Revision books in ESP: Myths and Reality

Halina Wisniewska
Kozminski University, Warsaw
e-mail: halinannawu@gmail.com

The term LSP is commonly used when referring to teaching and research of language in relation to the communicative needs of speakers of a second or foreign language used in a particular workplace, academic, or professional context thus LSP courses usually focus on the specific language needs of relatively homogeneous groups of learners. They may be addressed to students at, most often, tertiary level of education or to people who already completed formal education but need to use a foreign language to communicate in professional target situations.

The starting point of every ESP course design is a detailed needs analysis which allows to define linguistic requirements of learners, competence gaps in relevant areas, set the required level of knowledge and specify the ways of achieving it. Therefore courses of languages for specific purposes may vary in the choice of language skills, functions and topics taught. The need for individualization of the teaching process requires also decisions regarding teaching materials to be used. McGrath (2002:4) notices that ' when experienced teachers teach using a course book that they know well, they will have a sense of what to use and what not to use, what to adapt and where to supplement'. But how important for such decisions are the preferences of learners?

The aim of the article is to present revision books - didactic material highly valued by learners but not so much by teachers - and to outline some of the reasons for this discrepancy.

1. Needs analysis in ESP

There are various definitions of ESP in literature as the term covers various aspects of ELT and there is still some disagreement over the criteria for classification. Barnard and Zemach (2003:306) argue that "English for Specific Purposes is an umbrella term that refers to teaching of English to students who are learning the language for a particular work or study-related reason and therefore attempts to position ESP on 'by implication, superior position in EFL are groundless. According to them " ESP is not an approach, a method or a technique (although simulation and role-play activities are often identified with business ESP courses). The only feature common to all types of ESP course is a selection of the content and teaching approach according to the perceived needs of the learner".

Dudley-Evans and St John (1988:i), however, claim that the teaching of English for Specific Purposes has generally been regarded as a separate activity within ELT which the main concerns "have always been, and remain, with needs analysis, text analysis, and preparing learners to communicate effectively in the tasks prescribed by their study or work situation".

Every ESP course, aiming at satisfying learners' real-world professional demands as effectively as possible, must be based on specific situations which the learner will be involved in. The starting point of every ESP course design is a detailed needs analysis which allows to define competence gaps in relevant areas, set the required level of knowledge and specify the ways of achieving it. Therefore courses of languages for specific purposes may vary in the choice of language skills, functions and topics taught.

As the dynamics of the labour market make it impossible to predict the future linguistic needs of the learner, a very important part of EFL methodology is developing learners' skill of self- directed learning. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, 2001:6) defines self-directed learning as a process including:

• raising the learner's awareness of his or her present state of knowledge;
• self-setting of feasible and worthwhile objectives;
• selection of materials;
• self-assessment.

Self-directing learning is becoming more and more common among adult learners as it gives a lot of freedom in choosing the time of learning, learning style, strategies and materials. Yet, needs-oriented, learner-centred education requires a new approach to the problem of evaluation. It has become obvious that more autonomous learners should take responsibility for the final result of the learning process. To be able to do so they must have a possibility of unassisted self-evaluation of either their general language knowledge or particular language skills. Not all learners need formal assessment.

Very often adult learners decide to either start learning a language or improve foreign language competence for a particular reason e.g. a new job opportunity, their own satisfaction. Not all of them attend language courses because they need an official proof of their language skills. They may just want to ensure that they are making progress and / or pursuing their language learning goals. They do not intend to enter for any more or less formal examination.

In a traditional teacher-directed process it is the responsibility of the teacher to choose the most appropriate form of assessment. In self-directed learning the learner chooses what needs to be checked depending on the purpose of assessment. There may be a need to assess the progress made over a certain period of time or the present level of language fluency.

CEFR (2001) distinguishes two types of assessment:
• Achievement assessment - assessment of the achievement of specific objectives. It is oriented to the course – what has been taught.
• Proficiency assessment - assessment of what someone can do / knows in relation to the application of the subject in the real world. Achievement assessment is usually used by teachers who need to get feedback on teaching while employers, educational administrators and adult learners are more interested in what the person can now do, therefore they find proficiency assessment as more useful. " A proficiency test aims to measure how well the students will perform in their target language task and so fits within the ESP principles" (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998: 213).

