The texts allow enough room for comparisons

between equivalent topics in the context of my country (e.g. comparison between educational systems in the UK, the USA, and Croatia)” and they also agree (54%) with Item 8, “The texts have contributed to the overall development of my linguistic competences (speaking, writing, listening, reading)”. None of the students (0%) believe that the teacher-made material has not contributed to the improvement of their linguistic skills.

Table 1: Teacher Education students' satisfaction with the teacher-made material (in %)

	1*	2	3	4	5
Item 1: I am satisfied with the way the teacher-made material covers professional vocabulary.	0	2.7	24.3	40.5	32.4
Item 2: The teacher-made material gives too much emphasis to particular linguistic areas.	35.1	35.1	24.3	2.7	2.7
Item 3: Particular linguistic areas have been adequately developed.	0	2.7	18.9	56.7	18.9
Item 4: Professional texts are appropriately long.	5.4	5.4	18.9	32.4	35.1
Item 5: The texts are challenging.	0	5.4	51.4	43.2	0
Item 6: The texts cover topics which are relevant for my future profession.	0	0	10.8	32.4	56.8
Item 7: The texts allow enough room for comparisons between equivalent topics in the context of my country (e.g. comparison between educational systems in the UK, the USA, and Croatia).	5.4	16.2	13.5	45.9	18.9
Item 8: The texts have contributed to the overall development of my linguistic competences (speaking, writing, listening, reading).	0	5.4	29.7	54	13.5

*1 = I strongly agree, 2 = I disagree, 3 = I neither agree nor disagree, 4 = I agree, 5 = I strongly agree

Early and Preschool Education students' assessments indicate that they are generally neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the teacher-made material (see Table 2 below). A total of 37.5% of the students neither agree nor disagree with Item 1, “I am satisfied with the way the teacher-made material covers professional vocabulary”, while an equal number (15.6%) of them disagree and strongly agree with it. On the other hand, 25% of the students are satisfied and 15.6% are very satisfied with the way in which professional vocabulary is

covered in the material. The majority of the students (31.3%) are not sure if "The teacher-made material gives too much emphasis to particular linguistic areas", while 28.1% disagrees with this item. They are also not sure (40.6%) about Item 3, "Particular linguistic areas have been adequately developed", and only 21.9% agree with this item; 46.9% of them are not sure about Item 5, "The texts are challenging"; while 27.5% neither agree nor disagree and 31.2% disagree with Item 8, "The texts have contributed to the overall development of my linguistic competences (speaking, writing, listening, reading)". However, the majority of them have a positive attitude towards the length of the professional texts; 34.4% agree and 25% strongly agree with Item 4, "Professional texts are appropriately long". The highest percentage of the students (50%) acknowledge that the topics discussed in these texts are relevant for their future profession, however, 40.6% disagree that they allow enough room for comparisons between different educational context, which Item 7 addresses.

Great differences can be observed when the two tables are compared. Upon taking a closer look at the distribution of responses, it becomes obvious that the Teacher Education students are generally more satisfied with the teacher-made material than the students attending the Early and Preschool Education programme. In fact, the students of both study programmes agree on the items connected to the length, level of difficulty and appropriateness of professional texts addressed in items 4, 5 and 6. A total of 32.4% of Teacher Education students agree and 35.1% of them strongly agree that "Professional texts are appropriately long", while 34.4% of Early and Preschool Education students agree with this item as well as 25% of them who strongly agree with it. As many as 51.4% of the Teacher Education students neither agree nor disagree with Item 5, "The texts are challenging", while 43.3% of them agree that they are. On the other hand, almost the same percentage of Early and Preschool Education students neither agree nor disagree (46.9%) with this item and an equal percentage of them, 15.9%, agree and strongly agree with it. Also, 32.4% of Teacher Education students agree and 56.8% strongly agree with Item 6, "The texts cover topics which are relevant for my future profession", while 50% of Early and Preschool Education students agree and 28.1% of them strongly agree with it.

