



## **Survey of the English language proficiency of the academic staff at the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, Bulgaria**

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### **Abstract**

*This report aims to present the results of a survey on the attitudes towards the need to increase the English foreign language competence of the academic staff of the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, Sofia, Bulgaria. This survey is a part of a larger project, which is pointed at exploring the need to improve the English foreign language competence of the academic staff of the aforementioned university measured by the attitudes of both university students and their lecturers of non-English taught subjects. The outcomes of the survey clearly show that the academic staff is strongly inclined to strengthen their English language skills, because they are perceived as definitely insufficient for their day-to-day academic endeavors and further professional development. The results of the present study could open up space for future university-based initiatives and academic discussions on finding the best possible solutions how to develop the English foreign language competences of the academic staff in order for them to successfully participate in the process of internationalization and the international scientific field of knowledge relying confidently and solely on their increased English foreign language improvements. As a result of their enhanced English language proficiency, the university lecturers can secure their engagement in international scientific research, improve access to global STEM resources, and enable more effective teaching within science related disciplines.*

**Keywords:** *English, foreign, language competence, survey, academic staff*

### **1. Introduction**

The key concept of internationalization has evolved from a mere buzzword to a complex process based on strategic documents and policy requirements in the realm of higher education driven by the European Commission over the last few decades. An intrinsic value of this process is the international collaboration and research, cross-border partnerships and exchange of international students, to name just a few. The internationalization process is deeply rooted and dependent on the wide use of English language as a unified means of communication and teaching programmes, hence recognized as a medium of instruction and a mechanism for internationalizing the higher educational environment and prompting higher levels of international mobility.

The involvement and participation in the internationalization process of the European countries has been a different story for the western and the eastern parts of the continent. Orechova explains that "Western Europe has a substantial history in internationalisation efforts both due to the European Union higher education area integration and the more active participation in the international education market by the universities in these countries. Central and Eastern Europe, on the other hand, has joined the internationalisation trend significantly later due to historic circumstances" [1]. As a consequence of these irregularities, the English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom understandably have more author contributors in publications written in English compared to some Central and Eastern European countries which remain low in number [1]. In terms of English-medium instruction programmes in countries where English is not the official language, Kalnberziņa & Karapetjana [2] report that "there has been an increasing tendency to introduce English-medium instruction programmes in the world. For instance, universities in Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands have the largest proportion of EMI programmes".

Referring to Bulgaria, where the present survey has been performed, the process of internationalization is regulated by the official document "Decision to Adopt a Strategy for the Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2021 - 2030" of the National Assembly. This document stipulates the imminent challenges to the system of higher education concerning the insufficient implementation of the process of internationalization in the country. The main challenges include insufficient language training of some Bulgarian academic



lecturers and researchers, which hinders the creation of programs and courses in a foreign language, the attraction of foreign students and doctoral candidates, and the participation in research consortia and communities; a small number of specialties and programs offered in a foreign language and in a distance learning form in many HEIs; insufficient skills for working in an international environment on the part of some of the lecturers and part of the administration in HEIs [3].

In Bulgaria, out of 46 HEIs, there are a few universities which offer their study programmes solely in English language including Sofia University (e.g. European Union and European Integration, Philosophy, etc.); University of National and World Economy (e.g. Accounting, Financial Control and Finance, Diplomacy and Strategic Analysis, etc.); Technical University (e.g. Industrial Engineering, Engineering Ecology, etc.); Medical Universities in Sofia, Plovdiv, Pleven and Varna (Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy, etc.).

The University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (ULSIT) does not offer any study programmes in English in bachelor's and master's degree programmes and stays aside from the process of internationalization in terms of introducing English-medium instruction programmes. The only exception are the doctoral programmes of doctoral students from Austria and Germany (Interreligious Relations and Protection of Human Rights; Information Systems and Technologies, Informatics and Computer Science; National Security; Security in International Relations) in the Faculty of Information Sciences and in the Faculty of Library Studies and Cultural Heritage (Book Studies, Library Studies and Bibliography; Epistemology; Business, Administrative, Public Communications and Technologies; Cultural and Historical Heritage in the Modern Information Environment; History and Archeology; Leadership; Organization and Management of Information Processes). In the bachelor's and master's degree programmes there are accredited curricula of training courses, but they are only valid on paper and do not function in reality, because there are neither Erasmus foreign students (with the exception of one Erasmus student from Croatia, academic year 2021/2022) willing to enroll in these programmes nor university students from Bulgaria who would prefer to have their studies in English language. As a result of the Erasmus student's mobility at ULSIT, a publication in English was published in international conference proceedings [4].

In order to implement the internationalization requirements the academic staff should possess sufficient English language proficiency and lecture their academic subjects in English language. This problem poses serious hindrances to the image of the university and a prerequisite this academic quality issue to be resolved by the university authorities.

