

# Have changes brought about changes? Findings of a longitudinal study conducted among first-year students of English

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The constant changes affecting the Hungarian higher education system make both students and instructors face newer and newer challenges. The introduction of the Bologna system and the abolition of the entrance exams brought on the change that students gain admission into university programmes based on their school leaving exam results, and thus they are not screened for the programmes. In the case of language major BA and the new undivided one-tier language teacher training programmes the core problem may be the insufficient knowledge of the target language(s) which brings on vastly heterogeneous student groups in the individual seminars. In our paper we present an overview of the results of language proficiency and vocabulary tests taken by first-year English and American BA students and from 2013 also the teacher trainees. In addition to the placement tests a further questionnaire was administered, in which students evaluate their level of English on a 3-point, a 6-point and a 9-point Likert scale. Our results indicate that there is a lack of correlation between the scores necessary for admission and students' language proficiency level. The answers given in the questionnaires show how the students evaluate their own language proficiency at the beginning of their university studies.

## 1. Introduction

Due to the constant changes in the Hungarian higher education in recent years there has been an increase in the heterogeneity of the language proficiency and study goals of our incoming students at the Institute of English and American Studies at the University of Szeged. Since 2006, the introduction of the Bologna system in the Hungarian higher education, there have been no entrance exams to screen the applicants prior to their university studies, and thus the instructors of BA programmes have no opportunity to survey the incoming students' previously acquired subject specific knowledge and their solid – minimally B2 – English language proficiency. Therefore, in order for the instructors of the programme and the students themselves to have a clear picture of their level of English, placement tests, that is, a B2-level language proficiency and a vocabulary test, are administered in the first week of each academic year (see more: Doró, 2011c). The present paper analyses the results of these English language proficiency and vocabulary tests written by English or American Studies BA students and English language teacher trainees in the new undivided one-tier programme.

In an academic setting in higher education students, apart from having a solid language proficiency level, are expected to have clearly defined learning goals. In order to formulate their own goals, they must have an objective view of their own skills and capabilities as well as an accurate understanding of their current language knowledge.

As Doró (2011a, p. 82) also maintains “clear goals, good skills and good learning strategies are essential for academic achievement”. This has led us to the conclusion that the students’ evaluations of their own language proficiency can also be considerably informative. In order to assess the students’ self-evaluation, a questionnaire was administered, in which they evaluate their level of English on a 3-point, a 6-point and a 9-point Likert scale.

## 2. Background

As mentioned above, the introduction of the Bologna-type three-cycle structures (Bachelor, Master and Doctorate) into the Hungarian higher education system in 2006 brought about significant changes. The earlier dual system was relatively inflexible because arts faculty students were expected to decide at the point of leaving high school whether they opted to become elementary-school or high-school teachers, or graduate as philologists. Thus students were required to have rather specific plans regarding their future position in the labour market at the very start of their higher education studies. The Bologna system, on the contrary, makes it possible for students to reconsider their plans after having earned their bachelor degrees and continue their studies in master programmes that are not integrally related to their previous studies. Beyond the professions mentioned above, several other study directions (e.g. economy or social sciences) are available for BA graduates in English and other foreign languages. Furthermore, the introduction of the credit system has resulted in the recognition of credits earned in different institutions, or even abroad (see, e.g., Ministry of Education, 2006). The credit system gives students some degree of flexibility to make decisions about what courses to take and how to time them. This, however, inherently, carries the danger that in the case of non-completed courses students need to retake them several times, and, thus, prolong the time they spend completing a programme.

Cancelling the entrance exams for the BA-programmes, which deprives Hungarian institutions of the right to screen – or at least have the chance to meet – their prospective students was another major change in 2006. Basically, the same practice is applied for the new teacher training programmes. Although applicants take part in a short motivational interview, their language proficiency and subject specific knowledge are not assessed. One major negative consequence of this system is the arising heterogeneity in students’ language knowledge.

The authors of the present article are instructors in the English language study programmes of the Department of English Language Teacher Education and Applied Linguistics of the Institute of English and American Studies at the University of Szeged, and as such, we encounter the problems listed above in our everyday practice. The mere fact that a student has been accepted at our institute provides no information about their English language proficiency. The instructors only gain access to the names of the admitted students, but their prior results, including the scores achieved at the advanced

level school leaving exam in English, are not available. In a previous article, we (Bajnóczi & T. Balla, 2015) concluded that the scores students gain in the admission process would not be informative enough regarding the language knowledge of the prospective students because this score comprises many different elements and only one of them is the result of the advanced level school leaving examination in English.

