CHOICE OF STUDYING ENGLISH BY THE FIRST YEAR STUDENTS OF UASVM. MOTIVATIONS, ACQUISITION LEVEL, INFLUENCE FACTORS

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Abstract

For a significant number of university freshmen the choice of improving their level of English is a priority determined by its worldwide access. This allows them to obtain information from foreign scientific literature and to find a job in foreign farms in the country and abroad. Given the fact that levels of acquisition of this language is different for the 1st year students, the study aims to identify the knowledge of this language, the causes that led to the differentiation of pre-university education and the motivations that led them to choose the study of English of all the other four foreign languages (French, German, Spanish and Italian). The study was conducted in groups of university freshmen in the horticulture and landscape design specializations. Using the questionnaire method and direct investigations the results revealed that more than half of the students were assigned in groups of pre-intermediate and intermediate, 30% upper-intermediate and advanced, and almost 10% in beginner (basic English). The knowledge of English of a high school graduate who came to the agronomy university was determined by a combination of factors: the number of years of English study during pre-university education; the number of weekly hours of English language; interest to complete their vocabulary from extracurricular sources; motivation offered by the presence of English within the baccalaureate examination. Given the above situation, the teachers of English from agronomic higher education should establish appropriate strategies and find the most suited methods designed to ensure the best acquisition of specialized vocabulary in English by the end of their studies.

Key words: English, agronomy, level of knowledge, influence factors, motivations

In Romania, the study of foreign languages has had a sinuous evolution driven by the political context in which Romanian society was found. In the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the main foreign language in schools was French. At this has helped the Romanian language affinity with the French one, and the Romanian cultural and political ties with France.

After the Second World War, due to the fall under the influence of the Soviet Union, the main foreign language studied became the Russian language, followed by French and rarely by German and English.

After 1960, the Russian has acquired a secondary position, first rank being occupied by French, followed by English. This situation was maintained until 1990.

Meanwhile, in Europe, and worldwide, the language of communication became English.

After the fall of communism, especially after Romania joined the European Union, it became imperative in enhancing the learning of English in all educational structures, including the university level.

The knowledge of English is very important for the students from universities with agronomic profile, among others for having access to information from the scientific literature or to easier find a job in foreign companies both in Romania and abroad at the end of the university studies.

We aimed to study the level of knowledge of this language, the causes that determined the differentiation in the university education, the motivations that led to the choice of English to be studied etc.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The study was conducted in groups of college freshmen in the horticulture and landscape design specializations of the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Iasi.

The method used is the closed questionnaires that group a set of questions that have in view the type of graduated high school, number of years of English study, extracurricular means of acquiring the vocabulary etc.

Forty-one students from the 2014/2015 academic year were questioned.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The general data of the questionnaires show that the first year students of the profiles above come from various administrative backgrounds, graduates of high schools of varied typology that has influenced the curricula, the teaching methods and the motivation for learning the English language.

For the start we decided to analyze some of the factors that have differentiated educational level of English when the student begins his professional training. We took into account four criteria: the environment from which he graduated, the type of school, its profile, the specialization of the class graduated and the form of education.

1. The general situation at the beginning of university courses
1.1. The environment in which the high school studies were conducted

Of the total number of students, 36 (87.8%) come from urban areas and only 5 students (12.2%) graduated from high schools studies from rural areas (*figure 1*).
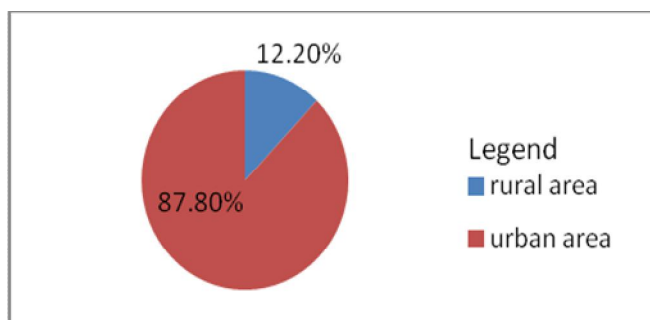

Figure 1 **The environment in which the high school studies were conducted**

The situation shown in *figure 1* is not specific to the students from the University with agronomy profile. It has a general character due to the small number of schools located in rural areas, but particularly to the limited material possibilities that the high school graduates have in order to continue their university education.

For the agronomic university education this is a worrying situation, because we consider that it would be better for the students to come from rural areas, because the environment in which they will practice their profession is familiar and they will adapt easily.

