COMMUNICATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES
FOR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PROFESSIONAL CAREER

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ABSTRACT

The European Framework of key competences for lifelong learning, released at the end of 2006, identifies and defines eight competences that everyone needs in order to achieve personal and professional goals, social inclusion and active citizenship in today's rapidly-changing world.

The paper discusses the pilot study results on communication in foreign languages as one of the key competence conducted in 2013. The analysis of the situation in Lithuania related to conceptual understanding of communication in foreign languages, its development for personal and professional growth and labour market demand is presented. The findings reveal the respondents’ self-evaluation of communication in foreign languages, the main challenges and opportunities it offers for professional life and career, personal development and participation in civic and community life.

Key words: communication in foreign languages, competence, self-evaluation, personal development, professional career

COMMUNICACIÓN EN LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS PARA EL DESARROLLO PERSONAL Y CARRERA PROFESIONAL

RESUMEN

El documento “Competencias generales europeas del aprendizaje a lo largo de la vida” (2006) preparado por el Parlamento y Consejo Europeos delimitó y definió ocho competencias clave necesarias para cada ciudadano que busca y pretende adquirir objetivos personales y profesionales además de implicación social y participación ciudadana activa en el mundo contemporáneo que cambia constantemente.

En el artículo se habla de los resultados de la investigación sobre las competencias de comunicación en Lenguas Extranjeras, realizada en 2013. El presente trabajo revela la situación relacionada con el entendimiento conceptual de las competencias de comunicación en Lenguas Extranjeras en Lituania. Se habla de la importancia del desarrollo de Lengua Extranjera para el crecimiento personal y la carrera profesional, también de la importancia de las necesidades del mercado laboral.

Los resultados de la investigación demuestran la gran importancia de habilidades comunicativas de autoevaluación en Lenguas Extranjeras también como el significado de las competencias en la vida personal, profesional, ciudadana y su imprescindible necesidad en el mundo contemporáneo. También el artículo trata de los obstáculos del aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: comunicación en Lenguas Extranjeras, competencia, autoevaluación, desarrollo personal, carrera profesional.

1. INTRODUCTION

Aging population and the increasing shortage of workforce challenge to search for ways to help adults stay longer in the labour market. These social processes and economic globalization also increase the competition among job seekers and require constant adaptation to the change of activity. Generic competences (GCs) have become a significant factor, which determines adults’ participation in the process of designing their career prospects and development of the welfare state. Moreover, development of GCs is seen as a challenging objective for educators, citizens, businesses and the public. GCs underlying the strategic aim of lifelong learning (LLL) have become particularly important as they guarantee more flexibility for the workforce and better adjustment to the constant change. In this light the development of GCs implies higher quality of LLL and spread of the network of informal education services. The concept of generic competences (‘key competences’ in EU documents) is fairly ‘raw’ in Europe, thus calling researchers’ attention.

The Key Competences for lifelong learning - European Framework, released at the end of 2006, identifies and defines the key knowledge and skills that everyone needs in order to achieve personal and professional goals, social inclusion and active citizenship in today's rapidly-changing world. With the development of the information society the need for generic skills in the fields of personal, professional and public life is constantly increasing. The processes of globalization and the growing internationalization of the economy affects the world of work, the introduction of new technologies and emergence of new forms of work organization also influence frequent changes in the area of job opportunities. Employees must develop not only specific, job-related skills, but also learn life skills that will enable
them to adapt to changes. The knowledge, skills and attitudes are essential factors for innovation, productivity and competitiveness, and they contribute to the motivation, job satisfaction and quality of work (European Parliament and Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning, 2005). There is a growing concern about social cohesion and democratic citizenship, so people need to be informed, engaged and active.

Two of the competences for lifelong learning defined in the Framework (2006) are related to languages and communication: (i) communication in mother tongue and (ii) communication in foreign languages.

The aim of the paper is to present pilot study results of the situation related to conceptual understanding of communication in foreign languages as one of the key competence, its development for personal and professional growth and labour market demand in Lithuania. To address this aim the analysis of research literature on communication in foreign languages and empirical research findings are presented.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Research into generic competences and social context

In the recent years generic skills have been emphasized in the curriculum of all levels of education: secondary, higher, vocational training. In Lithuania the interest in generic competences was noticed in the last decade in relation to a very rapid and large-scale change in socio-political and economic areas of life. The research is focused on the interrelation between generic competences and:

- the world of work
- higher education
- vocational training
- general education system.