We are of the opinion that it is extremely important to have a clear picture of our incoming students' English language knowledge since this information makes it possible for us to provide them with professional guidance, and thus facilitate their studies and help them cope with the challenges they encounter during their studies. When introducing a language placement test to the first-year students some years ago, our assumption was that if the students had the chance to get to know each other's results, they would be able to position themselves among their peers and would know whether they belong to the stronger or weaker students. These data would help the effective work with our students and could also contribute to the decrease in the number of unaccomplished courses and drop-outs (see, e.g., Doró, 2011b).

As summarised above, the introduction of the Bologna system into the instruction of arts students means that there is a minimal screening of the applicants, and almost anyone who has passed the advanced level school leaving exam in a foreign language can become a language major student (Doró, 2010, p. 581). The fact of having been accepted into the programme reinforces the, in many cases false, belief that their English knowledge is satisfactory for pursuing their studies in the higher education system. And, even if their language proficiency meets the expectations, they still might have "vague ideas concerning the academic content of the chosen field" (Édes, 2009 in Doró, 2011a, p. 83). As also observed by Doró (2011a) as well as by Doró and Szabó Gilinger (2015), students, at the beginning of their studies, are surprised to experience the differences between secondary and tertiary education, such as expectations, workload and student life (see also Prescott, 2010). It is frequently the case that many first-year students only recognise in their first classes that their content knowledge and language skills will not be sufficient to complete their courses in the first semester.

Beyond the problems relating to the students' language knowledge detailed above, the lack of entrance examinations has further negative effects. Without having the chance to meet the prospective students, the instructors have no information on the motivation, interests or future plans of students. This, again is a major shortcoming, since – as opposed to the former practice of the dual system, in which students, whilst preparing for the entrance examinations, familiarised themselves with the structure and contents of the programme and, thus, were well aware of what to expect from their classes – the students both in the Bologna and the new one-tier system do not have a clear, very often not even a vague, idea of what subject areas their studies entail.

Based on the recognition that the instructors in such programmes receive data neither about our enrolled students' language knowledge nor about their motivation, our

department endeavours to make up for this by asking our incoming students to take placement and vocabulary tests and fill in questionnaires.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Methods

The participants of the present study are full-time and correspondence first-year English Studies BA major and minor students as well as the students in the new undivided one-tier teacher training programme launched in 2013. Our present results are based on data obtained using two different types of data collection instruments: language placement tests on language use and vocabulary and a questionnaire on students' linguistic biographies and self-assessment. All of our subjects took part in a testing session at the beginning of their first academic year and were asked to take two language tests in altogether 60 minutes. One test was aimed at surveying the students' language use (100 multiple-choice items), while the other measured their vocabulary knowledge (150 items). The tests were written in the first academic week, since, we believe, the sooner the results are available, the more effective guidance and support can be provided to them in and outside their classes. The data were recorded between the academic years 2008–2009 and 2015–2016. The scores were made available both to instructors and to students. The questionnaire is a more recent element that was introduced at our department in 2013 in order to gain a deeper insight into our subjects' language learning backgrounds and the estimation of their own language level.

### 4. Results and discussion

In the following two sections we present the results of our students' placement tests and questionnaire data to illustrate our propositions outlined above.

#### 4.1 Placement test results

In a former study (Bajnóczi & T. Balla, 2015) we analysed the placement test results administered in the academic years between 2008–2009 and 2013–2014 and found that in the course of these six years the results (N=between 151 and 208) of the placement tests on language and language use varied between 63.19 % and 73 %, while the results of the vocabulary tests varied between 70 % and 76 %, with similar standard deviation figures in the different years. The new data from the academic years of 2014–2015 and 2015–2016 fall within the same ranges, see Table 1. Thus we can maintain that the means are not informative enough regarding the student populations' knowledge of English in the individual academic years. A more detailed analysis involving minimum

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<sup>1</sup> We are deeply indebted to our colleagues at the Department of English Language Teacher Education and Applied Linguistics at the University of Szeged for their help in invigilating these testing sessions and taking part in the assessment of the placement tests.

and maximum scores (e.g. 29–88 in year 2008 on the language use test and 29–100 in years 2008 and 2011 on the vocabulary test) as well as the number of students below, above and around an optimal level is more indicative of how successfully the students are likely to progress with their studies. The minimum and maximum scores of both tests are also presented in Table 1. Comparing the ranges in the different years, we found that there were major differences which reflect the heterogeneity we also experience in the course of instruction.

