

Students' Perceptions About their Preparedness for Undergraduate Studies of English

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Introduction

In the last years, as enrollment in institutions of higher education has increased, problems concerning academic achievement have grown proportionally. This is not a local, but a world-wide tendency, which has also affected Hungary, especially after the introduction of the Bologna system in many fields of study in the year 2006. This shift from the 4-year college and the 5-year university level education in the arts and sciences to a 3-year bachelor and an extra 2-year masters program brought with it problems that are showing only now, as the system is being introduced. First, due to the practically open access of students to the BA level programs, there is a general feeling among instructors that the students' level of preparation has been dropping. There is a great debate whether we should lower the standards to help weaker students stay in higher education or lose those who are lacking the academic preparation required for success. Second, while universities are struggling between elite and mass education, they are often forced to accept and keep even the less prepared students, as institutional funding is based on student numbers (McNay, 2006). Third, as the new curricula are in their first years of implementation, uncertainties are visible from the parents', the students', the instructors', and the job market's side in interpreting the content and the value of the degrees students are to earn.

This paper investigates the case of English and American Studies majors and minors at the Faculty of Arts of one of the leading universities in Hungary. Overall, many students seem to struggle with the demands of their university studies and fail to successfully fulfill even the first-year requirements. In the next sections I shall provide a brief background to some of the contributing factors on which empirical research has been carried out: academic literacy demands of a foreign language medium education, the difficulties students face when entering university, and finally their language skills, as well as their performance at courses and exams. Then, in order to understand whether students themselves have realistic goals for their studies and what their beliefs are regarding their ability to follow courses, questionnaire data will be explored. The findings of this study should help instruc-

tors, as well as supervisors, in understanding student performance and in helping students participate fully and successfully in the intellectual life of the university.

Background

Newman (2001) compares the academic achievement of undergraduate students to that of a game. Accordingly, from the students' perspective, achievement involves the finding and processing of the course content, interpreting the requirements presented by each instructor, as well as understanding the rules and tasks that vary from class to class. This game-like view implies that learning is not the only reason for studying from the students' point of view, and that the immediate goal is rather the surviving of the courses with a passing grade. Only skillful students are able to recognize the demands of their studies and modify strategies accordingly. We can conclude that clear goals, good skills and good learning strategies are essential for academic achievement.

Many language majors and minors in Hungary can also be considered players of an academic achievement game. However, I believe that not everyone possesses the above skills and strategies necessary for academic success. The following sections will provide a brief overview of what we know about the academic demands of the curriculum and the education system as well as the language and study skills of this student population.

Academic literacy demands in an L2 medium higher education for first-year undergraduate students

Academic literacy is a term used in a variety of ways in the literature, but it most often refers to the reading and writing done in school. For this study I will adopt a broader understanding of the term that goes beyond the ability to read and write in the target language. Academic literacy demands, in the case of the student population in question, will be understood as the needs and challenges they face when adapting to a language and discourse which is specific to their discipline area, namely English or American Studies. Academic literacy includes, above all, the ability to understand main points in different genres, in both written texts and oral presentations, to take notes in classes, to study from these notes, to ask and answer questions and to discuss problems. Most first-year students of English meet a discourse community that is foreign to them for two main reasons: first, they undergo a shift towards a different form of education, and second, the courses of their major or minor are held in English, compared to the L1 medium education in secondary school.

As for the first reason, studies have shown that the greatest risk of retention is seen in the first year of studies in higher education even when language skills are not contributing factors. Crosling *et al.* (2008) and Moxley *et al.* (2001), for example, among the possible reasons for high drop-out rate list personal factors, lack of support, financial issues, problems with integration, timetable and inadequate pre-

course information and guidance. Smith (2003) and Marland (2003) also point to the fact that adolescents are unsure about the field to choose and what the differences are between a school subject and an academic field with a similar name. If, for these reasons, students upon entering university find themselves in a major or minor by chance, they are unlikely to successfully function in the new academic environment.