1.2. Type of graduated high school
There should be no major differences between the types of pre-university institutions regarding the preparedness of graduates. It is assumed that at high school, the exigency for high quality teachers is actually higher which relates to the level of preparedness of the students. But unlike high school, the college graduates have the responsibility to obtain a certificate enabling them to practice a trade. And if it has to do with agriculture, is an advantage for students from colleges with a certain profile.

The study showed that of the total number of students, 63.4% graduated from high school and 36.6% from college (*figure 2*).

For the students of USAMV it is important not only the type of high school but also the profile of the class graduated because it has to do with the curricula and the number of hours of foreign languages which they attended.

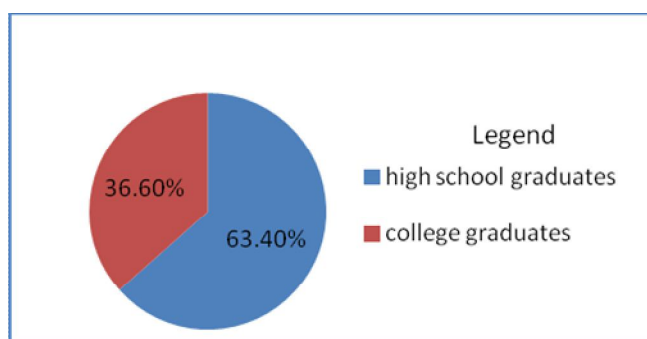Below we will point out the existence of these correlations.

Figure 2 **Distribution by type of graduated pre-university structure**

1.3. The profile of the graduated institution

We took into account the main profiles of these institutions: real, human, technological, and on the case of the last profile, we made sub-profile differentiation: economic, food, pedagogical etc.
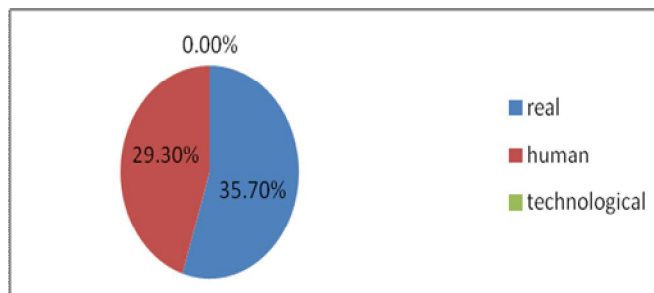

Figure 3 **Distribution of students per profile of the graduated high school**

The data summarized in *figure 3* show that there is a relatively equal distribution of high school graduates according to school profile. This creates differences on the degree of knowledge of English because it is known that at real and technological profiles the number of foreign language classes is lower. As regards the graduates, they come from economic high schools (57.1%), followed by food engineering high schools (21.4%). On the last places are the graduates form situated environmental profile high school (14.3%) and pedagogical high school (7.2%).
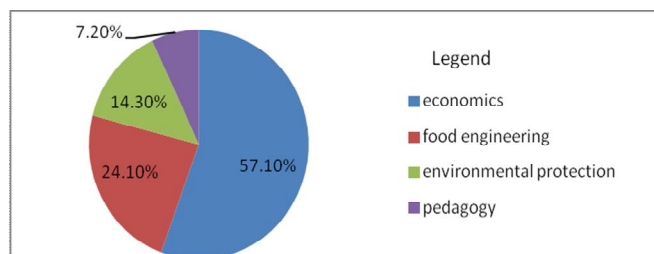

Figure 1.4 **Distribution graduates from technological high schools**

1.4. Form of education attended

In Romania, secondary education (high school) has three forms: a. with frequency (daily) b. evening classes; c. low frequency.

All students surveyed attended daily courses.

The type or profile of high school is less important for the acquisition of English. It is important the profile of the class, taking into consideration that there are classes with identical profile regardless the type or profile of the high school. For example there are classes of economics or mathematics-computer science in all types of high schools.

We present in *figure 5* the distribution of students according to the profile of the class graduated.
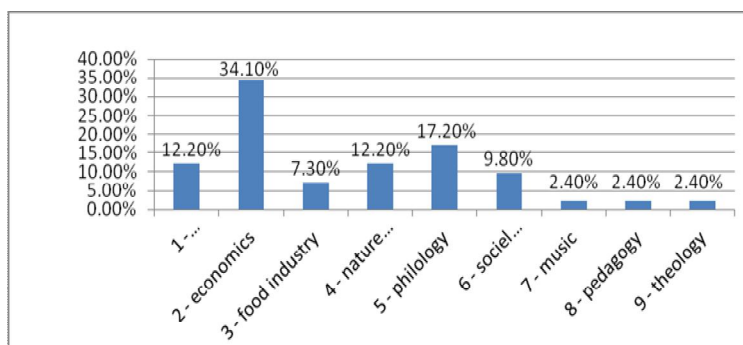

Figure 5 **The distribution according to the profile of the class graduated**

There is a wide dispersion of students in terms of the profile of the class graduated. The students come from as many as 9 types of profiles of high schools.

