

## A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE PROFILE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER AT THE AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS AND THE UNIVERSITY OF FORESTRY IN SOFIA

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### ABSTRACT

From a scientific point of view comparisons of learner profiles may provide insights of the effectiveness of teaching as a whole. This paper reports some of the findings of a study aiming to investigate the differences in views and attitudes towards English language learning among 1<sup>st</sup> year Greek and Bulgarian students of forestry, agriculture and landscape architecture. Through statistical analysis some significant differences are identified between the profiles of the Greek and Bulgarian learner. The paper analyses the findings, and makes implications for teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at universities of agriculture-related fields where the emphasis is on teaching English for Special Purposes (ESP) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

**Key words:** EFL, learners' profile, English for agriculture-related sciences

#### Introduction

This paper reports part of the findings of a study aiming to investigate the differences in views and attitudes towards English language learning among 1<sup>st</sup> year Greek and Bulgarian students of forestry, agriculture and landscape architecture. With this study we attempted to compare the students' needs and opinions on English language learning issues in an academic context. The current paper focuses on the learner profile which is constructed both on the basis of the survey conducted and description of the practice of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Greece and Bulgaria. In particular, the students were asked about their educational background in English language learning, they were asked to self-assess their general command of English and to express their needs and their learning preferences for the English language courses during their academic studies. The present study can be considered significant in that it is the first attempt to carry out an analysis of the EFL educational profile and the target needs of Greek and Bulgarian students of agriculture related sciences taking ESP/EAP tuition at university. By providing a statistical analysis of the differences in the students' specific language background and their expressed views on EFL issues, this study could be of some value for Greek and Bulgarian ESP/EAP instructors and act as a first step in developing common ESP/EAP course material.

Therefore, the research questions we considered for the current paper were as follows:

1. Do 1<sup>st</sup> year the Greek and Bulgarian students

of agriculture and forestry related sciences differ in their English language background?

2. Is there a significant difference between Greek and Bulgarian EFL learner profile?

#### EFL teaching in Greece

Greek is the official language in Greece with 98% of the population speaking and writing it. However, Greek people are multilingual and so English, French and German are also widely understood and spoken, especially by young people since foreign language teaching has been integrated in the Greek education system for many years now. According to official sources<sup>1</sup>, until the introduction of English in 1955-1960, only one foreign language, French, was taught at the secondary level. In 1992/93, foreign language teaching was included in the primary school curriculum (comprehensive 6-year curriculum for the teaching of English to pupils from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade of primary school to the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade of secondary school (*Gymnasio*) and English became compulsory. A second compulsory foreign language (French or German) was introduced in the secondary school in 1993. In 1996/97, German was introduced in the *Lykeio* (upper secondary level). In 1998/99, a foreign language chosen among the three on offer at this level (English, French, or German) became compulsory in three final grades of Greek secondary schools (the *Eniaio Lykeio*)

In addition, English is widely taught outside the official state education system by private language centres (the so called "Frontesterio") which are officially authorised by the Greek Ministry of

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.eurydice.org/ressources/eurydice/pdf/O\\_integral/025EN.pdf](http://www.eurydice.org/ressources/eurydice/pdf/O_integral/025EN.pdf)

Education. The institution of private language schools has been considered an integral part of foreign language education in Greece. It is said there are 7,600 language school centres in Greece (Kristou, 2002). The schools traditionally operate from 2 p.m. till 10 p.m. daily and teach elementary through to proficiency levels. Students attend regular classes (up to 6 or more hours weekly) at these institutions and the courses lead to a variety of EF Language Certificates. The most popular EFL exams include the USA Michigan English Tests (ECCE, ALCE, ECPE,), the UK Cambridge Examinations (Cambridge ESOL FCE, CAE, CPE certificates), locally developed exams (until recently the PALSO exams for levels ranging from basic, elementary, to standard and higher) and the State Certificate of Language Proficiency, known as K.P.G., an examination and certification system implemented on the basis of a 1999 law, by the Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs of the Greek state.

