

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE COMPETENCES FOR EMPLOYMENT AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

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## Abstract

An important part of a comprehensive personality profile in today's labour market is represented by language skills, reading and writing literacy, and communication skills. They belong to the group of key competences that are part of lifelong learning. In the business environment, foreign language competence and communication are perceived as a means of transmission of knowledge, values, experience, business objectives or success. Language and communication skills in modern education at universities or in enterprises are closely associated with greater outlooks for obtaining adequate and good quality employment, with personal development, with better promotion possibilities, with successful management of work or business meetings, and with the concept of cultural awareness.

Globalization, internationalization of the work environment, possibilities for studying, working, running a business or doing an internship abroad, using modern forms of communication – all this results in the increasing need for communication, dissemination of information and experience in a foreign language. The report on the implementation of the Action Plan „Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity” emphasizes the role of the European Commission in helping Member States to promote multilingualism.

**Key words:** communication, language, employment, career, development, competences.

**Classification JEL:** M12 Personnel Management

## 1. Introduction

„Language is the prerequisite to finding employment”, (Bírešová, 2009). The demands companies today enforce on their employees and/or job candidates relate not only to the relevant level of their education, but also to their quality. The situation on the labour market changes constantly and employers' requirements for the professional level, for the functional literacy of their employees, i.e. their ability to adapt to the changes in the ever changing labour environment, ability to change their qualification in line with the requirements on the labour market, and to keep their job keep growing (Blaško, 2010). In today's dynamic world, success comes to those who have the basic skills applicable in varying situations, professions and positions. This is fostered by one of the strategic objectives of the European Commission from Lisbon 2000, aimed at the development of key competences as the obligatory individual's attributes in the European community. Having competences denotes having comprehensive personality qualities that will enable the individual to cope with tasks and situations in his job, to carry out the relevant duties and activities, and in general display a contributory attitude.

The European Parliament and EU Council definition of **lifelong learning recommends** that Member States apply the European reference framework of Key competences for lifelong learning (EP, RE, 2006) which comprises the following:

1. Communication in the mother tongue.
2. Communication in foreign languages.
3. Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology.
4. Digital competence.
5. Learning to learn.
6. Social and civic competences.
7. Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship.
8. Cultural awareness and expression.

Competences for this framework are defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to each context. The key competences are those that each individual needs for his or her own fulfillment and development, active citizenship, social cohesion and employment. According to the Recommendation, all the key competences are considered to have equal importance (they are transversal and linked with one another) and each of them can contribute to a successful life in a knowledge-based society. In the context of objectives of this paper, it is especially the key competence quoted as second in the above list that is relevant – communication in foreign languages. We have based this on the assumption that success in getting employment is not only a matter of the applicant's professional knowledge, but also of the quality of his personality in a wider sense: his level of communication (lingual and non-lingual) competence. Foreign language competence opens new career possibilities, it can be a decisive factor in promotion, or it can give an existing job an interesting new dimension. Being able to speak foreign languages implies the ability of direct communication with people in your work area which is becoming increasingly important for many employers. At the same time, foreign language competence opens the door for work and life abroad (EK, 2008).

## 2. Language and communication competence

The Draft 2010 joint progress report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the „Education & Training 2010 work programme”, section Key competences for a changing world, states that greater attention should be paid especially to foreign language communication and a whole range of transversal key competences that are becoming more and more important with regard to the growing labour market and society requirements (KOM, 2009, p. 9). The importance of language and communication competences is also demonstrated by the results of the research project Uni2010 and The International Coach Federation (ICF). From a set of 10 competences established by employers and identified as being the most important (key) for a graduate's employability, priority is assigned to communication (ability to communicate effectively – orally and in writing, in Slovak and English) (Veteška, Turkeckiová, 2008, p. 125). For over 45% of respondents, the first five definitely also include information processing, problem solving, ability to learn, initiative and work in a team (Chalupová, 2010). It is interesting that the order of importance is almost identical with representatives of small, medium-sized and large enterprises, and also that the perception of key competencies is not dependent on the relevant working position. Another survey conducted by the Research Institute of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in Bratislava has shown that when recruiting new employees, employers are most of all interested in their foreign language and computer literacy (Reisová, 2002). A final cumulative summary of employers', students' and graduates' opinions suggests that the two most important key competences of technical university and college graduates are the **communication and language competences** and problem solving in various situations, positions, etc.

