



THE EFFECT OF CORPUS-BASED ACTIVITIES ON VOCABULARY ACQUISITION OF A1-A2 LEVEL SEVENTH GRADERS - A CASE STUDY

Edina Rizvić-Eminovićⁱ,
Vildana Neslanović
Faculty of Philosophy,
University of Zenica,
Bosnia and Herzegovina

Abstract:

Corpus-based activities (CBAs) have been used in FLT in recent decades, especially in countries where educational systems are well developed. However, this is not the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina. That is why a case study was conducted in a primary school in Bosnia and Herzegovina including 48 7th grade students divided into an experimental and a control group to investigate the effect of the use of corpus-based activities on vocabulary acquisition. In both groups blended learning methods were applied due to COVID restrictions. The aim was also to determine whether the use of CBAs had any impact on the students' motivation for participating in vocabulary learning activities. The students' results achieved in the pre- and post-tests which included new vocabulary items were analyzed and compared. The students' responses in the five-point Likert scale motivation questionnaires completed prior to and after the use of CBAs were also compared and discussed. Statistical analysis of the results confirmed that there was a positive effect of the use of CBAs on vocabulary acquisition of A1 – A2 level seventh graders, as well as on their motivation for participating in such activities. Contrary to statistically significant improvement in vocabulary acquisition, there is no statistically significant increase in the motivation to learn new vocabulary items in either of the groups, for which some possible explanations are also discussed in the paper.

Keywords: FLT, corpus linguistics, corpus-based activities, vocabulary acquisition, motivation

1. Introduction

The last few decades have seen a growing interest in corpus linguistics (CL). Biber, Conrad & Reppen (1998), Kennedy (1998), Baker (2009), O'Keeffe & McCarthy (2010), and

ⁱ Correspondence: email edina.rizvic-eminovic@unze.ba, edina.rizvic@gmail.com

Szudarski (2018), for example, provide an insight into CL in general, its definitions, historical development, and application. More recently, Frankenberg-Garcia (2012), Donesch-Jezo (2013), Kayaoğlu (2013), Ali (2017), Paker and Özcan (2017), Isentyeva (2020) and Rizvić-Eminović & Hadžić (2021) investigate how CL can be used in FLT and specifically in teaching vocabulary since vocabulary is seen as “*an essential part of mastering a second language*” (Schmitt, 2010: 4) and a major component of a student’s communicative competence (Canale and Swain, 1980).

Different strategies and techniques have been developed to enhance vocabulary acquisition. Nattinger (1988), for example, believes that ‘context clues’ help learners acquire vocabulary more easily than using word explanations and definitions. This implies that, besides their use in language analysis by linguists, corpora can also be used in language teaching and learning through corpus-based activities (CBAs). Johns (in Friginal, 2018), for example, insists that learners should investigate the language autonomously through access to linguistic data with the teacher support. Such an approach is referred to as Data Driven Learning (DDL). Significantly, DDL promotes the active role of learners in their linguistic development since it provides hands-on activities based on the analysis of authentic language (Szudarski, 2018). Furthermore, Craik and Lockhart (1972) suggest that the more active one works out the solution to a problem, the more likely they are to store the information permanently. Thus, because learners are encouraged to become researchers and to come to conclusions on their own, DDL is expected to provoke the learners’ cognition and help them acquire language structures and language more easily. This may be done by designing corpus-based activities which are then used in language teaching. In addition to learning grammar, such activities might help FLL’s in learning new vocabulary. Varley (2008), Balunda (2009), Ucar & Yukselir (2015), and Parker & Özcan (2017) have reported a positive impact of the application of CBAs on language acquisition of students at different levels of education. Furthermore, Chao (2010) and Ali & Elsherbini (2017) suggest in their studies that there is a positive effect of the use of CBAs in classrooms on students' motivation and attitudes towards learning English language, while Lewandowska (2014) explores how CBAs can be used to enhance learner autonomy. Further, Grigaliūnienė (2013: 34) states that the “*meaning is the product of context*”, which is a foundation for using CBAs in vocabulary acquisition. Namely, CBAs include examples from corpora and learners are able to understand the meaning of vocabulary by observing the contexts in which the words are used. This helps them acquire a particular vocabulary and use it later in communication in different contexts. This is especially significant if a word is polysemous, because context guides learners in understanding the right meaning (Szudarski, 2018). Furthermore, with CBAs, learners are encouraged to investigate the structures and linguistic features. Bernardini (2004) refers to such a method of learning a foreign language as “*corpus-aided discovery learning*”.

