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Original scientific paper

# **STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS A READING ASSIGNMENT IN THE ESP CLASSROOM**

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## ABSTRACT

*The aim of this paper is to analyze an activity which was implemented in ESP courses at one higher education institution in Croatia. The purpose of the activity was threefold: (1) to encourage extensive reading, (2) to improve vocabulary acquisition, and (3) to promote autonomous learning. This study gives us an insight into students' selection of reading material, choice of new vocabulary (general vs. specific), and their attitudes towards this task. Thirty-three first- and second-year students of agriculture-related study programs have met the requirements of this task. Their responses reveal various reasons for choosing a particular material, namely, book availability and its topic seem to be the most frequently mentioned reasons. Finally, although students do not appreciate all parts of the assignment (e.g. using dictionaries, technology), the majority of them find the task interesting and beneficial.*

**Keywords:** attitudes, English for specific purposes, English for agriculture, reading, vocabulary.

## INTRODUCTION

Given that ESP students are a heterogenous group of students in terms of language proficiency (Jelovčić, 2010; Marinac & Inić, 2022; Vulić, 2017), tailoring a suitable activity that would cater to different needs and preferences is a demanding endeavor. Despite mixed-ability classes, university-level ESP courses focus mostly on technical vocabulary acquisition since it is assumed that students had acquired general lexis and grammar by the time they entered college. Namely, vocabulary acquisition is thought to be the most important goal of foreign language learning by both students (Božić Lenard et al., 2018) and teachers (Knight, 1994). There is a variety of ways to acquire the language specific to a certain occupation or a field (Gajšt, 2011), and both direct and indirect instructions should be implemented to assist learners in vocabulary acquisition (Tumolo, 2007).

Extensive reading (ER) of relevant material is one of the possible ways to improve students' vocabulary. ER is defined as "reading in quantity" with the purpose of understanding the gist of the text (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, pp. 193-194) and may result in a myriad learning outcomes (Nation, 2015). What is more, "students choose what they want to read" (Day & Bramford, 2002), which caters to their individual preferences, language levels and encourages autonomous learning (Nation & Warning, 2020), which is one of the goals of language instruction in particular, that is, the Bologna concept in general (Gajšt, 2011). Although positive influence of ER on attitude and motivation is widely known (Day & Bramford, 1998; Karlin & Romanko, 2010; Mikami, 2020), Yamashita (2013) stresses that the affective domain of reading has not been studied extensively. For example, Babayan (2019) discovered that ESP students' awareness of the importance of ER and pleasure increased from the beginning to the end of the study programme, but also the feeling of difficulty, which the author connected to a more demanding reading students face in their senior years.

Another recommended strategy for vocabulary acquisition by researchers is note-taking, which involves "getting information about a lexical unit" and then taking notes in a certain form (e.g. vocabulary notebooks/cards, notes along the lines) (Mohseni-Far, 2007, p. 146; Gajšt, 2011).

Although ESP courses are primarily concentrated on technical vocabulary, ESP students need help with other terms as well, namely, the "semitechnical" terms shared with other sciences, but also the common academic vocabulary (Halliday, 1988, as cited in Peters & Fernandez, 2013). Unfamiliarity with these

terms may lead to problems when reading professional texts (Christie, 2002, as cited in Peters & Fernandez, 2013).

## **METHODS**

This study aims to investigate agricultural students' attitudes towards extensive reading in the ESP course, that is, their lexical needs.

The research questions which guided the study are as follows:

RQ1: How does ER affect ESP students' attitudes towards reading in English?

RQ2: What are students' attitudes towards the assignment?

RQ3: What is the profile of the words needed by undergraduate ESP students of agriculture?

At the beginning of the winter semester in the academic year 2022/2023 students enrolled in agriculture-related ESP courses at the Polytechnic of Rijeka took the Oxford Placement Tests (OPTs) by Allan (2004). Besides that, students submitted their seminar papers by the end of the semester. To implement both direct and indirect instruction, the seminar paper developed by Gajšt (2011) was adapted and implemented in ESP classes (Table 1). The primary goal was to engage students in autonomous learning by involving them in extensive reading and vocabulary note-taking. Thus, students had to write a seminar paper, which consisted of three parts: Introduction (a summary of the book and the reasons for choosing this book), Selection of terminology (30 new lexical items, synonyms, translation) and Comments.

