

FRINGES AND THRESHOLDS: ENGLISH PRACTICE CLASSES IN THE ENGLISH PHILOLOGY DEGREE

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English Practice (EP) classes form a constituent part of English Studies (ES) degrees in the country which have historically developed along a three-node model as studies in the English language, linguistics and literature. As current curricular arrangements obtain, these classes occupy a significant number of contact hours which, notwithstanding the shrinking classes allocation space in the ES programs under revision over the past decade, institutions of HE offering ES degrees seem dedicated to preserve. Moreover, recent student surveys have indicated that nowadays ES students place highest expectations and motivation value in pursuing ES degrees on the practical study of the English language which directly correlates with the contents of the course in EP. Yet, it appears that regarded from various perspectives EP classes occupy the fringes of ES as they are disposed now in terms of discipline, academic subject, scholarly concern, administrative and institutional accountancy and promotion mechanisms, pedagogy, etc. So much so, that there hardly exists a published systematic scholarly address of issues pertaining to the EP classes within the ES degree and subject, while discussions of EP classes are an intrinsic and dynamic part of in-house professional concerns on the everyday level. My paper aims at bridging this gap and addressing the issue of EP classes within the ES subject and BA degree.

Key words: English Practice classes, English Studies, disciplinary spaces, institutionalization, power relations, fringes, threshold concepts

English Practice classes form a constituent part of English Studies degrees in the country which have historically developed along a three-node model as studies in the English language, linguistics and literature. As current curricular arrangements obtain, these classes occupy a significant number of contact hours which, notwithstanding the shrinking space for class allocation in the ES programmes under revision over the past decade, institutions of HE offering ES degrees seem dedicated to preserve.

More specifically, from the point of view of accounting and legal framework of curricular allocations for HE in Bulgaria, ES programmes experienced the afore-mentioned ‘shrinking’ in a two-stage manner. First, as the adoption of the three-cycle model in accordance with cross-national recognition within the European space whereby the formerly five-year degrees in ES acquired the shape of 4 year BA degrees and subsequent graduate and post-graduate such. These were introduced for students who applied for university study in 1997 and graduated in 2001 in accordance with the *Higher Education Law* of 1995, followed in 1997 by a *Government Ordinance* which set a comprehensive *State Registry* of approved course programmes – *Uniform State Requirements*, with amendments in 1999 related to conforming Bulgarian HE to the Bologna Process mostly¹. Secondly, through further revisions of framework provisions for state supported tertiary education, such as the 2002 *HE Act*, which postulated and controlled, among others: a four-year BA study, an academic class load of min. 2200 – max. 3000; ending the degree with a State Exam (without immediate control on the nature and substance of the State Exam); ratio between habilitated and non-habilitated faculty teaching in the degree; ratio between mandatory and elective courses but provided no provisions with regard to the nature of these core courses or any quotas of classes’ allocation. These revisions faced further readjustments over the past 10 years (mainly in partial revisions undertaken in 2004, 2005 and 2007), whereby the last one comprehensively tied degree awarding provisions with the introduction of ECTS – 240 credits for the BA degree in no less than four years of education. For the purposes of my argument here, it is important to emphasize (again) that *the current legal framework for HE in Bulgaria does not prescribe particular arrangements with regard to curricular content and delivery format for subject areas such as English Studies*².

In terms of the current dispensation, in the present day ES BA degree’s compulsory corpus of classes, Sofia University (SU) curricula allocate 690 academic hours to courses in Linguistics and 465 for Literature/Culture. English Practice classes (EPC) amount to 960 contact hours. Veliko Turnovo University (VTU) curricular arrangements present a fixed balance of 435 for each strand (Linguistics and Literature) in the compulsory corpus and allocate 840 contact hours to EPC. At Plovdiv

¹ On legal frameworks of HE in Bulgaria available in English, see Georgieva 2002 and the website of National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency at <http://www.neaa.government.bg/en> (last accessed 7 Nov. 2012).

² While it does so for the regulated professions.

University (PU), within the compulsory courses 425 are allocated to Linguistics, 570 to Literature and Culture courses, and 1005 to English Practice classes. According to credit weight within the degree, in the case of PU, 70 out of the 240 credits are awarded through successfully completing the corpus of EPC, which amounts to about 30% of the credit weight or exceeds it when we add the Phonetics practicum for first year students. Similarly, for SU, those provide for between 74 and 78 credits of the overall credit for the BA degree.