The aim of using CBAs in teaching vocabulary is to help the students learn new vocabulary through exposure to authentic language, to teach them how to discover certain language structures on their own and how to apply the acquired knowledge in

practice and in their everyday communication. More importantly, CBAs are also used to motivate students in the process. For example, some studies show that those students who are more motivated to learn English, achieve better grammar test scores (Bujak, Bureković & Rizvić-Eminović, 2020).

Tahir and Mohtar (2016) provide various examples of exercises which can be used for vocabulary teaching, and most of these exercises are applicable in teaching vocabulary using CBAs. For example, filling in the blanks with a particular word which can be used in more than one context, crossword puzzles, cloze tests or matching parts of lexical items in order to understand the morphology of a word, all based on examples from corpus concordances.

However, many educators are still reluctant to use CBAs in the classrooms (Boulton, 2009). Not only do teachers find it challenging and time-consuming, especially if there is a lack of resources and equipment, but learners who are non-native speakers of English also find it difficult to interpret authentic language in context.

Considering the fact that CL, particularly the application of CBAs in ELT is a novelty in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and since there are no known studies in the country investigating the use of CBAs and their effect on student learning and motivation, a study was designed to explore the use corpus-based approach in teaching vocabulary to primary school students, more specifically seventh graders. The aim was to test the following two hypotheses:

H1: The use of CBAs in English language teaching has a positive effect on the vocabulary acquisition of seventh grade students (A1-A2 level as defined by CEFRⁱⁱ).

H2: The use of CBAs in teaching new vocabulary has a positive effect on students' motivation for learning new vocabulary in the English language.

This study provides an important opportunity to advance the understanding of the effect the use of CBAs has on vocabulary acquisition, particularly among younger learners and at lower levels of English language proficiency.

2. Methods

This research is an empirical case study based on the quantitative data obtained from vocabulary test scores and motivation questionnaires. The study was conducted in the period of one semester of blended teaching under COVID-19 pandemic measures. The vocabulary test scores in the experimental (EG) and the control group (CG) at the beginning of a semester were compared to the scores at the end of the semester to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference or a positive impact on CBAs on vocabulary acquisition in the EG compared to the CG. Students completed a motivation questionnaire in both groups at the beginning and at the end of the semester and the results were used to establish whether there was a statistically significant

ⁱⁱ CEFR refers to the Common European Framework of Reference, a definition of language levels written by the Council of Europe.

difference in the motivation to participate in activities for vocabulary learning between students in the EG and the CG.

2.1 Setting and participants

The participants of the study were 2 classes comprising a total of 48 seventh grade students in a primary school, whose English language proficiency was at A1-A2 level according to CEFR. Due to COVID-19 pandemic measures, students were transferred to blended learning in week 3 of the semester. In both classes, they were divided into two equal-size groups. One half of the class attended classes at school every other day, while the other half had classes online at that time. Both the EG and the CG consisted of 24 7th graders aged between 13 and 14 at the time when the study was conducted. In terms of gender, there was a total of 20 males (41.7%) and 28 females (58.3%). The EG comprised 9 (37.5%) males and 15 (62.5%) females and the CG 11 (45.8%) males and 13 (54.2%) females.

2.2 Instruments and materials

2.2.1 Motivation questionnaire

Prior to using CBAs with the EG during one semester, a motivation questionnaire was administered to students in both EG and CG to determine the level of the students' motivation for learning new vocabulary in the English language. The questionnaire was administered to students in the Bosnian language. It consisted of three statements with the answers in the form of the 5-point Likert Scale: 1 – strongly disagree; 2 – disagree; 3 – neutral; 4 – agree; and 5 – strongly agree. Additionally, the students were asked to add their average grade in English prior to the study. There were three statements in total in the motivation questionnaire. The first one was related to their extrinsic motivation or to students' views of the significance of learning vocabulary in a foreign language. The second statement measured their intrinsic motivation, or to what extent the students liked to be involved in the activities in which new vocabulary was learned in class. In the third statement, the students were asked to assess whether such activities helped them learn new vocabulary easily. After the use of CBAs with the EG, the same questionnaire was completed again by students in both the EG and the CG to establish whether there was a significant difference in the students' level of motivation for learning new vocabulary in both groups.

