

Dragana Božić Lenard

Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Computer Science and Information Technology Osijek,
Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia

Ivan Lenard

Primary School Ladimirevci, Croatia

Contemporary English Teaching Techniques in Primary School and their Pedagogical Grounding

Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course books are an essential component of EFL courses containing guidelines related to syllabus, teaching methods and materials so it is critical to design high quality course books and teaching materials. Material designers utilize numerous design components during the process of language curriculum development and have to consider the environment, discover students' needs, set appropriate learning outcomes, present the content in a logical sequence, assess and evaluate upon instruction. EFL course books have become more multidimensional shifting away from prescribed methodologies towards more generalized pedagogical principles providing students with more communicative opportunities and orienting less to prescribed language forms. For successful English language teaching and learning, the four skills, namely reading, listening, speaking and writing, need to be integrated in an effective manner. However, this is a demanding and gradual process during which students should be assigned interesting and challenging exercises in line with their development level.

Theoretical background

An instructional material in language teaching is an important factor that determines the course and effectiveness of teaching. Incorporating a set of skills in the language curriculum and course books has become a priority. In addition to corresponding to students' needs and facilitating the learning process, course books need to offer a coherent syllabus, adequate language control,

motivating texts, audio and video materials as well as supplementary materials (Harmer, 2015). J. C. Richards and W. A. Renandya (2010) propose a number of principles for the design of effective teaching materials such as contextualization of language, purposeful use of language, realist and authentic materials, an audiovisual component in teaching materials, development of students' ability to deal with both written and spoken genres and flexible and personalized elements fostering students' autonomy. I.-K. Ghosn (2012) suggests incorporating topics relevant to linguistic, cognitive and psychosocial development of students as well as gradual and meaningful integration of the four skills. However, that does not mean that the four skills are integrated isolated from each other. Until the end of the 1970s, the four language skills were taught separately due to the domination of traditional language teaching approaches such as the structuralism, direct method, grammar translation approach and others. Applying the aforementioned approaches was realized in focusing on teaching grammatical rules and translating texts from English to students' native languages. The use of segregated skills was first challenged at the end of the 1970s with the emergence of the communicative integrative teaching approach, which integrates reading, listening, speaking, writing, vocabulary and grammar into a single language lesson with the aim of increasing students' ability to communicate using a foreign language naturally. According to D. Kebede (2014: 18–20), there are several advantages of applying integrated teaching approach. It provides more purposeful learning on all teaching levels, contributes to consistent teaching, brings variety into the classroom thus enabling teachers to enrich their teaching strategies, makes learning more real-like, promotes learning and enhances students' motivation, helps students' develop different types of competences ranging from grammatical to sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences, assists in developing critical thinking, reduces class dullness and provides student-centered approach, to name a few.

Numerous researchers (Goris et al., 2019; Rahim, 2019; Akbarov et al., 2018; Sevy-Biloon, 2018; Merino & Lasagabaster, 2018; Pladevall-Ballester & Vallbona, 2016; Tajzad & Namaghi, 2014) studied the effects of integrated learning approaches and reported their success over segregated skills approaches. It was reported that despite acquiring a sound knowledge of segregated skills, students were still unable to effectively communicate in real-like situations pointing to the need of integrating the four intertwined skills. According to E. Kurniasih (2011), reading helps students develop writing skills while listening enhances one's ability to speak. When reading, students develop a sense for language structures and grammar (Bordag et al., 2016; Shintani, 2015). Writing, on the other hand, enhances reading fluency and helps students develop phonic knowledge as suggested by E. Kurniasih

(2011). Furthermore, studies have shown that incidental vocabulary learning happens through reading (Joseph & Nation, 2018; Siyanova-Chanturia & Webb, 2016; Webb & Chang, 2012), listening (Pavia, Webb & Faez, 2019) or watching activities (Rodgers & Webb, 2019; Ashcroft, Garner & Hadingham, 2018; Peters & Webb, 2018; Montero Perez, Peters & Desmet, 2017). Modern pedagogy of language learning has divided the four skills into two main categories – receptive and productive – and suggested that the four skills are to be interrelatedly but age-appropriately integrated with course books being one of the best mediums to achieve that task.

