

Preparation of ELT Materials

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Abstract— It can be very difficult to teach LSP to students of mixed age groups whose previous knowledge is at different levels – from beginner to advanced. The constraint becomes even more severe when the time is limited and the syllabus extensive. To solve this problem the teachers at BAK, the Accredited College of Business and Management in Zaprešić, decided to revise basic general English grammar and vocabulary with 1st year students in order to "standardize" their knowledge, so that in the 2nd year they would be prepared for tackling the more difficult task of mastering business English. As it is not easy to find adequate textbooks for such mixed ability groups, the teachers at BAK decided to write their own teaching materials. One of the currently on-going projects is creating a grammar handbook with exercises which will be used for teaching 1st year part-time students. The need for such a handbook arose when it became clear that even students with a rather good command of English keep making the same type of grammatical mistakes, especially when using English tenses. The handbook consists of 10 grammar units with brief explanations, each followed by exercises of various levels of difficulty. The presentation will focus on the need and reasons for creating tailored teaching materials and on the handbook itself.

Index Terms— business English, ELT materials, general English, grammar, handbook.

INTRODUCTION

Having mixed-ability groups is always a challenge for teachers and having students of different age in the same group is an additional difficulty. The problem becomes even more severe when the syllabus is extensive and the time for its realization short. This is exactly the situation that language teachers at the Accredited College of Business and Management in Zaprešić encounter when it comes to teaching part time students who have to cover approximately the same syllabus as full-time students, but in a quarter of their time. Some of the questions which arise from such a situation are the following: How to teach students of mixed age groups whose previous knowledge is at different levels – from beginner to advanced, and especially how to teach Business English or English for Special Purposes to such students? What teaching materials to use and how to choose them? How to define criteria for evaluating the students' progress in such diverse groups? In this paper we shall try to answer some of these questions and offer some solutions to these and similar problems.

THE NEED FOR TAILORED TEACHING MATERIALS

In a college which offers professional studies of business and management such as BAK, foreign languages are an important part of the programme. English and German are the two languages students can choose from, and most of them choose English as it is their first foreign language. Since they come from all kinds of secondary schools, both vocational and grammar schools, their knowledge is at different levels. Among part-time students there are also older ones who have not used English for quite some time and also those who have never learnt English or German and are absolute beginners. They also do all kinds of jobs and some of them use English on a daily basis, others not at all. All this creates a very diverse group of learners which is difficult to teach using standardized textbooks and the usual teaching methods. Therefore the teachers have developed a strategy with which they are trying to overcome these difficulties. The first step is to divide students into groups according to their knowledge, and for this purpose standardized placement tests are used. Once the groups are formed, it shouldn't be difficult to work, but this is the point where the problem occurs because all the students take the same course called English Language and therefore are supposed to take the same test. However, they cannot all follow the same programme since their previous knowledge is not the same. The solution is to make a unique syllabus but to adapt the teaching methods to the level of English of the students in each group. So, although the programme is eventually the same for everyone, it is the teacher who decides what approach to take and what to teach in each group. For instance, when teaching the English tenses, in the weakest groups the teachers will focus on the form and try to teach the basics, while in stronger groups they will go into details and focus on the use of the tenses. All this calls for a

specific approach to teaching and for specific teaching materials which need to be short enough to fit a 20-lesson course and they also need to be of varied difficulty to provide enough practice for weaker as well as for stronger students. Since we couldn't find any textbooks that meet these two basic conditions which are crucial to the taken approach, the solution was to create the teaching materials which would better fit the students' needs.

GRAMMAR HANDBOOK

Teaching Business English and English for Special Purposes to such mixed-ability groups is even a harder task. As learning BE and ESP requires at least some knowledge of general English, the teachers have decided to revise the basic general English grammar and vocabulary with first year students and in this way "standardize" their knowledge so that they would be better prepared to tackle Business English in the second year. In order to revise and boost students' vocabulary, a number of texts from magazines such as *The Economist* have been taken and adapted for classroom use. The strongest groups would work on original texts, and the weaker ones on their adapted and simplified versions. However, choosing a grammar handbook proved to be a more difficult task. Most of the existing handbooks are usually too long and cover a wide range of structures that cannot be taught in the short time the teachers have at their disposal. They are also aimed at students whose level of English is more or less the same. For these reasons it has been decided to embark on a project of writing the school's own grammar handbook with exercises for first year part-time students. The need for this type of teaching material arose when it became clear that even those students whose command of English is rather good keep making the same type of grammatical mistakes. Most students still use simple and continuous tenses incorrectly, do not use perfect tenses at all, often make mistakes when using articles, confuse adjectives and adverbs, use prepositions incorrectly, etc. Therefore the handbook focuses on these, for students most difficult areas; the first part deals with articles, nouns, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions, and the second part with types of verbs and tenses. The very first unit is about parts of speech and sentence structure since experience shows that students lack knowledge of these basic concepts in language learning, and language teachers strongly believe that it is important for students to be able to distinguish between different word classes and recognize their function in a sentence. In the second part of the handbook, special emphasis is placed on distinguishing the difference and use of simple and continuous tenses. The handbook consists of ten grammar units with brief explanations (see Appendix 1), each followed by exercises of various levels of difficulty, so that even beginner students can get some practice of the most elementary structures (see Appendix 2). For the more advanced students there are more difficult exercises (see Appendix 3). The handbook is intended to be used at home as a follow-up to the lectures. Grammar is taught in class in such a way that students are guided to draw conclusions about the rules themselves, which is generally considered a positive trend in foreign language teaching and materials development. Some of the exercises are done during the lesson to practice the new structure – the rest is set for homework and the explanations are there to remind students of the basic rules. For students who need even more practice and for those who want to learn more, there are further explanations and additional exercises which the teachers upload to *Baltazar*, the school's online learning platform. In this way everyone can get the amount of practice they need. So far, this strategy has worked well with part-time students and with this new grammar handbook it is expected to be even more efficient.