2.2.2. Vocabulary test

A list of 30 new vocabulary items was prepared from Oxford's *Project 3 Student's book*, the course book the students were to use over the course of the semester according to the curriculum approved by the local Education Department. The words which were included in the study are from Unit 2 to Unit 7. Those vocabulary items were subsequently included in the CBAs for students in the EG, as an addition to the exercises from the course book and workbook. The CG, on the other hand, only did the exercises from their course books and workbooks. The selected vocabulary items were used to

design a test to be used at the beginning of the semester, before the use of CBAs, referred to as the pre-test, and 15 weeks later, at the end of the semester, the post-test. The students were asked to complete a total of 30 multiple choice and gap-filling sentences. The pre- and post-test were administered to students in both the EG and the CG prior to and after the use of CBAs with the EG to establish whether the use of CBAs had any effect on vocabulary learning.

2.2.3. Corpus used for designing CBAs

For the purposes of this study, COCA corpus was used for extracting examples of vocabulary items the students were supposed to learn during one semester. The selection of example sentences was based on the students' level of proficiency in the English language. In some cases, the appropriate examples were difficult to find, which implies that COCA corpus might be more applicable in groups where students' level of proficiency is higher than the pre-intermediate level. However, the examples could still be found and effectively applied in designing activities for teaching vocabulary. The main idea was to use examples which would help the learners understand the meanings of words from the contexts. Besides this purpose, the sentences could also increase the students' awareness of different words which collocate with the new word they needed to learn.

2.2.4. Corpus-based activities

After the selection of vocabulary items, CBAs were designed for the students in the EG. Three suitable concordance lines were extracted for each new word from COCA, which was used to design different activities to help the students learn the vocabulary from the authentic language used in the corpus. Different exercises were used in order to motivate learners to participate. The CBAs, therefore, included gap-filling exercises, cloze tests, adding suffixes, puzzle crosswords, and guessing meaning from the context. The first two sets of activities were done with the students in the classroom, while the remaining six were prepared for students in Google Forms software due to the transition to online teaching. There was a total of 8 sets of CBAs each with three exercises for three or four new words from a unit. For each set of new words (3-4), the first activity was designed so as to enable the students to guess their meaning from the sentences and concordance lines extracted from COCA, and then choose the appropriate definition provided below. All the sentences in other types of exercises were also extracted from the COCA corpus. Clear instructions were provided for students prior to each activity both for classes online and in the classroom in written and spoken form. The instructions for the same type of exercises remained the same throughout the semester so that the students would not spend too much time figuring out what they were asked to do. The students were able to get an insight into their results after finishing the activities and they had an opportunity to complete the online activities again for a better score. Due to COVID-19 pandemic measures and an adapted form of teaching, the activities could not be done each week as the classes at school lasted shorter than usual and the students had other assignments to

complete at home. On the other hand, students in the CG used exercises from the course book and the workbook accompanying it to learn the new vocabulary.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

Prior to the implementation of CBAs, the students were asked to fill out the motivation questionnaire designed by the researcher in order to gain an insight into students' attitudes towards vocabulary acquisition. Additionally, the students did a test with 30 new vocabulary items. The mean scores and the independent samples t-test indicated that the EG and the CG group were homogenous with regard to vocabulary proficiency. The data related to each CBA done with students in the EG was not analysed since the focus of the study was not on each CBA individually, but on the effect, their overall use had on the students' vocabulary acquisition. After the implementation of all CBAs, the same vocabulary test and motivation questionnaire was administered to students in the EG and the CG. The results were analysed using SPSS. Since a small sample of participants was included in the study, Wilcoxon signed-rank test was applied to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in the results before and after the implementation of CBAs in the experimental group.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Pre- and post-test results

The statistical analysis of mean scores of pre-test results in the EG and the CG presented in Table 1 indicates that the students in both groups were at approximately the same level of vocabulary knowledge. The results showed that there were no major differences in the mean scores between the EG (M=10.00) and the CG (M=9.21) on the pre-test. The Independent samples test was the most suitable for determining the statistical significance of the results between the groups. The level of *p-value* (Sig.) presented in Table 2 is 0.716 ($p > 0.05$), which led us to conclude that the vocabulary knowledge of students in both groups was at approximately the same level prior to the use of CBAs with the EG, because there was no statistically significant difference. This confirms the homogeneity of the groups, which was one of the fundamental requirements for conducting the study.