Content-wise, for SU the Practical English Language course builds on the students' admission level approximately corresponding to Cambridge Advanced³. By the end of the fourth semester students reach a level of proficiency roughly equivalent to a pass grade in the Cambridge Proficiency Examination. The components of the Practical English Language course are: Integrated Skills, Analytic Grammar, Practical Modern English Syntax, English through Literature, Business Communication, Translation, etc. In addition, the courses in Practical Phonetics and Breakbar – Breaking Communication Barriers fall into this corpus. The Integrated Skills course for third- and fourth-year students consists of one-semester modules oriented towards specific fields of knowledge, such as politics, business, management, economics, newspaper language, etc. At Plovdiv University the entry level is positioned at B2⁴ and the English Practice classes are course units which integrate various aspects of the study of the language. These include classes in English Practical Grammar, Writing, Vocabulary building, Conversation, English-Bulgarian Translation, and Bulgarian-English Translation. Across academic years and terms these usually indicate 1 or 2 classes weekly for each aspect of the study of the language.

From a historical institutional perspective, EP classes mark the entry point for English as a university subject in manner of the course in the English language first introduced in 1906 at Sofia University together with the first institutional appointment of a lecturer in the English language. English as a university course in language study precedes the formation of a degree in ES (language, literature and linguistics). In 1906 Constantine D. Stefanov (1879 – 1940) was first appointed as a lecturer in the English language. He was appointed a part-time docent⁵ in English language and

³ <http://sites.uni-sofia.bg/english/prog-ba.html> (last accessed 7 Nov. 2012).

⁴ Following the European Framework for Linguistic Competence and indicated by the level of the uniform *Durzhaven Zrelostn Izpit* [State high school Exam] which marks the high school exit.

⁵ More or less equivalent to associate professor.

literature between 1923 and 1928 and promoted to full-time position as such for the period 1928–1935, starting with the establishment of the Chair in ES in 1928. For a period of over 80 years, in other words until the early 1990s, subsequent appointments – both part-time and full-time – follow a similar path of appointing a person first as a lecturer in the English language who then specializes in either literature or linguistics (or both) with very few exceptions⁶. The dominant pattern for a number of decades can be traced through numerous examples, such as Russi Roussev who was a lecturer in the English language (1929 – 1938), then a part-time docent in English (1938 – 1948); Zhana Molhova who was assistant in English grammar (1951 – 1961); Maria Rankova – part-time then full-time EL lecturer (1951 – 1966); Teodora Atanassova (1951 – 1962); Ivanka Harlakova (1953 – 1956); Pauline Pirinska (1953 – 1958); Dimitar Spassov appointed in 1956; Bistra Alexieva in 1963; Ekaterina Dimova in 1962;⁷ and so on and so forth. I return to some of the implications following from this path of a) institutionalization and b) professional academic career development later on. Still, suffice to say at this stage that historically EPC mark the threshold of English studies *becoming* a university subject and have had a stable presence in the institutional conception and practice of the degree's *being* in the country.

Unsurprisingly, a considerable volume of academic output of the above mentioned appointees in teaching the English language to English philology students is dedicated to the production of language course books in the local context. The first domestic publications aimed at the university study of the English language (in English practice classes) for the initial forty years are: Stefanov's edited *A Pocket Method for Studying English* (1921); Minkov's *An English Grammar* (1950 – 1953); Filipov and Radulova's *Textbook in English* (1954); Pirinska and Sharenkov's *English Reader for Lexicology* (1955); Atanasova and Rankova's *An English Textbook for I and II Year Students of English Philology* (1956); Rankova, Atanasova, Radulova and Russev *English Grammar in Comparison with Bulgarian* (1956); Molhova and Spassov's *English Grammar Exercises for English Philology Students* (1960); Rankova, Harlakova, Ivanova and Bulyova *English: An Elementary Course for University Students* (1961)⁸.

⁶ Among the early day exceptions are: Minkov who was appointed docent in 1939; Vladimir Filipov assistant in both literatures (English and American) in 1952; and the appointments in EL Methodology, starting with Nadezhda Radulova (1949 – 1957); M. Dzhananova (1949 – 1950), etc. (cf. Vesselinov 2008).

