

Student perceptions of English studies in Bulgaria

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Abstract

This paper sets out and discusses the findings of a comprehensive questionnaire survey conducted among English Studies (ES) students in three Bulgarian universities: the University of Sofia (SU), The University of Plovdiv (PU) and the University of Veliko Turnovo (VTU) between December 2007 and May 2008. The discussion registers the condition of ES from the point of view of students at various levels of university programmes. The responses received give data about (a) the ES student constituency; (b) student attitudes toward the discipline and programme in the course of engaging with them; and (c) student expectations at the points of entry and departure in terms of content, delivery, their interests and career aspirations.

Keywords: English Studies; non-Anglophone contexts; survey; student perceptions; Bulgaria

1. Introduction and background considerations

This paper sets out and discusses the findings of a comprehensive questionnaire survey conducted among English Studies (ES) students in three Bulgarian universities: the University of Sofia ‘St Kliment Ohridski’ (SU), The Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv (PU) and the University of Veliko Turnovo ‘St Cyril and St Methodius’ (VTU). The questionnaires were administered between December 2007 and May 2008 within the frame of the collaborative research project ‘English Studies in Non-Anglophone Contexts: East Europe’.¹ The overall aim was to register the condition of ES—understood as comprised of both language/linguistics and literature/culture—from the point of view of students at various levels of university programmes in Bulgaria.

The responses received give data about (a) the ES student constituency; (b) student attitudes toward the discipline and programme in the course of engaging with them; and (c) student expectations at the

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points of entry and departure at different levels in terms of content, delivery, their interests and career aspirations. Where appropriate I supplement the data with observations on curricula arrangements and content, institutional and educational documentation, and existing statistical data and scholarly publications. Whereas surveys of students' perceptions and attitudes in higher education (HE) are usually geared towards institutional (or, comparatively, across institutions and contexts) programme assessment in terms of access, achievement, career realization, learning outcomes, pedagogical efficacy, and/or academic performance and/or institutional evaluation, this survey was not for those purposes. The primary concern here was to view the discipline as practiced currently from (a) a learner's perspective, and (b) within a distinctively Bulgarian context—and thereby to provide a wide basis for comparisons and discussions.

Prior to detailing the patterns and departures in student views, it is worth outlining some context-specific features of the discipline in Bulgaria, especially in relation to student matters. I touch upon several of those before describing the structure of the student survey as well as the nature of the sample.

1.1. English Studies students in Bulgaria

High school graduates interested in pursuing a HE degree in English are opting for a discipline with a substantial institutional history in Bulgaria as evidenced in the historical overview by Shurbanov and Stamenov in 'English Studies in Bulgaria' (Engler and Haas 2000, 267-292) and as documented by Vesselinov (2008). From 1928 until the early 1980s their choice was limited to two universities (the second one since 1972) and would follow a single subject arrangement in a five-year course of study.² From the late 1980s prospective students have had more options in terms of institutions and degree arrangements with the introduction initially of combined subjects 'English and Bulgarian', later to become more diverse and involve English and another foreign language. These were accommodated in philology departments. These double majors

² How ES in Bulgaria compares to ES in other European countries in terms of differences and similarities in degree structure, curricular arrangements, personnel and delivery has been outlined to a degree in Kayman and Mesquita (2005).

occur at present in two variants—as philology degrees and as degrees in applied linguistics. Those high school graduates who applied for university in 1997 were the first to complete a four-year BA degree course of study and have the opportunity to continue in an MA programme of their choice.

Since the 1990s students applying for ES would enter an area of particularly dynamic growth in the HE sector in Bulgaria. In 1989 they were about to join a recently enlarged community of about 500 ES students spread across four universities (two of them, in Plovdiv and Shumen, just having admitted first year students in a combined subject). By 2008, on the other hand, they had the choice of five state universities offering ES as a single major together with a varied portfolio of ES in a combined subject BA degree. By this time there were over 450 full-time BA level students at each institution engaged in ES. Additionally, ES students can now also be found in several associated colleges, like Smolyan and Kirdzali, which offer combined subjects ‘ES and Bulgarian’, and in private universities offering both—ES as a single subject and ‘ES and other’. At present, high school graduates applying for ES take part in the second largest language-based recruitment area in Bulgarian universities after Bulgarian Studies. Bulgarian Studies has 120 allocations, while ES is next with 100. In comparison, across disciplines in all departments, Law has the largest student number allocation in state universities (250 places), History (130), Management with a Foreign Language (120), and IT (140)³. Large admission numbers notwithstanding, graduates wishing to enroll for an ES degree enter a very competitive field. For the 2009 admissions process at SU, 300 students who identified ES as their first choice competed for 100 available places.

Prospective students sit for entrance exams in English, which are currently pitched at the advanced level of linguistic competence. In terms of the *European Framework of References for Language Competences*, students of English are expected to perform at their admission exams at the level of proficient users (C1). The linguistic competence of applicants is tested by a composite exam which comprises a dictation, a multiple choice test, and essay writing, aimed at gauging levels of reading and listening comprehension, knowledge of grammar,

³ Based on SU admission data.

vocabulary and spelling, writing skills and ability to present arguments. Once admitted to the programme ES students are expected to study almost entirely in the medium of English.

1.2. The student survey

Within the above-mentioned project, the student survey discussed here was a key to acquiring a sense of those who become ES students in Bulgaria and how they perceive the current condition of ES. The questionnaire had three distinct, yet interrelated, parts. The first part was designed to gather data regarding the constituency of the ES student body according to programme; their educational background prior to entering university; their linguistic competences; socioeconomic and ethnic/nationality backgrounds. International and local mobility in ES enrolment was also a point of interest. The second part of the questionnaire encouraged students to reflect on their programme of study as a whole—insofar as they had grasped what the programme was seeking to achieve. The idea was to obtain an understanding of coherence/community/identity within the subject along the lines of programme content and programme delivery. In other words, responses to this section gave a sense of student expectations and interests and the extent to which their programmes are meeting these. This section also enabled students to reflect on the definition of ES in the context of Bulgaria, and in comparison to other contexts that they are aware of. The third and final part of the questionnaire probed students' experience of the discipline in relation to employment and professional prospects. Its objective was to track changing expectations as students progressed through different levels of study, and ultimately to relate ES in Bulgaria generally to career aspirations and prospects in Bulgaria today. A final question allowed space for students to describe the impact that ES has had on their lives in their own words.

