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THE IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENT ELEMENTS OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE FOR PARTICIPATION IN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY PROGRAMS: STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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Keywords:
English as a foreign
language;
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of higher education.

Abstract. The aim of this paper is to determine how students from the University of Novi Sad, Serbia, and the University of East Sarajevo, Republic of Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina, perceive the importance of certain language skills and aspects of English as foreign language knowledge for participation in international student mobility programs, and whether there are any significant differences between the responses of students from the two universities. To this end, a structured questionnaire was designed and administered among senior-year students from 10 faculties of the University of Novi Sad (N = 727) and 11 faculties of the University of East Sarajevo (N = 264) who participated in mobility programs during the winter semester of the academic year 2024/25. The data were processed using descriptive statistics, a t-test, and the Mann–Whitney U test. The results show that students highly value general communication skills, particularly speaking and listening comprehension, and that students from East Sarajevo—unlike their Novi Sad peers—assign almost equal importance to all areas of knowledge and language skills.

The differing perceptions between the students of the two universities reveal several significant differences. Of the 11 survey items, nine show statistically significant differences, including conventions of academic style, everyday communication, extensive vocabulary, specialized vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, excellent pronunciation, oral and written expression on specialized topics, and comprehension of lectures and spoken communication. These findings open avenues for further research and call for similar studies in the Western Balkans to better understand students' attitudes and create an environment that will encourage more students to take part in mobility programs, given their importance for the internationalization of higher education and greater cooperation among higher education institutions in the region.

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Introduction

International student mobility (ISM), in its different forms regarding duration and modality (cf. Erdei & Káplár-Kodácsy, 2020), is considered instrumental in implementing internationalization of higher education as one of the solutions to the challenges posed by globalization (Barragán Codina & Leal López, 2013; Teichler, 2017; de Wit, 2019). Higher education institutions around the world and the European Commission (2020) foreground the vital importance of foreign language skills for successful ISM experiences and achieving quality in education (cf. Ovchinnikova et al., 2023). The multifaceted nature of the role and importance of language competence in ISM has been extensively researched. In particular, enhancing foreign language skills has been considered one of the main outcomes or benefits of ISM (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Teichler, 2017; Cojocaru, 2018; Xu, 2019; Jackson et al., 2020; Hadfield & Lynch, 2025). Multiple studies have focused on different elements of language competence, especially in the context of English as a lingua franca study abroad and the rising popularity of English as a medium of instruction, and reported gains in general proficiency, listening, reading, writing, and oral skills (Pérez-Vidal & Barquin, 2014; Kaya, 2021; Pérez-Vidal & Llanes, 2021; Köylü et al., 2023), among others. Aspirations to improve language proficiency in a global language or the chance to learn a language, often as part of what is termed intellectual capital or intellectual migration (cf. Albien & Mashatola, 2021), have been reported as motives for applying for ISM (Teichler, 2017; Yin & Zong, 2022).

A number of studies have shown that language proficiency can act as a driver of ISM, but also as a barrier. Namely, students who assess their language skills at an advanced level or use it daily are more likely to apply for ISM than those who assess them at an intermediate level (Ovchinnikova et al., 2024). On the other hand, not being confident in language skills often poses a barrier to participating in ISM (López-Duarte et al., 2021; Brooks, 2023; Gutema et al., 2023; Doda et al., 2024; Ovchinnikova et al., 2024) or may influence students' decision to choose a host country where the same or linguistically similar language is spoken (Ovchinnikova et al., 2022, 2024). Therefore, language proficiency plays an important role

in choosing a study destination abroad (Curaj et al., 2015; Ovchinnikova et al., 2024), on a par with political affiliation (Varghese, 2008), but the decision also depends on the type of mobility and the cooperation agreements between higher education institutions (Ovchinnikova et al., 2024).