**Table 1.** The task for the seminar paper

SEMINAR PAPER (TASK)
<p>1) Introduction Choose a book you are interested in and that is connected to the study programme you are enrolled in. Read a minimum of 50 pages of the chosen book. Write your reasons for selecting a particular book and briefly describe its contents (the chapters you have read). The introduction is limited to approximately 100 words. All comments must be written in English.</p>
<p>2) Selection of terminology Choose at least 30 new lexical items (words/phrases) from the selected text. For each lexical item provide the following: a) LEXICAL ITEM IN ENGLISH (word / phrase) b) The context in which the lexical item was found (the sentence or the clause if the sentence is too long) c) Definition of the lexical item in English and the source of the definition: e.g. <a href="http://www.....">http://www.....</a> d) Translation of the item in Croatian (word / phrase) and the source of translation e) At least 2 synonyms in English of the chosen lexical item</p>
<p>3) Comments After completing the seminar paper, comment on any difficulties and positive experience you had related to the completion of this paper. Write about: a) Selection of the text b) Selection of lexical items c) Choice of definitions d) Translations (translation of vocabulary and translation process as such) e) Personal achievement The comment must be written in English.</p>

After completing the reading task, students were asked to fill in *Reading attitude questionnaire* (Yamashita, 2013) adapted and translated into Croatian for the purpose of the study. In order to meet the requirements of the study, items in relation to demographic data (gender, study programme, year of study, other foreign languages, self-assessment of the four skills), the assignment and their reading habits were added.

In relation to the terms and words selected by ESP students, the classification into three categories used by Peters and Fernandez (2013, p. 240) was implemented. Given that their research focused on architecture students, *Type A* category was paraphrased into *terms specific to agriculture*, whereas the other two categories remained intact, that is *Type B - terms for concepts common to scientific and other academic disciplines* and *Type C - ordinary words*. It should be taken into consideration that the boundaries between these word groups are not straightforward (Chung & Nation, 2003) and should be used only as indicators.

Thirty-three undergraduate agriculture-related students at the Polytechnic of Rijeka completed the OPTs, submitted the assignment and were interviewed. The sample consisted of 17 male and 16 female students. The majority of these students were full-time students (85 %) and only 5 students (15 %) were part-time students. Three agriculture-related study programs were included, namely,

Sustainable Agritourism (63.3%), Mediterranean Agriculture (18.2 %), and Winemaking (18.2 %).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In terms of students' previous learning experience, students of agriculture studied English from 4 to 15 years. In relation to their proficiency results, according to the OPTs (2004), the majority of students are at B1 level (36.4 %), followed by those who are at B2 (30.3 %). Seven students are at C1 level or above (21.21 %) and four students (12.12 %) at A2 level. In relation to self-assessment, the majority believes to be at B2 level when it comes to reading, listening and speaking. Out of the four skills, writing was ranked the lowest, nobody thought to be at C2 level and the majority evaluated themselves as B1 level. Besides English, the majority studied Italian (54.5%), followed by German (21.2 %), Spanish (6.1 %), and Slovenian (3 %). The results of this study corroborated that ESP classrooms in Croatia are mixed-ability classes (Jelovčić, 2010; Marinac & Inić, 2022; Vulić, 2017), in contrast to the study conducted at the Faculty of Economics which indicated a more uniform student population in terms of proficiency (Čakarun et al., 2021).

### Students' attitudes towards reading

In reference to students' reading attitudes, the responses give an insight into five attitudinal variables, namely, comfort, anxiety, intellectual value, practical value, and linguistic value.

The findings in relation to anxiety are given in Table 2. The item *I feel anxious when I'm not sure whether I understood the book content* was rated the lowest (2.61), whereas the mean for the item *I don't mind even if I cannot understand the book content entirely* was the highest (3.09).

**Table 2.** Means and standard deviations in relation to anxiety

Item	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
I feel anxious if I don't know all the words.	3.03	1.212
I sometimes feel anxious if I don't know all the words.	3.06	1.391
I feel anxious when I'm not sure whether I understood the book content.	2.61	1.321
I don't mind even if I cannot understand the book content entirely.	3.09	1.308

The findings in relation to *comfort* are provided in Table 3. The highest mean (3.70) was obtained for *I feel relaxed when I read in English* followed by *Reading in English is enjoyable* (3.45) and *I feel refreshed and rested if I read in English* (2.85). On the other hand, *Reading in English is dull* scored the lowest (1.97), together with *I feel tired if I read in English* (2.36) and *Reading in English is troublesome* (2.45). Namely, students seem to perceive reading in English positively.