1.3. The survey sample

A total of 417 BA and MA students in ES (and related) programmes at three Bulgarian universities responded to the questionnaire. The choice of locations was determined by several considerations. First, the place of each of those universities in the establishment and institutionalization of

the discipline: SU introduced the subject in Bulgaria and set up a department in 1928; VTU followed in 1972-3; and PU in 1988-9. Second, these three universities have the largest recruitment share and largest numbers of students currently involved in ES programmes for the country: for PU 591, SU 485, and VTU 440 studying full-time. Within our sample, students of English were attached to a variety of programmes, all leading directly or related tangentially to conventional English Studies (philology) degrees. These frequently involve the so-called double majors in English *and* Bulgarian, French, Russian, Japanese, Italian, Chinese, etc; or are developed within Applied Linguistics in view of the increasing demand for professional translators and interpreters. Among those, 96% of our informants come from BA full-time programmes and 4% MA English programmes. The structure of the sample across university, degree programme and year of study is given in table 1.

Table 1. Distribution by year of study.

Year of study in the degree	University		
	Sofia	Plovdiv	V.Turnovo
BA – 1 year	25%	15%	40%
BA – 2 year	36%	40%	11%
BA – 3 year	22%	26%	28%
BA – 4 year	17%	15%	12%
MA		4%	9%
Count	125	202	90

In order to reproduce the structure of the general sample spread across the three universities, the data are weighted as indicated in table 2. The statistics used hereafter allow us to regard the sample as representative for the three universities taken together.

Table 2. Weight data by University.

	University		
	Sofia	Plovdiv	V. Turnovo
Real sample	125	202	90
Weight	1,07	0,81	1,35
Weight sample	133	163	121

When interpreting the results it is necessary to take into account the stochastic error in different relative shares:

Table 2a. Maximal error (P=95%).

%	3	5	10	15	20	30	40	50
	97	95	90	85	80	70	60	50
Max Error	1,4	1,8	2,4	2,9	3,3	3,7	4,0	4,1

2. Student body constituency

As in other contexts (for the UK, see Williams 2002), ES students in Bulgaria are predominantly female: 76% female to 24% male is the extension ratio from the admission quotas (for 2008, for instance, those were, SU 68/30 and PU 70/35). It is worth noting however that the imbalance comes mostly in the final year of study at BA level where women become an overwhelming majority at 89%. Hence the feminization of ES occurs in a cumulative fashion, from the entry point into ES at HE to point of graduation. Overall, among all the philology degrees at PU, for example, ES programmes have the lowest drop out rate.⁴ The age of students involved in ES ranges between 19 and 22 years, with 23+ forming only 17% of the student body, which is

⁴ In the case of PU, Slavic Studies 89 students in year 1 and 24 in year 5; for Bulgarian Studies 104 and 37, respectively; while for Bulgarian and English those are 81 and 40; for the English Studies major 112 and 65. Based on Zhivko Ivanov, 'Admission Trends and Statistics'; presentation at the Colloquium in Admission Issues, Smolyan, November 2008, slides 9-12, and 15.

consistent with HE sector as a whole. Bulgarian ES programmes register international recruitment of students (here I do not refer to Erasmus exchanges) without specifically holding recruitment campaigns outside Bulgaria. These students come mostly from the region. While 94.5% declare Bulgarian nationality, there are 3.1% Turkish, 1.3% Macedonian, as well as Serbian and Moldovan nationals. Among ES students of Bulgarian nationality 90.5% identify themselves as ethnically Bulgarian, 5.1% as Turkish and 4% as Muslim in response to 'If Bulgarian, ethnicity where applicable'. An almost negligible number of students choose not to respond here—0.4%, together with all other ethnicities they mentioned. There are significant differences in this regard across the three universities: SU comprises 100% ethnic Bulgarian ES students; VTU 98.7% Bulgarian and 1.3% Turkish; and PU 79.2% Bulgarian, 10.4% Turkish, and 9.4% Muslim. PU has the most ethnically diverse student body in ES and reflects the proportions in the Bulgarian population generally—83.9% Bulgarian, 9.4% Turkish, 4.7% Roma, and 2% others, etc. (NSI census data, 2001⁵). Given the regional spread of ethnic diversity in the country, the location of PU may account for this, as may economic factors, since the capital Sofia is the most expensive city in the country. In 2001 ethnic minority students (Turkish and Muslim, or Roma) comprised 0.04% of the overall student body in the humanities (Georgieva 2002, 115), seven years later, at least in ES, access for minority students seems to have improved.

The fee for students in English philology degrees in state universities is between 420-440 BGN per academic year for the humanities and social sciences. This can be put into perspective by noting that fees for economics majors are lowest at 260-267 BGN, sciences 614 BGN, medicine 960 BGN. According to the survey, 48% of ES students come from households with 600-1,200 BGN monthly income, 33% from families with an income below 600 BGN, and only 19% from families earning over 1,200 monthly. With 354 BGN being the average salary for the country in the first trimester of 2009 (NSI) and 240 BGN the minimal salary since January 2009, it is not surprising that students need to rely on a variety of ways to support themselves while studying—see table 3.

⁵ NSI data lists the religious diversity in Bulgaria as follows: Orthodox Christian 82.6%, Muslim 12.2%, Catholic 0.6%, Protestant 0.5%, etc.

Since opportunities for stipends and fellowships are rather limited,⁶ in all cases students have marked more than one source of support. Since major universities offering ES are located in big towns in-country mobility is inevitable, and 67% of ES students surveyed had moved to Sofia, Plovdiv and Veliko Turnovo from elsewhere.

Table 3. Financial support.