As EFL teaching is greatly exam oriented there is a wide range of teaching materials in the Greek market specifically for the Greek student.

The institutions of higher education in Greece offer EFL courses on a compulsory or an optional basis depending on the policy of each university.

Leaving secondary school, students who enter the Agricultural University of Athens are expected to have a good command of English (B2 level) but English is not a prerequisite for their admission. It is a compulsory subject and is taught during the first six semesters of studies.

### **EFL teaching in Bulgaria**

The processes and reforms in EFL teaching in Bulgaria have been very dynamic for the last few years. In 2003/2004 a project was launched by the Ministry of Education for a first compulsory foreign language for 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students and a second compulsory foreign language for 5<sup>th</sup> grade students. But it should be noted that a common practice for many schools is to offer English language teaching for 1<sup>st</sup> graders as a stimulus to attract students. However, according to the same official source quoted earlier in this paper (see footnote 1), studying a first compulsory foreign language starts for 5<sup>th</sup> graders, and a second foreign language is introduced 8<sup>th</sup> graders.

A very good practice of teaching a foreign language are the so called "foreign language secondary schools" which depending on the major language taught are called "English secondary language school", "German secondary language school" and etc. These are state owned schools where 8<sup>th</sup> graders, after sitting an entrance exam, have one

year of intensive language learning with 17 hours of foreign language per week. There are also specialised secondary schools (in computer sciences, mathematics and etc) which offer intensive language learning with 15 hours of foreign language per week in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. At university these students usually have very good language skills, through levels may vary depending on school, aptitude and other factors.

Outside school English and other foreign languages are taught in private language centers which also organize certification exams. However, obtaining worldwide recognized certificate such as the Cambridge certificates and the Michigan certificates are very expensive for the average Bulgarian learner. Just for comparison, as of the present moment, ECPE can be taken only at one location in Sofia at one exam session per year, whereas in Greece there are numerous locations with more than one exam session per year.

The institutions of higher education in Bulgaria offer EFL courses on a compulsory or an elective basis depending on the policy of each university.

Leaving secondary school, students who enter the University of Forestry, Sofia are expected to have a good command of English, so that they can study English for Special Purposes; however, English is not a prerequisite for admission. It is a compulsory subject for the first four semesters of the studies, and an elective subject for some of the faculties for the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> semesters, of for the master degree students.

### **Method**

#### **Context**

This research was conducted by the EAP/ESP instructors at the Agricultural University of Athens and the University of Forestry of Sofia, and it was carried out in the English ELT freshman classes offered to the students of both universities.

#### **Questionnaire Design & Structure**

We designed the questionnaire after having identified the similarities and differences of the ELT courses offered in both universities. We negotiated on the phrasing of the questions so that they can all be comprehensible to the respondents. Still, we thought that the questionnaires had to be translated and distributed to the students in their mother tongue for the purpose of better understanding.

The Questionnaire contained 15 questions: 5 questions on demographic information (collecting data on learner's identity, language background and language usage), 2 questions on the participants' abilities (self-assessment of general language command and main language skills), 2 questions on their expectations in EFL during their academic studies

(acquisition and improvement of specific skills), 6 questions on learning preferences and needs (learning and assessment issues). Most of the questions were of closed type - ticking of given answers or rating according to 1-4 scale. There were some open type questions, too. In this paper we focus on the first part of the questionnaire; in other words we analyse the students' profile and their general English language command.

### The Participants

#### *Greek sample.*

Participants were 88 1<sup>st</sup> year students of the Agricultural University of Athens in the academic year 2006-2007 (37 male and 51 female) coming from all six faculties (see Table 1). The ages of the participants ranged from 17 to over 20 years of age, with the majority being 18 years old (60%).

