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The American academic novel and English for academic purposes

“And seek for truth in the groves of Academe.”

— Horace

This study focuses on American academic fiction, with special emphasis on increasing the students' vocabulary as well as knowledge and understanding of the American culture. Although American academic fiction has enjoyed immense popularity in the last few decades, it is still relatively unknown and unexplored within the Croatian context. The present study aims to increase both the Croatian readers' awareness of this genre and show that the American academic novel offers foreign learners of English not only detailed insight into the American higher education system and the problems faced by the American academic community, but also contributes to a better understanding of the diversity of American culture and society. Furthermore, the academic novel is a valuable source of campus words and phrases and as such is effective in making students fluent in social and academic interactions.

Keywords: American academic fiction; vocabulary; culture; campus words and phrases; academic community.

1. Introduction

In order to meet the challenges of living in a global society, we must develop an increased awareness of cultural diversity. If we are to interact successfully in intercultural communication, we must become aware that our cultural norms and attitudes may not be in agreement with those of other cultures. Therefore, not only



knowledge and understanding of other cultures but also an appreciation is essential for communicating ideas and knowledge effectively and professionally without disappointing or offending our listeners.

Literature exposes students to a wide variety of topics and diverse uses of language in culturally distinct international contexts. It can help learners develop tolerance and understanding and “provides a rich context in which individual lexical or syntactical items are made more memorable” (Collie 1987: 5).

This cultural diversity brings new communication challenges and may cause confusion and misunderstanding especially for foreign language learners. The key to effective cross-cultural communication requires using both correct grammar and vocabulary, and thus a basic comprehension of cultural diversity is the key to achieving mutual understanding and successful communication. It is this paper’s hypothesis that the study of American academic fiction can increase the students’ vocabulary as well as contribute to a better knowledge and understanding of the development of higher education in America and the diversity of American language and culture in general.

Learners are expected to focus on the cultural content as well as the specific vocabulary of a text as they learn to speak and write clearly and express accurately their meaning in English. They are trained to master the writing and communication skills to advance themselves in their profession through their ability to speak on a variety of current topics and perform in their chosen profession at the highest level.

The transformation and development of higher education in Croatia, particularly through the Bologna process, is directed at mobility through student and academic staff exchanges, joint educational and research projects and other outreach initiatives. To achieve the goal of becoming effective communicators and collaborators, students need to increase their knowledge and understanding of diverse cultures in order to be successful in promoting internationalization at home and study abroad. They need to be able to function in a diverse setting and have the specific knowledge of their specialty.

The Bologna process has resulted in academic degrees in accordance with those awarded by the traditional European institutions and this European character makes it distinct from its U.S. counterpart. On the one hand, there is the focus on specialization and concentration on a major of the Bologna Process, and on the other the general education and distribution requirements of the US study program. Although the two educational systems differ in many respects, their goals and outcomes are



similar and both are intended to provide students with the skills and abilities required for employment or a graduate education in their particular field.

Croatian students and faculty are familiar with the Bologna process and its implications for systems of higher education in Europe, but they are eager to obtain more details on the current education system in the United States, its structure and peculiarities. However, this has not yet been systematically addressed within the higher education curriculum.

In order to provide a broad international experience and ensure active student and staff participation and successful performance in Croatia's higher education, it is essential to focus on increasing foreign language proficiency and ingoing and outgoing student and staff mobility. Cultural awareness and foreign language proficiency skills are a prerequisite for successful interactions within the international academic community. Students and staff are expected to actively participate in discussions, interviews, meetings, presentations, workshops and other activities at visiting partner institutions or when hosting colleagues from abroad. In order to effectively connect, engage and interact in English with people of diverse cultures both socially and professionally, students must master vocabulary ranging from small talk (English for General Purposes) to campus vocabulary (English for Specific Purposes).

The American academic novel, as a window into the academic world, enables foreign learners to discover what American campuses are really like. The academic satires in particular are not only amusing and entertaining, but also abound in valuable information about the differences and similarities of the higher education systems in Europe and the United States. Particularly for future teachers, it might be helpful to look at the academic community as portrayed in academic novels which are set in the world of the academia and deal with themes closely related to academic circles such as economic, social and political trends that influence the development and management of American universities.