Lepaitė and Kliminskas (2003) analysed the aspects of research methodology of adult learners’ key competences, including communication in foreign languages. The authors claim that some of the competences are general for many professions, hence their transferability. Transferability of the competence of communication in foreign languages is a noticeable characteristic in particular. Lithuanian scholars (Čepienė, Teresevičienė, 2010; Jakubė, Juozaitis, 2012) focus on the role of generic competences in higher education settings, i.e. curriculum, overall university studies, study context and course design in an effort to bring the education closer to the world of work. Čepienė and Teresevičienė pay a considerable attention to the phenomenological approach in the development of soft skills (generic competences) and conclude with the importance of authentic environment, reflection, autonomy in learning process that aid in training of the skills.

21st century realities, as essential drivers for development of generic competences are analysed by Jakubė and Juozaitis (2012) in the context of higher education, by linking the relevance of higher education curriculum and study outcomes to the labour market demands. Moreover, the need for development of communication in foreign languages is also closely linked with the spread of humanistic ideas of the 21st century. Sustainable development, personal well-being, cooperation provisions, a healthy lifestyle as well as personal development are considered to be the priority issues of present day society.

However, in Lithuania there is a lack of analytical considerations and research-based findings into conceptual understanding of communication in foreign languages, its relevance to the labour market demands, challenges and opportunities it offers for professional life and career, personal development and participation in civic and community life. Therefore, the question that we pose is: to what extent the competence of communication in foreign languages is important for adults in relation to their personal, social, and work life.

2.2. Concept of communication in foreign languages

The European Reference Framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (European Communities, 2007:5) defines communication in foreign languages as the competence that:

- broadly shares the main skill dimensions of communication in the mother tongue: it is based on the ability to understand, express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in an appropriate range of societal and cultural contexts (in education and training, work, home and leisure) according to one’s wants or needs.

Furthermore, the competence embraces such skills as mediation and intercultural understanding. According to the European Language Competence Indicator (2005) the competence is measured in four domains:
- Reading
- Listening
- Speaking
- Writing.

Communication in foreign languages implies the elements of linguistic competence, communication competence and intercultural competence. One of the most significant changes over the past few decades has been the recognition of
the cultural dimension as a key component of language studies. Therefore, present day foreign language teaching is a complex process in terms of its contents, aims and competence development. The authors analyse language teaching emphasising interrelation between language and culture, acknowledge the relevance of cultural dimension in language teaching. The importance of the context of language use is also highlighted in the European Framework of Reference (2002; 2008). The use of a language is coupled with context and learners’ aims and motivation. Therefore, it is conceived as a tool that is applicable according to users’ aims, needs and context. The need to communicate occurs in a particular situation that shapes the form and content of that particular communication. Nazari (2007) considers that social and cultural aspects are already within the language, thus language teaching and learning should not be separated from the target community’s social practice context, otherwise language learning process is deemed to be useless. The author (2007) grounds the concept of communication competence and its importance in language teaching on Dubin’s idea (1989) that communication competence implies at least two concepts (i) concept of autonomy (ii) concept of ideology. Ideological concept is a broad notion embracing social and cultural aspects within a language, which distinguishes between Hymes’ (1971) understanding of communication competence and Chomsky’s (1965) linguistic (language) competence.

Since the acquisition of linguistic competence is not enough in a modern globalized and mobile society, learning of foreign languages is not possible unless simultaneous involvement of sociocultural aspects in foreign language teaching is taken place (Paulston, 1992; Holliday et al., 2004; Nazari, 2007). Thus, the above mentioned authors acknowledge the importance of cultural dimension in foreign language teaching by stressing the interaction between language and culture.

