

Two Teachers, One Textbook: Challenges and Changes

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Abstract: This paper offers an insight into the efforts of two teachers trying to put together a textbook, called *English for Social Sciences*. The teachers are myself and a friend, Ramona Bran, who is an English language teacher at the Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, within the West University of Timisoara, where I also used to work until the autumn of 2015. This book came with some challenges due to our target audience, our students, but also our styles of teaching which impinged on what we taught. This paper looks back at how these challenges were overcome and how we adapted to the changes necessary to come up with the book.

Keywords: didactics, teaching English for specific purposes, textbook, challenges

1. Introduction

Not so very long ago, myself and a colleague, Assistant Dr. Ramona Bran, decided to join forces and pool together all the resources and materials we had acquired over the ten years both of us had spent teaching students of various specializations at the West University of Timisoara. The reason was quite straightforward: to make life easier for us, but also for our students by presenting a cohesive material that would carry them through the four required semesters of studying English at Faculty. At the time, we started thinking about this book, both of us were teachers at the Faculty of Sociology and Psychology. I was teaching English to students of sociology and education

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sciences, whereas my colleague was teaching students of psychology and social work.

We had previously collaborated on another textbook aimed more narrowly at social work students. The book was called *Caregiving*, a pared-down and altered version of another eponymously entitled book, written years ago by the late Associate Professor, Dr. Constantin Chevereșan. Even back then, in 2009, while working on *Caregiving*, we were talking about the need for a book meant for all social sciences under the umbrella of the Faculty we were working for. Both of us had plenty of materials left, catering to a wider range of students than those studying social work. As teachers, colleagues and friends do, we had already started borrowing classes from each other, reworking the text and exercises to fit our needs and our styles of teaching. Therefore, bringing it all together in a homogeneous fashion was, it seems now, a natural development. *English for Social Sciences* is the result of our work over the years. Our main goal has always been to keep our students' English alive in the two years we met in class, improve their skills, but also to introduce concepts and ideas that would build progressively-thinking individuals for the society of the future.

Putting it all together, nevertheless, was not without its challenges, firstly due to my and Ms. Bran's style of teaching, and secondly due to our target groups, our students.

2. Challenges and changes

To start with the latter, the students pursue a degree in social sciences but they belong to four related, albeit different specializations: psychology, sociology and human resources, education sciences with its three separate branches, and to social work. Naturally, this means that they have different interests and expectations from what they learn: psychology students delve into the intricacies of the human mind and soul, sociology students examine society at large and its phenomena, human resources students study human interactions in relation to labour, social work students are preoccupied with society's disenfranchised whereas students of education sciences are trained obviously as educators of either schoolchildren, children with disabilities, or adults.

Consequently, even though these profiles are all under the more relaxed umbrella of social sciences, when it comes to teaching English for specific purposes, which means that some classes and topics can overlap, the

students still have different interests shaped by what they study, read or write for other classes and lectures.

There were other problems as well, when it came to my colleague and I putting this book together, such as the students themselves not being at the same level of English, even after the Baccalaureate. The reason for this is that many had simply scraped through; some had not studied English at all, or they had but only superficially. Both Ms. Bran and I took the decision to organize these students in a beginner group and aim *English for Social Sciences* at students of intermediate level or above.

Another additional lack of constraint complicating the above mentioned matters, as it were, was the fact that we were left to our own devices when it came to establishing a syllabus for such a motley group of students. As all teachers know a syllabus is paramount in language teaching, helping to portion the complex tasks of teaching and learning into “manageable units” (Hutchinson and Waters 1987:83). We would like to think that we have at least partly built our syllabus on a learning-centered approach, focusing on comprehensive topics rather than on language situations, creating interesting and enjoyable materials and activities to elicit the students’ interest and involvement (Hutchinson and Waters 1987:92-93).

Most of the classes included in the book were designed to be general enough to appeal to all four specializations, but containing enough specific details that could be developed later on in class according to which students were being taught the lesson. For instance in “Unit 3: Words We Use about Ourselves and Others. Stereotypes” Education Science students could focus on the stereotypes about school children and teachers, Sociology students might discuss socio-cultural stereotypes and their implications, Psychology students could delve into the implication behind labeling people who are different from us. A similar design can be found in other textbook units, such “Unit 6: Religious Symbols,” “Unit 44: Bullying,” etc. At the same time, however, the book does encompass units that are a little more narrowly funneled towards psychology, social work or education sciences students, such as “Unit 45: Cheating,” “Unit 31: Personality Traits,” “Unit 57: The Professional Social Worker,” etc.

