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UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' SELF-ASSESSED ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY¹

Abstract: The aim of the paper is to gain an empirical insight into final-year university students' self-assessment of their English as foreign language (EFL) proficiency regarding different linguistic domains relevant to their communication in the context of international student mobility. A quantitative research design was utilized and data were obtained through a structured five-point Likert scale questionnaire created for this purpose and administered among final-year students (N = 727) of 10 faculties of the University of Novi Sad, Serbia, partaking in international mobility programs. The gathered data indicate that the majority of students (63%) assess their EFL proficiency as sufficient for participating in mobility programs. The self-assessment scores reveal that students reported the highest confidence (high proficiency) in everyday communication (M = 3.95) and listening comprehension of lectures and general communication in English (M = 3.71) with respect to language skills, wide general vocabulary (M = 3.59), and proper pronunciation (M = 3.52), with respect to other segments of language knowledge. The lowest ratings (moderate proficiency) were given to writing (M = 3.12) and speaking (M = 3.22) on subject-specific topics, academic style conventions (M = 2.91) and specialized vocabulary (M = 2.97). This indicates that students perceive productive skills and subject-specific domains of their language competence as more challenging compared to receptive skills and general domains. The findings also indicate that there is a clear need for intensifying instructional support in specialized vocabulary and raising academic genre awareness.

Keywords: EFL proficiency, self-assessment, international student mobility, academic communication, language skills and knowledge, English for specific purposes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization has intensified the role of English as a world language ('the pivot of the world language system' (De Swaan 2001 in Singh, Papa 2010: 2), emphasizing the importance of high-level English as foreign language (EFL) proficiency as human capital for participation in international communication, economy, education and science in both developing and developed countries (Sae-Ong 2025; Zeng et al. 2023; Seidlhofer 2011; Phillipson 1992). *EF Education First*, an international education company, publishes global rankings of countries and regions, i.e., the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), which exhibits a positive correlation between a country's average adult English proficiency (online tests such as the EF SET) and an economic performance indicator, such as GDP (cf. McCormick 2013). According to the 2024 EF EPI, based on the data collected in 2023, Serbia was ranked 20th out of 34 European countries, being placed in the 'High Proficiency' band.² Educational institutions are pressured to produce globally competent citizens (cf. Daniels, Niemczyk 2021),³ EFL proficiency being an essential skill (Choi 2025; Baker, Fang 2022; Cavanagh 2020; Stein-Smith 2017).⁴ In recent years, English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has been introduced to universities throughout the world to enhance international competitiveness (Elkhayma 2022; Bowles, Murphy 2020; Doiz et al. 2013). Apart from this, EFL proficiency is often prioritized (explicitly required or strongly recommended) as a criterion for eligibility or competitiveness in mobility programs such as Erasmus+ and Fulbright, another key strategy for universities to respond to the challenges of globalization. English proficiency is instrumental in improving both academic and professional communication skills (Fadhil et al. 2025). Academic communication "encompasses the discourses conducted between the scientific community members and the lecturer-student interactions," including the virtual setting using software and programs such as Moodle, i.e., written, oral, and virtual communication (Mavrodieva et al. 2017: 593 and cf. references therein). The recent research conducted among 727 final-year students of 10 faculties of the University of Novi Sad (Serbia), participating in international student mobility (ISM) programs, has shown that EFL proficiency is ranked as the most important variable for students' decision to apply for these programs (Miškeljin, Knežević 2025) and that everyday communication and understanding lectures and spoken communication are

² <https://connectingregion.com/news/croatia-ranks-5th-globally-serbia-and-albania-among-top-50-for-english-proficiency/#::~:~:text=CroatiaNews-,Croatia%20Ranks%205th%20Globally%2C%20Serbia%20and%20Albania%20Among%20Top%2050,tier%20of%20English%2Dproficient%20nations>

³ See a study by Milovanović, Stojanović, Ćirković-Miladinović (2020) for attitudes of university students toward the internationalization of higher education in Serbia.