⁷ cf. Vesselinov 2008.

⁸ For subsequent course books, see Vesselinov (2011: 217 – 219).

A closer look into these texts would prove beneficial for reconstructing from a historical perspective the continuum of conceptualizing EPC within the degree vis-à-vis the course's content, relations to other courses, and place within the paradigm of disciplinary and subject dispositions in the English philology degree, on the one hand. On the other, these course books may prove useful for tapping into the changing across times posited reader/learner, i.e. the Bulgarian English studies student in a number of ways – from expected threshold levels of linguistic competence to competences, skills and knowledge in the goal-oriented educational paradigm within the EPC course but also beyond that within the degree as a whole⁹.

In the present and from the point of view of the students pursuing an English studies major – be that a philology degree in the subject or applied linguistics degrees in combination ‘English and other’ – is closely linked with the study of the English language itself. A recent student survey¹⁰ conducted among students at three universities (SU, PU and VTU) has indicated that nowadays ES students place highest expectations and motivation value in pursuing ES degrees on the practical study of the English language which directly correlates with the contents of the course in English practice.

[INSERT Expectations]

First and foremost, students enrolling in ES programmes expect to develop their linguistic competence and improve their language skills. At level beneath that, students expect to inform themselves about the UK and USA, study of history and culture of English speaking countries and, particularly, study of English and American literature.

⁹ In this respect, it is useful to take account of a whole range of locally produced course books, among them those that were aimed at students in programmes other than ES, so as to delineate qualitative differences of how English for Specific Purposes (when the ‘specific purpose’ is English as a subject itself) is conceptualized and manifested.

¹⁰ For the parameters of the survey as well as a detailed discussion of its findings, see Katsarska and Keskinova (2011: 155–181).

[INSERT Interests]

within the same survey, ES students' stated academic interests resonate with their expectations in several ways, and are generally practice-oriented. Therefore, arguably, from the perspective of students, EPC are central to fulfilling expectations and matching academic interests in pursuing ES at institutions of HE in the country. These student views appear to be supported in at least two ways at least on one level of institutional policy and practice. First, by according EPC the credit weight they merit within the degree across institutions and, secondly, by local institutional practices which link academic progress from one year of study to the next on the provision of passing the yearly EPC exam(s).

Yet, it appears that regarded from various perspectives EP classes occupy the fringes of ES as they are disposed now in terms of discipline, academic subject, scholarly concern, mechanisms for administrative accountancy and institutional promotion, pedagogy, etc. So much so, that there hardly exists a published systematic scholarly address of issues pertaining to the EP classes within the ES degree and subject, while discussions of EP classes are an intrinsic and dynamic part of in-house professional concerns on the everyday level.

Let me illustrate this with an example along some of the power structure grids I mentioned above. If we consider historically the dynamics of institutionalization of the subject which is also linked to individual professional academic advancement, it is quite evident that while the established practice of appointments as language instructors¹¹ marks the entry point into academia, academic advancement and thereafter promotion to decision-making positions with consequence in the institutional space of ES is within delineated domains, such as literature, linguistics, ELT methodology from conceiving of subject areas and scholarly domains to their manifestation in doctoral and higher¹² degrees to respective institutional appointments. Taking into consideration administrative accounting processes which are still based on 'lecture course' designation for respective positions¹³, such as associate professor or professor, the corpus of EPC is further removed from any association with significant institutionalized markers in the hierarchically disposed subject area of ES

¹¹ Be this position termed 'lecturer' or 'assistant' at different times, it amounts in substance to the same type of appointment.

¹² For instance, Habilitation based on the German model.

¹³ The institutional regulations for such positions require the appointee teach a corpus of lectures within the mandatory core curriculum.

as it is institutionalized in the country. Simply put, EP is not a lecture course, nor is there an associate professor (or higher) appointment in EP. Moreover, within the established bureaucratic accounting mechanisms in institutions of HE whereby the existing practice is that the lecture format is accorded twice the worth of seminars, the symbolic attributions of value (placed on a course, on a professional involved in teaching said course, etc.) acquire material such as well.

