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Teaching Bulgarian Learners of English:

An Analysis of Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Semantics, and Lexical Aspects

Today, English is arguably the most important language in the world for business, communication, and education, and young people all over the world learn English as a second language to help them further their educations and win high-paying jobs, either in their native countries or in predominantly English-speaking countries. Young Bulgarians are no exception to this trend. Bulgarian public schools begin English education in elementary school and continue it through high school, but many young adults in Bulgaria seek to continue their English education in order to find better jobs, both in Bulgaria and around the world.

Although many Bulgarians will say that English is "easy," there are still many key differences between the English language and the Bulgarian language that may be difficult for Bulgarians to learn; these can be best understood through an analysis of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and lexical aspects.

Phonology

In contrast to the English alphabet with 26 letters, including five vowels that can each represent multiple sounds, the Bulgarian alphabet has 30 letters, including eight vowels, and each

letter only stands for one sound. The Bulgarian alphabet comes from the Cyrillic alphabet, created by St. Kliment of Ohrid in the tenth century (Ager, "History and Development"). The alphabet was adopted in the late 1700s and has been reformed several times; the most recent reform took place in 1945, when two letters were dropped from the alphabet (Ager, "History and Development").   Today, Bulgaria's alphabet and phonology contain many sounds that are also in use in English, but also some that differ, as shown in Appendix A.

Since Bulgarian and English have different alphabetic systems, it is important for a Bulgarian learner of English to spend time learning the English alphabet and the sounds that go along with it. Care must especially be taken with letters that look the same in the two languages, but produce very different sounds. For example, "p" in English produces /p/, but in Bulgarian it produces /r/.

Bulgarian learners of English may struggle most with the "th" sounds in English (noted as /θ/ for the unvoiced "th" sound and /ð/ for the voiced "th" sound in the International Phonetic Alphabet), since the Bulgarian language does not include these sounds. Often, Bulgarian speakers of English will substitute a /t/ for /θ/ and /ð/ if they find the latter sounds to be too difficult to make, or they may misunderstand /θ/, confusing it with /f/ (Danchev 168). In addition, many Bulgarians use /l/ and /w/ interchangeably; the Bulgarian language does not have a separate letter for /w/ (see Appendix A). For example, the word for elephant, слон /slɔn/ may also be pronounced as /swɔn/, with little difference noticed by the Bulgarian speaker. Thus, beginning Bulgarian learners of English should receive training in both the formation of /θ/ and /ð/, but also the act of distinguishing between the /l/ and /w/ and the /θ/, /ð/, /f/, and /t/ sounds. An effective way of practicing these differences with an English language learner is through the use of minimal pairs, in which a learner is given a pair of words that only differ by one phoneme.

For example, a student could be given the words "lit" and "wit" and asked to spell each word, determining the differences between the two words. (See Appendix B for a sample listening lesson plan incorporating a few of these phonemes.)

Although Bulgarian does incorporate the /ŋ/ phoneme in combination with /k/ and /g/, /ŋ/ does not stand alone as a phoneme, and therefore Bulgarian learners of English may struggle when faced with minimal pairs such as "sin" (/sin/) and "sing"/(siŋ/). Often, Bulgarian learners will substitute the /ŋ/ with /n/ or even with /ng/ or /nk/, or delete the phoneme from their writing altogether, suggesting that they may not hear the sound at all (Danchev 168-169). Extended practice with listening and pronunciation should correct this problem.

Bulgarian does not have the soft /h/ sound that English uses, but it does have a similar sound in the Bulgarian letter "x"; however, this letter has a more guttural sound (Станчев, "Recording"). Although the language does not contain a letter for the /d͡ʒ/ sound, the consonant combination of "дж" makes the same sound. The Bulgarian letter "p", which makes the sound /r/ or /rʲ/, is a trill, unlike the hard sound of the English "r" (/ɹ/). Bulgarian learners should pay special attention and care to correctly pronounce /ɹ/.