The academic novels are intended to shape the students' awareness of higher education and give them an insider's view into the world of the American academia. In mastering the vocabulary in the campus context, learners also increase their cultural awareness of all aspects of higher education. The study of the novels can enable students to further their academic interests in international contexts and enhance their foreign language skills by being able to produce the right words in an academic setting.

For the purposes of this study, an investigation was conducted to show that there

is a need to make a systematic effort to enable students to acquire knowledge of campus vocabulary as well as detailed insight into the workings of other models of higher education. As non-native speakers of English, our students have received far less exposure to such expressions, and so they struggle to learn to use them appropriately in order to make communication with native speakers less difficult and confusing. The campus vocabulary is culture-specific and requires background knowledge. Therefore, the fact that the academic novels contextualize the vocabulary within the university campus makes them effective in teaching both language and culture.

2. Related research

Over the years, researchers have found that vocabulary instruction is central to learning and have linked it to students' academic success. According to Keith Folse (2011: 362–369), “English language learners face a debilitating gap between the words they know and the words they need to know ... to read authentic texts” and “understand challenging academic materials.” Furthermore, emphasizing the goal of learning with understanding, Antonacci and O’Callaghan (2004: 10) claim that “the influence of students’ vocabulary knowledge on their comprehension of text has been demonstrated over time through a range of studies (Anderson and Nagy 1991; Baker, Simmons, and Kame’enui 1998; Beck, Perfetti, and McKeown 1982; Cunningham and Stanovich 1998; Davis 1944; Nagy 1988).” Moreover, “teaching vocabulary can improve reading comprehension for both native English speakers” (Beck et al. 1982: 462–481) and “English learners” (Carlo et al. 2004: 188–215). Similarly, Petty, Herold, and Stoll (1967: 7) argue that “knowledge of words and ability to use language are essential to success” and that “after schooling has ended, adequacy of vocabulary is almost equally essential for achievement in vocations and in society.”

This study is in agreement with the previously mentioned views, particularly with the emphasis on the benefits of vocabulary learning for academic and professional success. However, this study also highlights cultural understanding and suggests that the study of American academic fiction can enhance learners’ language proficiency and cultural awareness. Such benefits of literature in language learning have been recognized by a significant group of researchers.

One of the first advantages that researchers mention is cultural enrichment and they (Parkinson et al. 2000: 9–11) claim that “reading literature promotes cultural understanding and awareness (Collic and Slater 1987; Schewe 1998; Sell (ed)



1995; Silberstein 1994).” Likewise, Lazar (1993: 15-19) suggests that “literature in the FL classroom motivates, offers access to cultural background, encourages language acquisition, expands language awareness, develops students’ interpretative abilities and educates the whole person in so far as it enhances our imaginative and affective capacities.” Being in agreement with the previous findings, the present study intends to show that American academic novels are a valuable source of information on American higher education and American culture in general and as such can develop both the students’ language and cultural proficiency.

3. Present study

The present study focuses on American academic fiction, with special emphasis on increasing the students’ vocabulary as well as knowledge and understanding of the American culture. By taking a closer look at how learners of English come to grips with campus vocabulary the study intends to call attention to the importance of teaching both language and culture in the foreign language curriculum. The study asserts that that American academic fiction contextualizes the campus vocabulary expressions and leads to successful language acquisition as well as develops competence for intercultural communication.

Since the implementation of the Bologna program, our students as active participants have been exposed to a whole glossary of fundamental concepts and terms in English as well as Croatian. In order to gain understanding of the education and training policies of the Bologna Process they have been familiarizing themselves not only with new vocabulary but also with a new education and degree structure that has introduced fundamental changes into the Croatian system of higher education. The ECTS - European Credit Transfer System/Europski sustav prijenosa bodova, undergraduate – BA/preddiplomski, graduate – MA/diplomski, PhD program/doktorski studij, and bachelor/prvostupnik/ica are just some of these new terms.