As many of the first-year students have little or no experience in studying at tertiary level and have vague ideas concerning the academic content of the chosen field, they may also face unexpected study-related demands in the new academic environment (Édes, 2009). On a daily basis they often find it very challenging to be left on their own to complete assignments, prepare for exams, learn new study skills and understand what the expectations of the instructors are. Students need to learn to identify important points in lectures held in English, to find an adequate format for note-taking, and to do substantial amounts of course-related reading on their own. This implies that students should be active participants in their own learning process. However, this idea is new for most students in Hungary, as in secondary school they are still too often given materials to memorize rather than to analyze; therefore, they are used to being viewers rather than participants of the teaching/learning process.

Adjustment problems to the new discourse community for first-year students of English are also mainly contributable to the shift from an exclusively L1 medium education to a predominantly L2 medium education. For most of them the only form of formal schooling in English has been the language classes in elementary and secondary schools. While in their first-year of English Studies, undergraduates are required to complete language courses targeted to improve all four language skills (which may be similar to their earlier English classes), they also have content courses in both small-group seminars and large-group lectures on linguistics, literature and culture. The lack of academic skills and the inadequate preparation for the chosen field are risk factors for all students, but for those who carry out their studies in an L2 the difficulties are multiplied.

We can voice the concerns listed above mainly based on anecdotal evidence and everyday teaching practice, as there is limited larger-scale empirical data on Hungarian English majors' (especially first-year students') language skills, goals, or achievement problems (Horváth, 2001; Nagy & Nikolov, 2007; Doró, 2008, 2009c; Kormos, Csizér, Menyhárt & Török, 2008). It is possible to compare the Hungarian students' case to those discussed in international studies, namely the immigrant or international students in US community colleges or in institutions of higher education in other English-speaking countries (Ramsay, Barker & Jones, 1999; Rosenthal, 2000; Curry, 2004; Leki, 2007). Ramsay Barker and Jones (1999), for example, compared the experience of first-year international and local students at an Australian university and found that international students had difficulties understanding lecturers and tutors mainly because of the vocabulary content and speed of input. These two factors have been found to be sources of difficulty also for Hungarian students, especially in large lecture halls where there is no immediate exchange of feedback between students and instructors (Doró, 2009b).

As has been pointed out in the introduction, in the existing Bologna system in Hungary admittance to BA level tertiary education is calculated on the basis of

academic work done in secondary school. Preparedness for tertiary education in an L2 is not directly measured at an entrance exam, although it needs to be pointed out that secondary school foreign language achievement in itself is not a good indicator of tertiary level academic literacy or a guarantee for success in a foreign language major. It is often the case even among students with really advanced general language proficiency that they struggle through their courses as they find the technical language too difficult, the content too abstract or the course demands too high. Pre-university information should be clearer to students regarding the academic content and nature of the programs, as students realize quite late that the BA level tertiary education is neither a language school nor an informal forum of exchange of ideas on English-related topics, moreover, it does not provide an easy access to a degree for those who speak English.

Language skills of first-year students of English

It has been discussed so far that the achievement of English majors and minors whose native language is not English is affected by their English proficiency level, study skills, educational background, goals, motivations, plus the academic strategies that balance for the lack of any of these factors. Language proficiency, above all, seems to be a crucial point in the academic achievement process. My teaching experience with Hungarian students suggests that good language proficiency in itself is not sufficient to declare a student prepared for academic studies in L2, but it is an indispensable factor without which academic achievement is close to impossible. Many students seem to arrive at the university with the conviction that their English proficiency level is adequate for their studies, as their secondary school grades or their ability to communicate with friends in the target language make them believe so.

Course grades and end-of-the-year exam results are general indicators of students' achievement; however, they fail to show what the starting point is or how much knowledge and what skills and strategies are gained throughout the semesters. For this reason, at the University of Szeged incoming students' language proficiency and vocabulary knowledge are tested upon their entry to the BA English program by using the Oxford Placement Test and the Vocabulary Levels Test. Although most of these data have remained for internal use, they provide an excellent source of feedback both for instructors and students. The findings of the research that I myself have carried out with students at the University of Szeged concerning their vocabulary knowledge indicate that the majority of the first-year students do not have the minimal vocabulary knowledge necessary for reading academic texts in English. This vocabulary threshold level for them can be defined as the knowledge of the first 3,000 most frequent English word families, the academic word list and the technical vocabulary related to the fields they study (see Doró, 2008, 2009b, 2009c). Similar results of insufficient vocabulary size of first-year students have been registered by Lehmann (2006, 2007) at another Hungarian university. Moreover, the study carried out by Nagy and Nikolov (2007) has pointed out that many first-year students of English lack the willingness to communicate in class. It has also been empirically documented that students read very