**Table 3.** Means and standard deviations in relation to comfort

Item	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Reading in English is troublesome.	2.45	1.325
I feel tired if I read in English.	2.36	0.994
I feel relaxed when I read in English.	3.70	1.015
I feel refreshed and rested if I read in English.	2.85	0.906
Reading in English is dull.	1.97	1.045
Reading in English is enjoyable.	3.45	0.971

With regard to *intellectual value* in Table 4, the item *I can acquire broad knowledge If I read in English* had the highest mean (4.36), followed by *I can get various kinds of information I read in English* (4.06) and *I get to know about different values if I read in English* (3.76). The lowest means were given to the items *I get to know about new ways of thinking if I read in English* (3.33) and *I can become more sophisticated if I read in English* (3.48).

**Table 4.** Means and standard deviations in relation to intellectual value

Item	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
I can acquire broad knowledge if I read in English.	4.36	0.699
I can become more sophisticated if I read in English.	3.48	0.939
I get to know about new ways of thinking if I read in English.	3.33	1.109
I can get various kinds of information if I read in English.	4.06	0.864
I get to know about different values if I read in English.	3.76	0.969

When it comes to *practical value*, the means are presented in Table 5. The items which obtained the highest means were *Reading in English is useful to get a job* (4.21) and *Reading in English is useful for my future career* (4.18). The other statements were also rated similarly, that is, *Reading in English is useful to get a good grade in class* (4.15) and *Reading in English is useful to get credit for class* (4.06).

**Table 5.** Means and standard deviations in relation to practical value

Item	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Reading in English is useful for my future career.	4.18	1.131
Reading in English is useful to get a good grade in class.	4.15	0.795
Reading in English is useful to get credit for class.	4.06	0.933
Reading in English is useful to get a job.	4.21	0.893

In relation to *linguistic value*, students rated *acquiring vocabulary* (4.36) and *developing reading ability* (4.24) the highest, followed closely by *improving sensitivity to the English language* (4.18), which can be seen in Table 6.

**Table 6.** Means and standard deviations in relation to linguistic value

Item	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
I can acquire vocabulary if I read in English.	4.36	1.119
I can develop reading ability if I read in English.	4.24	1.001
I can improve my sensitivity to the English language if I read in English.	4.18	0.727

The findings in reference to student's reading habits are presented in Table 7. Overall, reading shorter forms was rated higher in regards to reading longer forms in both languages. Furthermore, reading shorter forms in Croatian and English was rated the same (3.88). On the other hand, reading longer forms in Croatian was rated higher (2.61) than reading longer forms in English (2.24).

**Table 7.** Means and standard deviations in relation to reading habits

Item	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
In my free time I read longer forms (e.g. books) in English.	2.24	1.300
In my free time I read longer forms (e.g. books) in Croatian.	2.61	1.456
In my free time I read shorter forms (e.g. online articles) in English.	3.88	1.244
In my free time I read shorter forms (e.g. online articles) in English.	3.88	1.139

### Students' attitudes towards the reading task

In relation to students' attitudes towards the task (Table 8), the highest means were given to the items *The task expanded my vocabulary* (4.33) and *Reading longer texts in English is a useful way of learning English* (4.24). These



items are followed by *The task helped developing my reading skills in English* (4.09) and *Individual choice of reading material is a useful way of English language learning* (4.03). The lowest mean was obtained for the statements *I have enjoyed the opportunity to choose the reading material on my own* (3.67).

In terms of students' attitudes towards extensive reading, they are positive towards reading in English and agree with its intellectual, practical and linguistic value, which is in agreement with Yamashita (2013). In relation to their reading habits, as expected, students are more likely to read shorter forms both in Croatian and English than longer forms in both languages. Furthermore, the participants agree with the positive influence of the task on their knowledge, which is in line with Yamashita's (2013) conclusion that ER encourages learners to read and provides them with opportunities to develop their language skills.

