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**INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION ON ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS FOR
GEORGIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

Abstract

This article describes the process of creation of a series of textbooks to assist students in developing and enhancing their listening, speaking, reading, and listening skills in English. The textbooks are being written as a result of extensive cooperation between Georgian colleagues and American specialists from several universities. The article focuses on a reading textbook (working title: *Read in English Outside the Box*), being written through an ongoing collaboration between the Tbilisi State University team led by Professor Manana Rusieshvili, and Professor Donna Farina from New Jersey City University, USA.

Keywords: ELT, language skills, CEFR levels

The professors and instructors working with the B.A. students of English Philology at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University (TSU) embarked upon the creation of a series of textbooks that would assist students in developing and enhancing their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English. Presently, two books on speaking skills have been completed by a team assembled by Professor Manana Rusieshvili, the Chair of English Philology. One of the speaking skills books (part 1) was edited by Dr. Mary C. Baldrige, an English Language Fellow and English Language Specialist with the U.S. Department of State who worked in Georgia during the 2019–20 academic year. In addition, Dr. Baldrige completed a handbook on developing English writing skills. These textbooks are currently being piloted in the B.A. program of English Philology at TSU. It is expected that they will be published by TSU over summer 2021; the working titles are: *Speak English Outside the Box* (Parts 1 and 2) and *Write in English Outside the Box*.

Another initiative is *Listening Skills*, which, under the supervision of Professor Manana Rusieshvili, is currently being compiled by Dr. Nino Jojua, teacher of English at the Center of

Foreign Languages, in cooperation with Dr. Mariam Keburia, Invited Lecturer in the program of English Philology. This is intended as a practice-focused textbook consisting of approximately twelve units. It will help students develop the ability to decode and interpret native and non-native English speech through exposure to different accents and paces of speech. Students will learn to focus on listening for main ideas and details, factual information, association, evaluations, feelings and opinions. The textbook will explore a range of audio and video recordings on various topics delivered by British Council educators as well as other native and non-native speakers within different settings. It will also include pre-listening vocabulary practice and post-listening discussions with a special focus on delivery, accent, intonation, specialized vocabulary, functional language, cohesive devices and grammatical accuracy. The textbook has gone through the primary revisions and is expected to be finalized over summer 2021.

This report focuses on a reading textbook (working title: *Read in English Outside the Box*), being written through an ongoing collaboration. Professor Manana Rusieshvili, head of the Department of English at TSU and President of the English Teachers Association of Georgia (ETAG), is leading the department's team, consisting of Associate Professor Rusudan Dolidze and Dr. Sophie Totibadze, teacher of English at the Center of Foreign Languages. The team is collaborating with Professor Donna Farina from the Department of Multicultural Education at New Jersey City University in Jersey City, New Jersey. Professor Farina was a Fulbright scholar in the English Department at Tbilisi State University during fall semester 2019, where she lectured in lexicography and also taught M.A. thesis writing. Dr. Farina builds on the team's work creating the textbook units by editing them and adding exercises and explanations.

The development of reading comprehension skills is rarely indicated as a major problem by either English teachers in Georgia or their students. Nevertheless, Georgian students who take international exams (the International English Language Test [IELTS], the Test of English as a Foreign Language [TOEFL] from Educational Testing Service [ETS], or the Cambridge English for Speakers of Other Languages [ESOL] test) do frequently consider the reading sections more difficult than other parts of the tests. Students who receive a B.A. in English Philology are expected to confirm their command of English at the B2+ level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Note that the B2 level in reading is the approximate equivalent of the Advanced Mid level in the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, 2012*, the American proficiency framework (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, n.d.).

Generally, at the B2 reading level, a student:

Can read with a large degree of independence, adapting style and speed of reading to different texts and purposes, and using appropriate reference sources selectively. Has a broad active reading vocabulary, but may experience some difficulty with low-frequency idioms. (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 54)

To demonstrate their B2+ proficiency, TSU students take an institutional exam in English organized by the university's Center for Foreign Languages. This exam is planned according to the FCE ("First Certificate in English") format and includes reading skills.