Table 2: Early and Preschool Education students' satisfaction with the teacher-made material (in %)

	1*	2	3	4	5
Item 1: I am satisfied with the way the teacher-made material covers professional vocabulary.	6.3	15.6	37.5	25	15.6
Item 2: The teacher-made material gives too much emphasis to particular linguistic areas.	18.8	28.1	31.3	12.5	9.4
Item 3: Particular linguistic areas have been adequately developed.	0	18.8	40.6	21.9	9.4
Item 4: Professional texts are appropriately long.	6.3	12.5	21.9	34.4	25
Item 5: The texts are challenging.	9.4	12.5	46.9	15.6	15.6
Item 6: The texts cover topics which are relevant for my future profession.	0	6.3	15.6	50	28.1
Item 7: The texts allow enough room for comparisons between equivalent topics in the context of my country (e.g. comparison between educational systems in the UK, the USA, and Croatia).	9.4	40.6	25	21.9	0
Item 8: The texts have contributed to the overall development of my linguistic competences (speaking, writing, listening, reading).	6.3	31.2	37.5	18.8	3.1

*1 = I strongly agree, 2 = I disagree, 3 = I neither agree nor disagree, 4 = I agree, 5 = I strongly agree

Overall, the majority of Teacher Education students are satisfied with the manner in which professional vocabulary is covered in the teacher-made material, they are also of the opinion that the particular linguistic areas have been adequately covered, that the texts allow enough room for comparisons between different cultural contexts, and that they have contributed to the overall development of the students' linguistic skills. However, this positive attitude toward the teacher-made material is not shared by the Early and Preschool Education students. As it is observable from items 1, 2, 3, 5 and 8, these students are generally neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the teacher-made material.

The five open-ended questions as well as the two yes-no questions provide additional insights into what these EFL learners need in order to improve their English language skills.

For the question "In your opinion, what, if anything, should be changed in the way the teacher-made material covers professional vocabulary?" both the Teacher Education (10.8%) and Early and Preschool Education students (18.8%) indicated that there should be more professional and more interesting texts as well as more discussion topics, respectively. For the question "Which linguistic areas are emphasised the most in the teacher-made material?" the majority of Teacher Education students (35.1%) were of the opinion that the teacher-made material places the most emphasis on professional vocabulary, which was also the view of Early and Preschool Education students (43.8%). When it comes to the question "Which language skill have you improved the most with the help of the teacher-made material?" Teacher Education students emphasised reading (51.4%), followed by speaking (24.3%), writing (13.5%) and listening (8.1%). Early and Preschool Education Students also highlighted reading (75%), speaking (12.4), writing (9.4%) and listening (9.4%). Regarding the question "Which language skill have you improved the least with the help of the teacher-made material?" Teacher Education students believe to have improved writing (29.7%) the least, followed by speaking (21.6%) and listening (21.6), while Early and Preschool Education students felt their speaking skills (25%) were the least improved, followed by writing (18.8%) and listening (6.3%). Finally, regarding the question "What, if anything, would you change about the teacher-made material?" the Teacher Education students would add more grammar exercises (24%) and explanations (10%), more essay-writing tasks (8%) and more professional texts (8%). They would also prefer it if the texts were shorter (16%) and if there were explanations of professional vocabulary (8%). Early and Preschool Education students provided more detailed expectations of the teacher-made material. They would prefer if the texts were shorter (34.4%) and simplified (9.4%). They also believe there should be more questions for discussions (18.8%) as well as more professional vocabulary (9.4%) and grammar exercises (15.6%). A total of 12.6% of the students would like to have an English-Croatian dictionary included at the end of each lesson, while 9.4% believe they would benefit from more vocabulary exercises. Also, 12.5% mentioned more creative grammar and vocabulary exercises such as riddles and fun facts sections.