EFL teaching in Croatia

English is studied as a foreign language in Croatian primary and secondary schools. It is taught in almost all grades either as an optional or a compulsory course. If German is a compulsory course since grade 1, students get English as an optional course in grade 4. The majority of schools have English as a compulsory course since grade 1 and German as an optional since grade 4 because students prefer English. Some students study it as a first foreign language, in which case their workload ranges from 70 in primary to 140 classes in the secondary grammar school, while others study it as a second foreign language (if applicable) with the workload ranging from 70 to 105 classes. EFL aims to stimulate students' interest and motivate them to acquire language skills because it will contribute to their personal and social development. According to the National Curriculum Framework for the English Language (Group of associates, 2016: 194–195), the desirable outcomes are to teach students to independently use language in both a writing and speaking mode, apply effective language learning strategies, understand and accept other civilizations' and one's own culture and develop a positive attitude towards lifelong learning. A teacher is autonomous in his/her work; he/she makes decisions on curriculum implementation, teaching methods and materials as well as one's own continuous professional development. The teacher plans, combines, adapts and applies scientifically proven teaching methods appropriate to students' development level and learning needs. The teacher uses teaching strategies to make students think about learning and connect acquired knowledge and skills (vertical harmonization) accompanied by applying the acquired knowledge and skills in other courses and fields (horizontal harmonization). The teacher needs to assess students' knowledge and learning environment and adapt his/her teaching skills, exercise types and teaching materials with the final aim of students effectively acquiring reading, listening, speaking and writing skills – the four pillars of language learning.

Methodology

Pursuant to the modern pedagogy of language teaching, the communicative integrative teaching approach is performed in Croatian schools. Every unit consists of exercises addressing the four skills categorized in receptive and productive skills. However, we hypothesized that not all four skills are equally addressed in all grades but their focus depends on the students' cognitive and developmental level. The aim of this paper was to analyze the types of exercises the students are assigned to in their English as a Foreign Language classes. More specifically, the aim was to study if there are differences in the types of exercises with respect to the students' grades (number of years of studying English in the higher grades of the primary school) and the distribution of those exercises concerning the four skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing). We selected the higher grades of the primary school education (grade 5 to 8) because we believe that the teaching methods are more diverse and complex than in the lower grades (grade 1 to 4) which heavily focus on acquiring vocabulary and extensively use the Croatian language. In order to conduct the analysis, we decided to study teachers' books because they contain detailed instructions on how to do exercises in students' books as well as additional tasks and resources such as lead in or revision exercises. We employed a purposive sampling method and selected eight current teachers' books published by two most renowned Croatian publishers *Skolska knjiga* and *Profil Klett* – one book for each grade (grades 5 to 8) and the publisher as listed in the *Sources* section. It should be noted here that in all primary and secondary schools in Croatia, teachers are entrusted with an important task of choosing an EFL course book in accordance with the latest EFL methodologies and national language curriculum. By selecting a course book, a teacher selects a workbook, teacher's book and supplementary materials published by the same publisher. The analysis has pointed to certain differences regarding the frequency of exercise types and skill orientation between the two publishers; however, this paper did not aim to compare the publishers' preferences so the results will be reported cumulatively.

Inspired by the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, i.e. SIOP Model (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2008), we designed an observation protocol and classified every single exercise suggested to be done in the class with respect to the type of the exercise and skills it focuses on. The analysis was carried out on written artifacts which included teachers' books with all exercises from student books, lesson plans, course syllabi, unit goals and outcomes, in-class worksheets and other teachers' class resources. The observation protocol was based on before and during-the-observation-made rubrics. We designed four skill rubrics with some usual exercise types, for example **true/false**,

multiple choice, Bingo, gap filling, role playing, etc. During the examination, we studied one exercise at a time and recorded their frequencies in the respective rubrics. To exemplify, if students played a *Pictionary game* which was a warmer-up activity prior to listening, we recorded it in the pre-listening exercises, Pictionary game rubric. Some activities were difficult to classify because of their integrated multiple-skill nature. In such cases, we focused on the primary skill. For example, if students are assigned to read a text after which they have to do a multiple choice exercise, we classified it as a multiple choice exercise in the reading skill section regardless of them checking the reading comprehension by listening to a tape because listening is not used for the purpose of learning pronunciation or comprehension but it is simply a method for checking their answers. Moreover, a teacher may decide to check by providing students with the answers or by students reading them. During the examination, the rubric categories were expanded with new exercise types. Not all level books contained the same exercise types. For example, 8-grade books may not have any pre-listening Pictionary game exercises but they have multiple pre-reading/listening brainstorming exercises. The former rubric would in such cases have 0 frequency while the latter would have x exercise types. Homework assignments were not taken into consideration because teachers might not assign them or students may opt for not doing them.