The results of our research for the University of Novi Sad, Serbia, show that the highest priority is given to English language proficiency among the variables which influence applying for ISM (under review). According to another research in the Western Balkan region, language proficiency and communication barriers are marked as factors which can significantly affect the success and general experience of ISM of Albanian students (Doda et al., 2024). The research presented in this paper aligns with research related to various factors influencing students' decision to apply for ISM by seeking to discover how students value different elements of foreign language competence.

With globalization, the importance of the English language and English communication skills has increased (Akinbode et al., 2017; Higuchi et al., 2023), and English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has been introduced to universities worldwide (Elkhayma, 2022). It plays a fundamental role in the internationalization of higher education and in driving ISM (Kurusu et al., 2024). In the early 1990s, due to geopolitical changes, universities in the region of the Former Yugoslavia started intensively introducing English as a compulsory subject in many study programs. By joining the Bologna Process during the 2000s, English became compulsory or widely represented at universities across the region and an indispensable tool for science, communication, and instruction. In Serbia and the Republic of Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina), English is not institutionally compulsory for all university students, but the vast majority of students choose it over other available foreign languages (if any). Higher education institutions offer a variety of bachelor and postgraduate programs in English, and proof of the minimum recommended level of language proficiency is often required, as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL).

In spite of its importance for the region, research on international student mobility (ISM) in the Western Balkans has been scarce. The available studies, surveys, and reports have primarily focused on the following topics: pushing and pulling factors for ISM in Albania (Doda et al., 2024); advancing inclusive regional mobility (Lula & Bino, 2023); students' perspective on ERASMUS+ and its consequences (Beharić, 2022); the effects of ISM based on students' experiences (Unger et al., 2022); the social dimensions of ISM in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia (Savić et al., 2015); identifying the perception, attitudes, and experiences of students from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia regarding studying abroad (Bešić, 2009); and the impact of an internationalization strategy on ISM (Bošnjović & Trivun, 2013).

The aim of this paper is to examine how students from a university in Serbia and a university in the Republic of Srpska perceive the role of English as a foreign

language (EFL), more specifically, the importance of certain language skills and areas of language knowledge for participation in ISM.

Materials and Methods

As previously noted, this study aims at examining the perceptions of students from Serbia and the Republic of Srpska regarding the importance of EFL knowledge for participation in ISM programs. Along with the aim of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: How do students from the University of Novi Sad (UNS, SRB) and the University of East Sarajevo (UES, RS) perceive the importance of various elements of EFL knowledge for ISM participation?

RQ2: Are there any significant differences between the responses of students from the two universities?

To answer the research questions, this study employed a survey method with a cross-sectional design. The study focuses on one section of the questionnaire comprising 11 items related to EFL knowledge, skills, and competences. The items address the importance of the following: 1) knowledge of the conventions of academic expression style; 2) everyday communication; 3) extensive vocabulary; 4) specialized or technical vocabulary; 5) grammatical accuracy; 6) excellent pronunciation; 7) understanding lectures and English used for spoken communication; 8) understanding the content of specialized textbooks and other written documents; 9) oral expression on specialized topics; 10) writing on specialized topics; and 11) various strategies for coping with communication problems (e.g. paraphrasing, relying on context). The respondents assessed how important the above aspects are for ISM participation by selecting an answer on a four-point Likert scale (1—I totally disagree; 2—I partially disagree; 3—I partially agree; 4—I absolutely agree).

The participants included senior-year students from ten faculties of the University of Novi Sad (UNS; N = 727) and eleven faculties of the University of East Sarajevo (UES; N = 264), resulting in a total sample of 973 respondents. All participating faculties offer opportunities for international student mobility (ISM). English language majors did not participate in the survey, and the majority of participants—64% at UNS and 69% at UES—self-assessed their English language proficiency as sufficient for ISM participation. Additionally, only 22 respondents across the sample had previously participated in ISM, which was considered insufficient to have any significant statistical impact on the results.

The data were collected in October and November 2024 and analyzed using descriptive statistics, a t-test, and the Mann–Whitney U test. Cronbach's alpha for the reliability of the structured questionnaire was 0.863 for the total sample, 0.844 for the UNS sample, and 0.887 for the UES sample. Before being implemented, the

questionnaire was piloted on a sample of psychology majors, whose comments and impressions contributed to the final version of the instrument.