⁴ Analyzing the US context, Stein-Smith (2017: 71) argues that foreign language skills are 'the ultimate, overarching 21st century global competency'.

perceived as the most important EFL skills for participating in ISM (Miškeljin et al. 2025).

Aside from standardized tests and other educational methods, EFL proficiency can be measured through self-assessment (SA), a form of alternative ability assessment (Naeini 2011). Generally viewed, it is a tool which can increase students' metacognitive awareness, i.e., procedures which monitor and enhance the efficiency of mental processes or reasoning (Akturk, Sahin 2011), which is an essential component of their ability to self-regulate learning (Siegesmund 2017). SA is a frequently used data source in research and education, as well as in everyday situations such as job applications, e.g., Europass, an online CV creator (cf. Vonkova et al. 2025 and references therein). SA of one's knowledge and skills is an important factor in subsequent educational decision-making (Dunning et al. 2004). With the recognition of the importance of affective factors, language learning programs are becoming more learner-centered (Nurov 2000) and the dynamic and continuous nature of language learning (Dickinson 1996), SA has attracted a lot of attention in foreign language education (Demirbulak et al. 2022; Başak 2019). SA of one's EFL proficiency is a useful source of information about learners' level of language proficiency (reliable and valid under certain circumstances) and it is commonly used in EFL contexts (Papajoanu et al. 2021).⁵ A meta-analysis by Ross (1998) revealed the average correlations between learners' SA and objectively indicated language performance for the four language skills and that those who under- or overestimate their own proficiency in one skill tend to do so in another skill.⁶ Various factors influence the reliability and validity of SA, such as different classroom settings, students' training on how to apply SA, students' individual differences (their education level, cultural background, and exposure to the target language), methodological shortcomings (Başak 2019), and also gender (Vonkova et al. 2025; Papajoanu et al. 2021; Başak 2019; Tamjid 2008).

Multiple studies on the impact of SA on language skills showed that SA positively correlates with language skills (cf. Naeini 2011 and references therein) and other linguistic domains such as: pronunciation (cf. Kim, Ha 2024 and references therein), vocabulary learning (Le 2024), intercultural communicative competence (Tsatzali et al. 2025), and speech acts or pragmatic competence (Paluanova 2024). An empirical study by Altıntaş and Sariçoban (2023) uses the pre- and post-SA of language proficiency to evaluate ISM effects. In ISM research, SA data can be indicative of how students perceive their readiness and personal growth, their confidence, self-efficacy, and motivation, which all play crucial roles for successful mobility experiences, among other aspects (cf. Project Erasmus Careers 2025; Goldstein 2022; Roy et al. 2014; European Commission 2014). Along with this

⁵ Reliability and validity are two main criteria for any assessment method to be accepted and used in an actual language evaluation situation (cf. Başak 2019 and references therein).

⁶ Cf. Han (2022) and references therein for evidence and discussions on the correlation between self-assessed and actual performance.

line of research, the paper presents a study that was set to examine how final-year undergraduates at a Serbian university self-assess their EFL proficiency in the context of international student mobility and the growing importance of EFL competence for enhancing competitiveness in the increasingly global labour market. The remainder of the paper is organized into four sections. Section 2 outlines the methodology. Sections 3 and 4 present and discuss the findings, respectively. Section 5 offers concluding remarks and implications.

2. METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study is to provide an empirical insight into final-year university students' self-assessment of their EFL proficiency across different linguistic domains relevant to communication in the context of international student mobility. In compliance with this aim, the following research questions were set:

RQ1: Do final-year university students self-assess their overall EFL proficiency as sufficient for participation in international mobility programs?

RQ2: How do final-year university students self-assess specific elements of their EFL proficiency, such as their command of the four language skills, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and the knowledge of academic conventions in the context of international mobility program participation?

The study participants were 727 final-year undergraduates studying at 10 faculties of the University of Novi Sad that participate in ISM programs. The average age of the participants was 22.58 (SD=1.66), ranging from 21 to 37. Table 1 shows the distribution of participants in relation to their faculty and gender.