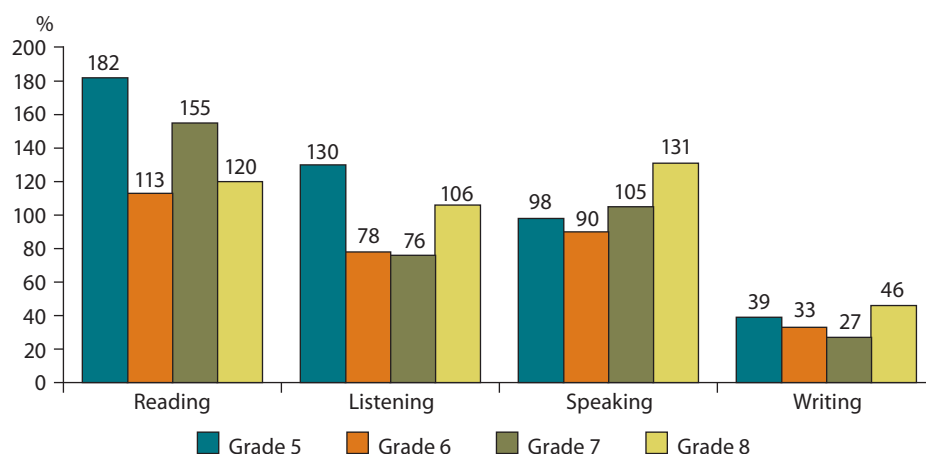
A mixed method approach was performed in this research. Firstly, a content analysis was conducted in order to classify the types of exercises in their respective groups after which a descriptive statistics was employed aiming to examine potential differences in focusing on certain skills in certain grades. We hypothesize that the four skills are not equally worked on, i.e. the lower grades (5 and 6) focus more on the receptive skills (reading and listening) while the higher grades (7 and 8) orient more on the productive skills (speaking and writing). Additionally, the exercise complexity level is expected to range from multiple choice, matching and true/false in the lower grades to gap filling, role-play and free-style writing in the higher grades. For the sake of results presentation and discussion, the four skills will be presented in their respective subchapters.

Results and Discussion

Figure 1 numerically provides the answer to our first research question – are the four skills equally focused on in the four grades or the lower grades orient toward the acquisition of the receptive while the higher grades concentrate more on the productive skills. As can be seen from the graph, all grades focus more on acquiring the receptive skills; however, the productive skills

are paid more attention as the students' development level rises thus replicating H. Rizaldy's results (2018). To present it numerically, the distribution of exercises regarding the two skills categories is as follows – the receptive skills are dealt with in 69.5% of the exercises in grade 5, 60.8% in grade 6, 63.6% in grade 7 and 56.1% in grade 8. To put it differently, the productive skills are practiced in 30.5% of the exercises in grade 5, 39.2% in grade 6, 36.4% in grade 7 and 43.9% in grade 8. These findings are rather expected since the skills acquisition is in line with the students' development level. It would be interesting to replicate this research to the secondary school level and examine if the productive skills acquisition is paid more attention than the receptive skills.

Figure 1. Frequency of the types of exercises with respect to language skills



Source: authors' research results.

In order to tackle our other research question on the exercise complexity level ranging according to the students' development level, we will elaborate on each of the four skills in a separate subchapter focusing on the most relevant or interesting findings.

Reading

During the reading process, information obtained from visual, linguistic and semantic sources combines to make sense of the text. In primary school, developing a reading skill means working on EFL comprehension through various in-class activities. Students mainly read short texts and do pre-/while-/post-reading exercises. According to the National Curriculum Framework in the English Language (Group of associates, 2016), the primary goal in grades