Table 1: Mean scores in the pre-test

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	S.E. Mean
Pre-test	Experimental group	24	10.00	4.39	.90
	Control group	24	9.21	4.43	.90

Table 2: Independent samples test

		F	Sig.	t	df
Pre-test	Equal variances assumed	.13	.716	.62	46.00
	Equal variances not assumed			.62	46.00

In order for the first research question to be answered, the pre and post-test results in both groups were analysed. Table 3 presents the post-test mean scores in both groups. It is evident that the EG achieved better results with $M=20.83$, compared to the CG's $M=11.00$. A comparison of the results reveals that the EG made a statistically significant improvement in vocabulary acquisition in the post-test ($p=0.000$). On the other hand, there is no statistically significant difference between the pre- and post-test results for the CG ($p=0.097$), as indicated in Table 4.

Table 3: Mean scores in the post-test

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	S.E. Mean
Post-test	Experimental group	24	20.83	4.78	.98
	Control group	24	11.00	5.32	1.09

Table 4: Post-test statistics

	Test 1 - Experimental group Test 2 - Experimental group	Test 1 - Control group Test 2 - Control group
Z	-4.29	-1.66
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.097

This finding confirms that the use of CBAs in English classes for teaching vocabulary has a positive effect on vocabulary acquisition of seventh graders, who are at A1-A2 level according to CEFR, compared to classes where CBAs are not used.

3.2 Motivation questionnaire results

As Table 5 indicates, the results from the student motivation questionnaire used in both groups before and after the study, referred to as the pre- and post-questionnaire, show that there is a slight improvement in the mean questionnaire results in the EG. Questionnaire results in the CG show that there is even a decrease in student motivation with regard to learning new vocabulary (Table 6).

Table 5: Descriptive statistics for the experimental group

Experimental Group	N	Mean	Std Dev	Minimum	Maximum
Pre-questionnaire					
1. Learning new words in the English language is important.	24	4.25	.53	Neutral	Strongly agree
2. I like participating in activities in which I learn new vocabulary.	24	3.63	.82	Disagree	Strongly agree
3. Activities in classes help me acquire vocabulary easily.	24	4.13	.45	Neutral	Strongly agree
Post-questionnaire					
1. Learning new words in the English language is important.	24	4.38	.58	Neutral	Strongly agree
2. I like participating in activities in which I learn new vocabulary.	24	3.83	.48	Neutral	Strongly agree
3. Activities in classes help me acquire vocabulary easily.	24	4.17	.82	Disagree	Strongly agree

Table 6: Descriptive statistics for the control group

Control Group	N	Mean	Std Dev	Minimum	Maximum
Pre-questionnaire					
1. Learning new words in the English language is important.	24	4.38	.71	Neutral	Strongly agree
2. I like participating in activities in which I learn new vocabulary.	24	4.00	.72	Neutral	Strongly agree
3. Activities in classes help me acquire vocabulary easily.	24	4.08	.72	Disagree	Strongly agree
Post-questionnaire					
1. Learning new words in the English language is important.	24	4.25	.94	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree
2. I like participating in activities in which I learn new vocabulary.	24	3.83	.87	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree
3. Activities in classes help me acquire vocabulary easily.	24	4.00	.88	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree

Overall, there is a positive change in the attitude of students in the EG towards participating in activities for vocabulary acquisition. The questionnaire responses provide an important insight into the students' opinions about the significance of vocabulary acquisition in a foreign language and about the effectiveness of CBAs for their vocabulary acquisition.

However, all p-values (Asymp. Sig. – 2-tailed) shown in Tables 7 and 8 ($p > 0.05$) indicates that none of the differences in the questionnaire results is statistically significant, even though there is a slight increase in student motivation in the EG.