Financial support				Total
	SU	PU	VTU	
I work part-time and study	45%	22%	17%	28%
I work full-time and study	5%	11%	4%	7%
My parents support me	69%	78%	83%	77%
I have a stipend/fellowship	23%	21%	10%	19%
Other	4%	4%	6%	4%

Students usually enrol into ES programmes immediately after completing their High School (HS) education. The largest numbers of ES students come from an English language or foreign language HS, 28 and 26 per cent respectively. 11% are from a comprehensive HS background (without a particular specialization) and 10% from HS with science profiles. In this respect, the profile of ES students has changed significantly since the late 1980s and early 1990s when an overwhelming majority were English language HS graduates, the so-called English-medium HS. These were established in the 1950s and were the elite HS institutions with English medium instruction in a select way across the curriculum. In what are currently known as Foreign Languages HS (often the transformed former Russian medium HS post-1989) students receive a similar level of language instruction but may not experience English-

⁶ The most common stipend is 120 BGN monthly on the basis of academic record average above 4.00 (6.00 is the highest grade in Bulgaria) from all exams in the previous academic year. There are also groups of students (with disabilities, single parents, etc.) who are entitled to the subsidy irrespective of grades or on preferential terms.

medium teaching elsewhere in the curriculum. Consequently, about 46% (at least) of students currently pursuing ES in Bulgaria have had no experience of studying literature in English before enrolling for the HE ES degree.

The changes with regard to language education at the secondary level in Bulgaria in terms of government policies, setting up of new schools, introducing English on a mass scale (from grade 1 of the primary level) have been documented extensively in scholarly publications (Thomas and Georgieva 2002; O'Reily 1998). For the purposes of the present paper, it is sufficient to note two trends. First, ES students come from widely varying HS backgrounds, with differing practices and policies for English language teaching and teaching in the English medium. Second, that, Bulgarian aside, students of English would have often studied another foreign language in addition to English.

Thus the linguistic competence 'portfolio' indicated by students in response to the questions 'How many languages do you use/can you communicate in?' and 'Specify level (basic, moderate, good, fluent) for reading, writing, speaking' comes as no surprise. 52% of the students indicate varying degrees of competence in two languages other than Bulgarian and 19% in three. Bulgarian and English (with 100% each) are followed by German (38%), Russian (19%), Spanish (16%), French (13%), Italian and Turkish (5% each). These numbers are irrespective of the type of degree, since with mixed majors or applied linguistics programmes one would expect such a variety, another language being a prerequisite. The variation between ES philology respondents, however, and 'ES and another' is within the 5% or less. Figure 1 illustrates further the linguistic competence of all students in terms of their self-assessed speaking, writing and reading competences in the first five foreign languages by the mean result from their self-grading on a scale from 2 (lowest) to 5 (highest).

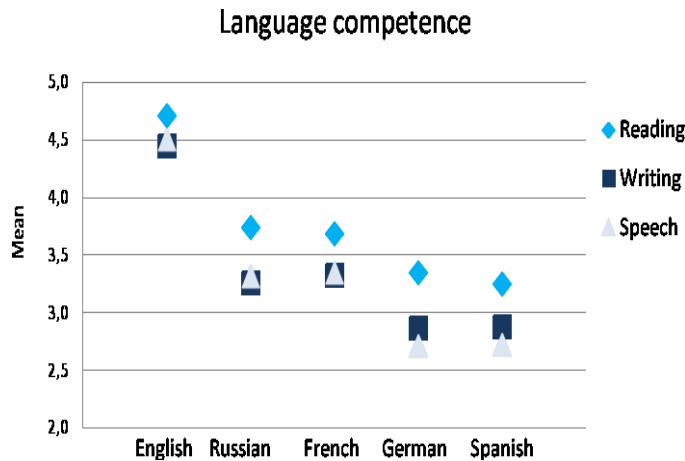


Figure 1

Two related issues emerge from the above observations. First, on the level of curriculum arrangements BA ES in Bulgaria is yet to capitalize on the foreign language competence in other than English languages of its students. Second, with regard to the varied paths by which students reach their required entrance level of English, the programme faces a tension between accommodating these differences or seeking to homogenize the student body in terms of linguistic competence⁷ and awareness of ES issues. What the expectations of students themselves are of their programmes of study, to what extent their expectations are met are issues taken up in the next section.

⁷ One of the ‘instruments’ in this respect become the English practice classes in the first year with the introduction in recent years of proficiency level textbooks—such as Leo Jones, *New Progress to Proficiency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and Kathy Gude and Michael Duckworth, *Proficiency Masterclass* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)—coupled with an incentive to produce new local university course books for the practical English classes.

3. Expectations and interests

Prior to actual enrollment in the ES programme prospective students in Bulgaria have access to a range of information sources. These include university catalogues and websites, promotional brochures and consultations with university faculty and/or high school teachers of English.

First and foremost, students enrolling in ES programmes expect to develop their linguistic competence and improve their language skills. Next, students expect to inform themselves about the UK and USA, study of history and culture of English speaking countries and, particularly, study of English and American literature. Figure 2 gives full details of student expectations.

