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ALL'S FAIR IN THE MILLENNIAL CLASSROOM¹

This paper is the result of an empirical research and its aim is to emphasize the necessity for adapting the choice and processing of the teaching material in teaching a foreign language for professional purposes to the needs, abilities and sensibility of the new “millennial” generation of students. Such approach, in regard to history students, mainly involves a more selective choice of all the more various genres (types) of texts (newspaper articles, summaries, speeches, citations, memoirs, etc.) The need to introduce increasingly varied activities with the aim of achieving a dynamic, motivational teaching of a foreign language for professional purposes is evidenced by concrete text samples.

Key words: language for professional purposes, selection/processing of teaching material, variety of genres/activities, motivation, attention retention

All modern wars start in the history classroom.
(Anonymous)

Since the title of this paper suggests a somewhat belligerent tone, I wish to start on a lighter note and share with you two images. The first one is a caricature showing a bespectacled teenager boy, with a puzzled look on his face, staring at an empty blackboard and the teacher saying to him: “There aren’t any icons to click, it’s a chalkboard.” This image is self-evident and may be seen as a paradigm of a new generation of students for whom the Internet is better than TV, reality is no longer real and the blackboard may soon become a historical artifact. The second one is a leaflet advertising a Belgrade language school, whose teachers promise the mastery of the English language in only 20 days and, together with it, an equally speedy recovery from the economic crisis suffered by their potential students/clients. This may serve as an illustration of how some members of our guild see adapting their teaching methods to the needs of this new generation, to which the character from the first image belongs. These and similar approaches to language teaching are indica-

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tive of a devastating effect of the tendency to regard EFL teaching as a most lucrative business venture. But of this, some other time.

It is not my intention here to prescribe any particular teaching method or to guarantee a speedy and successful acquisition of language but simply to suggest some teaching practices, materials and tasks that could be used in what has been labeled as the ‘millennial classroom’.

But let me first clarify why I have put the term *millennial* in inverted commas. The term *millennial* or *net generation* is primarily used for the generation of Americans born between 1982 and 2000, whose lives have been profoundly influenced by certain historical events, cultural and political ideologies, and above all by the use of the many new technologies.

So, although we may rightly attach the attribute *millennial* to our students too, since they were born at the turn of the century, we must be aware of the very specific historical and social circumstances that have to a great extent shaped their common experience. Namely, our ‘millennials’ grew up and received their compulsory schooling

in times of war and crises, the consequences of which are still felt and could not be avoided. So we are dealing here with a *sui generis* millennial generation of students, of whom at least half have never been abroad and most of whom, although technologically rather literate, still do not have their own computers. They clearly use and rely on technology a lot, the result of which is the acquisition of the skill of multitasking that enables them to listen to music, study and use their mobile phones to play games and send messages, all at the same time. This phenomenon has certainly vastly contributed to the obvious trend of the new generations having an increasingly low attention span. It is precisely this purely experiential observation that has prompted the writing of this paper.

So what does this observation have to do with teaching ESP/EAP to history students? Or to rephrase the question: What kind of materials and activities can we offer history students so that the almost proverbial instruction ‘open your books on page x’ is not followed by sounds and sighs of discontent?

Interestingly enough, students still expect and in most cases receive the ‘traditional’, ‘analogue’ teaching, accompanied by appropriate materials, but somehow they wish to be taught in the spirit of the new ‘digital age’, the spirit more likely to break the monotony of the class. So, however reluctant our students are to deal with the long, ‘traditional’ type of academic texts that are hard to avoid, particularly when history is in question, their expectations of what they are to receive in the classroom

are often rather traditional, because for most of them the accumulation of facts is still more important than actions and results.

Having mentioned monotony as one of the two elements in the attention span equation, we may as well mention the other one and that is the lack of motivation. There are, as you may know, numerous approaches to understanding motivation, but here it will be seen as responsible for the two basic dimensions of human behaviour – direction and magnitude (intensity). As such, it may help explain “why people decide to do something, how hard they are going to pursue it and how long they are willing to sustain it”. (Dornyei 2001:7). It is precisely the lack of ability or willingness to sustain a particular activity that results in the shortened attention span of students. This happens when they are faced with the materials and activities they find uninspiring and monotonous. And “monotony” to quote Zoltan Dornyei again, “is inversely related to variety” (Dornyei 2001:73). This, applied to history students learning English for both special and academic purposes, means offering them a widest possible variety of materials and tasks, enabling them to use their existing knowledge of both the language and the subject matter, while engaging their thinking capacities to the full (Hutchinson 1987:107).

In order to see how these assumptions could be applied in practice, I am going to share with you some material samples, mostly referring to the theme of war, not exactly an overly enjoyable one, but certainly ‘dear’ to many historians.

Let me begin with speeches. They have proved to be equally challenging for exploiting both language and content, because they represent instances of authentic, naturally occurring language and are related to specific historical events. Thanks to computer technology, the actual audio versions of famous speeches can be played in class, providing invaluable examples of a most sophisticated language use and opportunity for listening comprehension activities.