Results

The descriptive statistics results addressing the level of importance of EFL knowledge and skills as perceived by the respondents from Serbia and the Republic of Srpska are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

The students from Serbia perceive everyday communication and understanding lectures and spoken communication as the most important skills for ISM, as these areas received the highest ratings on the 1–4 scale (Table 1).

Table 1. The importance of EFL knowledge for ISM participation on a 1–4 scale as perceived by UNS (SRB) students

	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Conventions of academic expression style	3.02	0.78	-0.363	-0.362
Everyday communication	3.70	0.52	-1.320	1.940
Extensive vocabulary	3.42	0.67	-0.824	0.366
Specialized/technical vocabulary	3.19	0.74	-0.589	0.276
Correct usage of grammatical structures	2.97	0.82	-0.406	-0.357
Excellent pronunciation	2.75	0.83	-0.219	-0.451
Understanding lectures and spoken communication	3.69	0.56	-1.693	3.446
Understanding the content of specialized textbooks and other written documents	3.53	0.66	-1.133	1.218
Oral expression on specialized topics	3.41	0.66	-0.716	0.067
Writing on specialized topics	3.34	0.69	-0.644	-0.104
Strategies for coping with communication problems	3.49	0.65	-0.920	0.447

As shown in Table 1, the values for Serbian students range from 2.75 to 3.70. They prioritize speaking and listening comprehension in everyday communication, as these skills received the highest ratings (3.70 and 3.69, respectively). Conversely, the lowest-rated items are excellent pronunciation and correct grammar usage (2.75 and 2.97, respectively). The remaining items fall within a range of 3.02 to 3.53. A normal distribution was observed for all items, except for *Understanding lectures and spoken communication* and *Understanding specialized textbooks and written documents*.

The values recorded by the Republic of Srpska students are given in Table 2 below. As can be seen from the table, these students give high importance to all aspects of EFL knowledge, with all scores at 3.46 or higher. A slight advantage is given to *Specialized/technical vocabulary* and *Understanding lectures and spoken communication*, as these areas received the highest ratings.

Table 2. The importance of EFL knowledge for ISM participation on a 1–4 scale as perceived by UES (RS) students

	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Conventions of academic expression style	3.52	0.74	-1.351	0.798
Everyday communication	3.46	0.75	-1.251	0.835
Extensive vocabulary	3.52	0.74	-1.343	0.785
Specialized/technical vocabulary	3.62	2.55	14.058	218.247
Correct usage of grammatical structures	3.50	0.76	-1.281	0.535
Excellent pronunciation	3.49	0.75	-1.405	1.370
Understanding lectures and spoken communication	3.55	0.73	-1.499	1.438
Understanding the content of specialized textbooks and other written documents	3.47	0.75	-1.300	0.926
Oral expression on specialized topics	3.52	0.74	-1.400	1.056
Writing on specialized topics	3.50	0.70	-1.253	0.964
Strategies for coping with communication problems	3.49	0.77	-1.308	0.685

As previously noted, the range of recorded values for UES students is much narrower, with scores ranging from 3.46 to 3.62. Unlike their peers at UNS, UES students consider all aspects of EFL knowledge to be of nearly equal importance. Skewness and kurtosis values indicate a lack of normal distribution across all items.⁶

To check whether there are significant differences between the responses of UNS and UES students, the Mann–Whitney U test or a t-test was applied, depending on whether the normality assumption was violated. The results are given in the following two tables. Table 3 presents the results for six items which did not meet the normality assumption and thus required the application of the Mann–Whitney U test. The differences between the other five items, analyzed using a t-test, are given in Table 4. Overall, the p-values presented in both tables point to statistically significant differences across almost all assessed areas of EFL knowledge.

