



## E-BOOKS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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### Abstract:

Numerous research studies have indicated that e-books contribute to improving the quality of teaching and increasing students' achievements. As e-books imply various possibilities, the application of multimedia, and additional tools, they undoubtedly affect the interaction and dynamics of classes. The study aim of this paper is to shed light on the potential of e-books and to explore and present the advantages and disadvantages of their use. Based on the results of research (attitudes towards the use of e-books in foreign language teaching from both students of different ages and teachers' perspectives), a better and more effective implementation of e-books has been indicated.

### Keywords:

E-learning, education, ICT, e-book, language education, improvement.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole educational system has encountered a huge challenge. A solution outside the existing system was sought. The world has faced an unprecedented phenomenon and involuntary migration to the online environment. Numerous digital contents were created for educational purposes in a short period of time.

Many years ago, the curriculum of the education system in the Republic of Serbia already implemented ICT in teaching with the idea that the teaching content and methods should be adapted to students and the so-called new culture of learning. In that regard, textbooks have undergone a great change not only in terms of structure but also in the overall view of their function and purpose. Nowadays, e-books have become an increasingly popular issue, and numerous research studies have been conducted to shed light on this phenomenon.

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## 2. WHAT IS AN E-BOOK?

Before we shed light on the role and importance of the application of e-books in teaching, it is essential to define the very term. E-books are still called online textbooks, e-textbooks, multimedia textbooks, or electronic textbooks. These are certainly not synonyms, even though all these terms refer to textbooks in digital format and are relatively similar. Some are only available online, some both online and offline. E-books are not electronic versions of printed textbooks (most often that is a PDF version of printed textbooks)

E-books are more than an online record of printed textbooks. They include a lot of functions, tools, and multimedia, as their integral part.

Nuli [1] "defines a multimedia textbook as "a textbook that contains multiple media", and a digital textbook as "a textbook that uses digital format as a way of record". Matijević & Toplovčan [2] define an e-textbook as "digital materials that strictly follow the list of content and expected outcomes that are written in the syllabus of a subject".

"A textbook that is created as a digital book with various multimedia elements that are didactically and pedagogically adapted to students to take advantage of digital and multimedia textbooks is called multimedia digital textbooks" [3]. Today, multimedia is an integrative part of e-books, and it is not necessary to emphasize that in the title.

Therefore, the term e-book shall be used in this paper. In addition to multimedia as a key feature of e-books, another important feature is feedback, and it actually provides interactivity in learning and further encourages students since they can notice the sense of their work.

A lot of e-book publishers offering additional digital materials have appeared in a relatively short period of time. Taking this into consideration, there must be standardization and valorization of e-books. According to Čanić [4], e-books must contain the following elements:

- ♦ navigation – located between chapters and subchapters, available on each page;
- ♦ search – the ability to search by keywords;
- ♦ interactive index – links in the text;
- ♦ interactive textbook map.

Nuli [3] states a few functions which e-books enable their users:

- ♦ the function of learning material;
- ♦ the function of managing tool;
- ♦ the function of learning support;
- ♦ the function of interactive resource linking.

One of the biggest advantages of using e-books is the abundance of interactive and accessible features they offer. Lecturers at faculties give priority to the implementation of new strategies in teaching, which allows students to manage their own learning. Thus, this change in teaching strategies has led to a change in the tools used in teaching [5]. For this reason, the roads towards new digital product models that will enable publishers of new content to enter the textbook market have been paved. The fundamental changes in patterns of learning materials purchase occurred and accelerated the formal adoption of open educational resources to increase outstanding digital content [6]. Innovations in this area have been still taking place, so the implementation of the most modern approaches to learning a foreign language is always necessary. The application of modern approaches and methods in foreign language learning is inevitable if the aims of learning a foreign language are effective outcomes [7].

There is a variety of advantages of e-books [8]:

- ♦ easy transport,
- ♦ easy to order and download in web stores,
- ♦ compactness,
- ♦ adequate timing (the possibility to update and improve current issues daily),
- ♦ more efficient search,
- ♦ encouraging motivation through innovation and additional functions,
- ♦ encouraging digital competence,
- ♦ strengthening individual support,
- ♦ providing feedback.

On the other hand, besides these advantages and opportunities e-books enable, there are disadvantages of using e-books as well [9], [10]:

- ♦ costs,
- ♦ distraction from details of content due to the appearance of a large number of media,
- ♦ environmental factor,
- ♦ the lack of professionalism in working with new media in the classroom due to insufficient training and media education,



- ◆ inconsistent file formats,
- ◆ special haptic properties (the lack of regular page-turning, the smell of paper, etc.),
- ◆ limited availability,
- ◆ illegal use (the risk of piracy).