**Table 1. Profile of the Greek sample: students of the Agricultural University of Athens.**

| <b>AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS DEPARTMENTS</b>    | No of respondents | %          |
|---|-------------------|------------|
| Crop Science  | 31                | 35%        |
| Animal Science  | 6                 | 7%         |
| Agricultural Biotechnology                              | 6                 | 7%         |
| Rural Economics & Development                           | 16                | 18%        |
| Food Science and Technology                             | 25                | 28%        |
| Natural Resources Management & Agricultural Engineering | 4                 | 5%         |
| <b>Male</b>   | <b>37</b>         | <b>42%</b> |
| <b>Female</b>   | <b>51</b>         | <b>58%</b> |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>88</b>         |            |

#### *Bulgarian sample.*

Participants were 85 1<sup>st</sup> year students of the University of Forestry in Sofia in the academic year 2006-2007 (45 male and 38 female) coming from

four faculties (see Table 2). The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to over 20 years of, the majority being 19 years old (74%).

**Table 2. Profile of the Bulgarian sample: students of the University of Forestry in Sofia.**

| <b>SOFIA UNIVERSITY OF FORESTRY DEPARTMENTS</b> | No of respondents | %          |
|---|-------------------|------------|
| Forestry  | 30                | 35%        |
| Landscape Architecture                          | 28                | 33%        |
| Veterinary Medicine                             | 18                | 21%        |
| Agriculture                                     | 9                 | 11%        |
| <b>Male</b>                                     | <b>46</b>         | <b>54%</b> |
| <b>Female</b>                                   | <b>39</b>         | <b>46%</b> |
| <b>Total</b>                                    | <b>85</b>         |            |

### Results and discussion

#### *Student English Language Background and Profile*

First of all, the demographic questions together with the questions on students' background education in English language learning revealed some quite interesting results.

Looking at the number of years the students were taught English before they entered university (Table 3) we can see that the answers of Greek and

the Bulgarian students differ a lot. Out of 88 Greek students, only 8 (9%) were taught English for more than 10 years, a total of 71 students (81%) were taught English for 6 to 10 years, and 9 students (10%) were taught English for 5 years or less. Out of 85 Bulgarian students, 15 Ss (18%) - (double the Greek number) - were taught for more than 10 years, 36 students (42%) (almost half the Greek number) were taught English for 6 to 10 years, and 34 Ss (40%) (just above 4 times the Greek number) were taught

English for 5 years or less. This could actually be attributed to the different educational systems of the two countries and the number of years that tuition

of English lasts in each of the countries.

This is also apparent from the answers given to the question on where the students were taught

**Table 3. Years of English tuition of Greek and Bulgarian students.**

| How many years have you been taught English? | GR       | % of total | BG       | % of total |
|--|----------|------------|----------|------------|
| more than 10 years                           | 8        | 9%         | 15       | 18%        |
| 6-10 years                                   | 71       | 81%        | 36       | 42%        |
| 5 years or less                              | 9        | 10%        | 34       | 40%        |
|  | Total 88 |            | Total 85 |            |

English (Table 4). Very few Bulgarian respondents were taught English in the private sector besides school (16% were taught English at foreign language centres and 13% had private lessons) while the majority of Greek respondents, along with the English tuition they received at school, attended English courses at foreign language centres or/and had private lessons, too. The institution of Private Foreign Language Centres has been quite prevalent in Greece for decades now. The reason is that English was not taught at Greek schools in the past (with French being the only foreign language included in the curriculum) and it was not until the 1980's that English was introduced into the official Greek Education Curriculum; since then English has become a compulsory subject and the first foreign language to be taught

(along with French and German). So it became traditional for young learners to have English courses (usually evening classes) privately besides their schooling.

On the other hand, in Bulgaria it is especially worrying that 40% of all students questioned reported that they had studied English for 5 years or less. These are students from technical schools who usually explain that they only study a foreign language in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade. It will be interesting to examine the development in the future. It can, however, be expected, and the practice has proved it, that these students do not have the required level to be taught English for Special Purposes, and it may even be more meaningful for them to receive general English classes.

