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ELECTIVE EFL/ESP COURSE FOR LAW STUDENTS: SELECTION OF TEACHING MATERIALS

Research article

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**Abstract**

The article concerns the selection of educational materials for EFL/ESP elective courses for law students. To make a learning process an interesting and valuable activity, reading materials should be authentic, relevant to the students' professional interests, their background knowledge of a target culture, and also their level of foreign language proficiency. Reading the adapted version of the legal thriller "The Firm" written by American law-trained writer J. Grisham is suggested as a source of legal concepts and specialized legal terms and in a meaningful context and as an authentic educational material to strengthen law students' foreign language skills and enhance their cross-cultural competence.

**Keywords:** EFL/ESP teaching, elective course, law students, materials selection.

ЭЛЕКТИВНЫЙ КУРС АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА ДЛЯ СТУДЕНТОВ-ЮРИСТОВ: ОТБОР  
ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНЫХ МАТЕРИАЛОВ

Научная статья

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**Аннотация**

Авторы акцентируют внимание на некоторых дидактических принципах, которые следует учитывать при отборе учебных материалов для элективного курса английского языка для студентов-юристов. Выделяются среди них: аутентичность используемого материала, уровень владения иностранным языком студентов, их профессиональные интересы, а также базовые знания о правовой культуре страны изучаемого языка. Предлагается использовать адаптированную версию юридического триллера американского писателя Дж. Гришэма «Фирма» в качестве источника специализированных юридических терминов и понятий, а также в качестве учебного материала для дальнейшего развития иноязычной межкультурной компетенции студентов в профессионально ориентированном контексте.

**Ключевые слова:** английский язык, обучение, элективный курс, студенты-юристы, подбор материалов.

**Introduction**

In the Russian educational context, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is a required course for all undergraduate law students, and according to the higher education policy, professionally-oriented (ESP). In addition, second-year law students can take an English language elective course and continue learning a foreign language.

For an English language teacher, designing an EFL/ESP elective course syllabus for law students is a gripping and thought-provoking but daunting task, mainly for two reasons. On the one hand, it should meet the federal higher education policy requirements to pursue students' ability to communicate effectively within their field of study, and at the same time, this course being a subject of student's choice should be attractive to law students inviting them to prefer and enroll this precise course among other available elective alternatives. To raise students' attention and interests, some specially selected reading materials can be included in the elective course syllabus to strengthen law students' foreign language skills and enhance their cross-cultural competence.

**Research methods and principles**

Second language acquisition theorists and practitioners concur that input is a key factor in language learning. In an EFL educational environment, one of the excellent ways of providing language input is through reading. However, when designing a particular course syllabus, a language teacher should consider some didactic principles related to the students and the reading text used as educational material:

– significant for the materials to be authentic for "brining students into contact with the language as it is used in the culture" [9, P. 44] and thus creating the optimum linguistic conditions for the mastery of foreign language skills in a professional context, and expanding students' social and cultural experience;

– students' level of foreign language proficiency is also a significant factor for making a decision. Offering the students to read material that goes "beyond their level might be counterproductive, since learners may feel that they are incapable of reading in the target language" [2, P. 133];

– students' interest is an important aspect in a material selection process for the EFL/ESP class, "no matter how difficult or easy a text might be, it would be tedious to read if it is not interesting to the learner" [2, P. 134];

– students' background knowledge of the target culture plays a critical role in a foreign language reading comprehension process because the "reader needs to integrate text information with prior knowledge to form a mental representation of the meaning of the text" [11, P. 2]. For this reason, we tend to the opinion that the elective English language course should be logically correlated and integrated as a supplement to the required EFL/ESP course, compulsory for all law students. English in Legal Context course designed at the Department of Foreign Languages for Law reflects the needs to promote professionally oriented language teaching to students majoring in law. The course recognizes the importance of combining subject-specific content with the study of language. The content of the course is organized around substantive legal topics: Types of Law, Constitutional Law, Civil Law, Criminal Law, Tort Law. This approach allows learners to acquire language as well as information through material that is meaningful and contextualized, thereby heightening their professional and cultural awareness. English in Legal Context course by introducing the Anglo-American law system traditions, terminology adopted in English-speaking countries, as well as the key features of the legal language, scaffolds students with the knowledge and skills necessary to acquire legal discourse of a foreign country, America for example. For an English language teacher, the content of this course can serve a vector for designing an EFL/ESP elective course syllabus. For law students, this professionally oriented language course can serve the foundation as well as an incentive and a drive to choose an elective course for further English language learning.

### Discussion

The benefits of reading in a foreign language teaching are widely recognized. S. Krashen well known for his works on general theory of second language acquisition argues that reading has a dramatic effect on language learners' linguistic improvement and also on their cognitive development [7], [8]. Research studies show that learners who read much in the foreign language become not only more confident readers, "they write better, their listening and speaking abilities improve, and their vocabularies become richer. In addition, they develop positive attitudes toward and increased motivation to study the new language" [3, P. 1].

Many law students come to the classroom with an intrinsic interest in reading about criminal and legal issues. Within the English language elective course framework this interests can be utilized and developed to a great advantage for students by offering them reading literary works by the modern American law-trained writer John Grisham (1955) who practiced law for about ten years specializing in criminal defense and personal injury litigation. Currently, he is the author of more than 30 novels and a collection of stories. Many of his recent works explore problems in American criminal justice systems. One of the best works by J. Grisham exploring in its way the law related matters is rightfully considered his legal thriller novel "The Firm" which we propose to employ as an educational material within English language elective courses for law students.