As referenced earlier, Bulgarian has eight vowels, and each only makes one sound. However, when combined with the letter "й" (also known as и кратко, or /i krɑtkow/), other vowel sounds may be produced. Beginning Bulgarian learners of English often struggle with differentiating short and long vowel sounds, making the short vowels longer and the long vowels shorter than necessary (Danchev 157). For example, a learner might pronounce the words "sip" and "seep" the same way, with a vowel length that is in-between the correct lengths. Once again, work with minimal pairs may help learners to hear the differences between the words. However,

Andrei Danchev notes that these learners may be tempted to start making extra-long vowel sounds, so the teacher and students must be careful to observe proper vowel lengths (158). In addition, Bulgarian learners may confuse the /æ/ and /e/ sounds of English, especially while spelling, leading to errors such as confusing the words "band" and "bend" (Danchev 159). As a result, Bulgarian learners of English may need extra training in learning the many English vowel sounds in reading and writing, since unlike Bulgarian, the English language is not largely phonetic.

In addition, it is interesting to note that word stresses in English are much more regular than stresses in Bulgarian. English has patterns for word stress, while "the Bulgarian language lacks definite rules for stress; therefore, the accent of every word must be learned individually" (Pearson Education, "Bulgarian Language"). As such, Bulgarian learners of English may actually find English word stresses much easier to learn!

Morphology

Bulgarian nouns have three genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter. The gender of a noun is usually expressed by its ending, although there are some exceptions. Adjectives modifying nouns must agree in gender, number (singular, plural, and, for masculine nouns, whether or not there is a precise number of something), and definiteness (whether or not the noun being referred to is specific or general) (Holman and Kolvatcheva 6, 92, 102). Therefore, there are many possibilities for the formation of nouns and adjectives. In comparison, English nouns and adjectives may seem simple to a Bulgarian speaker, with just the –s or –es ending to pluralize most nouns; however, the exceptions to this rule, such as the plural of "child" being "children," require memorization and necessitate much practice for any learner of English.

Verb formation may cause difficulties for Bulgarian learners of English, especially in remembering to add the suffix –s for the third person singular (e.g., he sits); this is a difficulty faced by English language learners from many different language backgrounds, and is usually one of the concepts acquired later in language acquisition (O'Grady et al. 409). Some learners may struggle with knowing when to use the –s in a question, such as *"Does he speaks English?" or *"Did they invited her?" (Todeva 116). Todeva notes that errors in endings and tense, such as those mentioned above, are quite typical of beginning learners (116). These errors may be a result of the fact that Bulgarian's verb endings specify person and number (Todeva 117).

To show possession in Bulgarian when the possessor is a noun, the preposition на (/nɑ/), meaning "of," is placed between the item being possessed, which is placed first, and the possessor. For example:

Чантата на момичето

literally: the handbag of the girl (Alexander 26).

In contrast, English possessives are formed by the addition of an apostrophe. Since Bulgarian does not use this punctuation mark (Evtimov), special attention toward the formation of the possessive using the apostrophe may be necessary.

Syntax

According to T. Florian Jaeger and Veronica A. Gerassimova, the order of words in Bulgarian is somewhat freer than many other languages ("Bulgarian Word Order" 4). This is a result of the fact that the verb endings in Bulgarian are different for each person and also different for both singular and plural, so whether the subject is in the beginning of the sentence

or the end, it should still be distinguishable as the subject because it agrees with the noun. However, English is much more precise on word order; in Standard American English, the subject of the sentence must come at the beginning of the sentence.

Bulgarian also allows for the use of double negatives at times, although not in all circumstances (Alexander and Mladenova 148); this stands in contrast with English, because, with a few exceptions, double or "redundant negatives" (Grozdanova 54) are not permissible in English. Often, Bulgarian learners of English struggle with choosing between the words "not" and "no," possibly because their Bulgarian equivalent is the same word, "не" (/nej/); however, this is a distinction with which English language learners from many language backgrounds, and even children who are native speakers of English, struggle (Grozdanova 52-53). In addition, Bulgarian learners may place the negative particle before the verb, following the structure of the Bulgarian language, which puts "не" before most nouns to negate them (Grozdanova 53). For example, a Bulgarian learner of English might say, "She not is pretty," as the Bulgarian equivalent, "Тя не е красива," would be considered correct.