Also, due the fact that the Bologna studies program promotes greater integration of U.S. and European standards, it is beneficial for Croatian students to have a greater knowledge and understanding of both educational systems. If our students are to become active participants in all the opportunities that the mobility of Bologna offers, they need to have a complete understanding of all its aspects and possibilities within the global academic community. It is to be expected that students who have limited or poor knowledge about the jargon, traditions, policies and campus regulations will incur difficulties in participating successfully in academic programs and student activities as well as in adjusting to the college environment on



the whole.

A questionnaire survey was conducted with students in order to establish their degree of knowledge and understanding of specific campus vocabulary and their interest in American higher education in general. The questionnaire is enclosed in the Appendix.

4. Methodology

Respondents in the research comprised 76 first year students (23 males and 54 females) majoring in English at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek. The mother tongue of all respondents is Croatian and English is their L2.

The questionnaire consisted of two tasks. The first task included twenty targeted multiple choice vocabulary questions regarding English campus vocabulary. The students were required to choose the answer which defines the word or expression. Questions 1-15 included questions on familiar concepts and questions 16-20 on unfamiliar concepts. The second task comprised of questions regarding the students' attitude towards learning more about higher education and about their source of knowledge on this topic. The data analysis was done using methods of descriptive analysis and nonparametric statistical tests. The exact Mann-Whitney U test was used to test for the difference between the two distributions and the Spearman rank analysis was used to analyse the relationship between the numerical variables.

5. Results and discussion

The discussion will show that, on the whole, campus words and phrases pose difficulties for students regardless of the fact that many of these terms are used in their own native context and are not culturally specific to English-speaking cultures. In order to emphasize the importance of cultural studies in the language curriculum, this study intends to reveal the obstacles faced by foreign language learners and to bring attention to the significant connection of language and cultural identity.

Considering the overall success, the median group test score was 13 (72%), the maximum 16 (80%) and the minimum 7 (35%). The test score was lower than expected and indicates the students' poor knowledge of campus vocabulary. In view of the students' level of language proficiency in English as well as the fact that during their studies they had exposure to these campus words and phrases both in English and within their native context, it is somewhat surprising that they did not show better knowledge and achieve higher test scores.

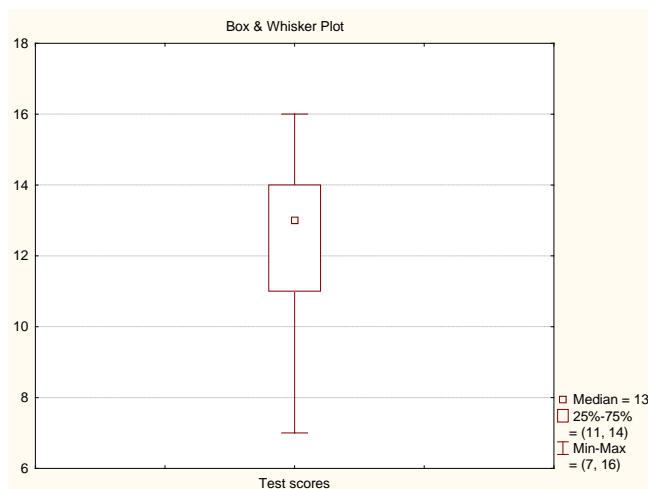


Figure 1. Box plot of test score for all respondents.

In addition, the overall test scores indicate that the male students showed a better knowledge than the female students. The female students' median score was 12 (67), and the male students' median score was 13 (72%). The score distribution according to gender is shown in Figure 2. The exact Mann-Whitney U test confirmed that this difference was statistically significant ($p=0.031$).