Table 7: Statistical significance of questionnaire results in the experimental group

Experimental Group	Learning new words in the English language is important.	I like participating in activities in which I learn new vocabulary.	Activities in classes help me acquire vocabulary easily.
Z	-.77	-1.39	-.24
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.439	.166	.808

Table 8: Statistical significance of questionnaire results in the control group

Control Group	Learning new words in the English language is important.	I like participating in activities in which I learn new vocabulary.	Activities in classes help me acquire vocabulary easily.
Z	-.33	-.47	-.04
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.744	.635	.971

A more detailed insight into the results can be gained through the analysis of the responses to each question presented in Tables 9 and 10 below. It is evident that there are no statistically significant differences in the results in the EG or in the CG, even though the mean values of the responses in the EG are slightly higher.

Table 9: Motivation questionnaire – responses in the experimental group

1. Learning new words in the English language is important.					
Pre-Questionnaire			Post-Questionnaire		
	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent
Disagree	2	8.3%	Strongly disagree	1	4.2%
Neutral	8	33.3%	Neutral	5	20.8%
Agree	11	45.8%	Agree	14	58.3%
Strongly agree	3	12.5%	Strongly agree	4	16.7%
Total	24	100.0%	Total	24	100.0%

2. I like participating in activities in which I learn new vocabulary.					
Pre-Questionnaire			Post-Questionnaire		
	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent
			Disagree	1	4.2%
Neutral	1	4.2%	Neutral	3	12.5%
Agree	19	79.2%	Agree	11	45.8%
Strongly agree	4	16.7%	Strongly agree	9	37.5%
Total	24	100.0%	Total	24	100.0%

3. Activities in classes help me acquire vocabulary easily.					
Pre-Questionnaire			Post-Questionnaire		
	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent
Neutral	1	4.2%	Neutral	1	4.2%
Agree	16	66.7%	Agree	13	54.2%
Strongly agree	7	29.2%	Strongly agree	10	41.7%
Total	24	100.0%	Total	24	100.0%

Table 1: Motivation questionnaire – responses in the control group

1. Learning new words in the English language is important.					
Pre-Questionnaire			Post-Questionnaire		
	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent
			Strongly disagree	1	4.2%
Neutral	3	12.5%	Neutral	2	8.3%
Agree	9	37.5%	Agree	10	41.7%
Strongly agree	12	50.0%	Strongly agree	11	45.8%
Total	24	100.0%	Total	24	100.0%

2. I like participating in activities in which I learn new vocabulary.					
Pre-Questionnaire			Post-Questionnaire		
	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent
			Strongly disagree	1	4.2%
Neutral	6	25.0%	Neutral	5	20.8%
Agree	12	50.0%	Agree	14	58.3%
Strongly agree	6	25.0%	Strongly agree	4	16.7%
Total	24	100.0%	Total	24	100.0%

3. Activities in classes help me acquire vocabulary easily.					
Pre-Questionnaire			Post-Questionnaire		
	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent
Disagree	1	4.2%	Strongly disagree	1	4.2%
Neutral	2	8.3%	Neutral	3	12.5%
Agree	15	62.5%	Agree	14	58.3%

Strongly agree	6	25.0%	Strongly agree	6	25.0%
Total	24	100.0%	Total	24	100.0%

As indicated in Table 9, the responses of students in the EG to the first statement differ in questionnaires done before and after the use of CBAs. They show that the number of students who strongly agree and agree that learning new words in the English language is important increased after the use of CBAs by 4.2% and 12.5% respectively. This leads to the conclusion that the CBAs helped the students understand how significant vocabulary is for learning a foreign language. The higher mean value for the responses to this statement in the second questionnaire presented in Table 6 (M=4.38) also indicates that after participating in CBAs, students changed their views of the importance of learning new words in the English language, since the mean value in the first questionnaire was M=4.25.