From the data shown in Figure 1.5 there results that more than a third of the students graduated from economics classes. There follows the philology classes with 17.2%, those of mathematics and computer science, and natural sciences with 12.2% each and those of social sciences with 9.8%. There are graduates who come from classes that apparently are less connected to the profile of this university such as classes of music, pedagogy and theology.

We will determine to what extent this situation has influenced the level of English acquisition at the beginning of the university courses.

2. The factors that determined the acquisition of English at the beginning of university

The knowledge of English that a high school graduate came with to the university was determined by a combination of factors:

a. the number of years of English study during pre-university education;

b. the number of weekly hours of English;

c. interest to acquire additional vocabulary from extracurricular sources;

d. motivation offered by the existence of English at the baccalaureate examination;

2.1. Number of years of study of English during primary and secondary education

In the past, there used to be students who enrolled in an English course as "beginners", due to the favouritism that the French language had, especially in high schools in the rural areas. At present, all the students asked studied English in secondary education.

But the level of knowledge materialized in the years of study was different (*figure 6*).
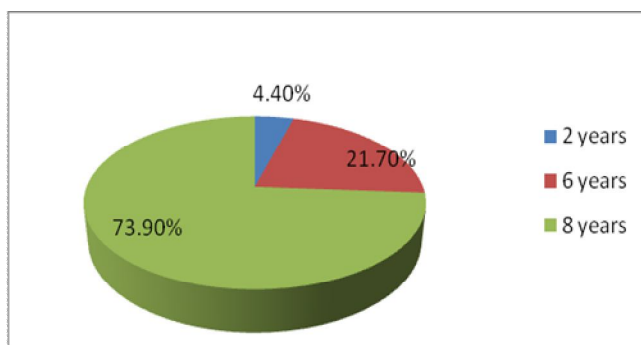

Figure 6 **Number of years of study of English in primary and secondary education**

Of the total number of participants, almost three-quarters (73.9%) studied English for eight years, which should imply a high level of knowledge of English. The administered tests show that the reality is different. Of the other respondents, 21.7% studied English for six years and only 4.4% for two years.

2.2. The number of weekly hours of English

This largely explains the different levels of English language of the students from the first year

The data show that there is great differentiation regarding the number of hours of English per week that graduates have attended during the pre-university education (*figure 7*).
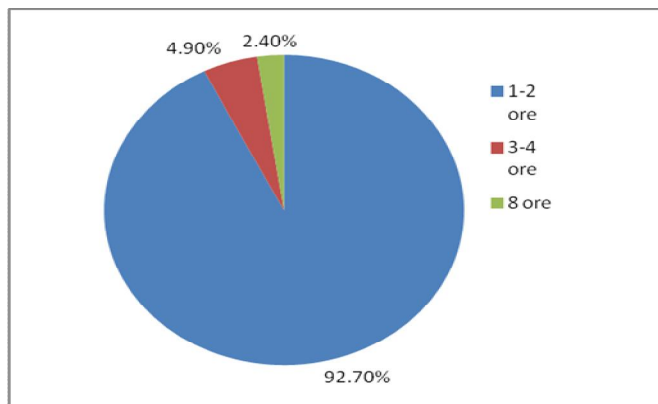

Figure 7 **The distribution of the number of hours of English per week**

The data contained in *figure 8* show that most students have 1-2 hours in curricula a week (92.7%). Of these, most (53.7%) studied English 2 hours per week.

As regards the remaining students, nearly 5% had 3 or 4 hours of English per week. Only 2.4% of them came from classes where English was studied intensively, with 8 hours per week.

2.3. The existence of English as part of the baccalaureate examination

The existence of English as part of the baccalaureate is a strong motivational factor in learning this language.

The data presented in *figure 9* shows that more than half (56.1%) had English as oral examination at the Baccalaureate, which requires the existence of an acceptable minimum level of acquisition of this language.