little in English, both with academic and personal aims, and they engage in limited written text production during their studies (Doró, 2008). These factors may directly effect students' academic achievement, as they slow them down in their progress.

The above findings are disturbing if we take into account the fact that many foreign language majors and minors have years of exposure to English in educational environments before enrolling in a university. Therefore, they often believe that good grades in secondary school provide them with language skills necessary for L2 medium tertiary education and ensure their success at the university. However, there is no guarantee that in a few months time students' language and general academic skills develop to the level that makes them able to participate in courses and receive passing grades.

Another factor that needs to be pointed out is that Hungarian students are rarely offered remedial courses in academic reading and writing, unlike ESL learners enrolled in colleges and universities in English-speaking countries (Curry, 2004; Newman, 2001; Melles, Millar, Morton & Fegan, 2005). English for academic purposes classes in the BA level English programs in Hungary are limited in number and are not offered as a form of preparation for academic studies in the L2. They are rather part of the second- and third-year syllabi and are offered parallel to content courses. Therefore, many students, especially in their first year, are required to follow courses in the target language while they have inadequate linguistic and content area knowledge.

The study

The previous sections have raised a number of concerns relative to the degree of success in the integration of first-year students into English BA programs that offer great challenges to them, many of which they are not prepared for. Therefore, they often end up playing a survival game of academic achievement which focuses on the basic survival of each course and exam with a passing grade rather than helping them integrate into an academic discourse community with advanced language and study skills as well as content knowledge. The concerns are twofold: First, how can we, instructors and course designers pinpoint the core problems that students face? Moreover, what are the problems that we are able and should be concerned with in order to help students? Second, what are the students' point of view, expectation and concerns in the process of becoming tertiary level students in their chosen field of studies? In order to fully answer the first questions, it is also crucial to explore the second aspect. This study will focus on some points of this second aspect, because we need an understanding of the students' goals and their perception about their own abilities. If student expectations are not clear or do not match those of their instructors, or if they do not have a realistic picture of their skills and abilities, we can expect that the transition from secondary to tertiary education is even more problematic and less smooth.

Methods

As has been discussed above, I was primarily interested in why first-year students had chosen English or American Studies and how prepared they felt for their undergraduate studies of English at a Hungarian university. Since the English program in this institution is almost identical for first-year English and American Studies students, they were treated as one student population. Similarly, majors and minors were grouped together, as the first-year program and the general requirements are very similar for both groups.

A questionnaire on students' perception, expectations and course-related experience was administered to 126 first-year students of English or American Studies at the University of Szeged in October 2008, at the end of the second month in the given academic year. This includes approximately 90% of the first-year students, and, therefore, can be viewed as fairly representative of the student population in question. To ensure student participation, the questionnaire was filled at the end of a mandatory seminar, in small groups, supervised by the instructors. Answers were given anonymously.

The questionnaire included both general and course-specific questions. For the purpose of this study, only the introductory part of the research instrument will be closely examined, the course-specific questions have been discussed in a previous study and will be referred to only for comparison (Doró, 2009c). The introductory part of the questionnaire included three questions and three statements in Hungarian. The English translation of the first three questions is as follows:

1. Why did you choose English (or American) studies?
2. How prepared did you feel, in terms of language proficiency, for your studies of English before starting the program?
3. How prepared do you feel now, in terms of language proficiency, for your studies of English?

The first question was open-ended in order not to influence the respondents' answers with previously stated categories. Students were free to give one or more reasons. With the second and third questions students were prompted about their self-judgment of language proficiency, whether they had felt it adequate for their studies of English before they started the BA program and whether this had changed after the first two months spent with course work. Students had to rate themselves on a Likert scale ranging between 1 and 4, one referring to 'serious language problems' and 4 described as 'fully adequate language skills'.