5 and 6 is to develop students' language and analytical skills accompanied by the development of interpretation and thinking skills in grades 7 and 8. That being said, an optional reading lesson is added at the end of each unit in the higher grades. It rounds up the unit, recycles vocabulary and structures and focuses on developing reading skills. It is important to build up interest prior to reading activities and set **pre-reading exercises**. The mostly employed are brainstorming activities. In grades 5 and 6, the only employed brainstorming subtype is a *guessing game* (15 exercises) in which the students are described something, provided with a first letter or scrambled letters or mimed an object. The higher grades students are assigned 7 such exercises and 28 other *brainstorming* subtypes such as associations, listing objects with similar characteristics, finding connections, combining elements into a story, predicting a story's plot, etc. This seems logical because the brainstorming exercises assigned to the higher grades students require more developed analytical skills which the lower grades students still do not have developed as proved by J. K. Shin (2017). All students are assigned 5–6 guessing game exercises containing a pictorial element. Occasionally, the students are assigned **while-reading exercises**. The 5-grade students are not assigned a *skimming/scanning* exercise, the 6-graders are given it only 2 times and the 7- and 8-grade students are assigned it 18 times. Since skimming and scanning are reading techniques which include finding the main idea, searching for evidence, handling text organization, disregarding gaps and irrelevant information, introducing them at a later stage is a more effective strategy (Papp & Rixon, 2018). All level students are assigned a *true/false* exercise in the equal number (15); however, the distinction is that the higher grade students are given a true/false/not given type of this exercise reducing their chances of guessing the correct solution. The majority of exercises in this section are **post-reading exercises**. The number of *multiple choice* exercises gradually decreases from 20 and 16 in the lower to 11 and 3 in the higher grades, which comes as no surprise because their complexity level is inversely proportional to the students' development level and is in according to similar T. Anjaneyulu's (2014) research. The 5-grade students' comprehension is more frequently (13) checked with *completing the table/grid* exercises than in other grades (up to 5 exercises). When comparing the number of *matching* exercises in different grades (18, 20, 32 and 19, respectively), it seems they are fairly equally distributed with an exception in grade 7. However, the qualitative analysis points to a subtle difference. Namely, the matching exercises in grade 5 focus on matching a chapter with a picture while in other grades it includes matching headings/persons/ideas/summaries with a chapter. Another expected finding is related to a *gap filling* exercise whose frequency increases from 2 and 5 in grades 5 and 6 to 12 and 10 in grades 7 and 8. This exercise type helps develop critical thinking skills

which is the reason for using it more often at later learning stages proposed as language pedagogy by H. T. Tehrani and A. B. Razal (2018) and R. Ellis and N. Shintani (2014). Finally, reading comprehension is checked by an *answering questions* exercise assigned 32, 37, 27 and 34 times in the four grades, which is a bit surprising considering it requires more language knowledge to answer the question. Expectedly, the answer complexity is not equal ranging from one word or a short sentence in the lower to longer sentences in the higher grades.

Listening

Listening is a fundamental skill in the acquisition of a foreign language involving processing speech and the use of non-verbal suprasegmental information, paralinguistic and contextual information. The listening activities in this research were preceded by **pre-listening exercises**. The lower grades students are assigned exercises containing a visual stimulus in the form of a *guessing game* (7), *miming* of a part of the conversation from the listening exercise (5) and a *Pictionary game* with key words from the listening exercise (3). The higher grades students are assigned a *guessing game* (12) using both visual and verbal stimuli such as key words the students should use to predict a story, a *quiz* (3) related to the field they are about to listen, *Chinese whispers* (2) or a *hangman* (1) both of which relate to the theme of listening. The lower grade students are provided with visual inputs to activate their knowledge schemata and attention focus similar as in M. Pateşan, A. Balagiu and C. Alibec's (2018) research. The majority of assigned exercises are **while-listening exercises**. The most frequent exercise choice for the 5-graders are *multiple choice* exercises (42) which are assigned three and a half times more often than to the 6-graders (12), 7-graders (11) and 8-graders (12). Similarly, the 5-graders are given *true/false* exercises 10 times compared to 4 times given to the other students. Only the 5-graders are occasionally played videos and asked to do *multiple choice* (4) and *true/false* (2) exercises combining the listening and viewing skills supporting the aforesaid. Adding a visual element makes listening more appealing and less difficult because students can see the speaker's facial expressions and extrapolate a message from one's body language. Being in line with the recent M. Szpotowicz and D. E. Campfield's (2016) research, these two exercise types have proven to be the most frequently given to the lower grades students probably because they are adjusted to students' development level. The quantitative analysis points to no differences with respect to *matching* exercises (24) assigned to the lower and higher grades students; however, a closer analysis reveals that the same material development logic is applied – the lower grades students match the audio input with pictorial elements, such as matching with a described family member, room in a house,