Despite this negative trend, there are still a number of university lecturers at ULSIT, who have gained international recognition in their scientific field due to their advanced English language skills, thus contributing to its development (T. Trencheva, T. Todorova, M. Garvanova, M. Encheva, B. Zhekov, V. Zagorov, etc.).

## **2. Methodology**

In view of the above-mentioned context of the insufficient number of English-medium instruction programmes in the bachelor's and master's degree programmes at ULSIT, a survey of the English language proficiency of the academic staff has been carried out in the spring semester, academic year 2025. This survey is a part of an inner-funded project entitled "Research on the attitudes towards the need to increase the foreign language competence of the academic staff of ULSIT". The research comprises of two separate surveys – among the academic staff and among the university students assessing their lecturers' language proficiency in English. In this article the first survey is a topic of interest and discussion. The research utilized the quantitative method based on a survey design.

The current total number of academic lecturers at ULSIT is 143. There are 76 academic respondents, who participated in the anonymous and voluntary survey electronically via Google forms. The survey consists of 3 sections: demographic questions; questions about the current level of English proficiency; questions about future English foreign language development. The total number of the survey questions is 35.

## **3. Analysis of the Results Obtained**

The answers to questions 1-9 of the *First Demographic Section* reveal that 50% of the academic staff at ULSIT is over 50 years old, the prevailing part is female lecturers (71.1%), who have signed a permanent employment contract with the university (98.7%) and are habilitated lecturers (59.2%) having defended their doctoral degree (85.5%) with an academic degree - chief assistant professor (36.8%), associate professor (32.9%) and professor (27.6%). Most respondents specialize in the

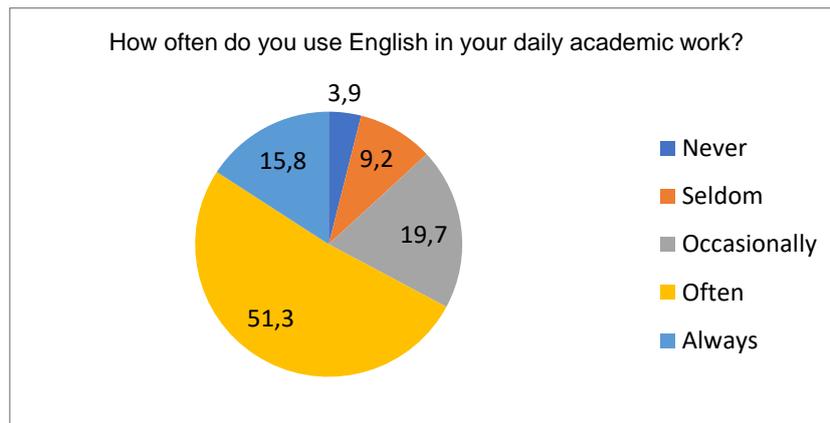


professional field of Public Communications and Information Sciences (61.8%) teaching university students in bachelor's (100%) and master's (73.7%) degree programmes in the Faculty of Library Studies and Cultural Heritage (65.8%).

In the *Second Section* of the survey about the academic staff's current level of English proficiency, the respondents perceive their current level of English proficiency as Intermediate B1 (according to CERF) (36.8%), followed by Upper-Intermediate level B2 (27.6%), Advanced level C1 (17.1%), Beginner and Pre-Intermediate levels A1/A2 (15.8%) and Proficiency level (2.6%).

To the question "Do you use English in your work?", the resounding 92.1% answer positively and only 7.9% admit that they do not use English in their academic duties.

The third question refers to the frequency of English language use in their academic work. The result of 51.3% show that the academic staff at ULSIT uses the English language often, 19.7% use it occasionally, 15.8% - always, 9.2% - seldom and only 3.9% - never (Fig. 1)



**Fig. 1**

The answers to the multiple-choice question 4 "What is the main purpose of using English in your work?" indicate that writing scientific articles (85.5%) and participation in international conferences and other scientific events (78.9%) are the most important reasons for the academic staff to use English in their academic work. The 59.2% respondents use English to go on business trips and communicate with colleagues abroad. For working on scientific projects 56.6% of the respondents have chose English and only 15.8% of the academic staff teach their academic subjects in English.

Although the respondents have determined the exact level of their English language proficiency in this survey, a large proportion of them consider their level of English skills as unsatisfactory (65.8%); the rest of the academic staff view it as satisfactory (30.3%) and 3.9% cannot estimate.

It is evident from the respondents' answers in the survey that they do not teach their academic subjects in English language (85.5%) except for 14.5% who do. Out of these 14.5% only 0-25% of their amount of lectures and seminars are taught in English (92.1%).