In the introductory part of the questionnaire students also had to respond to three statements and choose from the options offered. These statements were the following:

1. Usually I can follow the information presented in the English courses.
2. The information presented in the English courses is new to me.
3. The English program corresponds to my expectations.

For the first two statements respondents were offered the following four answers: 'always', 'usually yes', 'usually not' and 'never'. Regarding the last statement students could choose between 'not at all', 'partly' and 'fully'.

Moreover, students were asked to indicate their Oxford Placement Test result that they had taken a few weeks earlier. This was done to monitor a possible gap between their language proficiency measured by a test and the language preparedness judged by themselves as adequate or not for their studies. 107 students provided their placement test score (the remaining 19 students had most probably not taken the test). Scores range between 35% and 88%, with a 63.31% mean. This suggests that many students could be identified as 'at risk' regarding their general English proficiency level and are unlikely to succeed in the academic achievement process. For all students starting their studies of English a minimum score of 80% on this test would be desirable, which can be interpreted as a good knowledge of the basic grammar rules of the language. However, only five of the 107 students scored above this threshold level. Based on these test results, we can expect students to meet great difficulties while trying to engage in meaningful information exchange during their studies.

Results and discussion

Answers given to the first question regarding the reasons for choosing English or American Studies could be grouped into ten main categories that are shown in Table 1.

Students in some cases provided two distinct reasons; in this case the two answers were counted and entered into the table separately. For this reason the overall number of responses does not equal the number of participants. However, it was not taken into consideration whether the specific answers were listed as first or second reasons, because the order seemed to carry no significant meaning for the overall results. It needs to be noted, however, that in many cases the actual answers were worded slightly differently, but not to the point of distorting the grouping-based results. Of the 126 students, 44 (35%) indicated answers belonging to the 'I like English' category, followed by future career goals written by 24 students (19%). The English as a favorite school subject type answers (19 students, 15.1%), the desire to improve English proficiency (18 students, 14.3%), the interest in culture (16 students, 12.7%) or languages in general (12 answers, 9.5%) also came up relatively frequently. Only two students (1.6%) were motivated to choose this field of studies based on previous stays abroad. All these reasons seem to be very general, and could have oriented students towards other fields of studies. Only 8 respondents (6.4%) indicated the wish to become English teachers, for which the BA degree is a prerequisite. An additional 9 students (7.2%) answered that they would like to become translators, for which an English BA is only the very first step, something that students are often not aware of. Moreover, seven students (5.6%) were unable or unwilling to indicate a good reason for choosing this field and nine (7.2%) found it a forced choice. Answers in this last category included, for example, the non-acceptance to other programs, the seemingly no chances of getting a degree in other fields or no better career goals.

Table 1: Reasons given for choosing English or American studies

Main types of reason	Number of Percentage	
	students	points
I am interested in languages.	12	9.5
I like English.	44	35
I would like to improve my English proficiency.	18	14.3
I am interested in the culture of English-speaking countries.	16	12.7
This was my strongest/favorite school subject. / This is a language I have studied previously.	19	15.1
It seemed a good choice.	16	12.7
I would like to become an English teacher.	8	6.4
I would like to become an interpreter/translator.	9	7.2
In the future I will need English (for my job).	24	19
Previous stay in a foreign country.	2	1.6
Forced choice.	9	7.2
No answer	7	5.6

These answers seem to support the general concerns voiced in the previous sections that many students start their studies of English with vague, unclear or unrealistic goals. With regard to the last statement concerning the possible mismatch between students' expectation and first experience, we can note that only 39 students (31%) claimed that their studies fully matched their expectation. An additional 70 students (55.6%) indicated that what they experienced during the first two months of their studies partly matched their expectation. To summarize, only one-third of the students found what they had expected to find in their studies. This can partly be explained by their lack of information concerning the English program or their inability to fulfill the requirements.