Given the importance of the educational material to be appropriate to the student's level of foreign language proficiency, we suggest reading the version of the novel by Penguin House editors adapted for readers with the Upper-Intermediate (B 2) level of English language proficiency, and available on the Internet for students' needs. Though most law students who enroll in elective English language courses have an Intermediate (B 1) level of language proficiency, this movement to the more advanced level is quite appropriate in a foreign language teaching practice. According to S. Krashen's "i + 1" hypothesis, where "i" is a person's current language level and "+1" a slightly more advanced level, language learners improve their foreign language when they are given language input slightly more advanced than their current level [7, P. 20-24].

The audiobook which goes as a supplement to this version of the novel can be used for developing students listening comprehension skills along with their reading comprehension skills, which is the major focus of the elective course. Based on the book, the Sydney Pollack's movie *The Firm* with Tom Cruise starring can perfectly illustrate the reading material, making the elective course environment more attractive and enjoyable for the learners.

The novel's main character – Mitchel McDeere is a young lawyer who joins a small law firm Bendini, Lambert and Locke mainly because the firm specializes in international tax law, the area Mitch is determined to focus his professional interests. With the time, Mitch learns that the firm's organized criminal community assists its clients in tax evasion, money laundering through the offshore deposit system, and other criminal frauds.

While reading the book and watching the movie, students learn that according to American law:

– breaking professional legal ethic rules on the attorney-client privilege which protect communications between lawyers and their clients may lead to serious consequences: a lawyer can be suspended or disbarred from the practice of law, or even face criminal charges. It is this legal principle which poses a dilemma: if Mitch agrees to help the FBI and collects the information about the law firm illegal business, he thereby breaks professional legal ethic rules on confidentiality. On the other hand, if he stays with the firm, he will almost certainly go to jail when the FBI takes down both the firm and the Morolto mafia family.

– overbilling the clients is a federal offence punishable by either 10000 fine or up to 5 years imprisonment. This rule of law is what Mitch used to reach an agreement with the Morolto brothers without breaking any laws, thereby being able to keep his status as a practicing lawyer;

– money laundering falls under the federal Racketeering Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) law passed to fight organized crime. Violation of this statute may result in prosecution of all individuals involved in a corrupt organization. The criminal RICO statute provides for prison terms of 20 years and severe financial penalties. In both the novel and the movie Mitch is certain the files he managed to collect can provide enough evidence for massive RICO indictments that will discredit the law firm Bendini, Lambert and Locke and damage the Morolto mafia family.

Legal concepts and principles along with much of the vocabulary already known to the students from the content of the EFL/ESP required course receive a vivid interpretation in the book, rendering it an appropriate educational material for law students learning a foreign language. Used as authentic educational material closely connected to students' professional

interests, the content of the book will provide the students with the opportunity to experience reading as a valuable cross-cultural activity, and develop their foreign language skills in a professional context.

Evaluation and assessment of students' linguistic, reading comprehension, and communication skills development and progress can be done through a series of tasks and tests of both close or open modification and written or oral format. Interim assessment may include matching, multiple-choice, gap-filling, or more complex open-ended tasks, for example:

- If Mitch agrees to cooperate with the FBI, he.....
- If Mitch refuses to cooperate with the FBI, he.....

By requiring students to complete the phrase or sentence, this type of task can reveal their knowledge of the book's content as well as the corresponding vocabulary.

Final assessment can be based on the student's oral presentation on the topic chosen from the tentative list suggested for their choice:

- Law and lawyers in the legal thriller *The Firm*;
- The young associate – Mitchel McDeere;
- Bendini, Lambert and Locke – a mob-connected firm of tax lawyers;
- The FBI's efforts to combat corruption.

For this project, students may need to perform independent research and explore some aspects of American law and society not directly treated and discussed within the course. By engaging in this interactive process, law students will demonstrate not only increased knowledge of legal issues but also enhanced foreign language communication skills in the context of their prospective profession.

### Conclusion

Though the plot of this Grisham's legal thriller is based on a crime, the purpose of reading is a deeper study of how the legal system of a foreign country functions, rather than solving the crime itself. Embarking law students in piles of legal world details, Grisham's novel gives them opportunities to spy on a process of crime investigation, to witness how law can be applied, and how justice is done, and to experience all the intricacies, advantages, and disadvantages of legal reality. These circumstances make it possible to use this book as a source of legal concepts, specialized legal terms, language structures and patterns appropriate to professional socio-cultural context in a meaningful and fascinating context. Emotionally charged authentic literary text appropriate to the students' level of foreign language proficiency and relevant to their professional interests by involving students in the process of acquiring a foreign language more intensely and excitedly can effectively contribute to the development of law students' cross-cultural competence, stimulate discussion on various legal aspects of social life, as well as gain experience of literary and cultural analysis of linguistic material, which normally remains outside the scope of highly specialized course books for law students.

### Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

### Рецензия

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### Conflict of Interest

None declared.

### Review

All articles are peer-reviewed. But the reviewer or the author of the article chose not to publish a review of this article in the public domain. The review can be provided to the competent authorities upon request.

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