Table 3. Differences between UNS (SRB) and UES (RS) students' responses that violate the assumption of normality

	Mean rank (UNS)	Mean rank (UES)	Mann–Whitney U test	Z	p
Conventions of academic expression style	633.99	450.63	132023.50	9.504	0.000
Everyday communication	446.27	519.30	82834.50	-4.314	0.000
Extensive vocabulary	540.05	484.91	107594.50	2.996	0.003
Specialized/technical vocabulary	586.35	468.98	119816.50	6.18	0.000
Correct usage of grammatical structures	632.72	449.35	132057.00	9.487	0.000
Excellent pronunciation	678.01	434.53	144015.00	12.468	0.000

⁶ Skewness and kurtosis are statistical indicators of deviation from a normal distribution, reflecting asymmetry and peakedness, respectively. Extreme values on these measures indicate a lack of normality (Kline, 2016; Field, 2018).

As shown in Table 3, there are significant differences between the student responses for all six items. As for the rest of the items, the differences are presented in the following table.

Table 4. Differences between UNS (SRB) and UES (RS) students’ responses with normal distribution

	University	Mean	SD	Mean difference	t	p	95% Confidence interval of the difference	
							Lower	Upper
Understanding lectures and spoken communication	UNS UES	3.69 3.55	0.56 0.73	0.14	3.297	0.001	0.058	0.230
Understanding the content of specialized textbooks and other written documents	UNS UES	3.53 3.47	0.66 0.75	0.06	1.136	0.256	-0.041	0.152
Oral expression on specialized topics	UNS UES	3.41 3.52	0.66 0.74	-0.11	-2.321	0.020	-0.209	-0.018
Writing on specialized topics	UNS UES	3.34 3.50	0.69 0.70	-0.16	-3.138	0.002	-0.252	-0.058
Strategies for coping with communication problems	UNS UES	3.49 3.49	0.65 0.77	-0.01	-0.111	0.912	-0.101	0.091

In this case, three out of five items show significant differences between the students’ responses. Overall, significant differences were detected in the students’ responses to nine of the eleven survey items.

In summary, the obtained results show that the students from both universities perceive speaking and listening skills as highly relevant for participation in ISM. While UES students assign equal importance to all aspects of EFL knowledge, their UNS peers show greater variability in their responses. These differing perceptions between the two student groups result in several statistically significant differences, which are discussed in the following section.

Discussion

The results presented in the previous chapter address answers to the research questions formulated in this study. Firstly, they reveal which areas of EFL knowledge and skills are given priority for participation in ISM programs. For UNS students, spoken everyday communication and comprehension, together with understanding lectures, is primary for successful participation in student mobility programs. In the context of ISM research, spoken everyday communication has already been recognized as a key factor. For example, in their research on the role of foreign language skills in the study abroad decision-making of Belgian and Dutch students, Ovchinnikova et al. (2024) report that students who speak

a foreign language daily are more likely to apply for ISM. Good pronunciation, on the other hand, is the element that UNS students find least important, reflecting a “fluency over accuracy” attitude—possibly a reflection of the concept that has shaped their EFL learning. Surprisingly, elements related to subject-specific language—such as academic style, conventions, and technical vocabulary—are perceived as less important. A possible explanation for this may lie in the fact that the participants were senior-year students who had already completed their English courses at university and gained experience in these areas by reading relevant literature, articles, and reports while preparing for the courses they took and other study-related activities. An additional explanation may be of a more practical nature. Namely, participation in an ISM program involves living in a foreign country and constant communication in a foreign language, i.e., English, in a wide range of everyday situations. The students may therefore perceive this area as more important than academic language knowledge.

Unlike their UNS peers, UES students assign equally high importance to all the listed skills and areas of knowledge. This discrepancy is underscored by the detection of significant differences in nine out of the eleven survey items. Such a high number of statistically significant differences naturally raises the question of why students from Serbia and the Republic of Srpska perceive the importance of certain elements of EFL knowledge for ISM participation so differently. Since both sub-samples self-assessed their EFL proficiency similarly (as noted in the Materials and Methods chapter), the explanation cannot lie in an unequal EFL proficiency between them. Also, the EFL educational background in both countries is very similar: in addition to formal education from an early age through university, attending private language schools is also widespread and popular in both Serbia and the Republic of Srpska.