The study employed the quantitative survey method by means of a questionnaire in Serbian, developed for the purpose of the study. For assessing their self-perceived overall EFL proficiency, the students answered the question "Do you think your overall EFL proficiency is sufficient for participation in international student mobility programs?" by choosing one of the three options: "Yes," "No," or "I am not sure." To self-assess specific elements of their EFL proficiency, the students responded to the question "How do you assess the following segments of your English language knowledge?" There were ten items to self-assess and they included the following: 1) Academic style conventions; 2) Every-day communication; 3) Wide general vocabulary; 4) Specialized vocabulary; 5) Correct usage of grammar; 6) Proper pronunciation; 7) Listening comprehension of lectures and general communication in English; 8) Reading comprehension of textbooks and other specialized publications; 9) Speaking on subject-specific topics; 10) Writing on subject-specific topics. The students self-assessed the items on a five-point Likert scale (1 – insufficient; 2 – sufficient; 3 – good; 4 – very good; 5 – excellent).

Table 1. Study participants

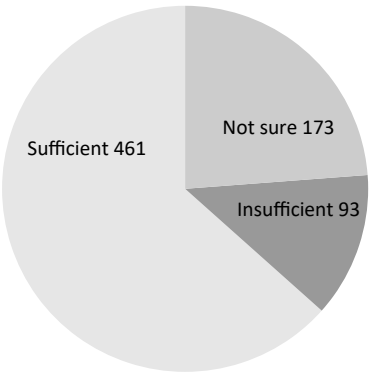
Faculty		Gender		Total
		M	F	
Faculty of Sciences	N	25	61	86
	%	3.4%	8.4%	11.8%
Faculty of Technical Sciences	N	12	51	63
	%	1.7%	7.0%	8.7%
Faculty of Economics	N	21	80	101
	%	2.9%	11.0%	13.9%
Faculty of Philosophy	N	5	100	105
	%	0.7%	13.8%	14.4%
Faculty of Agriculture	N	14	8	22
	%	1.9%	1.1%	3.0%
Faculty of Technology	N	15	75	90
	%	2.1%	10.3%	12.4%
Faculty of Medicine	N	26	74	100
	%	3.6%	10.2%	13.8%
Faculty of Education	N	1	25	26
	%	0.1%	3.4%	3.6%
Faculty of Arts	N	8	37	45
	%	1.1%	5.1%	6.2%
Faculty of Physical Education	N	52	37	89
	%	7.2%	5.1%	12.2%
Total	N	179	548	727
	%	24.6%	75.4%	100.0%

The cut-off points were: 1.0 – 1.49 = very low proficiency, 1.50 – 2.49 = low proficiency, 2.50 – 3.49 = moderate proficiency, 3.50 – 4.49 = high proficiency, 4.50 – 5.00 = very high proficiency (Joshi et al. 2015). The scale reliability returned a satisfactory Cronbach’s alpha of 0.946. The research data were collected during the winter semester of the academic year 2024/25 and were analyzed by means of descriptive statistics.

3. RESULTS

This section presents the results in relation to the research questions set in this study. Accordingly, the students’ responses regarding the sufficiency of the level of their EFL proficiency for mobility programs revealed that nearly two-thirds of the participants, more precisely, 461 (63%) assessed their EFL competence as sufficient for ISM participation. As for the rest, 93 respondents (13%) saw their proficiency as insufficient, while 173 of them (24%) were not sure and therefore unable to give this type of assessment. The results are presented in Graph 1.

Graph 1. How students self-assess their overall EFL proficiency for ISM participation



The results demonstrating how the participants self-assessed their language skills and other elements of their EFL knowledge can be seen in Table 2.