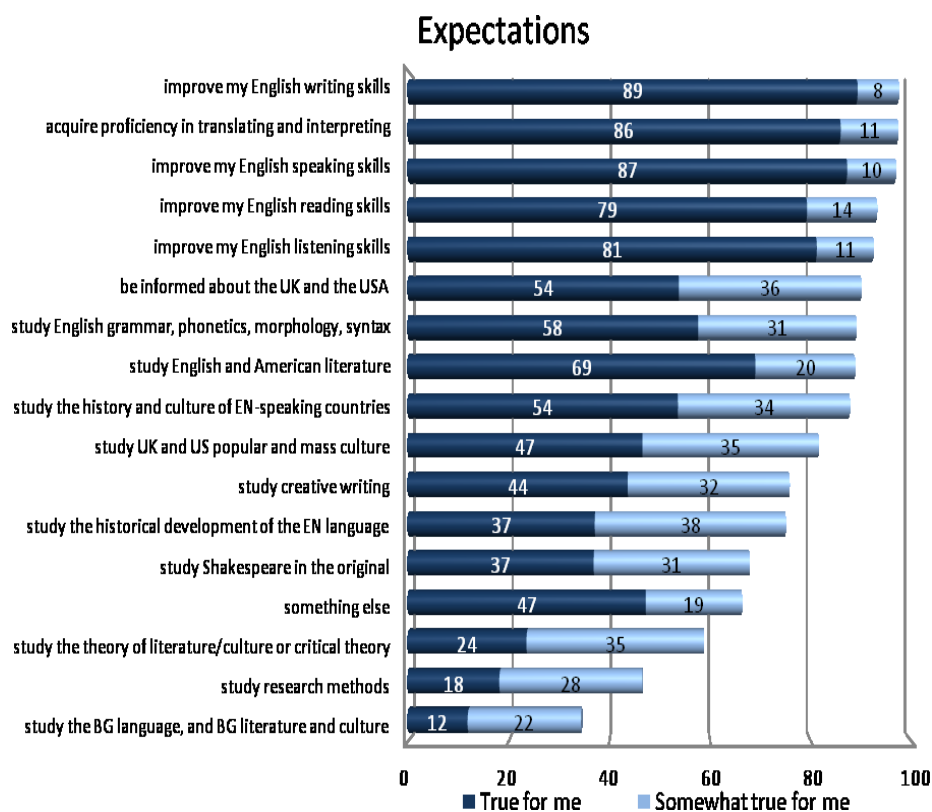


Figure 2

The high expectations to improve language skills and learn linguistics is consistent with the established conventions of ES (philology) programmes in Bulgaria. There are two notable exceptions here. Students seem to expect to engage with ‘Historical development of the English language’ to a lower degree, and even less to ‘study Shakespeare in the original’, while both are still significant parts of ES.⁸ Student expectations veer toward areas which can be seen as more recent developments in ES, such as ‘popular and mass culture’ and ‘creative writing’, which have found a place in the curriculum only since the mid 1990s in Bulgaria. High expectation with regard to the former is naturally fostered not only by the ubiquity of media and popular culture texts, but also by these being part of the educational experience of students (formal and informal) in learning the English language. Areas unfamiliar to students prior to entry in university—e.g. critical theory or research methods, or areas which seem not to be obviously associated with ES—e.g. Bulgarian language and literature, account for low expectations. These are unfamiliar because the former do not merit a particular emphasis in HS curricula or, as is the case with the latter, are less immediately within an envisaged scope of ES programmes because historically ES emphasizes ‘immersion’ in the respective target language/literature/culture. Also, since students’ expectation curve peaks at acquiring foreign language competences, it often seems difficult for them to foresee how the study of Bulgarian language or literature may contribute in this direction. On the whole, few students felt that the programme has changed their expectations (only 8%), 69% said the programme is concordant with their expectations to some degree, and 14% felt that their expectations were fully met.

ES students’ stated academic interests resonate with their expectations in several ways, and are generally practice-oriented. Figure 3 shows the percentages of students who acknowledged specific academic interests to greater or lesser degrees:

⁸ In the case of Historical linguistics (the theoretical study of linguistic change and textual practice with Old and Middle English texts) only SU (30 contact hours) and PU (90 contact hours) have kept it at the BA level, with the former reducing by 50% contact hour allocation after the transformation of the degree to a four-year BA cycle. Shakespeare still occupies a central place in the course in Renaissance English literature.

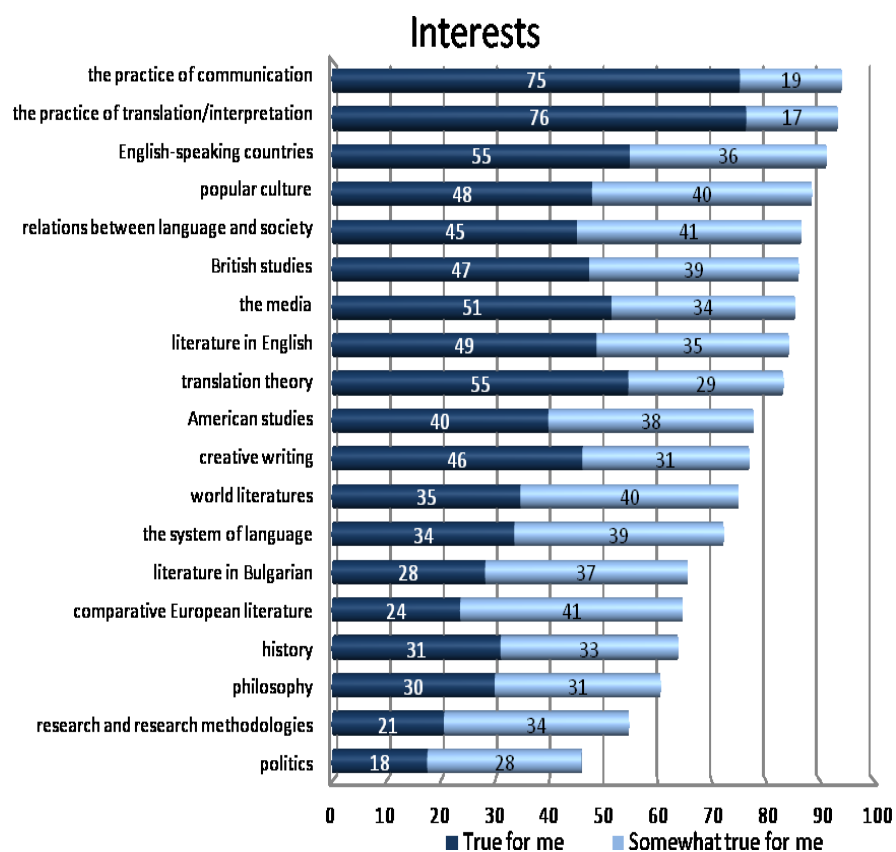


Figure 3

The greatest interest is in improving language skills and being informed about Anglophone contexts, and in the practical business of developing the ability to work as translators and interpreters. Thereafter, popular culture, the media, and sociolinguistics evoke roughly as much interest as 'literature in English'. Within this second group of pronounced interest, 86% declared a particular interest in British studies. Thus it ranks higher than interest in American studies which occupies a top position in the subsequent cluster of declared interest areas together with 'creative writing', 'world literatures' and the 'system of language'. Comparing stated interests between ES single major and 'ES and other', there are

four distinctive areas which differentiate the two categories, with over 10% differences in responses, which is the statistically significant marker in this section. The 'English and other' group state 86% overall interest in 'the system of language' (with 45% positive agreement) as compared to 65% (28% positively) of the ES major group. The most marked interests of students in ES major, as opposed to 'ES and other', are in the spheres of 'literature in English' (positive agreement difference 53% vs. 41%), British studies and American studies. The latter two are especially prominent with over 20 and over 15 % difference in positive identification 'true for me' respectively. It appears then that 'ES and other' has a more pronounced interest in the linguistic side of the discipline, and ES majors favour the literary and cultural studies side. I conclude this part by focusing on the two areas of least interest in the responses of students. Research methods rank low in both expectations and interests. At BA level this is a neglected area in the curriculum. Moreover, with the introduction of the four-year BA degree the final graduation requirement became a composite state exam, and removed the previously existing option of a dissertation submission, which accounts to a great extent for the responses. The fact that there is, in the zone of uncertainty, an overall 55 percent of interest in the area suggests some hesitant awareness of the relevance of research methods for ES.