**Table 4. Place where English language training occurs for Greek and Bulgarian students.**

| Where have you been taught English? | GR       | % of total | BG       | % of total |
|-------------------------------------|----------|------------|----------|------------|
| school                              | 62       | 70%        | 79       | 93%        |
| Foreign language centre             | 65       | 74%        | 14       | 16%        |
| private lessons                     | 41       | 47%        | 11       | 13%        |
| abroad                              | 0        |            | 0        |            |
| other (TV)                          | 2        | 2%         | 2        | 2%         |
|                                     | Total 88 |            | Total 85 |            |

The third question on the students' language background concerned the English Language Certificates (Table 5). The answers of the Greek Students differed quite a lot from those of the Bulgarian ones. Most English language courses in the Foreign Language Centres in Greece are exam oriented and this accounts for the great number of Greek respondents having obtained a Language certificate, mostly of B2 level (45%). What is interesting, as far

as the Greek students are concerned, is the total number of no certificate holders (28 out of 88 respondents (32%) which means that maybe these students' needs regarding English Language Learning at university might be different from those of the certificate holders (they may need more emphasis on grammar or reading and writing but not in an academic context).

**Table 5. Number and type of certificates of Greek and Bulgarian students.**

| <b>What English Language Certificate have you got (if any) and when did you obtain it?</b> | <b>GR</b> | <b>% of total</b> | <b>BG</b> | <b>% of total</b> |
|--|-----------|-------------------|-----------|-------------------|
| TOEFL  |           |                   | 2         | 2%                |
| FCE UCLES (B2)   | 35        | 40%               |           |                   |
| ECCE Michigan (B2)   | 4         | 5%                |           |                   |
| CAE UCLES (C1)   | 4         | 5%                |           |                   |
| CPE UCLES (C2)   | 3         | 3%                |           |                   |
| ECPE Michigan (C2)   | 4         | 5%                |           |                   |
| Other (STANDARD PALSO, GCIA, GCE)  | 10        | 11%               |           |                   |
| Other (not internationally or nationally recognized)                                       |           |                   | 6         | 7%                |
| No Certificate   | 28        | 32%               | 77        | 91%               |

However, the scene in the Bulgarian case is completely different. Ninety-one per cent of the students do not have any certificates. This may be attributed to the fact that obtaining internationally recognized certificates has started in early 1990s, and there are no nationally recognized English certificates. However, people who have graduated from an English language secondary school (see the part on EFL teaching in Bulgaria above) are regarded as having a sufficient level of knowledge of the English language. For a better representation in a future similar survey it will be expedient to specifically asked Bulgarian students if they graduated from the type of schools which have intensive English language learning.

Now, as part of the students' background in English, we looked into the ways that they make use of it in their daily lives. So we asked them what they use English for. As it can be seen from Table 6 both the Greek and the Bulgarian students make great use of English surfing the internet (97% and 89% respectively) whereas very few read English newspapers (10% and 9% respectively). Moreover,

almost the same number of respondents from both samples write e-mails (41% and 46% respectively). This is quite expected in our days as the use of new technologies has reached very high rates in students' lives, with the press being electronically accessible. However, the big difference (actually statistically significant) that can be noticed in this section is in the number of respondents who use English for travelling abroad (55% of the Greek respondents and 29% of the Bulgarian ones) and for watching English TV channels (24% of the Greek respondents and 71% of the Bulgarian ones). It can be expected that for economical reasons the Bulgarians travel less than the Greeks; however, the significant difference in watching English TV channels is puzzling. Maybe in Greece students are not interested in English satellite TV as films are not dubbed, so they listen to English from Greek TV channels. At the same time, it is highly questionable whether students in Bulgaria, even if interested, watch any films which are not dubbed or subtitled in their native language. The matter needs to be studied further if considered important.