2.4. The interest of acquiring additional vocabulary from extracurricular sources

It is known that learning a foreign language requires calling on other sources than the didactic ones. Most students (90.2%) said they completed their language skills using films. Of these, 65.8% added music and reading or music and computer games. A few (7.3%) completed their knowledge through visits to relatives from abroad (UK) and 2.5% in English-profile camps.

3. Evaluation of knowledge of English at the beginning of the academic cycle

For a teacher who teaches English at an agronomic university it is very important to know the level of language acquisition at the beginning of the first year of study.

Considering the above mentioned factors, it is expected a heterogeneous situation regarding the level of language knowledge at the beginning of the university training. In this sense, an evaluation test is conducted in the first week of the academic year. The classical methodology was used, students being tested for reading, writing, listening and speaking. We took into consideration the 6 levels of English language learning.

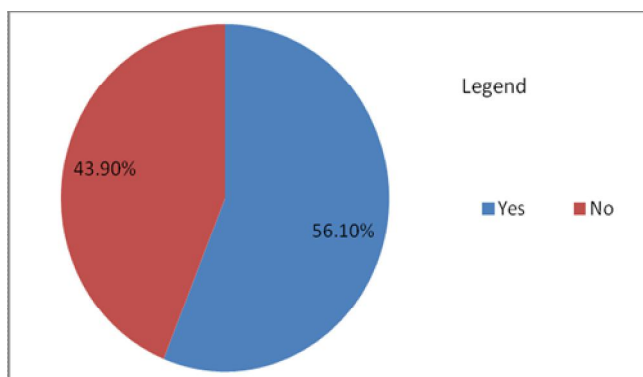The results obtained after the testing show their level of knowledge in a Gaussian curve.

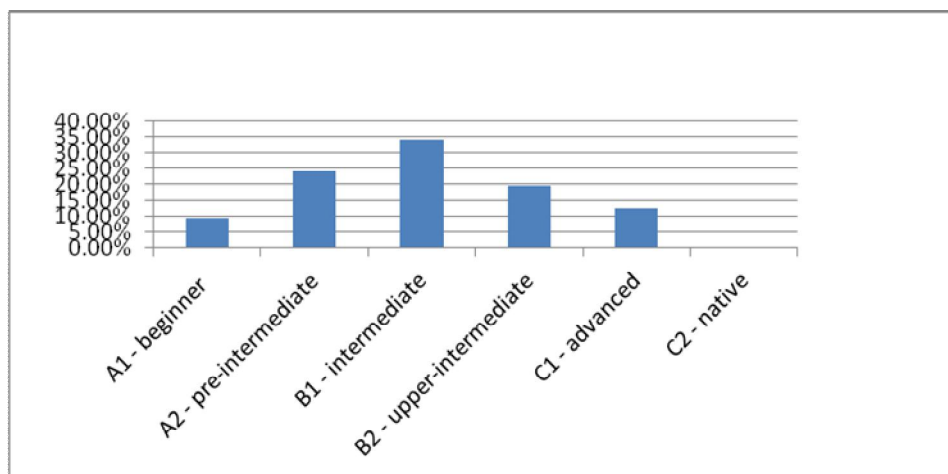Figure 8 **The distribution according to the presence of English at the baccalaureate**

Figure 9 **Grouping the students into categories of English acquisition**

After the evaluation, students were rated in five categories, as there were no "natives" among them. From the total number of students, most were located in the B1 - intermediary level (34.1%). Next was the category A2-pre-intermediate with 24.3%. Similar values had the B2-upper-intermediate category (19.5%). On the last places there were present the extreme categories, the category C1 - advanced (12.6%) and A1 - beginner with 9.7%.

The situation shown in *figure 9* requires the English teachers to set up an adequate strategy so that, at the end of the university cycle (of 4 years), each student should have acquired the English vocabulary specific to the specialization they prepared for.

On entering the university, the level of English of the students is very different. The causes are multiple, being determined by the type of high school they graduated from, the number of years of language study, and number of hours per week assigned for the study of English during primary and secondary education. Most students (58.4%) had a level of training of categories A2-pre-intermediate and B1 -intermediate.

For the reasons mentioned above, the teachers of English from the academic cycle have the opportunity to establish appropriate strategies and find ways to provide the best possible acquisition of English vocabulary specific to the profession that the future graduates are going to practice.

CONCLUSIONS

For the students of the faculties with agronomic profile, improving the English language is a necessity determined, among others by enlarging their knowledge of English for specific purposes, being also an advantage in finding a job in the country or abroad.

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