Language competence presents a set of language skills and language experience. This means that the language user, in his individual language conscience, has a firm knowledge of the language system elements and the elements of its particular subsystems. It is on this basis that, at the time of using the language for communication, he is able to select words and join them in accord with the particular grammatical rules into sentences in such a way that the receiver can decode the meaning of the information transmitted to him (Nebeská, 1992; Vaňko, 1999). The range of requirements for language competence depends on the communication situations and topics. Language competence is part of communication competence; it represents its significant foundation. However, communication competence covers a much wider area. It is related to the process of communication as a whole and it accounts for all relevant objective and subjective components of the communication situation. The term communication competence, so frequently used today, corresponds to the previously used term of performance, and it assumes a formed

language competence. In relation to language use, J. Horecký (1991, p. 103) does not perceive communication competence as a system, but as an ability and attribute of the participants in a communication. An employee's ability to use a language (produce a text) relates to his knowledge of the problem as well to his ability of logical thought and subsequent verbalization of his conclusions. According to Chomsky, communication competence is understood as a set of rules used to produce expressions of thought and to understand them (Chomský, 1995).

**Communication competence assumes:**

1. Language competencies, knowledge of verbal and non verbal tools for using language in various communication situations.
2. The knowledge of both official and unofficial communication standards (i.e. code of conduct). Communication competence should comprise knowledge on how to respond in different communication situations. „The idea is that a user's language communication should be in accord with social behaviour, social standards. This is not just a language issue, but also a social issue. It is, in fact, a matter of social tact, which determines how we should behave in terms of both language use and social interaction”, (Findra, 2001).
3. Knowledge needed for self assertion in a situation involving communication (i.e. including professional, encyclopedic knowledge, etc.).

Language and communication competences develop depending on the individual practical activity and experience, and, at the same time, are applicable in real life. They do not become out-of-date as some knowledge does: they have a potential for continuous development, and it is for this reason that they can be the foundation for lifelong learning and personal flexibility. They are the result of formal (school) education, semi-formal education (cultural institutions, enterprises, other organizations), as well as non-institutional education (Minedu, 2008). The key language and communication competences are a part general education (as a complex of knowledge and skills) and they enable the graduate to learn, act, evaluate and communicate also in a language other than his mother tongue. They enable his successful inclusion into both the work and non-work environment social structures. In terms of the quoted communication and language concepts, the development of the following employee's properties can be considered as most important (Kesselová, 2009, p. 152):

- language and communication competences,
- thinking and the ability to learn,
- reading literacy and verbal intelligence.

Communication and language competences today represent an indispensable attribute of any working position; without foreign language skills, correct expression of thoughts and communication, work tends to be less efficient, especially when an employee is unable to present his thoughts, ideas or comments and communicate correctly not only with his superiors, but also with colleagues and business partners. Communication competences also imply professional and representative conduct. Employers today take it for granted that all university graduates will have mastered these competences at the relevant level.

### **3. Language skills as a means for getting a job**

Entry of Slovakia into EU has among many other things also brought new possibilities and opportunities of employment with local and foreign companies not only at home, but also outside the country. This wider offer of job opportunities has, however, brought forward the demand for foreign language skills, and not merely at the level of everyday communication. Highly professional specialized posts require mastering of professional terminology and skills in using professional language that are indispensable for communication in a certain specialized field of knowledge. Mastering the language used in a special field is „important not only for the

management staff, but for each and every employee using it to communicate with one of the external or internal interest groups”, (Remišová, 1999, p. 151).

Foreign language communication has become almost an obligatory attribute of many professions and very much so of the new generation of graduates predominantly in technical branches. In spite of this fact, statistics show that 83% of graduates from technical universities and colleges are at pre-intermediate level of English, while 73% of companies require intermediate level (IAESTE, 2009). However, it still goes that poor knowledge of a language is better than no knowledge at all. Knowledge of at least two foreign languages should be a basic competence of all who wish to study and work for a Slovak or foreign company at home, or in another EU country. This has been established in the initiative report accepted by the General Assembly of the European Parliament (KOM, 2006).

