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Dissertation abstract

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A Study of Inter-Level Visual Design Elements in English Language Teaching (ELT) Texts

Abstract

To many English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) professionals, English language teaching (ELT) texts are an important element in ELT teaching and learning. Because of their role and contribution to second language acquisition, ELT texts have become the object of many research studies; however, the focus of most of these studies has been on the content and pedagogical aspects of these materials. Little research has been carried out on the actual visual design of ELT materials and the effectiveness and utility of their design. This study, bringing together the areas of applied linguistics and professional writing, was designed to investigate this very issue. Employing usability testing methodology, it explored how the number of columns and placement of headings in ELT text design might affect how quickly and how accurately ESOL students locate appropriate information in their texts.

Thirty-nine Czech participants (ESOL learners) in the study performed tasks with fabricated prototypes of ELT texts that employed three different format variations on the number of columns and placement of headings. They also completed a posttest questionnaire and were debriefed to express their feelings, opinions, and preferences for the provided prototypes. The collected performance data did not exhibit any significant differences in time and accuracy among the three formats and did not suggest that one design proved more beneficial than another in students' ability to search ELT texts. However, the collected preference data disclosed information about preferences for various formats. Specifically, designs of one-column were significantly favored over a design of two-columns. In addition, the participants did not have a strong dislike or preference for marginal and flush left headings; both were acceptable in one-column designs. The study also showed benefits of usability testing of ELT texts. Such testing could provide valuable insight into ESOL learners' interaction with ELT texts and reveal useful information about students' perceptions of and engagement with the visual design of ELT texts. Consequently, more successful and effective ELT materials could be developed using these tools.