person speaking, while the higher grades students match the described words with their definitions, synonyms, antonyms, etc. On the other hand, *gap filling* exercises are assigned to the lower grades students 14 times compared to 23 such exercises given to the higher grades students. Even if it is a one-word answer, a gap filling exercise is more appropriate for higher grade students because it activates listening, reading and writing skills at the same time, which is more challenging for less experienced students thus supporting the evidence from the previous observations by R. Šamo (2015) and L. Chuang (2016). The next exercise can be categorized as a while-listening exercise but since the students are usually instructed to do it after the listening to increase the comprehension level in spite of the lack of vocabulary knowledge, we decided to categorize it as a **post-listening exercise**. Checking listening comprehension by *answering questions* exercise is assigned 29 times in the lower and 62 times in the higher grades, which is rather expected especially when the students are instructed to listen first, memorize facts and answer later. In order to acquire proper pronunciation, the lower grades students are instructed to *listen and repeat* 25 times as opposed to the higher grades students who do that only 3 times. This outcome is contrary to that of H. Yilmaza and F. Yavuz (2015) who detected pronunciation as one of the greatest challenges for Turkish primary school students. We believe that the explanation lies in the national policy of not synchronizing anything so Croatian students are exposed to native English language pronunciation in both formal and informal educational contexts, hence the lack of the need to practice pronunciation in the higher grades.

Speaking

Teaching speaking skills starts with practicing pronunciation and intonation of utterances students hear, learning new vocabulary and mastering grammatical structures. At the primary school EFL level, students are not expected to use a wide range of words or complex grammatical structures in spontaneous communication. The focus is on fluency rather than accuracy so teachers are encouraged to organize as many communication activities as possible and advised to correct only those errors that impede communication or are in danger of becoming ingrained. That being said, numerous speaking activities even in the lower grades come as no surprise. One of the differences between the lower and higher grades students' speaking exercises is in their typology. Namely, the focus of speaking activities in the lower grades, intertwined with acquiring or practicing vocabulary, is in motivating students so **warmer ups** are frequently used. Warmer up activities help students trigger the existing knowledge and build a connection between the old and new information. *Bingo* (16), *charades* (9), *Taboo* (7), *chain game* (7), *spelling bee* (4), *word tennis* (4), *tongue twisters* (3),

snake (2), *Simon says* (2), *two truths one lie* (2) are some of the speaking games used in the lower grades to motivate and relax students who have fun while doing exercises and can make the most of the lessons. In comparison, the higher grades students usually start their lessons with checking their *homework assignments* (31), *brainstorming* (22), *finding someone who* (14) and *sentence building* (8). It is justifiable to use more complex exercises in the higher grades but it does not explain the reasons for the lack of diversity especially since warmer ups' far-reaching beneficial effects have been proven for all students' levels in numerous studies (Velandia, 2008; Nemati & Habibi, 2012; Wiśniewska, 2013; Yeganehpour & Takkac, 2016; Asif, 2017; Namaziandost et al., 2018; Mursyid & Mufaridah, 2019; Widwasworo, 2019; Pavlikova, 2019). Another recorded macro category are **information gap activities** within which there are 79 exercises of *describing pictures* in the lower and 43 in the higher grades. A half of the exercises assigned in the higher grades are done in pairs with students having to interact and exchange information to bridge a knowledge gap since they have different but complementary visual information. These results are very encouraging because the positive effects of using picture descriptions to encourage motivation and enhance students' speaking skills have been proven (Anjaneyulu, 2014; Lavallo & Briesmaster, 2017). The next exercise type is **opinion exchange**, i.e. free-production activities with students engaging in *discussing* and *debating* issues. Teachers are advised to organize 38 such exercises in grade 5, 43 in grade 6, 57 in grade 7 and 66 in grade 8. Parallel to the number, the complexity of discussion/debate issues increases so they range from presenting family members, talking about animals and free time in the lower to parent/peer pressure, technology, bullying and global concerns in the higher grades. Students and sharing their experience are put in the focus thus personalizing and making the speaking exercises more appealing. In order to develop the students' fluency and interaction, **drama-type activities** in the form of *role-plays* and *simulations* are organized. 11 such exercises are organized in grade 7 and 15 in grade 8. We recorded 14 such exercises in grade 5 and 20 in grade 6; however, those are usually post-reading or post-listening gap filling exercises with the students reading rather than speaking. This is probably due to the lower grades students' lack of vocabulary to perform role-play activities but even the role-play reading has its advantages in preparing students for real role-play situations, getting them out of their comfort zone and putting in semi-public speaking situations thus being in accord with the recent C. Becker and J. Roos's (2016), B. H. Nguyen and N. N. Do's (2017), E. Zare Behtash, A. Saed, P. Zare Behtash (2017) studies. One unanticipated finding was no record of **monologues** – *storytelling*, *show and tell*, *presentations* or similar types of free-production speaking activities given their numerous merits (Dolzhykova, 2014; Mutiarani & Izzah, 2015; Kalantari & Hashemian, 2016; Yuksel-Arslan, Yildirim & Robin, 2016; Kaminski, 2019).