What the above considerations amount to in practice is that scholarly, academic and institutional status (not only in symbolic dimensions of capital) appears to be directly related to the increasing distance between anyone member of a particular ES department and involvement in EP classes. By extension, this line of association also holds in terms of status attributed to courses in linguistics, literature and/or culture vis-à-vis that attributed to the course in EP in institutional terms and beyond that with a bearing on power relations within the space of ES as a degree and subject area.

The consequences from this are manifold. They could be seen in practices such as the English department at PU delegating the conducting of EPC to a fluid and often ad hoc cohort of 22 part-time lecturers in the English language for the current academic year to the English department at SU attempting – and failing – in 2012 to institutionalize the separation of EPC into formally recognized separate courses, i.e. Integrated skills – 1 and 2, Analytic Grammar, Practical Modern English Syntax, among others. This separation was introduced internally at the department level several years back without, however, being formally registered in official curricula and without being institutionally recognized on any of the power levels outlined above. While the first example is indicative of neglect on behalf of institutional human resource management with regard to the ‘fringe’ consideration that EPC are thus cast as, the second it seems to me is an attempt, albeit unsuccessful, to reconsider and reconfigure the place of EPC by negotiating *within* the above-mentioned established power structures rather than by challenging them.

To summarize, the subject of our discussion (EPC) is unmistakably there, i.e. occupying 30% of the ES curriculum, has been around for a while (about a 100 years), occupies a significant number of ES academics on an everyday level (department members who currently teach EPC in ES degrees) or used to be part of their professional academic careers, and is the top priority in expectations and interests of students pursuing ES degrees. Nevertheless, when I started considering this issue, it appeared somewhat difficult to find publicly available documented discussions with regard to EPC as related to ES on the whole, especially scholarly

publications which discuss EPC as a course in its entirety. What is available though, are internal institutional documents (syllabi, provided mainly for programme accreditation purposes), institutional texts addressed to the students (short course descriptions), and introductions to locally produced course books for English language practice. It is among those types of texts that one may discern the terms and the ways in which ES academics position EPC and articulate their relation to ES as a subject. Below are some excerpts from such texts¹⁴:

In particular it aims to develop students' listening skills so that they can listen to a range of types of English oral discourse; to develop students' reading skills so that they approximate the reading style of an educated native speaker, and are able to extract meaning in an efficient way from a range of text types; to increase the fluency and accuracy of students' speaking skills, so **that they are able to participate in academic seminars in English**, and to communicate confidently with native and non-native speakers of English; and to develop students' writing skills, especially their ability to write essays, with **a style cohesion and rhetorical pattern suited to academic English discourse**. In addition, **the course trains students in specific study skills, such as note-taking and using reference and other works in the library** (SU, Integrated Skills¹⁵).

This course **serves as a bridge** between the English language course and the theoretical disciplines in the curriculum (SU, Analytic Grammar, *ibid.*).

Such skills are important also **for a better acquisition of other BA subjects, such as Stylistics, Academic Writing, Translation, and Text Analysis**, as well as for the future work of students as teachers, translators, editors, etc. (SU, Practical Modern English Syntax, *ibid.*).

The translation practicum runs throughout your entire course of study in the BA degree in English Studies and occupies a significant space not only in terms of academic periods allocated to it (about a hundred each academic year) but also as a key component in assessing your language competence and progress in the BA degree.

¹⁴ All emphases mine.

¹⁵ http://sites.uni-sofia.bg/english/courses-ba.html#1._ENGLISH_LANGUAGE (last accessed 8 Nov 2012).

While translation is certainly a viable professional path for graduates from English degrees to pursue, for the time being and as intended in the present volume we will be considering its educational aspects and complex role within your overall study programme. For one, practicing translation is a way in which as students of English you are developing your language competence in terms of enriching and activating your vocabulary and grammar, i.e. linguistic skills; also, in terms of developing reading and writing skills. Secondly, the practice of translation is **a site of application** of knowledge and competences gained from your courses in Linguistics (morphology, syntax, stylistics, lexicology, sociolinguistics, etc.). As such, it gives you a ‘learn-by-doing’ access into theoretical issues, concepts and debates, while also presenting you with an opportunity to ‘test’ their applicability. Thirdly, being engaged in the process of translating fiction, you will be able to gain further insights into a number of issues addressed in your Literature studies courses – from **enhancing your awareness of audiences and readers together with specific socio-historical contexts to developing your abilities for close reading**. On the other hand, the tasks for **translating fiction will rely heavily on your literary competence of writers, their works and their contexts, literary methods and schools, your ‘cultural awareness’ in both English and Bulgarian**, etc. Finally, besides fostering analytical and critical thinking, the practice of translation stimulates a range of transferable skills, which do not necessarily remain solely within the career path of a translator. While working with the present volume, you will be involved in identifying problems and problem-solving, decision-making, reasoning and persuasion, identifying sources, editing, developing evaluation strategies, to mention only few (Katsarska, Pavlov 2008: 9).