KNOWLEDGE ASSESSMENT

Another problem that arises in these mixed-ability groups is how to assess the students' knowledge and test them. It would not be fair to give them tests of different difficulty since they all take the same course. But it is also impossible to give all of them the same test since weaker students would never be able to pass it, no matter how hard they studied. The solution is to make a unique test for everyone, but devised in such a way that it has graded exercises: easier ones which enable the weakest students to collect enough points to pass it, and more difficult ones for stronger students to have to study hard if they want to achieve good results. This approach can be illustrated by the following example: when testing the students' knowledge of verbs and tenses, there are about 50% of exercises which focus on the form of different tenses, so students are expected to be able to form different present, past and future tenses. Another 10 to 20% of exercises focus on the use of the more common tenses, so, for example, Present Simple and Present Continuous, Past Simple and Past Continuous, Future Simple and Going to Future would be contrasted. Another 20% focus on the form and use of more complicated tenses such as perfect tenses. Finally, 10 to 20% of exercises are quite difficult ones and test the use of all the covered

tenses. This approach ensures that all students whose previous knowledge was poor nevertheless get a chance to pass the test if they study hard. It also ensures that students whose previous knowledge was good can barely pass the test if they do not study – to achieve good results, they too need to make a considerable effort.

CONCLUSION

The teachers at the Accredited College of Business and Management in Zaprešić believe that, although demanding and time-consuming, creating teaching materials which best fit students' needs is useful and worthwhile. The aim of writing this grammar handbook was not only to make sure that all students get an equal and fair treatment regardless of whether their previous knowledge of English was good or bad, but also to try to offer each one of them a chance to learn as much as they can in spite of these differences.

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Appendix 1

BRIEF EXPLANATIONS

C Adjective or adverb?

- An adjective (*slow*) describes a noun (*reader*): He is a **slow** reader.
- An adverb of manner (*slowly*) describes a verb (*reads*): He reads **slowly**.
- Many adverbs are formed from adjectives by adding *-ly*:

adjective:	bad	careful	nice	quick	quiet	slow
adverb:	badly	carefully	nicely	quickly	quietly	slowly

Compare: She looked **angry** (*adjective*). She looked at him **angrily** (*adverb*).

Note:

- If an adjective ends in *consonant+y*, the adverb ends in *-ily*:
easy – **easily**; happy – **happily**; lucky – **luckily**
- If an adjective ends in *-le*, the adverb ends in *-ly*:
comfortable – **comfortably**; probable – **probably**; terrible – **terribly**
- if an adjective ends in *-ic*, the adverb ends in *-ically*:
automatic – **automatically**; dramatic – **dramatically**;
scientific – **scientifically** (exception: public – **publicly**)

Careful: some adjectives also end in *-ly* (*deadly, friendly, lively, lonely, silly, ugly ...*); these adjectives cannot be used as adverbs, so you cannot say, e.g.: ~~She smiled friendly.~~, but you can say: *She smiled **in a friendly way / manner**.*

- *Good* is an adjective; the adverb is *well*:

He is a **good** tennis player. He plays tennis **well**.

- Some words like *early, fast, hard, late ...* are both **adjectives** and **adverbs**:

I caught the early train.	I came early .
He is a fast runner.	He runs fast .
She is a hard worker.	She works hard .

- Some pairs of adverbs (*free / freely; hard / hardly; high / highly; late / lately; near / nearly; ...*) can have different meanings:

She worked hard but didn't pass the test.	She hardly worked – no wonder she failed.
The postman arrived late .	I haven't seen our postman lately – is he ill?
The station was near his house.	He nearly missed the train.

APPENDIX 2:

EASIER EXERCISE

C Adjective or adverb?

1 Choose between the adjective and the adverb:

I had an **unusual / unusually** experience **recent / recently**. I was walking home from a party when **sudden / suddenly** I saw a **bright / brightly** light in the sky. The light was **close / closely** to the park **near / nearly** my building. As I approached it, the lights began to flash **quick / quickly** and I heard some kind of **terrible / terribly** noise. I walked past the park turning around **nervous / nervously**. Then I noticed several **colourful / colourfully** dressed people coming towards me. They looked **serious / seriously** and I remember thinking to myself how **strange / strangely** it all was. I woke up in hospital the next morning with an **awful / awfully** headache and tried to explain to the doctor what I had seen the night before. He told me **patient / patiently** that I had been hit by a **large / largely** van while crossing the road near my apartment. I still think it wasn't a van and those people weren't paramedics!

APPENDIX 3:

MORE DIFFICULT EXERCISE

C Adjective or adverb?

2 Use the adjectives to complete the sentences. Sometimes you need to make an adverb from the adjective.

slow hard (2) fast angry furious easy(2) bad careful
dangerous comfortable (2)

1. The test was **easy** and I didn't have to work _____ for it.
2. I opened the bottle _____, with just one quick turn.
3. She runs very _____. She's not in good shape at all.
4. Tom learns very _____; he needs to hear something only once and already remembers it.
5. The weather was very _____ last week – it was cold and it rained all the time.
6. She was _____ and looked at me _____. I had broken her precious vase.
7. We are not friends, really. We _____ know each other.
8. Be _____ when crossing the street – it is a _____ crossing.
9. This armchair is so _____ that I think I'll fall asleep in it.
10. You just sit _____ in this armchair and I'll get you some coffee.