Discussion on the conception of intercultural competence yet poses more questions than answers. The competence has been researched by many scholars (Byram, 1997; Harden, 2011; Deardorf, 2011; Witte, 2011; Strohner, Rickheit, 2008) who ground on Chomsky’s concept of competence. While criticising Chomsky’s conception of the competence, they present their view on this multifaceted and multidimensional phenomenon. Deardoff (2011) claims that intercultural competence is a process that is continuing through life and there is no boundary at which a person could claim to be competent. In addition, Harden (2011) considers that a learner seeks a mediator or diplomat’s role, which requires the acquisition of a series of skills (Fr. savoirs), i.e., knowledge and skills, identified by Byram (1997). Byram (1997) formulated the conceptual framework of intercultural competence, which consists of five savoirs (Fr.): (1) Savoirs (knowledge), (2) Savoir-comprendre (skills), (3) Savoir-être (attitudes), (4) Savoir-s’engager (critical cultural awareness), (5) Savoir-apprendre/savoirs-faire (skills of discovery and interaction) (1997, p. 34). Other approaches focus on multicultural/multilingual competence (Thorne, 2013), plurilingual competence (Jørgensen, Rindler-Schjerve, Vetter, 2012, Thorne, 2013); plurilingual and pluricultural competence (Coste, Moore, Zarate, 2009; Sercu, Bandura, 2005) discussing multiple use of languages, language user’s linguistic repertoire and growing trend of multilingualism in the society today. Garrido and Alvarez (2006) grounding on Byram’s model consider that intercultural communicative competence involves certain skills, necessary for effective communication. All of them emphasize the importance of cultural dimension and close interrelation between language learning and cultural/intercultural education.

Language activity is the application of language competence (receptive or productive) in processing one or more texts or generating a discourse of a specific area in order to accomplish a task. In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2002:108) linguistic communicative competence is composed of the following components: (i) linguistic competences, (ii) pragmatic competences, (iii) sociocultural competences. The theoretical research discussed in the paper evidences the rationale for communication in foreign languages as a key competence for lifelong learning. The competence of communication in foreign languages embraces three major domains: (i) knowledge, (ii) skills, (iii) values and attitudes.
3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The pilot research was conducted in 2013 under the project “Research and Development Platform For Adult Training of Generic Competences”, Measure VP1-3.1-SMM-07-K „Support to Research Activities of Scientists and Other Researcher (Global Grant)“.

3.1. Instrument

The instrument of the pilot study was a questionnaire on communication in mother tongue and communication in foreign languages composed of several blocs:

- Demographic data
- Identification of the degree of relevance of communication in foreign languages
- Languages in use
- Ways of acquisition of the communication in foreign languages competence
- Factors encouraging learning foreign languages
- Factors hindering acquisition of foreign languages.

This paper is limited to presenting findings on the competence of communication in foreign languages. Internal reliability of the survey instrument was determined on the basis of Cronbach’s alpha - 0.867.

3.2. Respondents

The survey sample was composed of 201 participants who represented four groups: 1) employed; 2) having their own business; 3) unemployed; 4) seniors. As the survey was mainly carried online the most active respondents were young people with jobs. The demographic analysis of the respondents revealed that the majority of respondents are higher education graduates, including university and non-university education (65 %). More than a half of the respondents (59 %) currently have jobs, 9 % of them run their own business, 22 % of the sample are unemployed and searching for jobs, 10 % of the total sample are senior adults.

3.3. Methods
The study is based on quantitative analysis of the data and descriptive statistics. For the analysis of primary empirical data descriptive statistical methods were used for data location, frequency distribution and correlation between them. The differences between the groups of respondents (based on demographic, social factors), statistical significance was determined using appropriate tests. The primary empirical data were coded and statistically processed using SPSS 17 for Windows (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) program. Internal reliability of the survey instrument was determined on the basis of Cronbach’s alpha - 0.867.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Relevance of communication in foreign languages in modern society

The question aimed to identify the relevance of the competence of communication in foreign languages. The European Reference Framework suggests that skills of communication in foreign languages are the most important for people living and working in the information society. Furthermore, the need to develop these skills is lifelong aim. Linguistic competence embraces development of all language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Communication in foreign languages also involves linguistic interaction in an appropriate and creative way in a range of social and cultural contexts, such as education and training, work, home and leisure.

It was important to determine how the respondents treat the importance of foreign language proficiency in four areas:
- Professional activities and work challenges;
- Professional career;
- Participation in social and cultural activities as well as a citizen’s duties;
- Personal development.

The majority of the research sample ranks the competence as very important or important in four dimensions: (i) professional activity (ii) professional career (iii) participation in social, cultural activities and citizenship (iv) personal development. The collected data evidence that language skills are very important or important in all four areas of life: professional activities and work challenges (54.3% and 41.7%), professional career development (59.3% and 29.6%), personal development (70 % and 24.6 %). Although much lower number of the respondents consider that language skills are very important for participation in social and cultural activities (32.7 %), almost half of the survey participants see them as important (49.2 %).

Thus, we assume that the majority of the respondents consider their foreign language skills as very important or important in all four domains (81.9 to 96 %).