Despite the lack of academic subjects taught in English mainly in the bachelor's and master's degree programmes at ULSIT, the academic staff think that it is important to teach at least part of their lectures in English language (42.1%). The 38.2% respondents say that it is not important and 19.7% cannot estimate that matter.

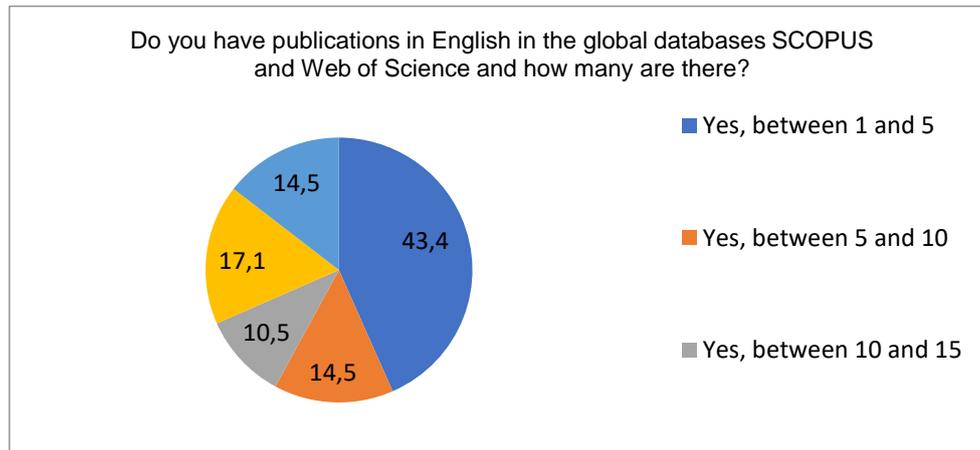
When asked "What kind of challenges do you face when you teach your subject in English?", 63.2% of the academic staff responded that they lacked confidence in their knowledge of the language. Other possible challenges include difficulties when adapting the course contents into English language (19.7%), absence of appropriate teaching materials (10.5%) and lack of university support (6.6%).

The next group of questions in Section Two of this survey is directed to the activities in which the respondents are involved when using the English language. Considering the frequency of reading scientific texts in English language in their professional field, 50% of the respondents say that they often read English scientific texts; 23.7% point out that they always read such kind of texts and 14.5% occasionally read English scientific articles. To the question whether the respondents participate in international projects and international scientific events in which English is the main working language, 71.1% state that they do participate in such events and 28.9% are not part of the international cooperation between universities.

In the next five questions 12-16 the respondents are asked whether they have any publication activities in English language (91.1% positive versus 7.9% negative) and what is the ratio between



Bulgarian and English language publications (67.1% fewer in English; 17.1% more in English; 15.8% equal number). For 42.1% of the respondents their total number of publications comprises 25-50% of their publications in English language; 34.2% of the respondents have 0-25% publications in English language; and 11.8% have their equal 50-75% and 75-100% publications in English out of the total number of their publication load. The publications by ULSIT author contributors in the global scientific databases such as Scopus and Web of Science are between 1 and 5 (43.4%); 14.5% of the respondents have between 5 and 10 publications and the same number of respondents do not have publications in the global scientific databases. The 17.1% respondents have more than 15 publications and 10.5% have between 10 and 15 (Fig.2).

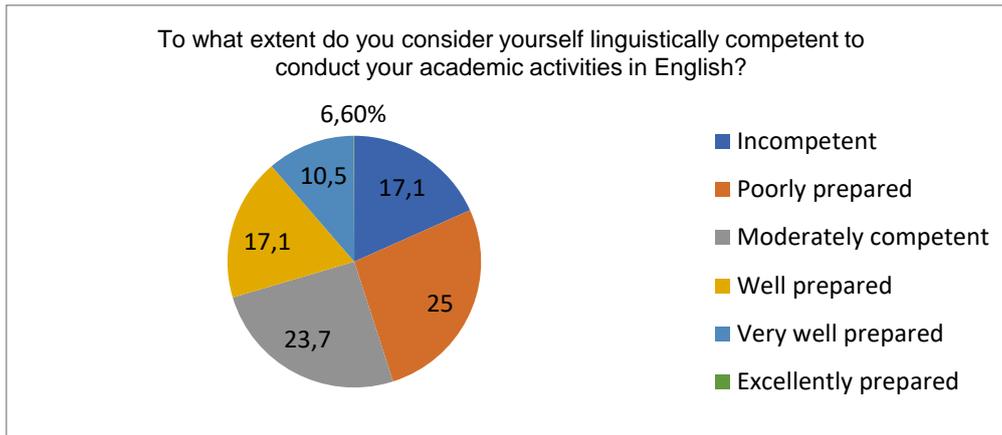


**Fig. 2**

To the question “Do you use citation in English in your scientific publication?”, the tremendous number of 93.4% denotes that they use it in their publishing activities. The answers to question 17 concerning their activities as scientific reviewers of international publication or proceedings of an international conference in English as the main language reveal almost equal ratio of 44.7% of the respondents who have been scientific reviewer and 55.3% who have not taken this responsibility, which is a positive step further in their professional development when using the English language.