There are some readily available assessment tools though only very few are suitable for self-evaluation. Self-assessment in self-directed learning process requires tools designed in such a way that the learner can use them and review the achieved results himself/herself without help of e.g. a teacher. An option for self-directed learners is to use didactic materials suitable for language skills assessment which main goal is to facilitate
● revision and/or consolidation of learner's knowledge in a certain discipline or area;
● identification of gaps in learner's knowledge and filling them in;
● expansion of the learner's existing knowledge
● testing particular language knowledge or skills.

2. Revision books in ESP

One of the main assumptions of English for Specific Purposes is that teaching materials should enable learners to acquire the variety of language and skills they will need in typical situations met in their professional life. There is specific vocabulary and language situations which are likely to appear in occupational contexts, therefore much greater emphasis must be put on developing lexical repertoire. Subject specialists need these lexical items that will enable them to communicate freely within the discipline represent. Checking this very specific vocabulary knowledge requires special tools.

Unfortunately, readily available materials used for such a purpose are scarce. Most of commonly known and used vocabulary tests cover general language lexical items chosen on the basis of their position on frequency lists. They are not an effective tool for checking specific vocabulary needed by e.g. a stockbroker. Neither are ESP textbooks. The primary role of a textbook, designed mainly for teacher - directed learning, is to develop language competences. ESP textbooks do not provide enough opportunities to revise professional vocabulary or job related language skills learnt from other materials, at various stages of language education . New vocabulary is often introduced in clearly written explanatory texts or exercises in which key terms are bolded. Exercises and revision units cover only the lexical items that appear in the units. Checking knowledge gained at earlier stages requires a different tool.

Additionally, some professionals need to have very clearly defined skills. Not always developing all language skills is necessary. ESP learners, particularly autonomous ones, should be given an opportunity not only to gain but also to evaluate the language knowledge according to their needs. Language revision books can be one of the instruments serving this purpose.

According to Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary (1996) *"to revise"* means:
1. To look at again for the detection of errors; to re["e]xamine; to review; to look over with care for correction; as, to revise a writing; to revise a translation.
2. (Print.) To compare (a proof) with a previous proof of the same matter, and mark again such errors as have not been corrected in the type.
3. To review, alter, and amend; as, to revise statutes; to revise an agreement; to revise a dictionary.

Drawing on this definition it can be said that a revision guide is a type of didactic material which, on the one hand, allows identification of gaps in learner's knowledge and, on the other hand, creates an opportunity for the learner to practise the possessed knowledge. Most such books concentrate on vocabulary, professional skills or grammar. Yet, the need for this type of material among learners does not raise enough interest among publishers, textbook writers and teachers.

3.Empirical research results

In 2008 an empirical research was undertaken in order to describe the role of revision books in the didactic process of ESP. As didactic materials can be evaluated from both learner's and teacher's point of view the research was carried in two stages.

The first stage was a questionnaire run among learners. A group of 150 respondents included undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate students of business. They represented various levels of language fluency - from intermediate to advanced. The lowest level (B2) was predominant among undergraduates, advanced (C2) was mainly among postgraduate students. The purpose of such a composition of the group was to get as wide perspective on the issue as possible. The next stage was to get opinions from experienced ESP teachers. The answers varied in length and scope. Due to the length constraints of this article only the most relevant (for this paper) conclusions will be addressed.