One of the perhaps most contextually-indicative responses in this section is the categorically lowest area of interest for ES students: 'politics' with 46% overall and 18% positive agreement. In the open-ended questions of the survey, only one of the 417 respondents stated that being a student in ES contributed to an increasing awareness of and interest in politics. These responses derive from the prevailing attitude in Bulgarian ES academia which regards politics as a 'dirty word' which has little to do with serious academic work. There are complex historical developments and current dispositions underlying this. Simplistically put, for students politics involves 'talk about parties, politicians, elections, etc.' permeating the media and their everyday lives which is often associated with corruption, failure of government and other disheartening 'news of the day'. From a historical point of view, politics is usually associated with the rigid ideological framework that existed prior to 1989, when not only society but also academia and particularly ES were 'politicized' in the sense of the subscription to a rigid ideology. Consequently, during the transition period there was a loudly declared

and sweeping move to ‘de-politicize’ academic discourse and education on all levels. These are superficially sketched observations, but the point is borne out in the survey: politics slips away between two kinds of reductive understanding.

4. Defining English Studies in Bulgaria

The legal framework which informs the current composition of ES functions since the 2002 Higher Education Act, which postulates and controls, among others: a 4-year BA study, the academic hours load min. 2200—max. 3000; ending the degree with a State Exam; the ratio between habilitated and non-habilitated faculty teaching in the degree; the ratio between mandatory and elective courses but without posing prescriptions as to the nature of these core courses or any quotas of classes’ allocation.

Given the composite nature of the ES (philology) degree in Bulgaria, which comprises both language/linguistics and literature/culture studies, the curriculum is designed so that courses may address both ‘fields’ in a balanced way, at least insofar as core obligatory courses go. Courses in English language practice occupy a considerable number of classes and run through the entire four-year course of study in the BA degree.

Students’ sense of the definition of ES emphasizes the linguistic orientation of the degree as well as their own practice-bound interests in language. 52% of our respondents describe ES in Bulgaria as ‘a study in language and linguistics’. Additionally, 20% of them identify it as ‘a study of applied skills in language’. The highest ratio in the latter category represents students who are involved in ‘ES and other’ degrees at VTU and PU. The identification of Linguistics as the dominant domain is contained in the responses of ES single majors which outnumber the same response from their ‘English and other’ peers by 14%. Linguistics ranks especially high among SU students (59%), where a closer look at obligatory core courses reveals 690 academic hours allocated to courses in linguistics as opposed to 465 for Literature/Culture. VTU curricular arrangements present a fixed balance of 435 for each in the compulsory corpus. The Literature ‘component’ is emphasized by 14% of students, who describe the ES degree as ‘a course in literary studies’. That percentage is higher in the final two years of the degree, reaching 25% in the fourth year. This shows the influence of

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subject distribution in the curriculum, as students engage in more literary studies as they progress. When reflecting in general on the impact ES has had on them, over one third of the students bring to the fore the literary/cultural studies. In their words:

Positively my engagement with the programme has influenced my interests in Literary Theory and Latin. [...] They broadened my perspective in areas I did not know were interesting (Literary Theory)...(BA ES SU, year 1)

And

The education has influenced my interests in literature and introduced me some works and writers I'd hardly pay attention to on my own. Also gave me the chance to study and research in detail. Authors gave me broader background knowledge on American & British history & culture. The teachers should be more open and enthusiastic give the students opportunities to present works, authors, etc. of their own choice—more contemporary literature and so on. I feel the greatest benefit so far has been the elective courses and the foreign lecturers. (BA ES PU, year 3)

Often, as evident in the quotation above and in many of the other responses, when given a chance to express their views in open questions, students of English attribute higher value to their interactions with 'native' speakers and courses by guest lecturers in the programme. A number of responses express a recommendation to bring 'more native speakers' to teach on the programme. Students feel that being able to have 'native' communicative skills would improve their prospects, and put an extra value on foreign tutors. That in itself is worthy of further discussion in view of, among others, Holliday's (2008) analysis of the 'native speaker phenomenon' vis-à-vis politics of inclusion. The following observations on some of the ways in which the non-Anglophone context of Bulgaria interacts with the target subject and context(s) has a bearing on that.

5. Context engagement

The extent to which ES in Bulgaria registers the context in which the discipline is practiced within the teaching and learning paradigm is the question addressed here via student responses. Students were asked to comment on the presence and balance of the target and home languages in classroom practice and in the readings that accompany their ES

courses. Figures 4 and 4a give the summary of their responses broken down according to institutional location.