As for ISM, both UNS and UES respondents come from faculties that offer mobility programs. However, program availability differs, with fewer options, and consequently fewer opportunities for participation, available to UES respondents, especially at smaller faculties. This may lead UES students to value ISM opportunities more highly, with this attitude possibly affecting their perception of the value of EFL for ISM. Other possible explanations may include social and cultural factors, such as prestige and admiration within the local community, family expectations, and professional networking, each of which may be valued differently in the two countries. All these aspects are worth further exploration and open up a broad range of new research possibilities. Overall, the findings of this study point to the multifaceted nature of the role of English as a foreign language in ISM, as highlighted by other authors as well (Jackson et al., 2020; Kaya, 2021; Brooks, 2023; and others).

Concluding Remarks

This paper seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on the role and importance of English as a foreign language in ISM with a collaborative, empirical study from a developing region, throwing light on students' perception of the importance of various skills and areas of English language knowledge as a factor which may influence their decision to apply for ISM, an aspect less researched globally. The results show that the students from both UNS and UES highly value general communication through speaking and listening comprehension, but a comparison of the responses from the two universities reveals a significant discrepancy, with UES students attaching greater importance to almost all the skills and areas listed.

This opens new avenues for further research, such as examining social and cultural factors, conducting comparative studies in the Western Balkan region, and applying qualitative research design. The ultimate aim is to motivate more students to take part in ISM programs, considering their numerous personal, institutional, and social benefits—personal development, their prominent role in the process of higher education internationalization, and their potential to foster openness and regional integration. In order to achieve this, the paper ends with a call for more research on the role of English language competence and other relevant factors influencing ISM participation among students from the Western Balkan region and other countries.

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Значај различитих елемената енглеског
као страног језика за учествовање у програмима међународне
мобилности студената: ставови студената

Резиме

Циљ рада је да утврди како студенти Универзитета у Новом Саду из Србије и универзитета у Источном Сарајеву из Републике Српске (Босна и Херцеговина) виде значај одређених језичких вештина и сегмената знања енглеског као страног језика за учествовање у међународним програмима студентске размене и да ли постоје значајне разлике у одговорима студената са поменутих универзитета. За ову сврху састављен је структурирани упитник и анкетирани су студенти завршних година десет факултета Универзитета у Новом Саду (N = 727) и једанаест факултета Универзитета у Источном Сарајеву (N = 264) који су учествовали у програмима међународне студентске мобилности током зимског семестра 2024/2025. академске године. Прикупљени подаци обрађени су помоћу дескриптивне статистике, т-теста и Ман-Витнијевог U теста. Добијени резултати показују да студенти високо

вреднују општу комуникацију путем говора и разумевања слушања и да студенти из Источног Сарајева придају готово једнаку важност скоро свим језичким вештинама и сегментима знања енглеског језика, за разлику од њихових вршњака из Новог Сада. Различите перцепције студената двају универзитета доводе до извесног броја значајних разлика. Од једанаест ставки из упитника, девет показују значајне разлике између испитаника. Те разлике односе се на познавање конвенција академског стила изражавања, комуникацију у свакодневним ситуацијама, широк општи вокабулар, стручни вокабулар, правилну употребу граматичких структура, одличан изговор, усмено и писмено изражавање на теме из струке и праћење и разумевање предавања и уопште комуникације на енглеском језику. Налази истраживања отварају широко подручје за даља истраживања и указују на потребу за сличним истраживањем у региону Западног Балкана да би се боље разумели ставови студената и да би се створило окружење које ће подстицати студенте да у већем броју учествују у програмима међународне мобилности, имајући на уму значај ових програма за интернационализацију високог образовања и за већу сарадњу институција високог образовања у региону.

Кључне речи: енглески као страни језик; језичке вештине на енглеском; међународна мобилност студената; интернационализација високог образовања.



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