Table 1. Results of the placement tests (2008–2015)

	2008		2009		2010		2011	
	Lg	Voc	Lg	Voc	Lg	Voc	Lg	Voc
<b>N</b>	182		164		168		181	
<b>Mean %</b>	63.19	72	70.43	70	72.09	75	65.2	73.78
<b>SD</b>	11.54	14.71	11.57	16	9.86	13.95	11.58	15.69
<b>Range</b>	29-88	29-100	37-96	29-99	49-98	31-99	31-94	29-100

	2012		2013		2014		2015	
	Lg	Voc	Lg	Voc	Lg	Voc	Lg	Voc
<b>N</b>	157		208		225		156	
<b>Mean %</b>	73	73.24	71.21	76	66.13	75.78	72.41	75.73
<b>SD</b>	14.61	9.06	11.44	11.52	9.46	12.59	10.43	12.86
<b>Range</b>	41-99	51-95	36-95	31-99	40-91	34-98	45-98	42-99

Past experience has shown that the results of the two placement tests serve as approximate indicators of the students' success in their studies, for example, the results of the complex language exam administered at the end of the first academic year of the English Studies Programme show that students have a good chance to pass if their incoming placement test results are not below 70%, which roughly corresponds to level B2 on the CEFR. Students with results of 50% or below in the majority of the cases do not even manage to complete the prerequisites for this exam. In Table 2 we present the percentage of students below the 50% level and above the 70% 'optimal' level in the grammar placement tests. The results suggest that in years 2008, 2011 and 2014 a great number of students with poor English knowledge started their studies at our institute and, indeed, these student populations proved to be the weakest in language seminars, while in years 2010, 2012 and 2015<sup>2</sup> we experienced that students started their tertiary studies with a more solid knowledge. Table 3 reveals that years 2008 and 2009 yielded the poorest and years 2013 and 2014 the strongest results on the vocabulary placement test.

As we have pointed out above, students starting their studies in 2008 performed poorly in the language use and in the vocabulary placement tests. These results

<sup>2</sup> When publishing the present paper only data from the fall semester of the 2015–2016 academic year are available.

coincided with the observations of the instructors teaching language classes for these students. Our colleagues confirmed that there were, indeed, many low-achievers among their students in that year. As opposed to these results, our students starting their studies in 2013 performed best on both tests: 60.09 and 72 % of the students achieved results higher than 70 percent. These students were more proficient than students in other years, and this was reflected in the work in the language seminars.

*Table 2.* Percentage of students achieving below 50% and above 69% (2008 – 2015) in the language use placement test

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
<b>N</b>	182	164	168	181	157	208	225	156
<b>max. 50%</b> (%)	14.83	4.9	1	8.2	0	2.4	2.36	1.92
<b>min. 70%</b> (%)	30.76	45.73	55.36	35.35	61.15	60.09	36	60.26

*Table 3.* Percentage of students achieving below 50% and above 69% (2008 – 2015) in the vocabulary test

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
<b>N</b>	182	164	168	181	157	208	225	156
<b>max. 50%</b> (%)	8.79	11.58	2.38	8.29	4.46	2.4	4.88	2.56
<b>min. 70%</b> (%)	52.74	53.04	64.88	65.19	61.78	75	72	66.02

As the data presented in the above tables highlight, the incoming student populations are not only heterogeneous within the same year of study, but there are vast differences between the students starting their studies in the different years as well.