The second statement in the questionnaire asked the students to determine how much they liked participating in activities for vocabulary acquisition. It can be seen from the mean values shown in Table 6 that there is a positive change in the students' attitudes towards participating in activities in which new vocabulary is learned in the EG (3.83 compared to 3.63), contrary to the mean values in the CG, which dropped from 4.00 to 3.83. Further, Table 9 indicates that there are more students who strongly agree that they like participating in activities in which they learn new vocabulary (37.5% compared to 16.7%); however, more of them are also neutral (12.5% compared to 4.2%) or disagree (4.2% compared to 0). There is a decrease in the motivation of those students towards participating in the vocabulary learning activities. The reason for that may be attributed to the changed circumstances in which the teaching process took place due to COVID-19 pandemic, shortened face-to-face lessons, lack of time and instruction to adjust to online teaching, and too much homework. By the end of the semester, the classes were mainly held online, and this might have also played an important role in the level of the students' motivation to participate in the classes. Most students preferred learning in a classroom environment rather than online. Nevertheless, they showed their interest in participating in the CBAs created in Google Forms, as almost all CBAs were completed on time and by all of the students. Additionally, since they were able to do the exercises more than once and gain an insight into their results, they had a chance to correct their mistakes. This novelty in their learning might have had a positive impact on the post-test results and a slight increase in their motivation.

The third statement in the questionnaire was used to determine whether CBAs helped the students acquire vocabulary more easily. The differences in the students' responses in the pre- and post-questionnaire show that the number of students who responded 'strongly agree' increased by 8.3%. With all the other percentages remaining the same, it can be concluded that those were the students who previously responded with 'agree' only, which indicates that their motivation did increase with the CBAs. Contrary to that, in the CG the 4.2% who disagreed stated they strongly disagreed, which means that the activities from their course books did not help in increasing their

motivation to learn new words. In addition to that, the 5.2% of students who agreed now became neutral, indicating that the existing activities did not contribute to their motivation to learn new words.

Even though statistically not significant in either of the groups included in the study, questionnaire responses still show that participants in the EG have slightly more positive attitudes and higher motivation for participating in activities in which new vocabulary is learned than participants in the CG. Therefore, it can be concluded that the use of CBAs for vocabulary learning with 7th grade students has a positive effect on their motivation for participating in such activities.

4. Conclusion

Statistically significant results of the comparison of the pre- and post- vocabulary test results have confirmed the first hypothesis, namely, that the use of CBAs in English language teaching (ELT) has a positive effect on vocabulary acquisition of seventh grade students (A1-A2 level). The mean scores indicate that the use of CBAs in teaching new vocabulary has a positive effect on the students' motivation for learning new vocabulary in the English language in primary school students in the 7th grade, although not with a statistically significant difference. This corresponds to the findings in the studies conducted by Ucar & Yükselir (2015), Chan & Liou (2005), Varley (2008), Chao (2010), Unaldi et al. (2013), Ali & Elsherbini (2017), and Islentyeva (2020).

Although based on a small sample of participants and in the conditions of blended learning due to COVID-19 pandemic measures, this study shows that the use of CBAs in teaching new vocabulary has significant potential, even though it may initially be demanding for the teacher in the sense of additional preparation. The empirical findings of this study enhance our understanding of the significance of applying new successful approaches to ELT. It also suggests that teachers should be encouraged to apply CBAs in their classrooms as one of the ways of motivating their students to learn new vocabulary.

5. Recommendations

Given that the present study involved a small sample of students who are at A1-A2 level of EL proficiency according to CEFR, a similar study could be done which would include more students of higher grades and at higher levels of EL proficiency to investigate whether the effect of the use of CBAs increases or decreases with the level of EL proficiency or the students' age. Additionally, more activities could be designed for use over the course of one academic year, to obtain more reliable results on the effect of CBAs on vocabulary acquisition, and also to examine whether extended use of CBAs has a positive or negative effect on student motivation for learning new vocabulary, particularly in the conditions of face-to-face teaching.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Author(s)

Edina Rizvić-Eminović is an Associate Professor in English Language and Literature Department of the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina. She earned her PhD degree in Linguistics at the University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Her research interests include contrastive analysis, ELT methodology and applied linguistics. She is a member of the Society for the Advancement of Applied Linguistics in Bosnia and Herzegovina (SAALinBiH) and the Society for the Study of English in Bosnia and Herzegovina (DAuBiH).

Vildana Neslanović earned her MA in ELT at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Her research interests include ELT methodology and CLIL.

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