

# 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 to acquire in order to achieve personal and professional goals, social inclusion and active citizenship in today's rapidly-changing world. The paper discusses the results of the pilot study on communication in foreign languages, one out of eight key competences, conducted in 2013. The pilot research was carried out under the project *Research and Development Platform for Adult Training of Generic Competences, Measure VP1-3.1-ŠMM-07-K* “Support to Research Activities of Scientists and Other Researcher (Global Grant)”. The analysis of the situation in Lithuania pertinent to conceptual understanding of the competence 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 the competence 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.

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**Keywords:** Communication in foreign languages, competence, self-evaluation, personal development, professional career

## 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.

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Research into generic competences and social context**

In 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 interrelationship 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 and Teresevičienė, 2010; Jakubė and 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 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 all aid in the training of the skills.

21<sup>st</sup> 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 is the competence of communication in foreign languages important for adults, in relation to, their personal, social, and work life.

### **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 interrelationships between language and culture, also acknowledging 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 which 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, and 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 distinguish between Hymes' (1972) 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 takes place (Paulston, 1992; Holliday, Hyde, Kullman, 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 even more questions than answers. The competence has been researched by many scholars (Byram, 1997; Harden, 2011; Deardorf, 2011; Witte, 2011; Strohner and Rickheit, 2008) who ground on Chomsky's concept of competence. While criticising Chomsky's conception of 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. Harden (2011) adds that a learner seeks a mediator's 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, p. 34) formulated the conceptual framework of intercultural competence, which consists of five *savoirs* (Fr.): (1) *Savoirs* (knowledge), (2) *Savoir-comprendre* (skills), (3) *Savoir-e^tre* (attitudes), (4) *Savoir-s'engager* (critical cultural awareness), (5) *Savoir-apprendre/savoirs-faire* (skills of discovery and interaction). 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 and Bandura, 2005) discussing multiple use of languages, language user's linguistic repertoire and growing trend of multilingualism in 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, p. 108) linguistic communicative competences are composed of the following components: (i) linguistic competences, (ii) sociolinguistic competences, (iii) pragmatic 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.

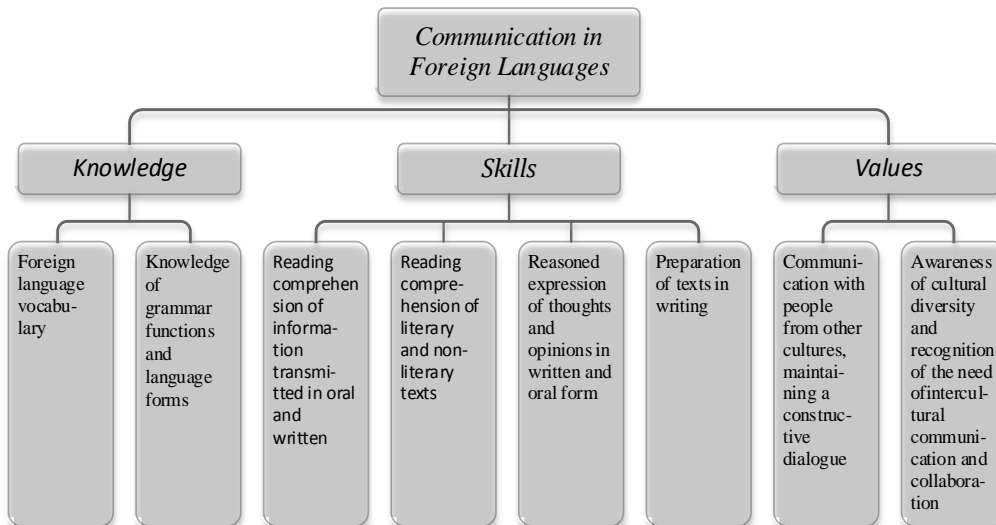


Figure 1. The competence of communication in foreign languages

Knowledge of vocabulary, grammatical functions and language forms are attributed to knowledge domain. The domain of skills includes: text comprehension, written and oral communication, text preparation in writing. Interaction with other cultures, awareness of cultural diversity and the need for intercultural cooperation is attributed to the value domain (see Figure 1).

### 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-ŠMM-07-K „Support to Research Activities of Scientists and Other Researcher (Global Grant)”. The aim of the pilot study was to determine the relevance and necessity of generic competences (communication in mother tongue and foreign languages) in modern society in parallel with needs and areas of their application.

### Instrument

A questionnaire on communication in mother tongue and communication in foreign languages was the instrument used in this pilot study. It was composed of six major parts:

- Demographic data (place of residence, age, education, employment, marital status, gender)
- Degree of relevance of communication in foreign languages for work, personal and social life
- Languages in use (languages respondents are able to use, their competence level)

- Ways of acquisition of the communication in foreign languages competence
- Factors encouraging learning foreign languages
- Acquisition hindrances 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.