Acquisition of more effective reading skills will allow students to apply their knowledge toward a strong performance on the exams, affording them an important professional credential. Apart from the specific challenges presented by either institutional (within the university) or international examinations in English, it is certainly crucial for TSU students who are English majors to develop their reading comprehension skills to the maximum extent possible. TSU students of English undoubtedly will enter careers for which a strong knowledge of the English language is highly beneficial. By improving their reading comprehension, these students will be better-positioned to demonstrate their knowledge base in English—in the job market and (eventually) on the job, as well as in other important life situations.

Presently, several textbooks are already available to assist in exam preparation. This new reading skills textbook is being written specifically with the needs of Georgian students in mind. It is organized around carefully-selected readings that cover a gamut of subject areas. The wide subject area variety is an important criterion of "Reading for Information and Argument" at the B2 level in the CEFR, at which the student:

Can obtain information, ideas and opinions from highly specialised sources within their field.
Can understand specialised articles outside their field, provided they can use a dictionary occasionally to confirm their interpretation of terminology. Can understand articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which particular stances or viewpoints are adopted. (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 57)

Since the students in TSU's philology B.A. program are interested primarily in literature and the English language, some of the texts chosen are within their field: from literature, from well-known

authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald as well as lesser-known ones. In addition, some of the reading texts cover literary topics, such as the evolution of the short story. In line with B2-level requirements, some reading texts cover specialized areas outside the students' main field of study, such as a historical text on linguistic anthropology that discusses South American Indian languages, or a unit that focuses on art and has three reading texts (about Gainsborough, Vermeer, and the looting of art by the Nazis). The texts also cover "contemporary problems in which particular stances or viewpoints are adopted" (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 57), such as one reading that examines the lack of diversity among Hollywood actors and another reading that discusses funding cuts in British universities.

Each unit in the textbook targets the development of specific reading skills that students need if they are to read with greater understanding as well as with more efficiency. The skills targeted in the textbook correspond to reading skills that are emphasized in the Common European Framework for the B2 level. For example, at B2, the CEFR expects that a student "Can use a variety of strategies to achieve comprehension, including watching out for main points and checking comprehension by using contextual clues" (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 60). In sync with this expectation, one of the reading units teaches summarizing (identifying the main controlling idea, main supporting points, and key words; it also teaches distinguishing less important or irrelevant points from main points). Another reading unit teaches chunking a reading passage (breaking down larger parts into smaller ones) and categorizing information (*main topic, sub-topic of a text; controlling idea of a paragraph*).

Because the goal is for students to achieve a B2-plus skill level, the reading textbook works on skills at B2 but also touches upon the skills of the next-highest, or C1, level. For example, the CEFR requires a C1 student to be able to read texts "in the standard form of the language or a familiar variety with little difficulty" (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 59); the readings in the textbook are in both British and American English, the two most widespread varieties of English. For example, in the aforementioned art unit, one of the texts is in British English and two texts are in American English. The rest of the textbook (discussion questions, explanations of skills, exercises, and directions) is written in American English. Another C1-level skill is "using contextual, grammatical and lexical cues to infer attitude, mood and intentions and anticipate what will come next" (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 60). In this vein, one of the units teaches making inferences during reading and becoming sensitive to the emotional tone of a text. To teach inferences, the unit

explains in detail what it means to make an inference; it also provides students with links to high-quality informational websites where they can, if desired, do additional reading about inferences.

Reading is for most students the most difficult of the three sets of activities that the CEFR labels as “reception”-oriented (oral comprehension, audio-visual comprehension, and reading comprehension) (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 47). When a text is challenging, reading comprehension is facilitated if students are provided with a supplementary audio-visual resource covering the same topic. For this reason, the textbook often contains links to carefully-selected YouTube videos that include related information to help a student tackle a written text more easily.

While the Pandemic slowed work on the reading textbook, it did not halt it. Thanks to Zoom, Professors Rusieshvili and Farina have had many very pleasant Sunday meetings to keep the work on track. The finished textbook is expected to consist of approximately ten to twelve chapters and the goal is to complete it during summer 2021. It will be published by Tbilisi State University at a price that is well within the budget of Georgian students. Like the other textbooks mentioned above, parts of the reading textbook have already been piloted successfully in classes held at TSU. It is expected that once the full published reading textbook has been used in the classroom, a second, revised edition will be prepared and published.

For inquiries about the reading textbook or any of the other skills textbooks, please contact Manana Rusieshvili.

References

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