3.1. Popularity of revision books among learners

The results of the research show that revision books are popular among learners. As Fig. 1` shows almost ¾ of the respondents have used this type of material in language learning process. It is worth mentioning that difference between the scores of the three groups of respondents was statistically non-significant what may suggest that the popularity of revision books does not depend on the general language proficiency.
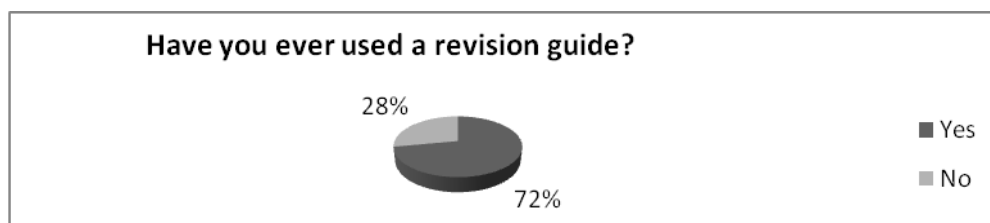

Figure 1. Popularity of revision books

When asked about usefulness of this type of learning material over 60% of those surveyed state that revision books are very useful. For 30% it is useful and only 1 respondent finds it not useful. Those who used this type of material used it for various reasons- from gaining new knowledge, consolidating the knowledge they possess or assessing their knowledge relating to a particular language skill.
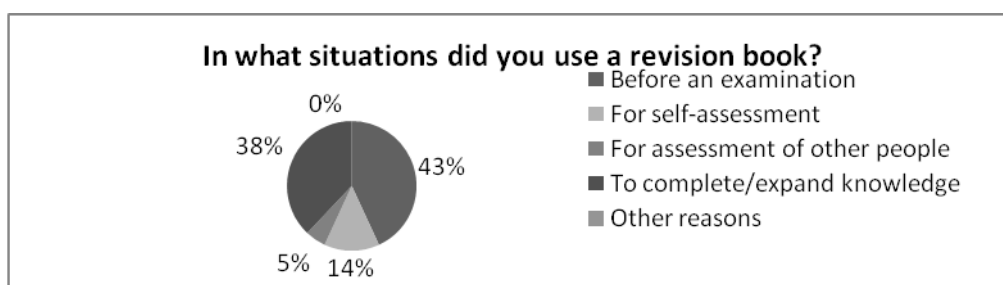

Figure 2. Reasons for using revision books

3.2. Popularity of revision books among teachers

Revision books are designed primarily for learners who develop their language skills in form of self-study. However, some authors and publishers recommend them also for use in teacher-directed learning. In such cases revision books can be used for textbooks supplementation. To evaluate the popularity and usefulness of revision books as teaching material the second stage of research was carried among teachers. 75 experienced ESP teachers were selected to give their opinions on this type of didactic material. This stage of the research was carried by means of a personal interview. The respondents were asked two questions:
- Do you think revision books are useful in ESP teaching?
- Why yes?/no?

The answers given by the respondents can be divided into two groups: positive opinions and negative opinions. There was not even one respondent who would have any doubts about which answer to choose. This allows to draw a conclusion that teachers have a very clear opinion on the usefulness of this type of material. It was interesting to notice that more of them are sceptical about the potentials of revision books.
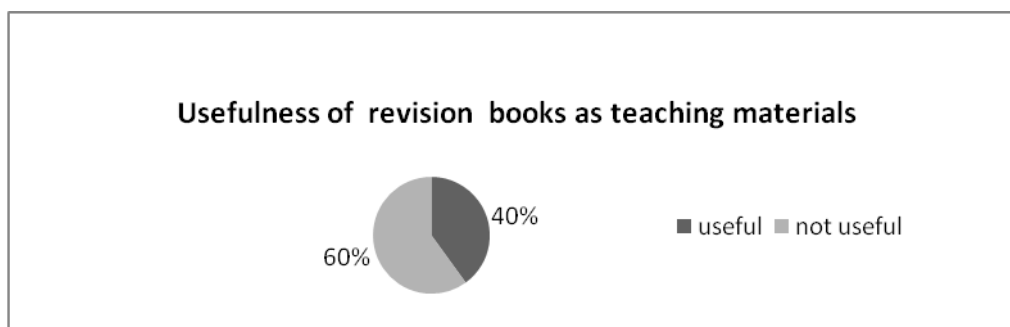

Figure 3. Teachers' opinions on usefulness of revision books

.