When asked whether there were enough discussion exercises, both the Teacher Education students and Early and Preschool Education students expressed the view that there are enough discussion tasks in the teacher-made material, 64.8% and 53.1% of them, respectively (see Table 3 below). However, 29.7% of the Teacher Education students and 37.5% of Early and Preschool Education students believed there could be more exercises. Also, while the students of both study programmes found the texts to be adequately long, 62.5% of Teacher Education students and 53% of Early and Preschool Education students, a significant number of them did not. A total of 40% of the Early and Preschool Education students and 37.8% of the Teacher Education students considered them to be too long. Additional clarification for this could be found in Item 5, "What, if anything, would you change about the teacher-made material?" where students expressed the view that the texts should be shorter.

Table 3: Students' answers to yes-no questions about the teacher-made material

Yes-no questions	Teacher Education Students		Early and Preschool Education Students	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Item 6: Are there enough discussion exercises?	64.8%	29.7%	53.1%	46.9%
Item 7: Are the texts appropriately long?	62.1%	37.8%	53.7%	46.3%

5 CONCLUSION

As Allwright noted, "There is a limit to what teaching materials can be expected to do for us. The whole business of the management of language learning is far too complex to be satisfactorily catered for by pre-packaged set of decisions embodied in teaching materials" (1981:9). The results of the questionnaire confirmed our initial assumption that the students of both study programmes would not be entirely satisfied with *English for Educators*, however, we did not expect such a great difference in the two groups' opinions regarding the teacher-made material. While the vast majority of the students attending the Teacher Education programme expressed a favorable attitude toward the teacher-made material, this view was not shared by the students attending the Early and Preschool Education programme.

Despite this difference, all of the suggestions expressed by our students in the open-ended part of the questionnaire indicate the students' high level of expectations when it comes to their English classes. They also prove that instead of just blindly following our own intuition about how foreign language classes should be organised, it is highly beneficial to allow our students to take part in organising the classes. Since English is obviously one of the most desirable and important languages in both private and professional contexts, the results of our questionnaire could be beneficial for teachers of ESP at institutions of higher education, as well as for public and private language schools since they indicate problem areas in teaching ESP and provide initiatives for improving course materials.

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U KOJOJ SU MJERI NASTAVNA SKRIPTA PRIMJERENA SVEUČILIŠNIM STUDENTIMA?

Rad se fokusira na adekvatnost nastavnoga materijala *English for Educators* autorice Marine Marasović Alujević za nastavu engleskoga jezika na Učiteljskom fakultetu u Rijeci. Izlaže se problem specifičnosti poučavanja jezika struke općenito i na navedenoj visokoškolskoj instituciji. Cilj našega istraživanja, koje je provedeno upitnikom koji su ispunjavali studenti prve godine ranoga i predškolskoga odgoja i razredne nastave, bio je dobiti povratnu informaciju od studenata o tome je li navedeni nastavni materijal prikladan za njihovu buduću struku i za razvijanje njihove kompetencije na engleskome jeziku. Rezultati istraživanja ukazuju na to da su studenti općenito zadovoljni navedenim nastavnim materijalom. Osobito zadovoljstvo istaknuli su načinom obrade vokabulara struke i pomoći koju im je nastavni materijal pružio u razvijanju jezičnih vještina. Ipak, neka područja zahtijevaju poboljšanje (npr. utvrđivanje nekih gramatičkih i leksičkih kategorija, potreba za dodatnim gramatičkim i leksičkim vježbama te za vježbama tvorbe riječi i zadacima za diskusiju, a tekstovi bi trebali biti kraći). Studenti su nastavni materijal ocijenili prikladnim za svoju buduću struku. Rad može koristiti nastavnicima engleskoga jezika za potrebe struke na visokoškolskim institucijama te u državnim i privatnim školama stranih jezika jer potiče razmišljanja o uključivanju studenata u kreiranje i poboljšanje nastavnih planova i programa za engleski jezik.

Ključne riječi: skripta, učiteljski studij, rani i predškolski odgoj i obrazovanje, adekvatnost, jezik struke