**Table 8.** Means and standard deviations in relation to the task

Item	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
The task expanded my vocabulary.	4.33	0.777
Reading longer texts in English is a useful way of learning English.	4.24	0.867
The task helped developing my reading skills in English.	4.09	0.843
Individual choice of reading material is a useful way of English language learning.	4.03	1.015
I have enjoyed the opportunity to choose the reading material on my own,	3.67	1.242

In order to compare the results between male and female participants, a t-test was carried out. The results of the t-test indicated that there is a statistically significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) in terms of how female and male participants rated *usefulness of reading English to get a better course grade*. Namely, female students (4.24) rated this item higher than male students (3.88). Also, a statistically significant difference occurred in relation to the item *I find my reading in English problematic*, that is, female students rated this claim higher (2.94) than male students (2.00). According to Liu (2004, as cited in Božinović, Sindik, 2011) female students are better at managing and controlling their emotions, therefore, possibly more likely to recognize their efforts (i.e., reading) lead to certain goals (i.e., better course grade) and more disposed to share their challenges as well.

Also, a statistically significant difference occurred when comparing the results of students who attended their study program in Rijeka (Sustainable Agritourism) in relation to students who pursued study programs (Winemaking/Mediterranean Agriculture) in Poreč. More precisely, *Reading English is useful to get a better course grade* was rated higher (4.38) by Sustainable Agritourism students in relation to students of Winemaking/Mediterranean Agriculture in Poreč (3.75). It is possible that students enrolled in Sustainable Agritourism are more aware of the positive sides of reading in a foreign language given that their studies deal with tourism as well. Also, the item *In my free time I read shorter forms in Croatian* was given a higher grade by students of Winemaking/Mediterranean Agriculture (4.42) in comparison to Sustainable Agritourism students (3.57).

At the end of the questionnaire, students were asked to share their attitudes towards the task. Their answers could be divided into three groups, depending on the attitudes towards the task, i. e. positive, ambivalent, and negative. The majority of students' comments were positive, sharing that everything about the task was in line with their expectations. Some shared that the task was interesting. Furthermore, the rest pinpointed that it helped them with learning new words, but also encouraged reading.

*An interesting assignment and I think it helps a lot in expanding vocabulary. (3)*

*Everything was great. (15)*

*I believe the task is a good way of learning new vocabulary and encouraging students to read in general or professional literature in particular. Also, the task also gives an opportunity to meet different cultures, writing styles and ways of thinking. (16)*

Ambivalent comments praised the task's usefulness, but also shared something that was problematic in relation to task completion. The students said the task was either time-consuming or they could not find new words.

*A good way of learning English but it demands a lot of effort. (33)*

*The task is interesting but considering the time and exams and the need for a break it is a bit demanding. (4)*

*The task was fun I have learned some new things, it was not difficult, but it was demanding. Partly I blame myself for that because I postpone everything until the last minute. (25)*

*I had difficulty finding new words because I mostly understood those I came across so it took a long time to find them. All in all, the task was useful. (2)*

Although research shows that free choice of reading material increases students' intellectual satisfaction (Judge, 2011), negative comments reveal that this is not always seen as a benefit. These findings are in accordance with Gajšt (2011), where more than a half of first year students and more than a third of third year students find choosing the reading material a challenging endeavour.

*I had a difficult time finding a book that was connected to my study programme because there were more articles than books on the Internet. (7)*

*It was difficult to choose a book because I don't read books in English so I didn't even know where to look...(13)*

Finally, in terms of choosing the reading material the only rule was to choose a title in relation to their study program, that is, agriculture. In line with that, students selected books on a myriad of topics within the field, from business (e.g. *Building a Sustainable Business: A Guide to Developing a Business Plan for Farms and Rural Business* (33)), medicinal herbs (e.g. *Healing Herbs* (31)) to cultural topics (e.g. *Rural Tourism Development: Localism and Cultural Change* (23)). The participants also provided their reasons for choosing a reading material, which could be divided into two groups, that is, practicality and interests.