Another quite difficult concept for many Bulgarian learners of English is the infinitive. As an advanced Bulgarian learner of English noted, "…it's pretty difficult to grasp what the point of having an impersonal verb form like [the infinitive] is at all," since Bulgarian lacks that structure (Nikolov). Elka Todeva has noted that research has shown that "the infinitive poses problems both on the level of comprehension and production" (113) and that "errors with the infinitive occur quite frequently at different levels of production" (113). She also states that "improper and, above all, insufficient use (or underuse) of the infinitive…is also an important factor" in determining that an English language learner's use of the infinitive structure is different from a native speaker's use (Todeva 113). Often, language learners will attempt to

avoid using the infinitive (or other difficult structures, for that matter) in conversation, but sometimes the use is inevitable (Todeva 115).

Infinitives may also be a problem when combined with modal verbs, such as "can" and "must;" errors like *"I can to swim" may be found in learners' Bulgarian-to-English translations (Todeva 118). In Bulgarian, the particle "да" (/dɑ/) is inserted between the main verb and the second verb, which in English would be the verb infinitive.

For example:

Аз мога да плувам.

Literally: I can [da] I swim

Translation: I can swim.

Therefore, Bulgarian learners of English may decide to translate all forms of да + a verb as an infinitive phrase (to + verb); however, as the example above shows, this translation construct would not be correct for all phrases of this type (Todeva 117-118).

Modal verbs may also cause difficulty for Bulgarian learners of English outside of the infinitive construct. Modals are used to indicate the ideas of possibility and necessity, such as the words "can," "should," "must," and others (Georgieva-Nenkova 75). Georgieva-Nenkova identified five groups of errors with modal verbs (77-78). The first group contains errors that are grammatically correct, but inappropriate for the situation, e.g., asking someone for help using the word "must" (Georgieva-Nenkova 77). The second group of errors is grammatically incorrect, probably because of an incorrect generalization, e.g. *"She can't is reading" (Georgieva-Nenkova 77). The third group is "grammatically deviant," or a nonstandard use due to the

interference of Bulgarian and also an incorrect understanding of English, e.g. *"Scientists must to turn theory into effective practice" (Georgieva-Nenkova 77). The fourth group of errors is grammatically unacceptable and typically caused entirely by the interference of Bulgarian, e.g. *"If I want to make a cake I have to some milk" (Georgieva-Nenkova 77). Finally, the fifth group contains mistakes with no plausible explanation, such as *"What must eat he prepare I?" (Georgieva-Nenkova 78).

Semantics

A Bulgarian speaker who is learning English may struggle with the understanding of specific meanings and usages of words. Even though an English word may seem to have a direct translation or equivalent in the second language, its connotation may cause its meaning to actually be different than the Bulgarian learner expects. However, it is important to note that this experience holds true for learning any language, not just English, and for learners of all language backgrounds.

Irina Boukovska notes that Bulgarian learners of English may struggle with the use of the words "also" and "too;" however, she also recognizes that even English speakers sometimes disagree on the proper usages of the words (44). Although "also" can mean "as well," "furthermore," and "moreover," in Boukovska's research, of 244 instances of errors in the use of the word "also," nearly 98% of them had to do with the meaning "as well" (Boukovska 45). These difficulties may be attributed to the fact that the placement of the word "also" and even the intonation of the speaker affect the meaning of a sentence (Boukovska 45-46). For example, the sentence "Dick also spoke to Mary today" may have three different meanings, depending on whether stress is placed on "also" (Dick and someone else both spoke to Mary today), "spoke"

(Dick did something else for Mary, in addition to speaking to her today) or "to Mary" (Dick spoke to someone else and to Mary today) (Boukovska 45). English language learners must be familiarized with these differences in order to increase their communication competence in both listening and speaking.