CONTENTS	
Foreword	
UNIT 1: English as Lingua Franca	Adjectives · Matching · Lexical cloze · Reading comprehension · Open cloze
UNIT 2: Britishness	Matching · Gapped text · Reading comprehension
UNIT 3: Words We Use About Ourselves and Others. Stereotypes	Adjectives · Rearrange the words (x2) · Adjective check-list · Lexical cloze
UNIT 4: Political Correctness	Nouns (job titles) · Matching · Summarize · Comment on · List of terms · Writing (Paragraph)
UNIT 5: Gender Roles and Relationships	Comment on · Dialogue · Reading comprehension · Vocabulary (expressions with <i>man</i>) · Present tenses (exercises, translation)
UNIT 6: Religious Symbols	Lexical cloze (x2) · Reading comprehension (multiple choice) · Find a title · Synonym list · Word formation · Discussion · Passive voice
UNIT 7: Legal Aliens	Lexical cloze · Discussion · Matching · Open cloze · Reading comprehension
UNIT 8: Discrimination	Matching · Discussion · Writing (Report) · Making a presentation
UNIT 9: Human Rights	Comment on · Reading comprehension · Gapped text · Matching · Synonyms · Discourse cloze · Writing (Formal letter)
UNIT 10: 1984 & 1989	Matching · Discussion · Reading · Finish the sentences · Reading · Matching · Gapped text · Reading comprehension · Writing (Present perfect: How have things changed since 1989.)
UNIT 11: On Freedom	Comment on · Matching · Open cloze · Reading comprehension
UNIT 12: Quoting, Reporting, and Interpreting. Linking Words.	Gapped text · Collocations · Linking words
UNIT 13: The True Value of Age	Proverbs · Matching · Lexical cloze · Questions · Comment on
UNIT 14: Disorders	

Figure 1: A brief look at the contents of ESS

The reason we chose topics that, at a first glance, might be considered rather general is so that we could bend them, if you will, towards our students interests. These lessons are designed to be highly interactive but starting from a serious, measurable basis, which in our case is a rather traditional one, namely a text.

Almost all lessons consist of a buildup to the subject of the text, beginning with a brief, introductory exercise, such as to comment on a quote, or translate a joke, brainstorming, followed by a vocabulary exercise with the unknown words or expressions from the text. After the text itself (usually a shortened article), we inserted a type of reading comprehension in the form of questions, true/false sentences or multiple choice questions. Some units have other additional texts, statistics, tips on how to write various compositions from reports to essays.

Several of the units have been reworked from our original textbook, *Caregiving*, for instance: “Unit 13: The True Value of Age,” “Unit 15: Disabilities,” “Unit 26: Talking about Addictions.” These lessons have been expanded and adapted to fit more general needs. Certainly, we have learned

from our previous experience with *Caregiving*, and approached this textbook with a greater attention to detail and a wider variety of exercises for our students to practice vocabulary, grammar, but also speaking.

The types of exercise that predominate in this book are: gapped texts, matching, question-answer reading comprehension, gap fill (lexical cloze, open cloze, multiple choice, discourse cloze), rephrasing, error correction.

One important change that we insisted on including this time, which we felt was sorely lacking in *Caregiving*, is a more consistent presence of grammar all throughout the book. Since it ideally targets students at an upper-intermediate level, or higher, *English for Social Sciences* does not approach English grammar by explaining it in detail. It contents itself to activating and refreshing already existing knowledge. We have included information and exercises on all the present, past and future tenses, on the modal verbs, and the passive voice.

One of the greatest challenges that my colleague and I faced when it came to writing *English for Social Sciences* resulted from our quite different styles of teaching, which affected the materials we had for class. Mine is more teacher-controlled; I prefer to have a clear, measurable content which usually consists of shorter gapped texts, followed by a reading comprehension, vocabulary exercises, all designed to do its job in one hour and a half, which is the length of a seminar. Ramona Bran's teaching style is more generous, less teacher-controlled with longer texts that are carefully analyzed for concepts, relevant for psychology and social work students, with reading comprehension questions more focused on the students' opinions rather than narrowed down to text.