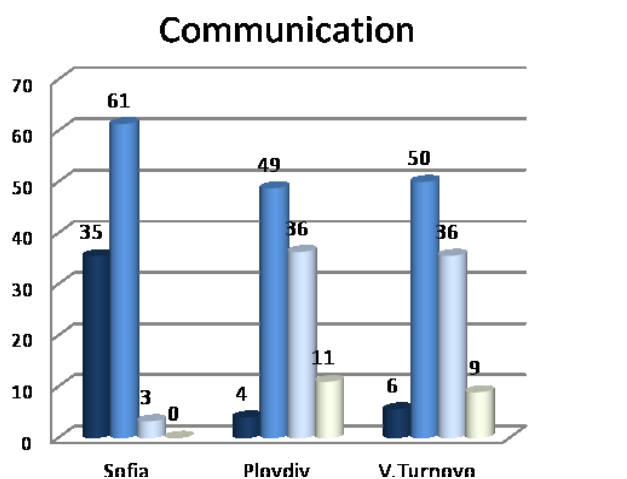


Figure 4

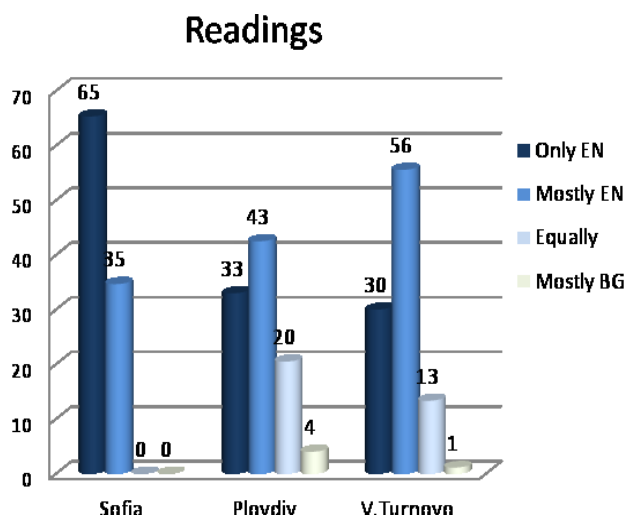


Figure 4a

Even a cursory look at the figures above indicates the dominant presence of the English language both in terms of classroom communication practice and in the assigned classroom and independent readings or bibliographies accompanying various courses. Communicative practice makes more use of the ‘home’ language, while texts remain overwhelmingly within the domain of the target language. This is also evidenced by a survey of syllabi and course descriptions where Bulgarian texts (required readings or assigned texts) appear only occasionally for the few courses which are taught in Bulgarian⁹ or target Bulgarian-into-English translation practice. Within the current legal framework for HE there do not exist prescriptions either as to the language of instruction or of texts. In formal institutional documentation, such as degree and qualification descriptions, written in the Bulgarian language for programme accreditation purposes there is no specific reference to language either. If at all, language is mentioned in educational documentation pertaining to ES if it is not English, the general understanding being that the language degree is in the target language on a number of levels and focuses mostly on the target context.

Variations within the context of Bulgaria are registered through the statistically relevant distinctiveness of SU, where 65% of ES students state that their readings are ‘only in English’, compared to more mixed readings registered in PU and VTU. PU and VTU variations come mostly from the programme ‘Bulgarian and English’ and the joint subjects for the two universities respectively, which are developments since the late 1980s. But largely, a philosophy of ‘total immersion into the target language’ is followed in Bulgarian ES. Students regard this in a positive light. According to one student:

English is a vocation—studying, teaching whatever. I catch myself sometimes that I think in English—so the programme in a way helped in the development of my second mother tongue—an optional language to think on if I’m tired of Bulgarian.
(BA ES PU, year 4)

⁹ In the ES degree currently there are 2 to 5 courses taught in Bulgarian, such as the Introduction to linguistics and Literary theory (for PU and VTU), the strand for Pedagogical qualification (courses in Psychology, Audio-visual methods, etc), which is elective at SU and VTU, and those classes in which the Bulgarian into English translation is practiced. In objective terms that would be ¼ of English practice classes would be assigning texts in Bulgarian, and 10% of the compulsory core courses at the BA level for ES at VTU, for instance.

A further brief point to be considered along the lines above is the presence of the 'home' context in assigned readings. On the whole, course syllabi rely mostly on current critical texts that are being used in ES in the target context(s). Locally produced texts are fewer but nonetheless present, especially in terms of course books and textbooks for practical English classes and descriptive grammar courses, where the latter are often organized on a contrastive/comparative basis. Scholarship by Bulgarian scholars in literature in English and culture studies courses (especially across universities) is rarely placed in required readings sections.

Besides establishing the dominance of the target language and context in view of communicative and reading practices for ES in Bulgaria, it is worth looking at the ways in which 'English' as a disciplinary academic focus and 'Bulgarian' as a 'home' context 'interact' with each other in practice within the educational space of ES. Figure 5 presents the summary of student responses to statements that aim to tap into some of the processes of context engagement along the lines of statements related to course design, pedagogic and analytical strategies, classroom practice and assessment procedures.

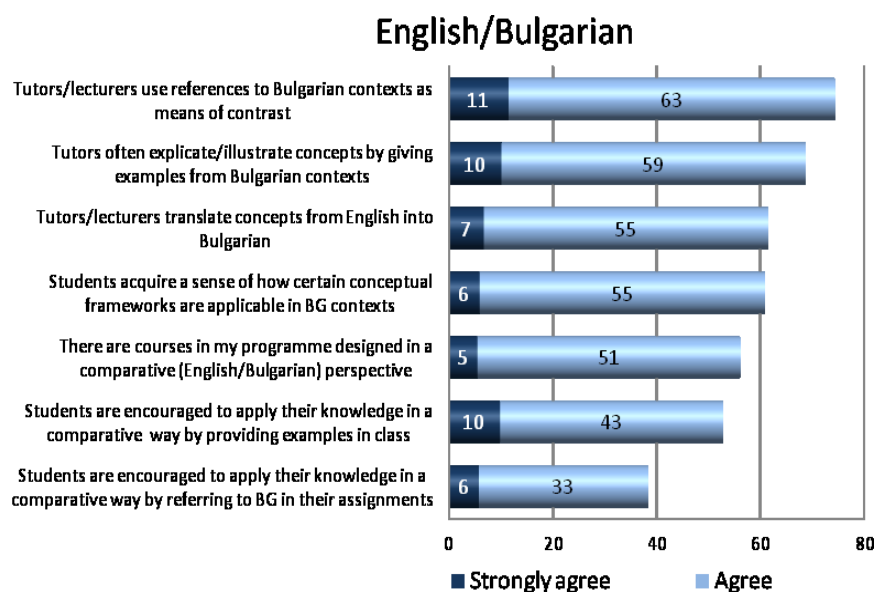


Figure 5

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That the Bulgarian context is mostly used as a means of contrast and marking difference is a view which students across the three universities share. Consequently, when asked to phrase the impact of the programme in their own words, students often summarise the effect in terms of difference and contrast, as follows:

When I first came in the university, I thought that English and my second language (French) will be useful and very important for my future. But now I see that they are not just this. I understand that the knowledge of a foreign language helps me understand a whole new culture which is far different from the Bulgarian. (BA ES+French VTU, year 1)

And

The programme has definitely contributed to a better understanding of cultural differences between Bulgaria and English-speaking countries. (BA Applied Linguistics VTU, year 3)

The practice of translating concepts in the classroom space is slightly more widely spread (13.4% difference) among students of 'ES and other'. These are also the students who are more likely (with the same percentage difference) to state that they 'acquire a sense of how certain conceptual frameworks are applicable/function in relation to Bulgarian contexts.' Both the practice of translation and exemplification are markedly less present, in students' views, in SU. At the level of course design both ES major and 'ES and other' students have concordant views. The difference in views exceeds 10% when one compares the institutional contexts of SU and of VTU and PU. Students disagree most with the suggestion that they are able to bring the 'home' context into classroom discussion through examples and through application of their knowledge in a comparative perspective. With regard to the latter, disagreement is strongest among ES majors. In other words, while the application of 'home' context can be seen in tutor-led learning, students are not encouraged to apply the home context themselves. Further, the 'home' context is also markedly less pronounced within the institutionally documented mode of knowledge assessment—in assignments, exam papers, etc. which are the formal markers of student progress. Thus, there is a tension between student and tutor roles in actively engaging the 'home' context in academic discussion whereby tutors lead and control it. Also, there appears to be a clear demarcation

that knowledge and progress in pursuing ES pertain mostly to knowledge of and progress in the target context(s). A further discussion of some relevant points in view of this section can be found in Gupta (2010, 328-343).

6. Career goals and prospects

For over half of the ES students at the three universities, the programme they are in was their first choice. 57% have stated that it was true for them and 61% disagreed with the statement ‘I wanted to study something else but didn’t get admitted to the other programme.’ Further, positive students’ responses are evenly distributed between ‘I plan to apply for a further degree in the same subject area’ vs. ‘a different subject area’ which suggests that the ES degree offers both potential for continuous interest and motivation and opens scope for a further MA in a different area. Some ES BA graduates pursue MAs in management, business administration, economics or media studies. These choices are linked to students’ views on how an ES degree is perceived in terms of professional development and employment opportunities.

The majority of students agreed with the statement, ‘My degree in English definitely improves my employment prospects’. In the first year of study this conviction is expressed by 63%, in the second it drops by 20%, and by the fourth it goes up to 60%. That view is more firmly maintained by ES MA students—82%.

Institutional documents naturally firmly assert such a conviction, usually in similar terms, and students may well be influenced by them. SU’s *English Philology Programme Profile* in 2008, for example, states that ‘upon completion BA ES students can become:

teachers in comprehensive and specialized secondary schools; teachers in colleges and universities; specialists in various departments of government administration, dealing with Bulgaria-UK and Bulgaria-USA relations; translators / interpreters from and into English, as well as of specialized issues and literature with regard to the UK and USA from other languages; journalists working with issues related to the UK and USA; consultants in the field of literature, language, culture, religions, historical and contemporary developments in the UK and the USA; experts and consultants in our [Bulgarian] and foreign companies, in the private or state tourist sector, in publishing, in libraries, etc.

The career paths that students themselves envisage are mapped in Figures 6 and 7 in terms of goals and desired prospective employers, both at the point of entry into university and at the moment of responding to the questionnaire.