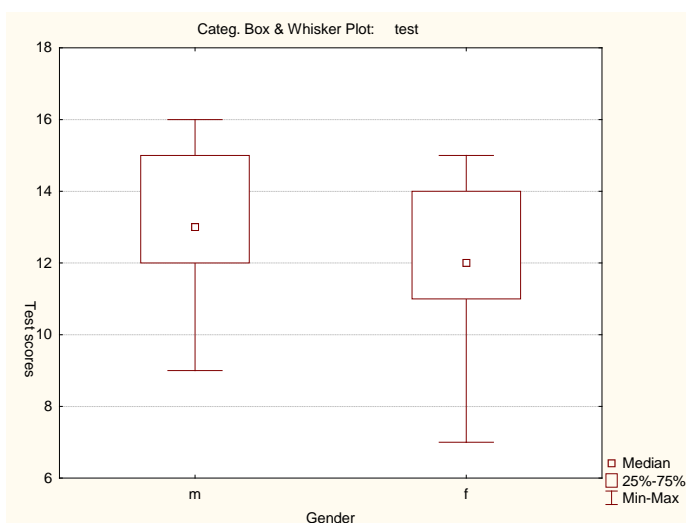


Figure 2. Box plot of test score by gender.

Considering the overall success for the unfamiliar concepts, the median group test score was 4 (80%) out of a total of 5. This test score was surprising in that it



indicates the students' knowledge of unfamiliar concepts is better than their knowledge of campus words and phrases that are familiar within their native context.

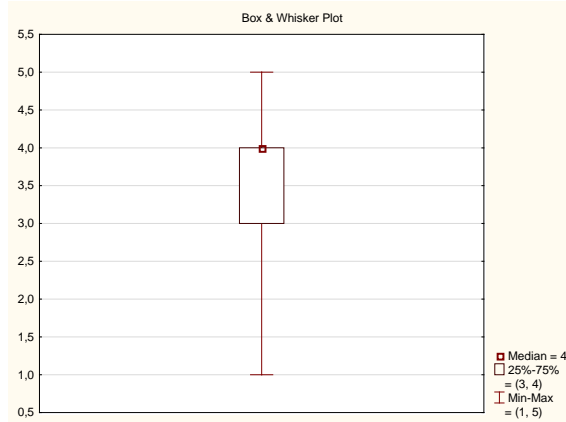


Figure 3. Box plot of test score for all respondents for unfamiliar concepts.

The median score for unfamiliar concepts according to gender, was 4 (80%) for the female students and 4 (80%) for the male students. The score distribution according to gender for unfamiliar concepts is shown in Figure 4. The gender differences were not statistically significant for the total group, which means that both groups had similar difficulties with the culturally specific items which are not present in their native context.

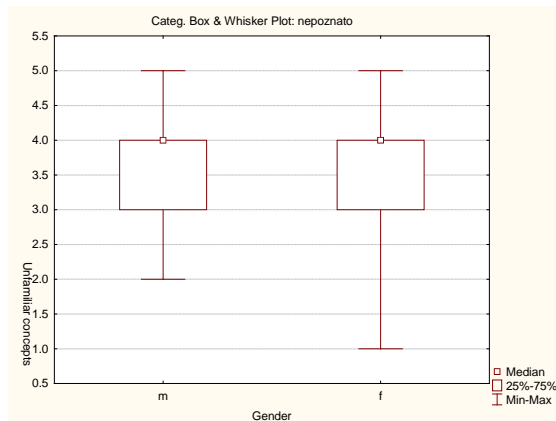


Figure 4. Box plot of test score for unfamiliar concepts according to gender.

According to the results, campus vocabulary can present difficulties even when it is part of the students' native context. The median score for all respondents for



familiar concepts was 9 (60%) out of a total of 15. The results (Figure 5) were poorer than expected considering that these campus words and phrases are familiar within the students' native context.

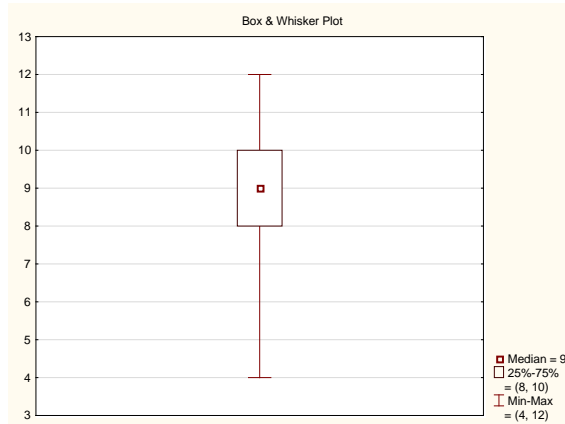


Figure 5. Box plot of test score for all respondents for familiar concepts.