**Table 6. Uses of English chosen by Greek and Bulgarian students.**

| <b>What do you use English for?<br/>(you can tick more than one answer)</b> | <b>GR</b> | <b>% of total</b> | <b>BG</b> | <b>% of total</b> |
|---|-----------|-------------------|-----------|-------------------|
| Reading newspapers  | 9         | 10%               | 8         | 9%                |
| Travelling abroad   | 48        | 55%               | 25        | 29%               |
| Writing letters, e-mails  | 36        | 41%               | 39        | 46%               |
| Job applications/university applications                                    | 9         | 10%               | 15        | 18%               |
| Watching English TV channels  | 21        | 24%               | 60        | 71%               |
| Listening to English radio stations   | 21        | 24%               | 27        | 32%               |
| Surfing the Internet  | 85        | 97%               | 76        | 89%               |

**Table 7. The Common Reference Levels**

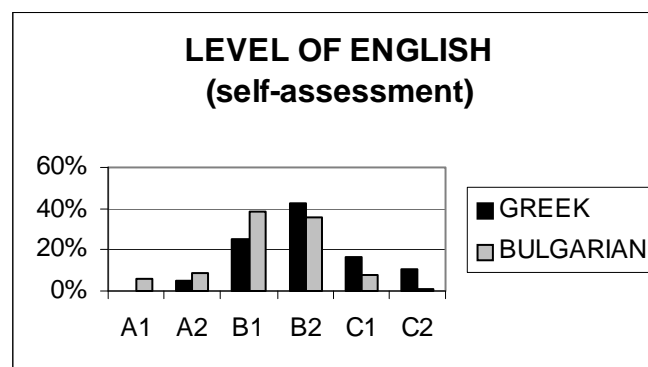
| Level       | Band | Name                              |
|-------------|------|-----------------------------------|
| Basic       | A1   | Breakthrough                      |
|             | A2   | Waystage                          |
| Independent | B1   | Threshold                         |
|             | B2   | Vantage                           |
| Proficient  | C1   | Effective Operational Proficiency |
|             | C2   | Mastery                           |

### Self-assessment of the knowledge of English

According to the Common European Framework (The Council of Europe, 2003), foreign language teaching works to a three tier hierarchy of level and achievement: elementary, intermediate and advanced. These three tiers are each sub-divided into two giving a six level framework as shown in Table 7.

The students were asked to assess their already acquired knowledge of English on a 1-6 scale (the respective levels of the Common European Framework) and the answers were various (Graph 1). Very few Greek respondents assessed themselves at A level (only 5% at A2) whereas 15% of the Bulgarian respondents assessed their knowledge of English at A1-A2 level. The majority of Greek students, 38 out of 88 (43%) assessed themselves at B2 level, which is close to the number of respondents who have obtained a certificate of B2 level. On the other hand, the number of Bulgarian students who assessed

themselves at B2 level is quite high (31 out of 85 (36%) which may mean that although they do not possess a language certificate their knowledge of English is quite satisfactory). Generally we can see that the vast majority of both samples fall into the B1-B2 level area. The teaching implication is that we can have agriculture-related materials of B level suitable for both the Agricultural University of Athens and the University of Forestry in Sofia. As for C1-C2 levels, there seems to be a difference (a statistically significant difference) in the number of Greek and Bulgarian students. Twenty-four out of 88 Greek respondents (27%) assessed themselves at C1-C2 levels, whereas only 8 out of 85 Bulgarian respondents (9%) assessed themselves at C1-C2 levels. This can be also related to the number of Greek respondents who have obtained a certificate of C1 or C2 level (13%) (see Table 5).