Writing

Writing is a productive skill both students and teachers have problems with. The major problems students deal with is the lack of appropriate vocabulary, problems with proper spelling, use of grammatical structures and coherent paragraph organization. Teachers can find it very challenging to teach because it is a time-consuming task, they teach in mixed-ability large groups thus not being able to help every student as much as they would want and students may show a lack of interest due to the challenges they face with. Students need to first acquire letter-sound correspondences which greatly differ from their native language. In order to tackle this problem, teachers may employ **copying activities** during which students acquire the mechanical basis of English language writing. This was employed 25 times in the lower and only 6 times in the higher grades. The exercises range from mere copying sentences and categorizing words to unscrambling words or using full forms instead of contractions thus simultaneously reinforcing grammatical structures. An approach which is more frequently adopted when practicing writing as well as speaking skills is **task-based** language teaching approach whose advantages and results have been confirmed in many studies (Najjari, 2014; Lai, 2015; Panavelil, 2015; Bryfonski & McKay, 2017; Kafipour, Mahmoudi & Khojasteh, 2018, Sundari, Husnaini Febriyanti & Saragih, 2018). The main objective of the task-based learning approach is to engage students in authentic language use by simulating real-world communication situations. It is a learner-centered approach focusing on meaning rather than language forms so students are encouraged to freely use their ideas and be creative not worrying about grammatical, syntactical or lexical correctness. The 5-grade students are assigned task-based learning approach writing tasks 24 times, 6-graders 21 times, 7-graders 11 times and 8-graders 12 times. Some examples of those exercises are completing a library membership template card, doing one's poster, responding to an email from a pen pal, describing one's typical day, interviewing a friend in the lower compared to writing an advertisement, blog, (auto)biography, for and against essay in the higher grades so assigned tasks correspond to the students' interests and proficiency level. The higher grades students are assigned more free-productive writing tasks so they are frequently (24) given a post-listening or post-reading exercise in the form of changing the outcome, writing a story from another character's perspective, impersonating a character and telling one's story, etc. Due to time restrictions and the nature of writing tasks, the higher grades students are given individual homework assignments (usually workbook exercises) and group projects consisting of researching a topic, doing a poster/Power Point presentation and presenting it in the class. Since all those projects are optional tasks, we decided not to include them in our research.

Conclusion

This research aimed to examine how the four language skills, namely reading, listening, speaking and writing, are distributed in grades 5 to 8 of EFL classes in Croatian primary schools and whether the exercise complexity is in line with students' development level. Eight current teachers' books containing all exercises used in the course books as well as additional materials were analyzed from the both quantitative and qualitative perspective. The content analysis has shown that the receptive skills are more focused on in all classes with a gradual decrease in grades 7 and 8 and a simultaneous increase of productive skills exercises, which is appropriately balanced given the students' development level. All units start with warmer up activities whose learner-centered nature piques students' interest and encourages them to actively engage. Even when tailored to focus on one skill, those activities are usually a combination of more skills because students need to process the activities rules and communicate in an oral, written or visual form thus activating multiple skills. An effort has been made to include every skill in each unit in an integrated way so the receptive skills exercises frequently served as an input for the productive skills exercises. The exercises complexity level ranged from shorter output, visual stimulus based and controlled exercises in the lower to free-productive, more autonomous, real-like situations in the higher grades. Due to its time-consuming nature, a skill which is given the least attention in the class is writing whose marginalization might eventually prove to be a disadvantage for students so teachers need to find a way to bridge this gap. The teachers' and consequently course books have proven to be adequate to successfully cater for primary school students' needs offering additional materials and exercises should a teacher, who plays the role of a facilitator, decide to use them pursuant to students' needs assessment.