In the case of the word "too," Bulgarian learners may overgeneralize the assumption that "too" is best used at the end of a sentence (Boukovska 47). They may also encounter interference from the Bulgarian language by attempting to translate "too" as "също" (/sʌʃtow/), a similar word that can mean "also," "too," "as well," or "either"; however, Bulgarian's rules allow "също" to be used with a negative verb, while in English, this would not be allowed (e.g., "I am not coming also") (Boukovska 47). In addition, Bulgarian learners of English may erroneously use the word "and" in place of "too", "either," or "also," as the Bulgarian word "и" may be used for all of these words (Boukovska 48, 51).

Another group of words often used incorrectly by Bulgarian learners includes "still," "yet," and "already." Since "still" and "yet" depend largely on placement in the sentence, they must be placed correctly. For example, *"I haven't still planned where to go" is incorrect, but both "I still haven't planned where to go" and "I haven't planned where to go yet" are correct (Grozdanova 56). Grozdanova further notes that the placement and choice of some words may change their meaning, from being polite to rude (60). For example,

Are you leaving yet?

Are you leaving already?

Aren't you leaving yet?

Aren't you leaving already? (Grozdanova 60).

Grozdanova identifies yet another area of difficulty in pairs of words that are quite similar, but with different connotations, including "little" and "a little," "few" and "a few," "too" and "very," and "fairly" and "rather" (57). Although the sentences in which they are used are often grammatically correct, their meanings may be different than the intended meanings of the English learner who is using them. For example, the statements "the apartment is fairly large" and "the apartment is rather large" have slightly different connotations; the former statement would suggest a positive idea of the apartment, while the latter suggests a slightly negative idea of the apartment's overly large size (Grozdanova 58).

Bulgarian learners of English may struggle with choosing the correct word to use when dealing with modal verbs; for example, the Bulgarian word "трябва" (/triɑbvɑ/) may be translated as "must," "have to," "should," "ought," "need," or "be to," depending on the context (Georgieva-Nenkova 82).

A very significant difference between English and Bulgarian involves the placement of articles. English uses the indefinite articles "a" or "an" and the definite article "the", which are placed before the word. Bulgarian's definite article is attached to the end of the noun or the adjective preceding the noun, and it must agree in gender with the noun (Holman and Kovatcheva 31, 102). Often, no indefinite article is used for nouns that are singular and can be counted (Toncheva 131). For example,

Аз съм учител.

Literally: I   am   teacher.

Translation: I am a teacher.

Bulgarian learners of English may leave out the article entirely (also known as the zero article), or they may use an incorrect article (e.g., using "a" instead of "the") (Toncheva 129). For example,

*"Iron is metal" (Toncheva 131).

*"Do you know anything about the colour films?" (Toncheva 130).

Toncheva further notes that

With generic reference, both concrete and abstract non-count nouns in English are used with the zero article. In Bulgarian such nouns with generic reference are usually used with the definite article (particularly when in the subject position). Native language transfer can account for errors such as:

***The** darkness doesn't worry cats.

*The swimming is my favourite sport (130).

Toncheva also states that in English, the indefinite article (signified as – in academic writing) can signify that there is only one of an item or idea; in Bulgarian, to express the "oneness" of something, the word "един" or the zero article is used (132). For example,

*"It takes me – hour and – half to get to work"

is a result of transfer from Bulgarian (Toncheva 132).

Toncheva suggests a list of eight rules about article usages and the order in which they should be taught for teachers of Bulgarian learners of English (See Appendix C).

Once again, it is important to note that the semantic difficulties listed above are only a sampling of some of the most common problems that Bulgarian learners of English face. As with learning any language, difficulties may vary by learner, and there are many other sources of difficulty in grammar and translation for Bulgarian learners of English. The book Error Analysis: Bulgarian Learners of English, which is listed in the works cited page of this paper, offers many additional sources of difficulties, as noted from the authors' research, as well as suggestions for teaching Bulgarians who are struggling with aspects of English.