Speeches have also proved to be suitable for dealing with elements of style or register. Consider, for example, the following task: *What rhetorical and linguistic devices does the speaker use in order to produce a more powerful effect? Study the underlined words, phrases and sentences.*

It is to be in our natural state – which is one of nagging doubt, imperfect knowledge, and uncertain prediction – and to be prepared nonetheless to put on the mantle of responsibility and to stand up in full view of the world, to step out when others step back, to assume the loneliness of the final decision-maker, not sure of success but unsure of it.

... And it is in that “not knowing” that the courage lies.

... And when in that state, our courage fails, our faith can support it, lift it up, keep it from stumbling.

... As you begin your leadership of this great country, Mr. President, you are fortunate, as is your nation that you have already shown in your life, courage in abundance. But should it ever be tested, I hope your faith can sustain you. And your family. The public eye is not always the most congenial. (Ekklesia)

In just a few lines of the excerpt from a speech, students can find examples of powerful metaphors and collocations, the use of emphatic sentences, synonyms, contrasts, inversions and short sentences - all with the aim of making the speech more expressive and persuasive.

When students find out that this speech was given at the new US President's first annual National Prayer Breakfast by Tony Blair, they are bound to get involved in an animated discussion. For whenever history verges on politics, students cannot resist the urge to 'speak their critical minds', however uncritical they may be at times.

To exploit their competitive spirit and their willingness to demonstrate their knowledge of the subject matter further, a number of excerpts from different 'war' speeches may be offered to guess the speaker and the context in which they were delivered. Here are some examples:

- *Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.*
- *I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm; to which rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.*
- *I say to the House as I said to ministers who have joined this government, I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many months of struggle and suffering.*
- *Soldiers of my Old Guard: I bid you farewell. ... I go, but you, my friends, will continue to serve France. Her happiness was my only thought. It will still be the object of my wishes. Do not regret my fate; if I have consented to survive, it is to serve your glory. I intend to write the history of the great achievements we have performed together. Adieu, my friends. Would I could press you all to my heart. (History Place. Great Speeches Collection)*

Some of these speeches certainly deserve to be read and analyzed in their entirety, to mention, in this context, Winston Churchill's innumerable speeches as gems of rhetoric and invaluable sources of a most sophisticated language use.

Moving on to what often constitutes the main body of materials for ESP/EAP students and that is academic texts and to a lesser extent newspaper articles, I should like to say that since it is the students' attention span that we are mainly concerned about, these materials must be chosen with particular care. Namely, they must either contain a novelty element, something that students will find intriguing because it is new to them, or an element of controversy, so that it can potentially arouse either their interest or feelings about it. In addition, these materials are more likely to be welcomed, if the students can relate them to their own, however remote or indirect experience. On the other hand, they should be equally suitable for practicing different academic skills.

So let us have a look at some samples of these materials, still remaining in the realm of war, this one being an excerpt from a shortened version of a lecture on the distinction between the so-called *Old Wars* and *New Wars*:

'Old War' refers to an idealized version of war that characterized Europe between the late 18th and the middle of the 20th century. 'Old War' is war between states fought by armed forces in uniform, where the decisive encounter was battle.

[New wars] are wars where battles are rare and where most violence is directed against civilians as a consequence of counter-insurgency tactics or ethnic cleansing. They are wars where taxation is falling and war finance consists of loot and pillage, illegal trading and other war-generated revenue. They are wars where the distinctions between combatant and non-combatant, legitimate violence and criminality are all breaking down. (Keldor 2005)

This text meets most of the requirements stated above: it introduces new notions, it deals with the type of wars waged in the period of history of which our students have rather distinct views and perhaps even some vague memories. On the language side, they are perfectly suitable for teaching a number of academic skills such as: defining, comparing and contrasting, summarizing, most of which students will certainly need in their future career.

Of newspaper articles as sources of teaching material a lot has been said and written. But when history is in question, archival articles may be particularly appealing, especially if they depict the events of the moment. They bring the sense of immediacy and authenticity that are so often missing from historical texts.

This is an introduction to an article exploring the importance of the day Willy Brandt silently apologized to the Poles for the atrocities committed by the Nazis:

On December 7, 1970, West German Chancellor Willy Brandt travelled to Warsaw, Poland and dropped to his knees before the monument to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943. Many in Poland and Germany were deeply moved by this famous gesture of repentance and apology. This reading explores some of the issues and questions around what it means to apologize. In the aftermath of genocide, those victims who have survived are scarred forever. They are left to cope with the loss of loved ones and the painful memories of violence against themselves, their family and their people. In such circumstances, how important is an apology? Is an apology a crucial piece of the puzzle of reconciliation, without which there can be no “moving forward,” and lasting, healthy co-existence? Or is the act of apologizing—of asking for forgiveness—an empty one that falls short, even to the point of being offensive to former victims? (Warsaw Ghetto Memorial)

The appropriate vocabulary referring to the act of apologizing is there, the content is more than inspiring, promising a discussion either on a general level or about particular instances of individuals' apologizing on behalf of entire nations.

To further elaborate the theme and practice the skill of paraphrasing, an entirely different type of material can be used here – a resume of a paper (Borneman 2005), in this case dealing with the emerging tendency of states to issue apologies on behalf of their nations.