The findings of the last portion of questions 18-20 from Section Two suggest that the respondents have not participated in teachers’ mobility Erasmus programmes (75%) and only 25% have been a part of them. Out of this 25%, only 22.4% of the respondents have taught their academic subject in English language. Due to this low representation of teachers’ mobility at ULSIT, the academic staff would like to participate in initiatives to improve their qualifications in terms of teaching English and attracting international students (72.4%).

In question 21 of Section Two respondents admit that the greatest difficulties and English language challenges they face are rooted in both oral and written acquisition of English language (50%); the rest of the answers are divided into oral language acquisition difficulties (30.3%), written language acquisition difficulties (21.1%) and no difficulties at all (11.8%). The findings of the last question 22 “To what extent do you consider yourself linguistically competent to conduct your academic activities in English” suggest that 17.1% of the respondents consider themselves incompetent; 25% think they are poorly prepared; 23.7% say they are moderately competent, 17.1% consider themselves as well prepared, 10.5% are very well prepared according to their own opinion and only 6.6% consider themselves as excellently prepared to conduct their academic activities in English language (Fig. 3) The proportion of the respondents’ own assessment of their readiness and competency is equally distributed in the chart showing one half of the answers as incompetent and the other half as competent and well prepared enough for their academic work.



**Fig. 3**

The Third Section of the survey contains questions 1-4 about the future English foreign language development of the academic staff at ULSIT. Only 7.9% of the respondents do not think they need any additional help and support in providing English language training courses at the university. The rest of the academic staff would prefer to develop further their English language skills suggesting the language aspects which need to be improved: communicative skills and engaging in oral discussions (69.7%); vocabulary skills (61.8%); grammar skills (51.3%); writing skills (50%); listening skills (46.1%); pronunciation and intonation skills (44.7%); reading skills (30.3%).

When asked "Would you participate in an English language training program if one was organized by the university, and how would you prefer the training to be organized?", the prevailing number of respondents (53.9%) answer affirmatively and choose the option of blended learning format. The other options they choose are face-to-face courses (23.7%); online courses (11.8%); and 10.5% respondents would not participate in such training programmes. They also share their expectations towards the training process – improving their communication skills (75%); increasing their chances of publishing their scientific works in international editions (47.4%), which is equal to improving their teaching skills in English language (47.4%). The 3.9% respondents have not specified their expectations in terms of their future training and development of their English language skills.

Finally, to the question "Do you believe that improving your English language proficiency would contribute to your overall academic development and growth?", the majority of the respondents (80.3%) strongly believe that improving their English language proficiency would favor their overall career advancement, 14.5% cannot estimate and only 5.3% consider improving their English language proficiency would not impact their future professional goals.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The results of the survey unequivocally show that the level of English language proficiency of the academic staff at ULSIT is still insufficient in order for the university lecturers to perform their academic duties and teach academic subjects in English-medium instruction programmes. Although they perceive their English language competence as comparatively low in terms of academic subjects taught in English language, publication load, mobility and scientific event activities, and international connections with colleagues their attitudes towards improving their English language skills is obviously positive with explicit expectations and motivation to improve their English language skills in order to participate equally in the process of internationalization and make greater academic achievements.

The only question which remains unanswered and poses some misunderstanding is how the academic staff has manages to use the English language so far as a tool of communication to write scientific texts, participate in international events and teachers' mobilities despite the numbers being under average. I presume the answer to this question solely lies in resolving this problem of developing their English language proficiency on individual basis without the institutional support of the university.

These few lecturers' exceptions could be illustrated with examples of their academic activities such as participating in international conferences (e.g. INTED conference) and projects (e.g. Erasmus+ project Digital Education for Crisis Situations: Times when there is no alternative (DECriS)), being editors of scientific journals (e.g. Izdatel Scientific Journal), being members of academic councils (e.g. Informing Science Institute, USA) publishing scientific articles in English, having access to global STEM



resources, and by improving their English language skills, they will be able to teach subjects, thereby expanding their audience and inspiring significantly larger audience in their field of research.

In conclusion, stricter measures are now being taken by the university authorities to offer English language training courses, which will contribute to bridging the gap between the bottom-up and bottom-down approaches and overcome the challenges posed by the state government to expand the number university lecturers with improved English language proficiency and its practical implementation in international settings.

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