Students will probably also be interested to **have to deal with texts and authors that usually fall outside the traditional literary syllabus** (e.g. Woody Allen’s humorous stories and J.G. Ballard’s science fiction ones; the poetry of Roger McGough and Brian Patten) (SU, English through Literature, First year Elective within EPC¹⁶).

The first three of these quotations are taken from EPC descriptions at SU, the fourth one is from the introduction to a course book in translation

¹⁶ http://sites.uni-sofia.bg/english/courses-ba.html#1._ENGLISH_LANGUAGE (last accessed 8 Nov 2012).

practice produced at PU, and the fifth one is an excerpt from an elective module for first year students at SU within the corpus of EPC. Those chosen extracts related to EPC seem to me go beyond articulating the presence of EPC simply as a means of enhancing English language proficiency or homogenizing varied levels of learner's competence at entry point. They are also different from, say, being conceptualized within 'English for academic purposes' paradigm, assuming the acquisition of a specialist register and usage, whereby the subject which is studied academically may be anything from biology to marketing. These carry in my view features that distinguish them as justifying a continuum with implications for English studies (as a discipline and subject) by gesturing at subject areas, texts, methods, key issues and threshold concepts¹⁷, etc. and by suggesting a linkage between strands within the curriculum and areas of study. At the same time these course descriptions and an introduction to a course book reveal a continuum between English outside this particular institutionalized space (English studied before tertiary education in Bulgaria, the English present in the general public space surrounding the disciplinary space of ES, as well the English present in formal or informal practices and exchanges of the students, etc.) and English as it is disposed within this particular institutionalized space, i.e. ES in Bulgarian universities. They gesture at the idea that English is not merely a means or a medium but simultaneously an object of study as well. While metaphorically we often conceptualize this place of EPC as a 'bridge' or a necessary pre-condition for excelling in courses 'proper', emphasizing its instrumentality, I think it will be more beneficial to consider EPC as the *'linchpin'* in ES in the non-Anglophone context of Bulgaria – a metaphor which builds on two concepts, namely that of operational centrality to any one 'mechanism' and cohesion between its various 'parts'. In our case in point, I discern this cohesive role of EPC being articulated between academic paradigms (of Literature and Linguistics studies which appear parallel in the subject as it is conceived and practiced here), between theory and application (practice), between texts/discourses and exchanges of varied nature and purpose, etc. Or to put it differently, in exercising the medium the possibilities of conceptually studying the object arise. Therefore, even when opting for a general textbook geared at level homogenization and consolidation, such as *Proficiency Masterclass*, instead of a locally produced course book, for

¹⁷ The reference here is to the Meyer and Land Threshold Concept which has been applied variously in HE research. With a view to ES, illuminating discussions of threshold concepts appear in Orsini-Jones 2010 and Orsini-Jones 2012.

first year BA students in the case of PU, the practice in the ES classroom adapts and supplements this core material to the above-mentioned needs, goals and content. The extent to which these possibilities are made use of or capitalized on, or at least articulated among the professional and scholarly communities in ES themselves or, for that matter, to the student of ES in Bulgaria, remains an open question.