Besides that, e-books are increasingly characterized by supplementary/additional materials. These are often downloadable and printable materials offered by most publishers. Worksheets with additional exercises, transcripts of audio exercises, task solutions, maps, dictionaries, and tests sorted by units can be found there. They are often available for free.

When it comes to e-books in foreign language teaching, two terms are vital: interaction and cooperation in the digital environment. Interaction and cooperation in the digital environment represent the intentional, reciprocal, and partnership-oriented influence of participants for the purposes of understanding [11].

The question is whether the application of e-books necessarily leads to effective, innovative interaction and cooperation in the classroom. It does not matter whether it is a smaller online phase in blended learning or classes that are conducted entirely online. Another phenomenon has appeared – a new learning culture.

It is often considered how e-books are changing the culture of learning. Taking into account the accelerated technical progress, there is a growing call for the introduction of e-learning and e-learning materials. Regarding this, Honegger [12], highlights three possible situations:

- ◆ The culture of learning has not been changing – e-books transfer the old culture of learning
- ◆ The culture of learning has been changing – e-books show that the old culture of learning with digital tools and media is not efficient anymore. Changes in the culture of learning have occurred.
- ◆ The new culture of learning has appeared – e-books are the opportunity to implement the new culture of learning.

While textbooks used to be comprehensive and informative teaching materials, today, they are open to both teachers and students. Learning can be understood as an active process of processing, organizing, selecting, and filtering information. Research on teaching and learning has assumed that the digitization of teaching materials will lead to further steps towards constructivism or at least to an interplay of "constructive and instructive teaching elements" [13]. It has been increas-

ingly important for students to work independently and at their own risk, for instance – to be encouraged to work with e-books at home and to prepare accordingly for units planned in class. Through these personal experiences of learning, students sometimes construct their own knowledge structure [13].

If a real change in the learning culture occurs, it should be emphasized that the use of digital teaching and learning media only makes sense, for instance, when e-books are integrated into e-learning platforms. This advances students' access to teaching materials since they are available for many years and a lot of subjects. Hence, e-books can be perceived as a middle phase until the moment they become an integral part of learning platforms and thus become a central component of the application of everyday school life for all students and teachers. Mazza [14] underlines this assumption by emphasizing that only the integration of digital textbooks with learning platforms ensures a flexible, interactive, and collaborative learning outcome.

## 2.1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, STUDY AIMS AND HYPOTHESES

The main aims of our research are to examine if students and teachers evaluate the use of e-books in foreign language teaching positively and to check which language skill is the easiest (or the most difficult) to be acquired while using digital coursebooks. We wanted to examine which function of e-books coursebooks is considered the most useful. Prior to the very research, the following hypotheses were set:

1. It is assumed that students/teachers evaluate the use of e-books in foreign language teaching positively.
2. It is assumed that e-books are used in the majority of classes.
3. It is assumed that reading is the easiest to be acquired.
4. It is assumed that students find audio and video clips most useful.

## 2.2. RESPONDENTS

The respondents are primary school (5-8 grade), and secondary school students, university students, and language (English, Spanish, Russian, French, German, and Italian) teachers who teach in primary and secondary schools, Singidunum University, and a language school



called My School from Obrenovac. The respondents who voluntarily agreed to participate in this electronic research attend the following schools: elementary school Živojin Perić, Stublin (Obrenovac); elementary school Nikola Tesla, Novi Sad; IT high school Smart, Novi Sad; Grammar School in Obrenovac; high medical school Dr Andra Jovanović, Šabac; and school center Nikola Tesla, Vršac.

Taking into consideration that respondents are of different ages (12-60), who learn and teach different foreign languages and use different e-books written by different authors and published by various publishers, we find the sample very relevant. 539 primary and secondary school students, 174 university students, and 68 foreign language teachers from different parts of the Republic of Serbia contributed to this research. More on respondents shall be shown in Conclusion.

### 2.3. INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURE

In order to receive the required data, the authors created three questionnaires – the first one for primary and secondary school students, the second one for university students, and the third one for foreign language teachers. The questionnaires were created in the Microsoft Forms application and distributed to respondents via email and Viber.

The number of questions in each questionnaire is identical so that the received data can be compared. We opted for quantitative research bearing in mind that it is more relevant to express individual attitudes and experience in foreign language learning and teaching.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the first part of the questionnaires, it was examined if the students go to primary or secondary school. Moreover, we examined the study program and the year of students who took part in the questionnaire. When it comes to teachers, we checked which educational institution they teach at. The results are shown in Table 1.

Taking into account all these results, it can be concluded that our sample is very heterogenic since the users of e-books differ in age; they learn different foreign languages, live in different places, and use different e-books by both foreign and domestic publishers. Everything mentioned shows that the listed data could provide a more objective image of the implementation of e-books in foreign language teaching in the Republic of Serbia.