The next two questions of the questionnaire focused on students' perception of their language proficiency level, before and after admission to the university. Although, as already mentioned, we would expect an advanced proficiency level from undergraduates entering university as English or American Studies majors and minors, we found that only five of 107 respondents scored above 80 % on the Oxford Placement Test. This would imply that students themselves feel the need for better language skills, a basis for succeeding in their student career. Answers given to these two questions, however, do not support these expectations. As summarized in Table 2, half of the students, upon their entry to the English program, believed to have good language skills and expected to face few problems caused by their language proficiency level. An additional 8.7 % felt to have fully adequate language skills. All remaining students expected to encounter some language problems, but only one of them expected serious difficulties in the English program due to inadequate language proficiency level. It is, therefore, clear from these data that many students overestimated their preparedness for their studies, an issue that is often raised during informal feedback sessions given to students on their course performance.

Another interesting aspect to analyze is whether students' judgment changes and becomes more realistic as they gain some academic experience. The answers students gave approximately two months after enrolling in the BA program indicate that there was some shift toward the lower scores. Overall, students felt less prepared for their studies after having faced the first challenges. A closer examination, however, reveals that 79 students (62.7%) were not influenced in their judgment by the introductory months, eleven (8.7%) even felt more prepared than previously. For one of these students this meant moving up two points on the scale. Not surprisingly, however, there were students who modified their answers and moved one or two points down on the scale: 32 respondents (27%) lowered their judgment by one point and two (1.6%) by two points. These last students changed their answer from the 'good language skills, few expected problems' to the 'serious language problems' category. It needs to be underlined, however, that in light of the test results and course work, many more students should have lowered their scores. The results seem to support instructors' general feeling that students are often unable to identify and foresee the problems that they will face while progressing through their years of studies.

Table 2: Students' perceived language proficiency level and preparedness for university studies of English

Answer	Before starting university		In the second month of the first semester	
	Number of students	Percentage points	Number of students	Percentage points
1	1	0.8	7	5.6
2	51	40.5	61	48.4
3	63	50	51	40.5
4	11	8.7	7	5.6
Total	126	100	126	100

1 = serious language problems

2 = not very good language skills which causes problems

3 = good language skills, few problems

4 = fully adequate language skills

Answers given to the remaining two statements further indicate a mismatch between students' self-judgment and reality: 37.3% of the students believed that they could always follow the courses held in English, and an additional 57.9% claimed that language-wise they were usually able to understand the instructors. This is a much better picture than what the same students gave in the second part of the questionnaire when asked about specific seminars and lectures (Doró, 2009b, 2009c). This result might also support my frequent concern that students are often unable to understand how much they do not understand of the course material. Difficulties deriving mainly from language problems are also too often paired up with difficulties deriving from the lack of content knowledge: 64.3% of

the students claimed that the information presented in class was usually new to them, while the remaining 33.3% claimed that it was usually not.

Findings from the present study suggest that many students in question believe that their language skills are adequate for carrying out undergraduate studies in an L2-dominant academic environment. However, their level of academic literacy even in their mother tongue might not be high enough to experience a smooth shift from secondary to tertiary level education. The simple fact of having progressed through secondary education with good enough English grades and having been accepted for undergraduate studies in English can create the impression that their skills are adequate enough for their chosen field. They have little reason to believe differently, especially if they do not know what to expect from their tertiary level education or if they are unable to form realistic judgments about their abilities, skills and program requirements.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that first-year students of English often have little preparation for overcoming the challenges they face while learning the academic language and content of the courses. They seem to play a daily survival game of academic achievement, but many are unsuccessful players because too often they do not only miss clear goals, lack language and study skills, but are also unable to evaluate their own abilities and failures. This complexity makes teaching and learning academic literacy a great challenge and often presents a frustrating point for both undergraduate students and instructors. Support should be given to students in becoming academically literate and navigate through the challenges of higher education. This should be done not only through teaching class content, but also through awareness-raising, in order to assist students in finding the roles they themselves should play in their own academic achievement. The research instrument applied in this study was very general in nature; therefore, it could be used with other similar student populations. The information gained from the data can serve instructors' need to learn more about their students' backgrounds, understand their aspirations, and build on their (lack of) competencies when designing the syllabus or reacting to student failures.

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