In addition, the median score for familiar concepts according to gender, was 9 (60%) for the female students and 10 (64%) for the male students. The score distribution according to gender for familiar concepts is shown in Figure 6. The exact Mann-Whitney U Test confirmed that this difference was statistically significant ($p=0.019$). Despite the fact that the scores of the male students were significantly higher than that of the female students, the overall scores indicate that neither group possesses sufficient knowledge to interact successfully in intercultural communication.

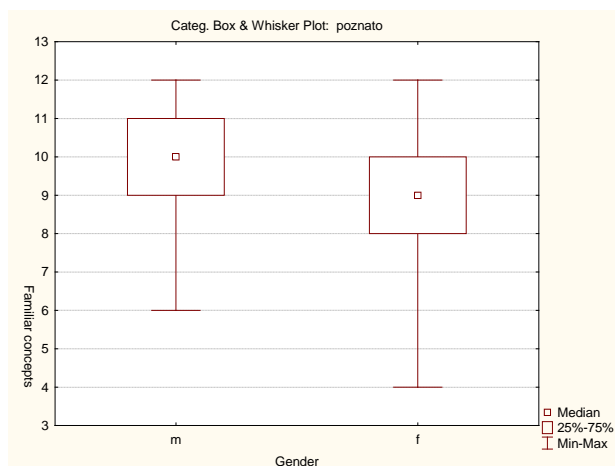


Figure 6. Box plot of test score for familiar concepts according to gender.



Furthermore, the Spearman Rank Order Correlation ($\rho=0.11$) is not statistically significant different from zero, which coincides with the conclusion that there is no correlation in the number of correct answers between the familiar and unfamiliar concepts.

The replies for the second task regarding the students' willingness towards learning more about higher education showed that the majority of the respondents have a positive attitude for acquiring further knowledge. Out of the 76 students, 71 (93.4%) expressed an interest in learning about American higher education.

Furthermore, regarding the source of knowledge on this topic, the Internet was named by 61 out of 76 students (80.3%) as the main source of their knowledge on American higher education. Other selected sources were print media 8 students (10.5%), TV shows 6 students (7.9%) and fiction 2 students (2.6%). The fact that fiction turned out to be the least likely named source makes evident that students are not aware that it can be a valuable source of information on higher education.

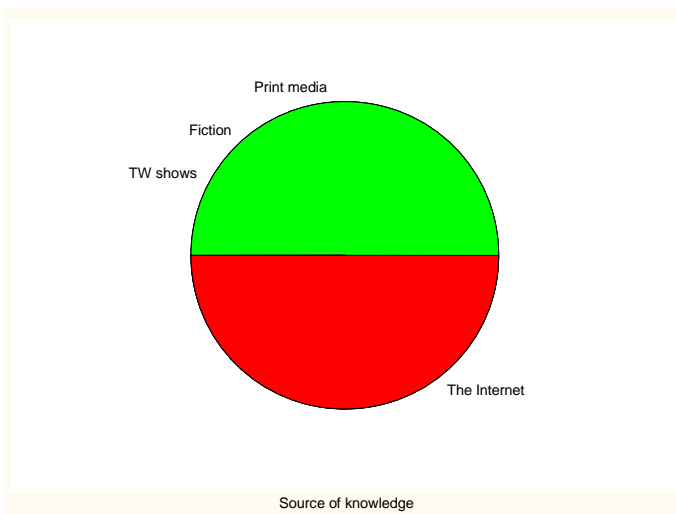


Figure 7. Pie Chart of proportions for source of knowledge.