As observed, the recorded values spanned from 2.91 (moderate proficiency)
Table 2. Students' self-assessment of specific domains of their EFL proficiency

Elements of EFL proficiency	Mean	SD
Academic style conventions	2.91	1.02
Every-day communication	3.95	0.92
Wide general vocabulary	3.59	1.02
Specialized vocabulary	2.97	1.05
Correct usage of grammar	3.44	1.05
Proper pronunciation	3.52	1.02
Listening comprehension of lectures and general communication in English	3.71	1.08
Reading comprehension of textbooks and other specialized publications	3.45	1.06
Speaking on subject-specific topics	3.22	1.05
Writing on subject-specific topics	3.12	1.07

to 3.95 (high proficiency). The lowest value referred to the knowledge of academic style conventions, while the highest self-assessment score was given to participation in every-day communication. It is interesting to notice at this point that communication within subject-specific domains was rated considerably lower and assessed with the mean value of 3.22, described as moderate proficiency. Listening and comprehending of both academic and every-day communication was the second rated skill (3.71), followed by reading comprehension of textbooks and other specialized publications (3.45). Writing on subject-specific topics was the skill that the respondents felt least competent for (3.22). Overall, the productive skills used in the context of academic communication were assessed lower than the receptive skills.

When it comes to specific segments of EFL knowledge, such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and academic style conventions, the survey results show that the segments referring to the use of EFL in academic and subject-specific contexts were ranked lowest in this survey, with the means below 3. Academic style conventions and specialized vocabulary are reported as the weakest aspects of their EFL proficiency. Unlike these, general vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation were ranked higher, all in the range 3.59–3.44 (high to moderate proficiency).

4. DISCUSSION

Considering the students' self-perceived overall EFL proficiency in the context of ISM, we can say that the study findings are quite encouraging; namely, the majority of the final-year undergraduates, more precisely, two-thirds of the sample, consider their EFL proficiency sufficient for partaking in international student exchange. Such a result is not surprising if we take into account today's widespread exposure to the English language via various technological tools and the fact that the Serbian educational system integrates EFL into the primary curriculum as a compulsory subject from the first grade (Prošić-Santovac, Rixon 2019), extending this practice throughout the primary and secondary education. However, when it comes to specific domains of EFL proficiency, the findings point to variation across them. The self-assessment scores regarding the skills (Table 2) reveal that the students consider themselves highly proficient in everyday communication and more proficient in receptive skills, such as listening and reading comprehension, than productive skills, such as speaking and writing in specific academic contexts, which answers RQ 1. This indicates that the students perceive productive skills as more challenging, which aligns with the previous research suggesting that learners tend to rate their receptive abilities higher than productive ones, i.e., they are more confident in their receptive skills (Masrai et al. 2021; Li, Zhang 2021; Ross 1998). Apart from the view that students' receptive competence (the language they can understand) is always at a higher level of development than their productive competence (Kerimbaevna 2024) and that producing an L2 (second language) output requires active construction and higher-order cognitive skills than receiving an L2 input, the current finding may also be explained by an observation that a greater emphasis is placed on reading and listening during EFL classes at school and university (Šebestová et al. 2011 in Papajoanu 2021). What additionally draws attention in relation to the obtained results is the fact that reading comprehension of textbooks and other specialized publications, speaking, and writing on subject-specific topics were rated as moderately proficient, i.e., lower than other skills used in non-professional contexts. The same holds true for the other survey items, implying subject-related use of English, such as specialized vocabulary and academic style conventions. These results can be interpreted in light of previous lit-