4.2. Self-evaluation of the competence of communication in foreign languages

Next question dealt with the respondents’ self-evaluation of their competence. The respondents were asked to rate their foreign language skills on the scale very good, average, poor and I do not know. Foreign language skills were assessed in relation to:
- Wide range of foreign language vocabulary;
- Knowledge of grammar and language functions and forms;
- Comprehension of information transmitted in written and oral form;
- Reading comprehension of simple texts;
- Reading comprehension of complex (scientific, professional, literary) texts;
- Reasoned expression of thoughts and opinions in written and oral form;
- Preparation of a text in writing;
- Communication with people from other cultures, maintaining a constructive dialogue;
- Awareness of cultural diversity and recognition of the need for intercultural communication and collaboration.

Assessing their communication competence in foreign languages (see Fig. 2) the survey participants were rather modest. The biggest number of the respondents evaluated their communication in foreign languages skills as average. The analysis of responses reveals that more than a half of the respondents (59%) assess their understanding of simple texts as very good. Other skills as very good are rated by smaller number of the respondents (12 % to 35%): complex (literary, scientific or professional) texts reading comprehension (12%), knowledge of grammar, language functions and forms (17%), text preparation in written form (18%), delivery of reasoned opinion in writing and oral form (20%), foreign language vocabulary (22%), communication with people from other cultures maintaining a constructive dialogue (30%), understanding of information transmitted in written and oral form (32%), awareness of cultural diversity and recognition of the need for intercultural communication and collaboration (35%). Quite many respondents do not possess or have poor skills of reading comprehension of complex (literary, scientific or professional) texts (41%), one third of the sample (31%) state having poor knowledge of grammar and language functions. Few respondents could not evaluate their skills (1% -8%): vocabulary (1%), text preparation in writing (8%).

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4.3. Languages in use and learning methods

The answers to the question about the respondents’ use of foreign languages reveal that Russian and English are dominating on the scale, the other languages are ranked lower: Polish (9%), German (8%), French (4%), Spanish (2%) are far less popular. Assessment of languages in use was conducted in the scale very good, good, poor, and I do not know. Communication in Russian is indicated by 40% and English respectively by 38% of the study participants as very good. The Polish language proficiency is greatly recognised by 15% of the respondents, whereas German, French and Italian – by 7%, 6% and 4% of the research sample respectively. The findings imply that the mastery of other languages is at a lower level if compared to Russian or English.

The respondents were also asked to indicate the ways of learning foreign languages. The following options were presented - attendance of seminars and lectures at school, college or university, language courses at language schools, self-study of foreign languages (studying textbooks), educational experience/learning through daily experience, distance learning, using computer programs online. The most frequent way of learning a foreign language is through daily experience. More than 50% of the surveyed respondents indicated this type of learning. The other methods such as self-study and attending seminars and lectures at school, college or university are equally popular (22% and 23%). Distance learning is the most popular way of learning among the youngest age group respondents - even 80.5% of respondents aged 18 to 29 develop their foreign language skills using this method. Thus, this group of the survey respondents has the opportunity to balance their work and study process.

4.4. Motives of learning foreign languages

In pursuit to determine the relevance of the competence of communication in foreign languages for personal development it was important to identify what motives encourage foreign language learning and what barriers prevent respondents from learning. The correlation between these factors and the categories of respondents’ age, education, and employment was verified. The factors were verified by finding out the correlation between determining factors that facilitate and hinder the development of foreign language competence. The Chi-square test, which indicates whether the empirical and theoretical distribution of the difference is significant, was used.

Among the factors encouraging learning of foreign languages wish of personal development and career prospects prevail. Wish of personal development is the most evident among all age groups. The other motives are related to work environment: the majority of the respondents consider that learning a foreign language may increase career opportunities, helps in job search and perform everyday work tasks. Career opportunities as the most important factor encouraging to learn foreign languages is indicated by the youngest group of respondents (18 – 29 years old). Self-realisation among the listed factors is ranked lower. Wish of personal development is much stronger that career prospects proportionally with each older group of the respondents. This finding can be interpreted in the way that young respondents are less sure about their career; therefore they pay bigger attention to foreign language learning as they think that foreign language skills increase their career prospects. Older respondents feel safer in the work field and ensure their stability at work by exposing their knowledge and expertise. As a leisure activity language learning is the most important for the oldest group of the sample (70 year olds and over). The least important factor in language
learning is family support. Thus, we claim that the major encouraging factors are self-realisation, personal development and work.