The newfound inclination of states to issue apologies to both individuals and other states attests to the growing power of victim groups, evinces a novel willingness of states or state representatives to admit wrong, and reveals an emergent global public that is eager to hear such admissions. Such symbolic actions can play an important role in diffusing conflict and preparing the groundwork for a new political order.

The distinctions between different registers and media can be drawn here and further elaborated, as features of discourse often unfamiliar to students.

Let me mention again the element of authenticity in connection with another genre that could be used as challenging teaching material, and that is memoirs, all the more so if the author is both a participant and a 'foreign observer' of a 'local history'. Namely, it is often difficult to find authentic materials pertaining to the history of the peoples from these regions, written in English.

Joyce Cary, a prominent Irish writer, is one of those who did write about it. He went out to Montenegro in 1912 to join the First Balkan War, as a member of a British Red Cross Unit because as he said he wanted the

experience of war thinking “there would be no more wars”. The result of this experience is *Memoir of the Bobotes* (1964). Cary took carriage from Cetinje and, as he writes, “began at once to drive up a mountain”. “There is no road in all Montenegro that does not go up and down a mountain somewhere in its course”, he observes (Cary 1964:17). A gentleman joins him in the carriage and offers him real Tuzi tobacco. A witty and perceptive observation of Cary’s follows:

The Montenegrins are a democratic people, or rather an aristocratic people where there is equality, because all are aristocrats of an equally Good Family. One man has no right to a whole carriage for his selfish use, nor to a tobacco box, nor to a loaf of bread.

At another point in his memoirs (Cary 1964:77), he describes how battles were fought and how each battalion and company had their own flag-man and how:

... each flag-man had to be provided with his deputy, and it was generally a deputy that carried a flag at the end of the fight.

The post is hereditary; it is the flag-man’s son and nephews that wait to take the flag from him when he is hit. At the beginning of the campaign the flags were carried by veterans – at the end by youngsters.

Perhaps it is a good thing for their service, this heavy death-rate, which allows young men to learn their work in each war, who can be expected to last out till the next and hand on the tradition.

To end this shortened list of various genres of teaching materials, let me mention quotations. Experience has proved that they can be very effective in breaking the monotony that longer chunks of text sometimes produce. Consider the following war-related quotations (War Quotes):

- *Violence is the first refuge of the incompetent. (Isaac Asimov)*
- *Older men declare war. But it’s the youth who must fight and die! (Herbert Hoover)*
- *When you have to kill a man it costs nothing to be polite. (Winston Churchill)*
- *The pioneers of a warless world are the youth that refuse military service. (Albert Einstein)*
- *In time of war the loudest patriots are the greatest profiteers. (August Bebel)*
- *Patriots always talk of dying for their country and never of killing for their country. (Bertrand Russell, attributed)*

If none, than the last two should inspire a heated discussion on the many faces of patriotism.

Quotations can also be used as the last refuge in tricking students into learning 'the good old grammar'. Teaching grammar in context to ESP students is a must, but even then it may not be alluring enough. So humorous or witty quotations, especially if related to the students' field of interest, can produce refreshing teaching material. To soften the so far belligerent tone of this talk, here are some quotations exemplifying the use of the infamous Present Perfect, modals, and conditionals:

- *History teaches us that men and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives.*
- *When you have seen one nuclear war, you have seen them all.*
- *I have always disliked myself at any given moment; the total of such moments is my life.*
- *In the beginning the Universe was created. This has made many people unhappy and been widely regarded a bad move.*
- *There must not be a crisis next week. My schedule is already full.*
- *Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.*
- *No historian should be trusted implicitly.*
- *History must not be written with bias, and both sides must be given, even if there is only one side.*
- *Remember, guns do not kill people unless you practice real hard.*
- *If God had wanted us to vote, he would have given us candidates.*
- *History would be a wonderful thing - if it were only true. (Metcalf 2002)*

All these examples of materials and accompanying tasks illustrate the need to change the way we teach because the outlook of our students has changed too. It is, indeed, constantly changing at an accelerating pace with every new generation. Although the effort the teacher expends is often enormous, and at times unreciprocated, it does prove to be well worth it. If, for example, it results in an enthusiastic student's presentation on a subject of their particular interest, that could be taken as a good omen, auguring, if not a war, than at least a battle won.

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СВЕ ЈЕ ДОЗВОЉЕНО У УЧИОНИЦИ НОВОГ МИЛЕНИЈУМА

Резиме

Овај рад је резултат емпиријског истраживања и има циљ да укаже на неопходност да се избор и обрада материјала у настави страног језика струке прилагоде потребама, способностима и сензибилитету нове „миленијумске“ генерације студената. Овакав приступ, када су у питању студенти историје, пре свега подразумева пажљиви избор што разноврснијих жанрова (врсте) текстова (новинских чланака, резимеа, говора, цитата, мемоара итд.). На конкретним примерима текстова указује се и на потребу увођења што разноврснијих активности у циљу постизања динамичне, сврсисходне и мотивишуће наставе страног језика струке.

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