## **Respondents**

The survey sample was composed of 201 participants who represented four target 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 biggest part of the respondents are those with higher education, including university and non-university education (65 per cent). More than a half of the respondents (59 per cent) currently have jobs, 9 per cent of them run their own business, 22 per cent of the sample were unemployed and searching for jobs, 10 per cent of the total sample were senior adults.

## **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.

## **Research results and discussion**

### **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. Linguistic competence embraces development of all language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Communication in foreign languages also involves linguistic interaction in appropriate and creative ways, in a wide 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 shows that language skills are very important or important in all four areas of life: professional activities and work challenges (54.3 per cent and 41.7 per cent), professional career development (59.3 per cent and 29.6 per cent); personal development (70 per cent and 24.6 per cent). Although much lower number of the respondents consider that language skills are very important for participation in social and cultural activities (32.7 per cent), almost half of the survey participants see them as important (49.2 per cent).

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 per cent).

### **Self-evaluation of the competence of communication in foreign languages**

The next question dealt with the respondents' self-evaluation of their competence. The respondents were asked to rate their foreign language skills on the scale of: *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 of 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 per cent) assess their understanding of simple texts as *very good*. Other skills as *very good* are rated by smaller number of the respondents (12 per cent to 35 per cent): complex (literary, scientific or professional) texts reading comprehension (12 per cent), knowledge of grammar, language functions and forms (17 per cent), text preparation in written form (18 per cent), delivery of reasoned opinion in writing and oral form (20 per cent), foreign language vocabulary (22 per cent), communication with people from other cultures maintaining a constructive dialogue (30 per cent), understanding of information transmitted in written and oral form (32 per cent), awareness of cultural diversity and recognition of the need for intercultural communication and collaboration (35 per cent). Quite many respondents do not possess or have poor skills of reading comprehension of complex (literary, scientific or professional) texts (41 per cent), one third of the sample (31 per cent) state having poor knowledge of grammar and language functions. Few respondents could not evaluate their skills (1 per cent - 8 per cent): vocabulary (1 per cent), text preparation in writing (8 per cent).

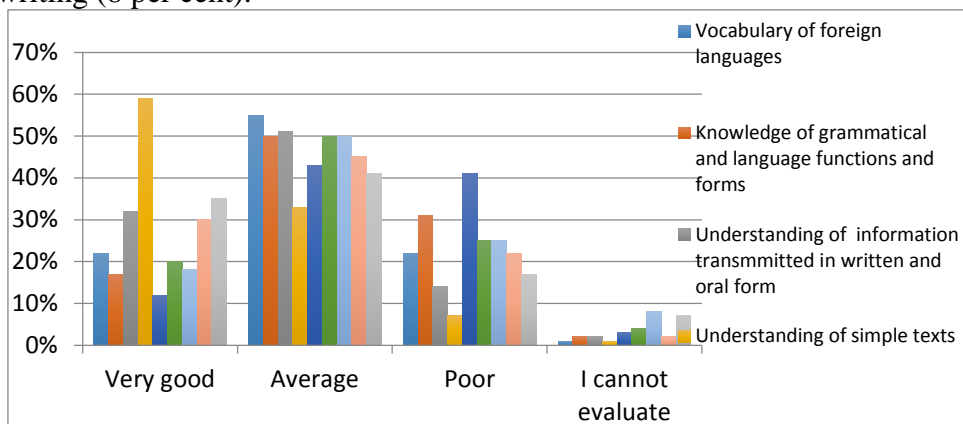


Figure 2. Self-evaluation of the competence of communication in foreign languages

### Languages in use and learning methods

The answers to the question about the respondents' use of foreign languages reveal that Russian and English are dominant on the scale, the other languages ranked lower are: Polish (9 per cent), German (8 per cent), French (4 per cent), Spanish (2 per cent) are far less popular. Assessment of the languages in use was conducted on the scale of: *very good, good, poor, and I do not know*. Communication in Russian is indicated by 40 per cent of the study participants and English by 38 per cent, respectively, as *very good*.

The Polish language proficiency is greatly recognised by 15 per cent of the respondents, whereas German, French and Italian – by 7 per cent, 6 per cent and 4 per cent of the research sample respectively. The findings imply that the mastery of other languages is at a lower level when 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. According to the survey, more than 50 per cent of the respondents indicated that daily experience is the most frequent way in learning a foreign language. The other methods such as, self-study, and attending seminars and lectures at school, college or university are equally popular (22 per cent and 23 per cent). Distance learning is the most popular way of learning among the youngest age group respondents - even 80.5 per cent 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.