1) practicality

*I selected this book because it was the first book that came up when I searched for agricultural books on Z-library. (33)*

*I have selected this book because in this semester we have a course on rural tourism. (25)*

2) interests

*I chose this book because of its interesting topic that I can see myself pursuing. The information given in this book can help us in our everyday life. (22)*

*Students' selection of new lexical items*

Students' choice of new words was analyzed and the vocabulary was divided into three categories (agricultural vs. scientific vs. ordinary). The author analyzed 990 words, that is, these words were put into three categories: agricultural (29.9 %), scientific (32.4 %) and ordinary (37.7 %). These findings corroborate the results by Peters and Fernandez (2013) who also discovered that ESP students were the least familiar with scientific words. However, this study showed that students were the most curious about the meaning of ordinary English words, which might be explained in terms of low(er) language proficiency. Finally, Peters and Fernandez (2013) analyzed the choices of postgraduate students of architecture, whereas this study investigated the selection of words made by undergraduate students of agriculture, hence, these differences could be accounted for in terms of different levels of academic degrees.

Also, the participants' choice of words was not homogenous, that is, there was a considerable difference among the students. For instance, as it can be seen in Table 9, most unfamiliar words selected by this student (4) belong to the scientific category, whereas Table 10 portrays an example of a student who chose, to a great extent, ordinary English words.

**Table 9.** Student's (4) choice of new words

TYPE A (specific to agriculture) A	TYPE B (common to scientific register) 16	Type C (ordinary words) 7
homesteading skills, perishable product, eco-labelling, poultry, pasture, perennial crops	stakeholder, assess, invaluable asset, enterprise, liquidity, solvency, current liabilities, depreciation expenses, revenue, below-cost, market, fluctuating, equity, financial feasibility, lease, easement	address, tangible, undifferentiated, ponder, distinguish, fundamental questions, hauling

**Table 10.** Student's (15) choice of new words

TYPE A (specific to agriculture) 4	TYPE B (common to scientific and other disciplines) 5	TYPE C (ordinary words) 21
prairie, polyculture, forestry, no-till farming,	malnutrition, integration, implement, indigenous, scope, income, egalitarian,	Eradicate, poverty, abundant, consumption, acknowledge, efficient, integral, displacement, initiative, achieve, facilitate, empower, increase, marginally, enhance, manner, declare, collaboration, inclusion

## CONCLUSION

Although students are positive about ER in general, and this task in particular, and value its benefits, it has to be taken into consideration that outside the classroom students face other challenges in terms of time, access to books, knowledge (Crawford-Camiciottoli, 2001). This is, however, yet another reason why this or similar ER activities should be implemented in the ESP classroom where some of these barriers could be overcome by teachers' assistance. Furthermore, it has to be taken into account that only part of an ESP course was dedicated to this task, therefore, the results might not be applicable to other settings, that is, more research is needed to test this task in other circumstances.

In order to get a better insight into students' attitudes towards the task, a questionnaire should be implemented before the task as well, to monitor more accurately the influence of the task on students' attitudes. In terms of selecting new lexical items, the analysis showed that academic (i.e., semi-technical) and ordinary words should not be excluded from ESP courses given that these are, to a certain degree, unknown to students at tertiary level. Furthermore, since students were free to choose any book they came across, their lexical choices were also affected by their reading materials. To get a more accurate view into the ratio of technical and ordinary words, this assignment should be adjusted by making one book obligatory for all students.

Finally, larger sample size could shed light on gender and study program differences. Also, the influence of other factors, such as language proficiency level, on the selection of new vocabulary, should be analyzed in future studies, as well.

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## STAVOVI STUDENATA PREMA ZADATKU ČITANJA U POUČAVANJU ENGLESKOG JEZIKA STRUKE

*Cilj je ovoga rada analizirati aktivnost koja je provedena na kolegijima engleskog jezika struke na jednoj visokoškolskoj ustanovi u Hrvatskoj. Svrha aktivnost je bila trostruka: 1) potaknuti ekstenzivno čitanje, 2) poboljšati usvajanje vokabulara te (3) promicati autonomno učenje. Ovaj rad daje nam uvid u odabir materijala za čitanje, novog vokabulara (opći odnosno jezik struke) te stavove prema ovomu zadatku i njegova korisnost. Trideset i tri studenta poljoprivredne struke ispunili su sve obaveze predviđene zadatkom. Njihovi odgovori otkrivaju nekoliko razloga za odabir određenog teksta, naime, dostupnost knjige te tema čine se kao najčešće navedeni razlozi. Naposljetku, iako studenti ne cijene sve dijelove voga zadatka (npr. korištenje rječnika, tehnologije), većina njih smatra zadatak zanimljivim i korisnim.*

**Ključne riječi:** čitanje, engleski jezik struke, engleski za poljoprivredu, stavovi, vokabular.