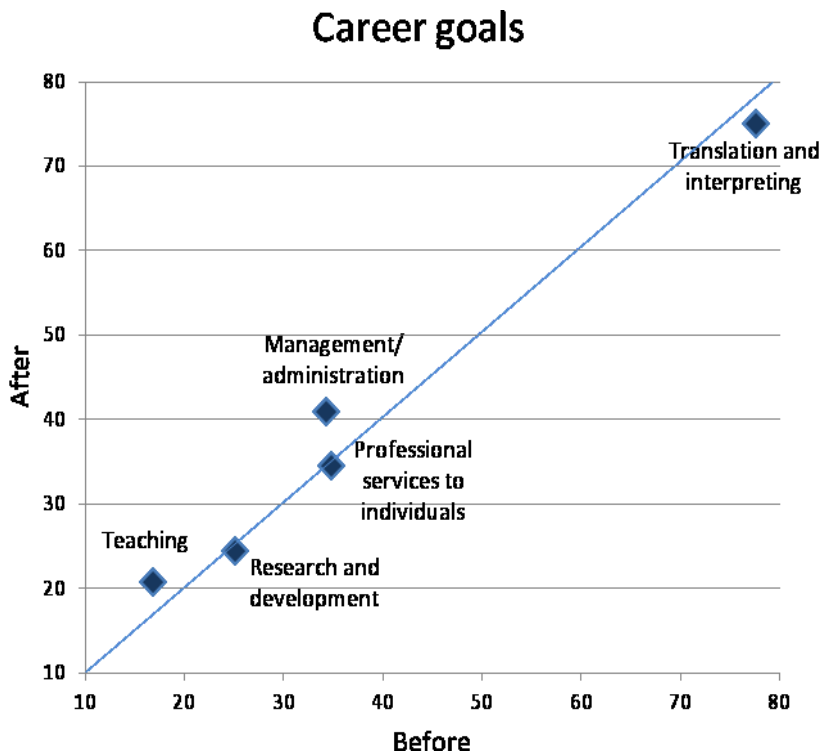


Figure 6

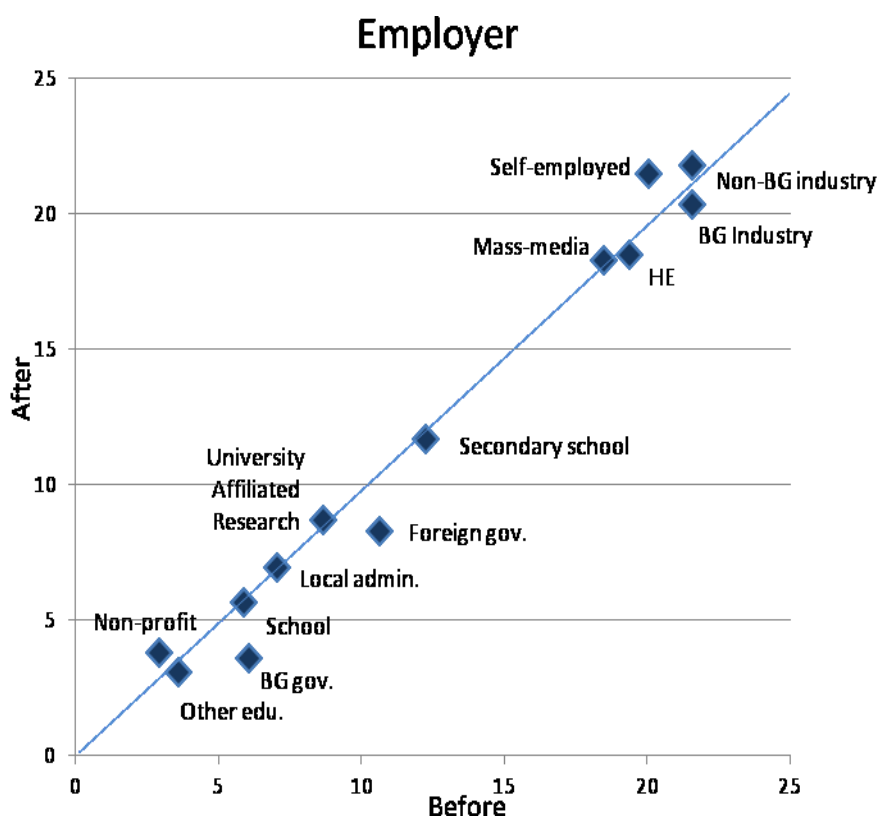


Figure 7

In terms of goals, professions of translating and interpreting score highest, though there is a slight lowering of rating with progress through the programme. Translation is historically one of the ‘strengths’ of ES degrees in terms of curriculum orientation, academic content and professional realization. It has been embedded in ES degrees as a major means of studying the target language since the introduction of English at the university level and is one of the key means of assessing students’ linguistic competence through English practice exams. The BA degree curriculum currently allocates about 100 contact academic hours to translation practice per year and there are a number of courses addressing translation within the core subject area (Translation Theory, Error

Analysis in Translation, etc). More recently, the ES major and ‘ES and other’ BA degrees have explicitly institutionalized translation as a professional qualification area and all universities are currently offering Translation-related programmes at the MA level. SU and VTU have introduced two delineated curricular strands for professional specialization ‘Teaching’ and ‘Translation’. Until the 1990s only the former existed in an institutionalized form. Currently, at the MA level the translation-oriented programmes are ‘Translation and Linguistics’ and ‘Conference Interpreting’ for the three universities and ‘Translation and Intercultural Communication’ for PU. These developments are related to the socio-economic opening of the country since 1989 and have been most notably spurred since 2002 by Bulgaria’s prospects for accession to the EU in 2007. For a number of students professional aspirations to be translators and interpreters guide their sense of the impact of ES on them. Echoing many others, one student says:

Interpreting is an informative and enriching experience, one needs to have knowledge about a wide variety of topics. Every interpreting task has something to teach us. For those who want to work as interpreters learning never ends and I find this rather good for my personal growth. I also believe that facilitating communication between two parties is a noble mission, which is yet another aspect giving me professional satisfaction. (MA Conference Interpreting VTU)

The stable middle ground in students’ views is occupied by ‘professional services to individuals’ and ‘research and development’. The least desired aspiration among the respondents is ‘teaching’, which is actually one of the employment sectors for ES graduates. However, the prospect of teaching seems to gain in attractiveness as students progress further with their studies. ES programmes thus seem to compensate for the prevailing view in Bulgaria that teaching is not financially lucrative.¹⁰ Indeed, ES students themselves note this occasionally:

¹⁰ The average salary in the sphere of education for the first trimester of 2008 in the country was 488BGN (NSI data, 2009) for both private and state sectors. For 2007 the average annual salary in education is 414BGN in the state sector and 581BGN in the private (NSI data, 2008). State schools teacher salary at the beginning of one’s career, the point where ES graduates will be, is currently fixed at 450BGN.

The English Philology course has definitely contributed positively to my development. I now have the confidence of speaking in English freely and fluently there is also a deeper understanding of the teachers' professions as well as students' responsibilities. (BA ES PU, year 4)

And

I have become more responsible. I also discovered that I have a talent for teaching. (BA ES VTU, year 2)

Progress through an ES programme seems to raise career aspirations (with the highest difference) in the area of 'management / administration'. Further, among envisaged prospective employers students place higher premium on the non-Bulgarian industry sector, with Bulgarian-industry and self-employment ranking close to it. Also high on the expectation horizon is employment in the mass media and HE. The government sector, however, suffers most in terms of students' employment aspirations as the students progress through ES programmes.

7. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, it is clear that the pursuit of an ES degree attracts an increasing number and varied body of students, often involving in-country or international mobility from the region, a multi-linguistic background, and a wide-range of educational backgrounds in HS. The dominant motivation factor for pursuing an ES degree in Bulgaria appears to be the promise of professional realization. Students see in ES programmes an opportunity for professional development in a European job market, especially in translation and interpreting.

Interestingly, students also often see ES as a discipline vested with normative values along the lines of cultural diversity, respect of difference, etc. Comments in this direction include:

My programme contributed to gaining experience communicating with a great many of different people. I enjoy cultural diversity. (BA ES PU, year 3)

The programme [...] has influenced my interest in different cultures, as in my own culture too. This programme has also helped me to learn that it's important to be able to respect the difference between mine and other cultures... (BA Bulgarian and English PU, year 3)

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My programme has broadened my horizon and has made me more aware of cultural differences. This gives me a better sense of identity, contributes to my communication skills, helps me define my interest and encourages my tolerance. (BA ES+French VTU, year 1)

Yet, more often than not, the terms in which diversity and difference are understood and expressed in students' responses reveal a sharp contrast between the context in which ES is conducted and the, so to speak, disciplinary 'text'—which seems often to assert homogenized and discrete totalities like the Bulgarian and the British nations. But that's outside the scope of this paper.

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