### **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 relationship 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 Pearson Chi-square test, which indicates whether the empirical and theoretical distribution of the difference is significant, was used.

The factors that prevailed in the encouragement of learning foreign languages were: *wish of personal development* and *career prospects*. *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 performance of 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 than *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 and have to compete in the labour market; therefore, they pay more 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 relationship was identified between the respondents' age and some of the factors, encouraging enhancement of language competence: *necessary for work, helps to find a job, career prospects and need for self-realisation*. However, analysis of the relationship between the participants' education level and the motives, encouraging learning languages reveals the strongest correlation between *wish of personal development* and language learning. The group of respondents with higher education are more focused on self-development through learning foreign languages. The relationship between employment and language competence development is observed in: *need for work, helps to find a job, career opportunities, and wish of personal development*. There is no significant relationship between foreign language learning and such motives as *leisure activities* or *family support*. Table 1 shows Pearson Chi-square tests with a statistically significant relationship (\*) between respondents' age, education, employment status and motives of encouragement for learning foreign languages.

Table 1. Relationship between respondents' age, education, employment and motives for learning foreign language

Factors motivating development of foreign languages	Pearson Chi-Square Test		
	Age	Education	Employment status
Necessary for work	,000*	,067	,000*
Helps find a job	,000*	,161	,000*
Career opportunities	,000*	,596	,000*
Wish of personal development	,148	,000*	,002*
Ambition of self-realisation	,001*	,269	,166
Leisure activities	,215	,795	,899
Family support	,411	,506	,391

\*p value is significant at p=0.05

### Acquisition hindrances of foreign languages

The analysis of the relationships between *age, education and employment* and factors, hindering development of foreign language competence, highlight significant relationship between the lack of time and the respondents' age. Younger respondents experience this problem more

often (63,4 per cent of 30-39 year old surveyed persons and 66,7 per cent of 40-49 year old) than older survey participants (29,4 per cent of 60-69 year olds). Lack of motivation depends on the respondents' age too: 69,2 per cent of 18-29 year old sample admit that factor as important compared to 33,3 per cent of 70 year olds and over. Deficiency in motivation also depends on the respondents' education: 62,9 per cent of respondents with secondary or vocational education and 47,3 per cent with higher education indicated this factor. High cost of education services is not preventing respondents from learning languages. The biggest group, who need support from the environment to learn foreign languages was observed among the respondents who are searching for jobs. No statistically significant relationship 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. Particularly strong relationship is observed in the category of education and self-distrust in foreign language to learning skills (21,4 per cent of the sample with secondary or vocational education compared to 8 per cent with higher education), as well as relationship between employment and language learning (22,0 per cent of searching for jobs and none from self-employed group). Health problems are an important factor observed among older respondents. This suggests that respondents see strong links between health problems and the ability to develop their language competence. Moreover, the findings imply statistically significant relationship between the respondents' age and acquisition of foreign language competence. Age problems as a factor, impeding enhancement of language competence is significant among senior respondents (33,3 per cent of 70 year olds and over) and also depends on employment status. None of the self-employed participants see it as an important factor. The correlation is slightly weaker in the category of education (see Table 2).

Table 2. Relationship between respondents' age, education, employment and factors hindering foreign language acquisition

Factors hindering learning foreign languages	Pearson Chi-Square Test		
	Age	Education	Employment status
Lack of time	,000*	,227	,000*
Lack of motivation	,740	,027*	,146
High cost of training services	,691	,010*	,490
Shortage of learning resources	,331	,001*	,299
Not enough support from the environment	,530	,003*	,066
Nowhere to learn	,207	,551	,606
Change in marital status	,032*	,239	,512
Distrust in personal abilities	,022*	,000*	,003*
Health problems	,000*	,018*	,000*
Age problems	,000*	,767	,000*

\*p value is significant at p=0.05

## Conclusion

The pilot survey 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 (Polish (9 per cent), German (8 per cent), French (4 per cent), Spanish (2 percent), Italian (1 per cent) 38 per cent of the research sample assesses their English as very good and 35 per cent as good. 40 per cent of the survey participants can speak Russian very well and 42 per cent - well.

3. The research participants were rather modest while assessing their competence of communication in foreign languages. The findings revealed that only reading a simple text was ranked as *very well* by more than a half of the respondents (59 per cent). 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 per cent of the research sample.

4. Foreign languages are mostly learnt through daily experience. 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 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 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. Respondents with lower education experience self-distrust in their foreign language learning capacity more often compared to survey participants holding higher education degree.

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