#### 4.2 Questionnaire data

In the previous section we presented the results of placement tests assessing the incoming students' performance at the beginning of their academic career. In order to find out how students perceive their own language proficiency, we used an instrument designed to help us assess our subjects' self-evaluation of their language knowledge with the help of three different scales. The students were requested to assess their level of English on a 3-point, a 6-point and a 9-point Likert scale, on which 0 means no knowledge of the language, and 3, 6 and 9 mean a native-like level, respectively. The answers are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. First-year full-time students' self-evaluation of their language proficiency 2013-2015

	2013			2014			2015		
N	140			182			133		
	3-point Likert scale	6-point Likert scale	9-point Likert scale	3-point Likert scale	6-point Likert scale	9-point Likert scale	3-point Likert scale	6-point Likert scale	9-point Likert scale
<b>Mean on scale</b>	2.36	4.04	6.19	<b>2.26</b>	<b>3.98</b>	<b>5.97</b>	2.28	4.14	6.09
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>78.66</b>	<b>67.33</b>	<b>68.87</b>	<b>75.33</b>	<b>66.33</b>	<b>66.33</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>67.66</b>

(100%=native-like proficiency)

As Table 4 reveals, the subjects think that their knowledge of English exceeds 66.33 percent on all the three scales in each year between 2013 and 2015, that is, they evaluate their language knowledge to be relatively close to the native-like end of the scale. In view of the placement test results presented in Table 1 above, this estimated knowledge reflects a highly optimistic picture on the students' part.

It is also interesting to note that although there are differences in each year's means as regards the language use and vocabulary placement tests results (see Table 1), there seems to be a more moderate change in the means of the students' self-evaluation regarding their language proficiency. Whereas the placement tests show that the average achievement of the students starting their studies in 2013 was 71.21% on the B2-level language use component and 76% on the vocabulary component, students ranked their language proficiency much higher: between 67.33 and 78.66 on a scale between zero and native-like proficiency. Similarly, in 2014, the placement tests results were 66.13 and 75.78 on the B2-level scale, with students ranking their own proficiency between 66.33 and 75.33, and in 2015 the B2 results were 72.41 and 75.73, while the students ranked themselves between 67.66 and 76 (see Tables 1 and 4).

Our students enter into the BA programme with a language knowledge that they believe to be a high proficiency level that is sufficient for completing their course requirements while the instructors are of the opinion that there is a need for an intensive and complex language development. Since in our view our students' initial expectations towards their tertiary studies do not appear to be completely realistic, there is a controversy which needs to be settled. In compliance with the above and as Doró (2011a, p. 81) also observes, many students seem to struggle with the demands of their university studies and fail to successfully fulfil even the first-year requirements while at the same time they "believe that their language skills are adequate for carrying out undergraduate studies" (Doró, 2011a, p. 90). Colleagues at other Hungarian universities have also problematized incoming students' language knowledge and have also pointed out the mismatch between the expected language proficiency, the study demands and the performance of students of English, e.g. Lehmann (2006) discusses how advanced learners' vocabulary is tested in a proficiency exam.

Summarising the above, the instructors at the Institute of English and American Studies face a dual challenge. On the one hand, there is a great need for a systematic and extensive language development, while, on the other hand, the students need to understand that what they conceive to be appropriate and sufficient language proficiency may not be satisfactory to successfully complete their studies. That is the reason why in the past few years not only the number of compulsory language classes has been raised, but the department has also been trying to find ways in which instructors can both raise consciousness and deal with the students' needs as much as possible. When there was an opportunity to launch new courses, a 'remedial' intensive language course for the weakest students was offered. This course, unfortunately, due to reasons that would exceed the limits of the present paper, did not yield the expected results; however, the experience played an important role in developing the contents for our Academic Study Skills course, which aims at helping the students make the huge step that connects the way they studied at high school with what is expected of them during their English studies at the university (see also Doró, 2015). Our department's new endeavour for trying to enhance our incoming students' success in their studies is to form study groups where first-year students are assisted by teacher trainees in their final years.

## 5. Conclusion

In our present paper we aimed at summarising the findings of our different data collection instruments. The results reveal that many of the challenges we face as instructors in our everyday practice of language teaching derive from the fact that our first-year students' English language proficiency reflected in the placement tests and the level the students believe to have differ to a great extent. This discrepancy between the results has twofold implications. First, it implies that it might be difficult for students to commit themselves to improving their overall language skills, and second, it is highly challenging for instructors to make first-year students realise that their lack of the appropriate language proficiency level prevents them from having a successful academic career (see also Doró, 2011a). Although there are several steps the instructors of the institute have taken in order to help our students, there is a constant need for monitoring the incoming student populations. Instructors should increasingly be prepared to find ways to motivate students to deeply engage in their studies.

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