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Review: English for Theologians

Urška Sešek and Simona Duška Zabukovec. Ljubljana: Teološka fakulteta Ljubljana, 2010. ISBN 978-961-92694-6-6.

English for Theologians is aimed at students of the Faculty of Theology and builds on secondary school knowledge of English. The approach used and the design of materials are presented in the foreword, and the body is divided into five thematic sections, each consisting of several units (*In the Beginning Was the Word, The Word Dwelt Among Us, I Will Bless the Lord at All Times, From His Fullness We Have All Received, and Born of God*). The appendices include an English-Slovene theological dictionary, *Slovensko angleški slovar* (Slovene-English glossary), sample gospel readings with tasks, the key to all reading and vocabulary tasks in the coursebook, and a sample exam sheet.

The quiz at the beginning of the book enables students to become more aware of their learning styles and get some tailored advice on language learning, and aims to encourage them to take control of their learning process. The coursebook as a whole is underpinned by a student- or learning centred approach. Connected to this is the idea of learner autonomy, which includes self-directedness and self-reflection/assessment on the part of the learner. These ideas are present in the coursebook implicitly (by the methodological rendering of the materials) and explicitly (e.g. the *Recommended listening* section which learners are expected to do on their own, tasks with keys etc.)

Coursebooks undoubtedly help to organize the learning and teaching for both the teacher and learners, and should therefore have a clear and coherent structure, but it should not be too tight as this can cause monotony. The model structure of the course must be clear and systematic, but still flexible enough to allow for creativity and diversity. It is therefore the structure of the unit which most clearly reflects the author's intentions and underlying beliefs. Let us have a look at the structure of one unit from the course book *English for Theologians*:

Unit 1: BIBLE		
1	Short quotation	A sort of vignette at the beginning of each unit that introduces the topic and can be used to stimulate conversation.
2	Warm-up	Activity introducing a reading text. Usually a speaking, sometimes a writing activity.

3	Reading (⇒ presentation / input)	Next to the reading text there is always a 'while-reading' task which directs the reading process.
4	Vocabulary	The post-reading task reinforces the vocabulary of the reading text.
5	Did you know...?	Brief explanations of grammar, vocabulary and culture of English, reading strategies, etc.
6	Speaking	Prompts for discussion aimed at developing speaking skills.
7	Listening & pronunciation	Audio materials recorded specifically for the purpose of the course and available from the website of the Faculty of Theology.
8	Vocabulary	Post-listening activities to reinforce vocabulary.
9	Creative writing	Short and creative writing activities thematically connected with the topic out of which students choose two or more.
10	Recommended listening	Activity directing the students to selected audio or video content on the Internet, related to the theme of the lesson and accompanied with a listening task.

English for Theologians contains fifteen units in five sections. Throughout the course book each unit has a relatively unified format which is flexible enough to suit the different topics. So, for example, a certain unit may have more reading texts than others, or not include a writing activity, yet each unit still covers most of the components shown in the above outline.

The course book has a clear internal consistency based on two main organizational principles: carrier content and language skills or real content. As explained in the foreword: "*The course book is organized thematically: each lesson deals with one of the topics that is relevant to the theological profession and included in your study programme.*" The second organizational principle, i.e. developing language skills or determining the relationships between them, is based on the fact that reading and listening are our main sources of language input, enabling us to acquire grammar and vocabulary that can then be activated in language production. A particularly key component of both comprehension and productive fluency is vocabulary, which is why great emphasis is put on vocabulary input as well as practice activities. If we compare target language input to a diet, the authors have provided a 'healthy and balanced diet': at the bottom of the pyramid with the major foods there are the two receptive skills - reading and listening (along with vocabulary), and at the top, with the 'food' to be used sparingly, there is grammar.

The selection of the two organizational principles of language content is appropriate for the context of ESP. The thematic organization of learning content provides relevance and attractiveness of the teaching material, and the skill-based organization allows the teacher more flexibility in dealing with the language skills. A strong emphasis is placed on the development of vocabulary, which is consistent with

the recommendations of the lexical approach and the characteristics of the ESP context in which the teaching of English at the Faculty of Theology takes place.

The sequence of five thematic parts containing the 15 units is carefully thought out, and the links are very subtle: it starts with a historical perspective and passes to the treatment of religious services and common religious concepts and objects, the feelings and perceptions of religious people, the diversity of world religions, the Church in Slovenia etc. The links between the thematic parts and individual units in a given context are coherent, but not too strong, which gives flexibility to the material - the teacher can decide in what order and how to discuss the units. Given the extensive experience of the authors in teaching English at the Faculty of Theology, the course book shows an experiential 'documented practice', which gives the material practical value and credibility.

Texts remain the main instrument of foreign-language learning and teaching. However, they should not only be a source of 'interesting' target language (i.e., grammar and vocabulary), but also a source of relevant and interesting information. The authors have successfully managed to fulfil this aim. Many of the texts also act as accessible summaries of what students have to learn in other theology courses.

The methodological approaches used in the design of the course book reflect all the latest developmental trends in foreign language teaching methodology:

- 1) learning/student-centredness: e.g., reading strategies in *Unit 9: What is Process Theology?*,
- 2) an emphasis on authentic reading and listening texts as the main sources of language input. The treatment of texts is process-oriented and interactive, based on the threefold model of teaching receptive skills (pre-, during, and post-reading/listening). A fine example of practical applications of modern models of reading stressing the construction of meaning in the interaction between the reader and the text is found in *Unit 9: What is Process Theology?*,
- 3) vocabulary is dealt with according to the principles of the lexical approach, e.g. collocations,
- 4) interculturality: e.g., *Unit 13: Slovenia and the Church*, and
- 5) the approach to carrier content follows the principles of CLIL, involving a form of language immersion.

The course book *English for Theologians* by Urška Sešek and Simona Duška Zabukovec is the first English course book for theologians in Slovenia. It is virtually tailor-made as both authors have taught at the Faculty of Theology. We can say that the book, a fruit of their long and hard professional work, is a significant achievement in the field of ESP materials writing in Slovenia. The course book is designed according to modern principles of foreign language learning and teaching, and will undoubtedly contribute to the development of language competence of the students at the Faculty of Theology.