A significant correlation was identified between the respondents’ age and the factors, encouraging enhancement of language competence: necessary for work (.000), helps to find a job (.000), career prospects (.000) need for self-realisation. However, analysis of the relationship between education and the motives, encouraging learning languages reveals the correlation between wish of personal development and language learning. Thus, it must also be admitted that respondents’ education has no influence on their motivation to enhance foreign language competence. The correlation between employment and language competence development is observed in the following categories: need for work (.000), helps to find a job (.000), career opportunities (.000), personal development wish (.002). There is no relationship between foreign language learning and such motives as leisure activities or family support (see Table 1).

Table 1. Correlation between respondents’ age, education and employment and factors encouraging development foreign language competence

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors encouraging development of foreign languages</th>
<th>Chi- Square</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>Necessary for work</td>
<td>.000*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Helps find a job</td>
<td>.000*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career opportunities</td>
<td>.000*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal development wish</td>
<td>.148</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ambition of self-realisation</td>
<td>.001*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leisure activities</td>
<td>.415</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family support</td>
<td>.411</td>
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*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

4.5. Barriers in the process of learning foreign languages

The analysis of the relationship between age, education and employment and factors, hindering development of foreign language competence, highlight a significant correlation between the lack of time and the age of the respondents (.000), and the respondents’ employment status (.000). Lack of motivation depends on the respondents’ education (.027). High cost of education services is not an important factor preventing from learning languages. Deficiency of motivation depends on the respondents’ education. Although statistically reliable, the latter relationship is not very strong and has the possibility of error (.027). In order to determine whether the respondents have the support from their environment to learn and develop linguistic competence is important; the correlation was found between respondents’ education and foreign language competence training (.003). No statistically significant correlation was found between the categories (age, education, employment) and the factor “nowhere to learn”. Thus, it can be assumed that there are plenty of opportunities and services to learn foreign languages. A significant relationship is observed between the respondents’ age and change in their marital status, which is statistically significant (with an error probability) for learning foreign languages (.032). Neither the respondents’ level of education, employment or a significant role in the change of family circumstances, linguistic competence education for fails. Distrust in the potential to learn foreign languages plays an important role in the age category (.022). However, there is a statistically significant relationship with an error probability between respondents’ age, education and employment and foreign language learning (.022). Particularly strong relationship is observed in the category of education and distrust in the abilities to learn (.000) and employment and language learning (.003). Health problems are the only factor in the relationship between the respondents’ age, education and employment, and learning foreign languages. The correlation is slightly weaker statistically in the category of education. This suggests that respondents see strong links between health problems and the ability to develop their language competence. Age problems as a factor that impedes enhancement of language competence is significant in the age (.000) and employment (.000) categories. However, a reliable connection between respondents’ level of education and age problems was not found (see Table 2).

Table 2. Correlation between respondents’ age, education and employment and factors hindering learning foreign languages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors hindering learning foreign languages</th>
<th>Chi-Square</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
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5. CONCLUSIONS

The pilot research conducted in 2013 with the aim to identify the role of communication in foreign languages in the society revealed the following:

1. The competence of communication in foreign languages is important in four areas:
   - Professional activities and work challenges
   - Professional career
   - Participation in social and cultural activities as well as a citizen’s duties
   - Personal development.
   Slightly less importance was noticed in the area of participation in social and cultural activities as well as a citizen’s duties.

2. The survey respondents assess their communication in foreign languages competence as average. English and Russian are dominating languages among the surveyed whereas the acquisition of other languages is relatively lower on the scale. 38% of the research sample assess their English as very good and 35% as good; respectively 40% of the sample can speak very good and 42% good Russian.

3. The research participants were rather modest while assessing their competence of communication in foreign languages. The findings revealed that the only skill of reading a simple text was ranked as very good by more than half of the respondents (59%). Other skills are not so well developed. However, awareness of cultural diversity and recognition of the need for intercultural communication and collaboration is acknowledged by 35% of the research sample.

4. Foreign languages are mostly learnt through daily experience (more than 50%). The other ways of learning foreign languages include individual learning based on course books, distance learning, attending lectures and seminars. The latter method is the most popular (80.5%) among the youngest group of respondents (18-29 year olds).

5. The most important factors encouraging the development of communication in foreign language competence are related to self-realisation, personal development and area of work related needs.

6. Factors hindering foreign language learning are lack of time and motivation. Although the group of respondents older than 60 do not experience lack of time, yet other problems related to age and health occur. They are typical for the respondents who are over 50 years old.

7. References