Further – which explains the inclusion of a quotation from an elective course description within EPC – with a view to the dynamics of ES as a discipline across contexts over the past twenty years or so, two of the major trends at least, more specifically, that of the *changing and expanding curriculum* and *its contemporary pull*¹⁸ seem to be delegated to elective provisions in the institutionalized space of ES in the country. In this respect, the awareness and responsibility of navigating along these recent disciplinary developments is a matter of student choice. However, in recent years, the site which implicitly creates the environment for acquiring this awareness and contributing towards that being an informed choice is quite possibly located precisely in EPC by virtue of texts and registers diversification, of inclusion of works and/or authors beyond canonical such and of the contemporary or from the immediate present, of contextualization vis-à-vis specific groups of learners not simply in terms of recognizing and addressing their levels of linguistic competence but also in terms of socially contextualized pedagogy¹⁹. Examples include recent course book publications which, for instance, offer selections of contemporary texts and/or a variety of genres, such as *Translation Practicum* (Pavlov, Katsarska 2008), *Translation XL* (Katsarska, Koynakova. et al. 2001), *An American Perspective: Newspaper Texts for Advanced Learners of English* (Katsarova 2003), even if they do not necessarily state clearly the rationale underpinning the selection in relation to the subject and discipline(s) of ES. Another less obvious or less obviously documented example, is the recently adopted practice at PU of offering fourth year students a fixed list of books to choose from for oral exam preparation whereby part of the selection rationale is based on *literatures* in English (Australian, Canadian, Nigerian-English, Egyptian-English, etc.) as well as on contemporary literary value recognition grids on the current book market – prize and award nominees and holders (*The*

¹⁸ For various approaches to the discussion on the ‘expanding curricula’ and ‘contemporary pull’ in ES, see Gupta and Katsarska (eds., 2009), Gawthorpe and Martin (2003), Graff (1987), Scholes (1998), among many others.

¹⁹ Understood within existing discussions with regard to classroom identity politics, for example, hooks (sic!) 1994, hooks 2003, among others.

Booker, The Whitbread, etc.), both of which principles are yet to be coherently or explicitly addressed as governing any one literature course in the core curriculum at the BA level.

Additionally, bearing in mind the established pedagogical tradition of immersion or ‘near-native’/‘native’ goal orientation that spans the entire repertoire of course offers (in language practice, in linguistics, literature, and culture), it seems to me that the idea and practice of *located-ness* of ES (as a discipline, subject, and pedagogy) in the particular social, historical, cultural, political, linguistic, etc. context of Bulgaria is carried out primarily in EPC. One example here will be that the presence of texts in Bulgarian and the production of such by the ES students themselves, for instance, are legitimized in the practical translation seminars, thus creating at the very least a premise for advancing of critical literacy in Bulgarian, among cultural, political, media, etc. awareness about the Bulgarian context and pertaining academic skills and knowledge, even if these do not form an explicit and/or consistent line in institutionally stated goals of ES degrees. Among numerous examples in this vein, there also exists the practice of training students in library research and in writing annotated bibliography essays, which practice in the case of PU takes place within the writing classes in the EP corpus. Being assigned to conduct library/bibliographic team work on American literature in Bulgarian translation, for instance, students gather experience not only in terms of relevant ground work for translation or reception studies, but, more importantly for me at this point, they develop a critical awareness of cultural flows with regard to the context’s (i.e. Bulgarian) recent socio-political past in relation to issues that fall *within* the scope of ES as a discipline(s).

Finally, as the ‘Introduction’ to *Translation Practicum* (Katsarska, Pavlov 2008) explicitly states and course descriptions suggest, EPC provide for the exercise and formation of a number of analytic skills. Even if an academic programme can only be selective in terms of objects of study – in the offer of texts, discourses, registers, etc. – the analytical processes entailed and fostered thus are applicable more widely to the world, especially *the world of the students*. Since EPC are emphatically student-oriented and rely on learners’ input and performance, these present an opportunity for students to extend the analytical processes they are picking up to areas of interest to them which do not necessarily figure in the programme whether they are encouraged to bring those into the ES classroom or not.

All in all in my view, EPC offer a wide area of exploration as related to English studies along the nodes outlined above. This particular paper aimed at being suggestive rather than exhaustive in terms of the scope of relations between EPC and English Studies as a discipline(s) in the non-Anglophone context of Bulgaria which are present in the institutional and pedagogical practice albeit explicated or pursued to varying degrees of articulation and/or coherence. Insofar as their *presence* is recognized, they could inform further discussions on the subject, shape consistent methodological address or prompt reflexive practices in the EPC classroom and beyond that in the English Studies space at various discourse levels – institutional, scholarly and/or pedagogical – in our particular context or across contexts.

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