6. Conclusion

Literary texts expose students to a wide variety of topics and diverse uses of language in culturally distinct international contexts. The American academic novel, which is set in a campus or university, is a reliable link to American institutions, its particular social and cultural structures. This small but recognizable subgenre of contemporary fiction has enjoyed immense popularity in the last few decades in the



English-speaking world, but remains relatively unknown and unexplored within the Croatian context.

The aim of the present study was to increase both the Croatian readers' awareness of this genre and show that the American academic novel offers foreign learners of English not only detailed insight into the American educational system and the problems faced by the American academic community, but also contributes to a better understanding of the diversity of American culture and society. Furthermore, the academic novel is a valuable source of campus words and phrases and as such is effective in making students fluent in social and academic interactions.

Students should be obliged to read a selection of American academic novels in the course of their undergraduate and graduate studies as part of their literature and language courses. The student-centered novels would enable students to experience the world of the academia from the student's point of view, while the staff-centered novels would provide insight into the academic community for future teachers. By reading these novels, they would become familiar with the authors and the context in which the works were written as well as with the correct use of the campus vocabulary in the proper context. ECTS, core courses, electives, GPA, add/drop a course, incomplete, tuition, commencement, grading on a curve, sorority/fraternity, dean's list, financial aid, undergrad, faculty, tenure track, adjunct, TA, academic advisor, chair and politically correct campus are just some of the terms students will come across as they read.

The results of the study have proven the initial hypothesis that campus words and phrases pose difficulties for students regardless of the fact that many of these terms are used in their own native context and are not culturally specific to English-speaking cultures. Although the test results suggest poorer overall knowledge than expected of unfamiliar as well as supposedly familiar campus vocabulary, the expressed willingness to learn opens the door for turning to American academic fiction as a window into the American educational system. The American academic novel can enhance the students' understanding of the diversity of American culture and society in general and increase fluency and familiarity with language associated with university life. In addition, it can promote confidence in speaking English in academic contexts and improve the students' intercultural communicative competence as well as foster enjoyment in reading and discussing literary texts.

Our study indicates that in order to aid the foreign language learners in solving the mystery behind the culture-specific campus vocabulary we need to recognize the important role of culture and tradition as an inseparable part in the foreign language curriculum. It is noteworthy to mention that learners were extremely curious



as to the meaning and origin of the words and phrases they were unfamiliar with, which further confirms the necessity and desire of cultural studies in the EFL classroom.

Due to the fact that universities generate knowledge and knowledge is what fosters development in all spheres of society, the present study suggests that detailed insight into the American educational system, as well as the problems faced by the American academic community, may contribute to a better understanding of academic structures and represents a very valuable source of experience and knowledge which could significantly contribute to the domestic and foreign scholarly exchange.

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AMERIČKI AKADEMSKI ROMAN I ENGLSKI ZA AKADEMSKE POTREBE

Predmetno je područje ove studije američki akademski roman, s posebnim naglaskom na istraživanju mogućnosti usvajanja specifičnoga akademskog vokabulara (riječi i fraza koje se koriste u sveučilišnoj sredini), te razvijanju sposobnosti za kritičko mišljenje o aktualnim temama iz područja visokoga obrazovanja, kao i američke kulture u cjelini. Iako je američki akademski roman u posljednjih nekoliko desetljeća stekao veliku popularnost na engleskom govornom području, još je uvijek relativno nepoznat i neistražen žanr među hrvatskim čitateljima. Ova studija ima za cilj povećati svijest čitatelja o tom žanru i pokazati da američki akademski roman nudi onima koji uče engleski kao strani jezik ne samo detaljan uvid u američki obrazovni sustav i probleme s kojima se suočava američka akademska zajednica, već i da pridonosi boljem razumijevanju specifičnosti američke kulture i društva. Nadalje, akademski je roman vrijedan izvor akademskoga vokabulara, a kao takav vrlo koristan za razvijanje osobne komunikacijske i interkulturalne kompetencije.

Ključne riječi: američki akademski roman; vokabular; kultura; akademski vokabular; akademska zajednica.