erature reports outlining the challenging nature of these segments of EFL learning to students (cf. Flowerdew, Peacock 2012; Nergis 2013). Thus, when it comes to specialized vocabulary learning, a significant body of research has shown that its acquisition presents considerable challenges for students, particularly concerning the specialized terminology inherent to particular fields (Hyland 2000; Le, Trinh 2024). As Webb and Nation (2017) observe, these challenges may originate from the demanding nature of technical vocabulary learning itself. Similar reports can be found in relation to acquiring the use of academic conventions. Okičić (2024), for example, reports on difficulties that EFL learners face in adapting to the academic conventions prevalent in the Anglo-American tradition of academic writing. These findings clearly point to a need for additional support in mastering the skills relevant for communication within students' professional field and strengthening their academic genre awareness. It has to be added at this point that in the context of the Serbian educational system, at university level, students begin learning English for their professional fields, with an in-depth focus on the skills needed for future professional and academic communication (Stojković, Piršl 2018). English for Specific Purposes (ESP), as Stojković and Piršl (2018) observe, is present at all Serbian universities either as an obligatory or an elective course, usually at the undergraduate level of studies, and this applies to the participants of this study as well. The length and intensity of the participants' ESP courses, however, vary significantly, as there are some study programs that provide only a one-semester ESP course. Within such a restricted timeframe, the acquisition of specialized English and mastery of academic skills may represent a considerable challenge to both students and instructors. The study findings, therefore, are not only of significance to language instructors in terms of intensifying and improving subject-specific domains of EFL learning, but also to study program designers and policy makers to allocate more space to English courses in higher education curricula.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The paper has given an empirical insight into final-year students' self-assessed EFL proficiency at the University of Novi Sad in the context of ISM, considering the important role of EFL proficiency for participation in ISM, and for improving both academic and professional skills, on one hand, and the significance of self-assessment of one's knowledge and skills for the dynamic and continuous nature of language learning, and further decision-making related to education, on the other hand. Overall, the findings reveal that the final-year students at the University of Novi Sad self-assess their English language proficiency as sufficient for participation in international student mobility programs. They also consider productive skills to be more challenging compared to receptive ones, especially in their specific academic context, and rate them as moderately proficient, which

calls for ESP instructional support. Needless to say, the present study is subject to certain limitations. First and foremost, it lacks an objective assessment measure against which the findings could be compared, thereby mitigating subjective bias that self-assessment procedures are influenced by. Secondly, the study method relies on quantitative data only. Finally, although large in size, the study sample includes students at only one university. Further research should combine self-assessment with performance-based assessment and compare discrepancies, and also include interviews or focus groups to uncover the reasons behind students' self-evaluations.

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Депарман за биологију и екологију

САМОПРОЦЕНА ЗНАЊА ЕНГЛЕСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА УНИВЕРЗИТЕТСКИХ СТУДЕНАТА У КОНТЕКСТУ МЕЂУНАРОДНЕ СТУДЕНТСКЕ МОБИЛНОСТИ

Резиме: Циљ рада је да се стекне емпиријски увид у самопроцену знања енглеског као страног језика студената завршних година студија у различитим језичким доменима релевантним за комуникацију у контексту међународне студентске мобилности. Примењен је квантитативни дизајн истраживања, а подаци су прикупљени путем структурираног упитника са петостепеном Ликертовом скалом, који је креиран за потребе овог истраживања. Истраживање је спроведено међу студентима завршних година ($N = 727$) са 10 факултета Универзитета у Новом Саду, Србија, који учествују у програмима међународне мобилности. Добијени подаци указују на то да већина студената (63%) процењује своје знање енглеског као страног језика као довољно за учешће у програмима мобилности. Резултати самопроцене показују да су студенти исказали највеће самопоуздање (висок ниво познавања језика) када је у питању свакодневна комуникација ($M = 3,95$), разумевање предавања и опште комуникације на енглеском језику ($M = 3,71$), затим у погледу језичких вештина, широки општи вокабулар ($M = 3,59$) и правилан изговор ($M = 3,52$). Најниже оцене (умерен ниво познавања језика) додељене су писању ($M = 3,12$), говору ($M = 3,22$) о стручним темама, академским стилским конвенцијама ($M = 2,91$) и стручном вокабулару ($M = 2,97$). Ови резултати указују на то да студенти доживљавају продуктивне језичке вештине и стручне домене своје језичке компетенције као захтевније у поређењу са рецептивним вештинама и општим доменима. Резултати такође указују на јасну потребу за интензивирањем наставне подршке у области стручног вокабулара и подизањем свести о академским жанровима.

Кључне речи: знање енглеског као страног језика, самопроцена, међународна студентска мобилност, академска комуникација, језичке вештине и знање, енглески језик струке.