Lexical Aspects

A Bulgarian learner of English noted in an interview that "it's pretty unusual for, say, a Bulgarian to learn a new word after he's 20 or so, yet English speakers seem to be learning new words on a semi-regular basis" (Nikolov). The very large vocabulary of English can be a difficulty for language learners, especially if their native language has significantly fewer words. Vocabulary development can account for many of the difficulties that Bulgarian learners of English face, not only in terms of the vast number of words, but also in spelling, pronunciation, and other lexical aspects.

From Old English to Middle English to today's modern English, the pronunciation of many words has changed, often to make words simpler to say (O'Grady et al. 248). However, as English has changed through the centuries, its spelling has not always adapted to keep pace with the pronunciation changes. For example, the word "knot" in Old English was pronounced with the /k/ sound, but today that sound is not pronounced (O'Grady et al. 254). Spelling in Bulgarian

is largely phonetic, so the complications of English spelling, with its silent letters, many rules, and many exceptions can be a significant hurdle for English learners (Nikolov).

Boyadzhieva-Milenova noted four types of lexical errors, including incorrect substitutions of homophones, synonyms, antonyms, and hyponyms, incorrect selection of parts of speech, and usage of words in the same category of meaning, but with different specific meanings (179-186). Errors with words that are spelled or pronounced similarly include the use of "rein" instead of "rain," or "leave" instead of "live" (Boyadzhieva-Milenova 178-179). Learners might also choose words that are similar in definition, but are used differently, such as "look" and "see," or "beautiful" and "wonderful" (Boyadzhieva-Milenova 180, 182). Interference from Bulgarian, or even another language that has been previously studied, can also be a source of errors for the English learner; for example, the words "do" and "make" have varying meanings, depending on the language and context, and may be used incorrectly by language learners for this reason (Boyadzhieva-Milenova 186-187).

English has a number of phrasal verbs and idioms that may be very difficult for English learners to understand, since they usually cannot be understood by dissecting the parts of the phrase and must instead be memorized. An advanced Bulgarian learner of English noted that phrasal verbs may be "confusing to the learner because it's not obvious that a verb is being used phrasally and may in fact mean something completely different than what it looks like" (Nikolov). Phrasal verbs are commonly used by native English speakers and include such items as "take over," "draw out," and "straighten up." Similarly, idioms such as "head over heels" and "happy-go-lucky" may mean nothing to non-native speakers, and may be a source of even more confusion when translated directly; their meanings must be memorized in order to be understood. An English language learner may incorrectly attempt to use an idiom or phrasal verb by using the

words in an incorrect order or context, or by substituting some of the words in the idiom for similar words (Kouteva 190). For example, he or she might say, *"I'm tired and sick of explaining myself every step" or *"It's a matter of life and dying" (Kouteva 190).

Often, English words can be used in several different parts of speech, sometimes while appearing to be identical; this is a source of confusion for many English language learners. In Bulgarian, since verbs, nouns, and adjectives are differentiated by their endings, their meanings are not as difficult to ascertain. For example, the word "fight" could be used as a verb, a noun, or an adjective, depending on the context (Nikolov):

My brother and sister fight each other often.

The fight was quickly stopped by two teachers.

The school band played the fight song as the pep rally began.

Finally, as a result of the influence of English on global culture, Bulgarian has adopted numerous words from English. Often, these words serve as aids for English language learners, as they are pronounced similarly or identically, aiding with spelling, and have the same meanings as well (Moskovska 205). However, one must be careful when relying upon similar-sounding words, as "false friends" may be misleading (Nikolov). For example, "евентуално" /ivintuɑlnow/ means "perhaps" or "possibly," while the English word "eventually" means "after a period of time" (Nikolov).