The main arguments in support of the negative opinions are:
• topics in revision guides are not correlated with topics in textbooks,
• coursebook packages offer enough teaching material,
• revision books offer exercises on too few levels of difficulty,
• exercises in revision books are too mechanical, do not involve cognitive skills of learners,
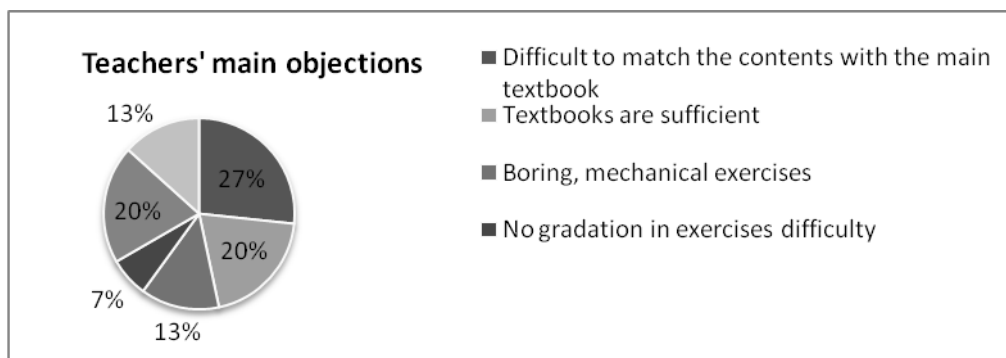• revision books make the learning process very easy what demotivates learners.

Figure 4. Teachers' arguments against

On the other hand, teachers who use revision books notice that:
• revision books help learners revise for exams,
• revision books allow to consolidate the material taught ; as a result all students have the same material to learn,
• revision books make teacher's work easier as they can be used as an additional source of exercises.

4. Conclusion

Didactic materials should be evaluated for their potential to engage both the learners' and teacher's attention and effort (Rubdy, 2003:38). 'By asking the students to assess their own learning, the teacher promotes autonomy by training them to become aware of their learning processes. This helps the students internalise the required criteria for acceptable performance both with regard to the curriculum and real life situations, and leads to a more realistic view of their actual skills'. In fact, formal or traditional language testing is seldom used outside the educational bodies as the only tool to measure the level of particular skill or language competence.

In case of revision books learners' and teachers' preferences regarding teaching/learning materials do not match. The analysis of the research results indicates that revision books are found as useful and effective in the process of learning but only by learners. Language teachers do not regard them as a valuable tool.

Quantative and qualitative analysis of this type of didactic material (conducted in another empirical research on self-assessment tools) confirms some of the arguments given by teachers, mainly that the choice of topics is random or based on the author's intuition rather than learners' needs and that mechanical exercises are cognitively unchallenging for learners. If revision books are to be really valuable in language learning/teaching they must be designed with special attention paid to the content and structure.

In some cases, however, the teachers' perceptions of the value of revision books represent more their preferred teaching style than reflect the potential value of this type of material.

As Tomlinson (2003:18) notices ' language teachers tend to teach most successfully if they enjoy their role and if they can gain some enjoyment themselves from the materials they are using'. The popularity of revision books among learners seems to be big enough to challenge another Tomlinson's reflections that 'learning materials lose credibility for learners if they suspect that the teacher does not value them.

References:

Barnard, R., Zemach, D., 2003, *Materials for Specific Purposes*, [w:] Tomlinson, B., *Developing Materials for Language Teaching*, Continuum, New York.

Block, D. 1991, *Some thoughts on DIY materials design* , "ELT Journal" 45.3, s. 211-217.

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR), 2001, ec.europa.eu/education/languages).

Dudley-Evans T., St John M.,1998,*Developments in English for Specific Purposes. A Multi-disciplinary approach*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

McGrath, I., 2002, *Materials Evaluation and design for Language Teaching*, Edinburgh University press, Edinburgh.

Rubdy, R., 2003, *Selection of materials*, in B. Tomlinson (ed) *Developing Materials for Language Teaching,* Cromwell Press Trowbridge.

Tomlinson, B., 2003, *Developing Materials for Language Teaching*, Continuum, New York.

Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, 1996, Random House.