As a consequence, when we spliced our materials together in one document, we realized right away that the outcome was not a homogeneous one. Thus, we set about chiseling away at what we had, mostly reworking the longer texts, inserting more activities around them that the students could do while reading. In other cases, we fused several classes in one unit, doing away with superfluous texts and slimming down a topic that would have spread over more Units, for instance "Unit 32: Who Am I?" used to sprawl over three chapters, before my colleague decided to pare it down.

There were also cases when we decided that a specific text would not work for what we had in mind. For example, I used an old text in one of the classes because it introduced the past tenses, but the problem was that the subject matter of this text was the 1962 Munich air disaster that hit the Manchester United team. Despite its inclusion of all the four past tenses, we decided that it was simply not relevant for our target audience; therefore we

set about finding a new text that would match our grammar needs but also remain pertinent to our audience.

In order to achieve our goal, we used the Google search engine, at first, to find a suitable text. Since we did not really know what text to look for, however, my colleague suggested that we use an already existing text, one that she used in class quite often, one which we could easily link with other topics. This text is now the central point of “Unit 38: Survival of the Fittest.”

The grammar side that we kept from the previous text consisted of using the verbs in the text to introduce the past tenses. In order to do that, we had to tinker with the verbs so we could have past simple, past progressive, past perfect and past perfect progressive verbs, all in the same text. The task for the students is to match the numbered verbs with four main uses of the four past tenses. This type of connection between the grammar and the text prevents the students from considering the various parts of a unit as isolated, as having nothing to do with the other.

There were also cases when we had to come up with a new text altogether. It happened for “Unit 10: 1984 & 1989” which deals with concepts from George Orwell’s famous novel, Huxley’s *A Brave New World* and the historical events surrounding the Berlin Wall. We decided to find a new text about the Berlin Wall, which was easier to do because we knew exactly what to look for.

Afterwards we worked together on shortening what was essentially an article in order to provide an easier reading, isolating the more difficult words and then extracting the fragments that the students were later to reinsert back in the text during their reading exercise. Since it is a text with a great deal of historical facts about the construction and the impact of the Wall, we decided against a detailed reading comprehension based on the text, opting for a few questions that would incite discussion among our students. We also chose to introduce a grammar exercise focused on the present perfect by asking our students to use the tense in describing the changes that have occurred in our own country since the 1989 revolution.

Evidently, these were not the only possible obstacles that we came up against. A number of smaller challenges cropped up along the way but the advantage of two colleagues who are already used to what the other teaches is that we knew how to work through them in order to reach a solution satisfactory to the both of us.

From a methodological point of view, we have designed our classes over the years to be as interactional as possible, but still based on simple and quantifiable means of assessing our students. The textbook embraces some of

the principles of the communicative method of language teaching insofar as the exercises we included are meant to foster student interaction with one another and with the teacher. We focus on meaning, we use contextualization, we do not focus on accuracy during speaking exercises, preferring to encourage fluency (Richards & Rodgers 1986:67-68). We strove to develop materials that suit our students' needs and their varying specializations (Richards & Rodgers 1986:69).

The learners' activities are more traditional, such as pairwork, groupwork, reading, answering questions, or commenting. However, the exercises are meant to put an emphasis on the communication first, and then on the acquisition of language forms. The teacher's role is central in conveying the information in the textbook, assessing students' needs and managing group processes, but the students have many opportunities to negotiate meaning amongst themselves (Richards & Rodgers 1986: 76-78).

There are still many aspects of the textbook and the way we came up with it that are in need of future improvement, but we are happy to have succeeded in spanning a gap when it comes to teaching English to students in social sciences.

4. Conclusion

The famous quote attributed to Socrates, "I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them think," represents, I believe, the motto that guided me and my friend, Ramona Bran, not only in collaborating on this textbook, but also in what we teach and how we chose to do it. Working together has undoubtedly presented some challenges, but these hurdles did not stop our progress, as *English for Social Sciences* proves. We even joked towards the end that it was hard to stop once we found a groove and we had a clear picture of what the book should include.

I would say the greatest challenge we faced was homogenizing the materials we already had into one, unitary structure. Our collaboration proved that a class teach from handouts may not always be the same class you want to include in a textbook. This implied changing old classes, but most importantly the way in which we had grown used to teaching them.

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