Conclusion

Error analyses, although time-consuming, are immensely helpful in understanding the difficulties faced by English language learners. The intent is not to negatively judge the learners,

but rather to understand the sources of each difficulty, whether a source is an incorrect understanding or overgeneralization of English, or interference from the native language, in order to best assist the learner in developing communicative competence. Teachers of English should be willing to put forth the time and effort to study the native language or languages of their students in order to better help students understand and ultimately achieve proficiency in both languages. A well-rounded approach to this analysis, including phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and lexical aspects, may ultimately save time, struggles, and confusion on the part of both teachers and students. It is the author's hope that this paper is able to assist teachers of Bulgarian students as they work to help their students achieve their goals of English proficiency.

Appendix A:

Bulgarian letter	International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbol	English equivalent
А а	/a/ or /ɐ/	A as in amazing
Б б	/b/	B as in believe
В в	/v/	V as in van
Г г	/g/	G as in gun
Д д	/d/	D as in done
Е е	/ɛ/	e as in met
Ж ж	/ʒ/	S as in treasure
З з	/z/	Z as in zoo
И и	/i/	E as in even
Й й (и кратко/ih kratko)	/j/	Y as in yes; also combined to form diphthongs
К к	/k/	K as in kite

Л л	/l/ or /w/	L as in lemon (sometimes also w as in went)
М м	/m/	M as in man
Н н	/n/	N as in name
О о	/ɔ/	O as in order
П п	/p/	P as in pat
Р р	/r/	R as in rat
С с	/s/	S as in sat
Т т	/t/	T as in tot
У у	/u/	Oo as in cool
Ф ф	/f/	F as in fall
Х х	/x/	Ch as in Scottish "loch"
Ц ц	/t͡s/	Ts as in fits
Ч ч	/t͡ʃ/	Ch as in church
Ш ш	/ʃ/	Sh as in shake
Щ щ	/ʃt/	Sht as in shtick
Ъ ъ (ер голям/er goliam)	/ɤ/	U as in sun

Ь ь (ер малък/er maluk)	/j/ (but not usually pronounced)	Sometimes y as in canyon, but not usually pronounced
Ю ю	/io/	Yo as in yo-yo
Я я	/ja/ or /ɤ/	Ya as in yarn

Adapted from *Teach Yourself Bulgarian* (Holman and Kovatcheva xii-xiii), "IPA Phonetic Chart" (Coghlan), and "Recording of the Bulgarian Alphabet"(Станчев).

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Appendix B:

Lesson Plan Intended Audience: elementary school, middle school, high school: beginning ESL

Objective: provide students with practice in listening to and distinguishing among sounds of English

Specific focus of lesson: sounds /l/ and /w/; /t/, /ð/, and /θ/; /a/ and /æ/

Materials: several bingo cards with different sound words; each student will get a few bingo cards. I will draw the words out of a hat, making a list as I go, and have students color with crayon in the box with the word that I say. When a student gets bingo, we will verbally go through all of the words on the bingo card on the Smartboard and check to make sure the student was right. This game would be used as a review after having worked on several sound pairs over time. The student who got bingo will get an M&M for each one that is right, and other students will get M&Ms for their right answers, as well.

Outcomes: the student should be able to distinguish between the several target sounds after several times practicing and playing this game and with the other practices we've already done.

Assessment procedure: I will collect the students' bingo cards and compare their results to my list to see if they got all the words right or if they missed any. I will also watch the students as they answer their bingo cards and make individual notes as necessary to focus on any problem sounds.

Appendix C: Rules for Teaching Articles

1. The indefinite article **a/an** with singular count nouns as marker of indefinite reference.

2. The definite article **the** with singular count nouns as marker of specific definite reference.

3. Numerical use of the indefinite article **a/an** with singular count nouns as contrasted to the use of numerals with plural count nouns.

4. The zero article and unstressed **some** with plural count nouns as markers of indefinite reference, as contrasted to the use of the definite article **the** with plural count nouns as marker of specific definite reference.

5. The zero article and unstressed **some** with non-count concrete and abstract nouns as markers of indefinite reference.

6. The indefinite article **a/an** with singular count nouns with generic reference.

7. The zero article with non-count concrete and abstract nouns with generic reference.

8. The definite article **the** with singular count nouns with generic reference (Toncheva 137-138).

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