**Graph 1. Level of English - self-assessment made by the Greek and Bulgarian students.**

### Statistical analysis

Seeing that there were differences in the answers given by the two samples we focused on the most striking answers and in order to see whether statistical inference about the two population proportions can be made. We performed a statistical hypothesis testing technique on the proportions (a two-tailed test). We found that some results were statistically significant, which means that there is a difference between Greek and Bulgarian 1<sup>st</sup> year

students of agriculturally related sciences concerning some issues of English Language Learning (See Table 7)

As a result of the statistical analysis the following conclusions can be drawn:

- the Greek and Bulgarian students study English for statistically significant different lengths of time and at statistically significant different places (school, language centers and etc.);
- there is no statistically significant difference

**Table 8. Showing the Null Hypotheses and the Z-statistic values**

| <b>Null Hypothesis</b>   | <b>Z-statistic*</b> | <b>Decision</b>       |
|--|---------------------|-----------------------|
| There is no difference between the number of GR Ss and that of BG Ss who were taught English <b>from 6 to 10 years</b> before they entered the university of agriculture     | 5,34                | Null is rejected.     |
| There is no difference between the number of GR Ss and that of BG Ss who were taught English <b>for more than 10 years</b> before they entered the university of agriculture | 2,04                | Null is rejected      |
| There is no difference between the number of GR Ss and that of BG Ss who were taught English <b>for 5 years or less</b> before they entered the university of agriculture    | -4,60               | Null is rejected.     |
| There is no difference between the number of GR Ss and that of BG Ss who were taught English <b>at school.</b>   | -3, 93              | Null is rejected.     |
| There is no difference between the number of GR Ss and that of BG Ss who were taught English <b>at private language centres</b>  | 7,73                | Null is rejected.     |
| There is no difference between the number of GR Ss and that of BG Ss who learned English <b>by private tuition</b>   | 4,92                | Null is rejected.     |
| There is no difference between the number of GR Ss and that of BG Ss who self-assessed their English command at <b>B2 level</b>  | 0,25                | Null is not rejected. |
| There is no difference between the number of GR Ss and that of BG Ss who self-assessed their English command at <b>C1 level</b>  | 1,48                | Null is rejected.     |
| There is no difference between the number of GR Ss and that of BG Ss who self-assessed their English command at <b>C2 level</b>  | 2,72                | Null is rejected.     |
| There is no difference between the number of GR Ss and the number of BG Ss who <b>use English for travelling abroad</b>  | 3,49                | Null is rejected.     |
| There is no difference between the number of GR Ss and the number of BG Ss who <b>use English for watching English TV channels</b>   | - 6,26              | Null is rejected.     |

Level of significance  $\alpha = 0,05$       Critical value = 1,96

between the number of the Greek and Bulgarian students who self-assessed their knowledge at B2 level;

- there is statistically significant difference between the number of the Greek and Bulgarian students who self-assessed their knowledge at C1 and C2 levels;

- there is statistically significant difference between the Greek and Bulgarian students on the following preferred uses of English: (1) for traveling abroad, and (2) for watching English TV channels.

#### **Implications for language teaching**

Based on the survey conducted some implica-

tions can be made for the practice of language teaching at both the Agricultural University of Athens and the University of Forestry in Sofia:

1. The teaching materials at the universities should be developed at B1-B2 levels;

2. There are students who do not have the required level of knowledge to take a course in ESP or EAP;

3. The Bulgarian students need certification of their language skills.

#### **Concluding remarks**

What was explored in this paper is the profile of 1<sup>st</sup> year Greek and Bulgarian university students of agriculturally related sciences and their English

language learning background. The Greek and Bulgarian ESP/EAP instructors were given some valuable insight regarding their students and the English courses at university in view of further cooperation among the Agricultural University of Athens and the University of Forestry in Sofia. It is hoped that further research on a greater scale, based on more detailed questionnaires and/or interviews could illuminate other subtle differences between Greek and Bulgarian students and raise better awareness of EFL pedagogical issues for the ESP/EAP instructors.

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