Based on the results, we have noticed that e-books are used in foreign language teaching at Singidunum University more than at schools. This has confirmed the assumption of the authors.

Teachers		Students	
Primary school	35.1%	Primary school	50.2
Secondary school	21.6%	Secondary school	49.8
University	24.4%		
Language schools	18.9%		

Table 1 – Respondents

	Primary and secondary school students	University students	Teachers
Spanish	0.6%	13.1%	4.5%
French	9.7%	4.4%	3%
German	67%	60%	11.9%
Italian	0.9%	5.6%	3%
Russian	21.8%	16.9%	7.5%
English	/	/	70.1%

Table 2 – Languages Taught and Learnt



	Primary and secondary school students	University students
Yes, on each class	21.7%	8.9%
Yes, a few times per month	16.4%	15.6%
For independent work only	5.8%	5.4%
We do not use e-books	56.1%	10.1%
For homework only	/	/

Table 3 – How often do you use e-books?

The initial task was to question if students and teachers evaluate the use of e-books positively, which was done through a task – “Evaluate the use of foreign language e-books” on a scale from 1 to 5. Primary and secondary school students evaluated it with an average grade of 3.18, while university students evaluated e-books with 4.48. The average grade of teachers was 3.94. This has led us to the conclusion that university students have a very positive attitude towards e-books, whilst primary and secondary students are less satisfied with them.

The second hypothesis (that e-books are used in the majority of foreign language classes) was examined through a question – “Do you use e-books?”. The following results have been received:

In accordance with the obtained results, our hypothesis that e-books are used in the majority of foreign language classes has not been fully proven. In fact, only university students use their e-books in each class (68.9%), whilst only 21.7% of primary and secondary school students use them in each class. As 24.3% of teachers work at university, it can be concluded that the answers of teachers and students match when it comes to this question.

The third hypothesis of ours is that reading is the easiest skill to be acquired. Choosing more than one answer was possible in this question. These are the results:

Teachers had a differently posed question (The use of e-books helps my students to acquire easily:). They were provided with different answers, as well. Furthermore, they could choose more than one answer:

	Teachers
vocabulary	24.5%
grammar	17.9%
speaking	15%
writing	6.1%
listening	22.4%
reading	12.9%
e-books do not help them	1.2%

Table 5 – Acquisition from teachers' perspective

Comparing the results, it was noticed that the majority of the respondents (28.2% of primary and secondary school students and 34.6% of university students) believe that vocabulary is the portion that is the easiest to be acquired. It is followed by grammar (17.9%) and speaking (15%). Considering the results, our hypothesis cannot be confirmed.

	Primary and secondary school students	University students
vocabulary	28.2%	34.6%
grammar	21%	26.3%
speaking	21.4%	15.9%
writing	10%	16.2%
e-books do not help me	19.4%	7%

Table 4 – Acquisition from students' perspective



The fourth hypothesis was about the most useful element of e-books. It was assumed that students would choose audio and video clips. The question for both students and teachers (The most useful functions of e-books are (more than one option is possible)) provides us with the following results:

The insight into the obtained results confirmed our hypothesis regarding teachers and their opinion. Primary and secondary school students find educational games the most useful, whilst university students opt for PowerPoint presentations.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Based on the obtained study results, it can be concluded that e-books have largely found their place and application in foreign language teaching in many educational institutions in the Republic of Serbia, especially in higher education institutions. Students mostly consider e-books useful. Therefore, the majority of them have evaluated them positively.

The application of e-books in primary and secondary schools is less than expected (21.7%). The reason for such application is primarily the lack of technical equipment in classrooms.

The research showed that the largest percentage of respondents think that using e-books facilitates the acquisition of vocabulary the most. Students find educational quizzes and games the most useful function of e-books, whilst teachers opted for audio-video clips.

An interesting fact that has been obtained from this research is that a large percentage of respondents, mostly those who attend primary schools, state that the issue they encounter when applying e-books is code activation.

Furthermore, e-books and access to them should be further simplified in the upcoming period. As discussed in the paper, e-books have both advantages and disadvantages in terms of their use. The fact is that technical progress and development clearly favor the quality and advantages of e-books. At the same time, there are negative comments which highlight the disadvantages of e-books.

Textbooks, learning materials and foreign language teaching itself are undergoing major changes. Nevertheless, the impact of these changes on success in foreign language learning has not been sufficiently explored yet. The use of e-books should eventually lead to learning autonomy.

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	Primary and secondary school students	University students	Teachers
PowerPoint presentations	20.8%	37.6%	15.3%
Educational games (quizzes)	41.3%	31.2%	31.8%
Video and audio clips	28.5%	28.5%	43.5%
QR codes	6.6%	2.7%	8.2%
Other	2.8%	/	1.2%

Table 6 – The most useful functions (students)



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