The „*multilingual*” policy of the European Commission arises from the need to support a functional multilingual economy, to make available legislative documents and procedures to all citizens – employees within the EU in their own language and to support language education and diversity. According to a recent Eurobarometer survey, only one half of the respondents declare ability to be involved in conversation in at least one language other than their mother tongue. The best score in the survey was that of the inhabitants of Luxembourg (99%), Latvia and Malta (93%), and Lithuania (90%). On the other hand, Hungarians (71%), Britons (70%) and Spanish, Italian and Portuguese citizens (64% each) speak only in their mother tongue (Euroactive, 2008). New programmes implemented since 2007 (Culture 2007, Youth in Action and Lifelong Learning Programme) support the multilanguage policy. Language skills have become one of the most important topics of the European Year of Workers’ Mobility.

The Commission claims that European enterprises need employees skilled in languages. This mainly concerns enterprises which either do business or are involved in other commercial activities in several Member States with a different language environment (last but not least it is also necessary to be able to communicate with business partners all over the world, or for the service staff to read a manual in English). The lack of qualified employees that would meet these demands relates mostly to small and medium-sized companies which, however, have the potential to create new job positions through implementation of their new innovative procedures. These companies are the leading subjects in the process of social and local integration in the Union. Statistic results of the language skills requirement research show that as many as 68.8% of the 30 employers participating in the survey require two foreign languages. On the other hand, 31.3% of employers are satisfied with their candidates having knowledge of only one world language. The weighted average suggests that the average requirement of language skills per job offer is 1.04 (Euroactive, 2006).

At present, approx. one fifth of the respondents are studying a foreign language (21.2%). From among these, as many as three quarters of Slovaks are studying English. A little less than a half is studying the German language. These are followed after quite a large interval by Russian (3%), Spanish (2.6% French and Italian 1.7%). Other languages are studied by less than 1% of respondents (Jakubeczyová, 2006). However, knowledge of a single foreign language is not sufficient these days (Pajtinka, 2009). A study presented by David Graddol (2006) warns of the unfavourable future of monoglot English graduates: „...they face an unhappy economic future as qualified multilingual youngsters from other countries are proving to have a competitive advantage in global companies and organizations. Candidates speaking some of the less frequent languages are becoming more and more interesting for the labour market. From the results of the research focused on foreign language communication performed using the face-to-face method in May 2005 by TNS SK it further follows that almost a third of Slovak graduates declare having communication skills in English and German, a quarter can communicate in Russian, Czech and in some cases English. Every seventh respondent can communicate in Hungarian. This is

followed, with a large interval, by Polish, which was quoted by less than 7% of respondents“ (Jakubéczyová, 2006). Employers prefer more language skilled candidates, because to learn a language is in many cases more difficult than to acquire other professional skills (Pravda, 2009). Employers require from candidates different levels of language proficiency, depending on the work position, work requirements and also whether the employee comes into contact with the main office abroad, with customers abroad, etc. In the business environment, language is generally perceived as a tool for transmission of knowledge, values, experience, and business objectives. Insufficient language competence (be it verbal or non-verbal) may have two contradictory properties:

- it can give rise to various misunderstandings,
- or, it can clarify them.

In terms of the above, three essential problems occur in foreign language communication:

- multiple meaning of terms (sometimes this may involve only shades of meaning – nuances, in other case there may be a substantial shift in meaning),
- interference (overlapping or crossing of terms),
- absence of equivalent term in the target language.

Understanding native speakers of English and non-verbal communication (mimics, paralinguistics, haptics, environment, time, proxemics, visual contact), which helps to decipher or interpret the contents of communication, also seem to present a problem (Bedrnová, Nový, 2002, p. 586). Body language, just like language, is culture specific, and this can sometimes make deciphering meaning by means of one's own culture rather difficult. Knowledge of a foreign language alone is not sufficient for achieving language and communication competences so important today: mastering of culture-specific rules of interaction is an indispensable attribute of the above skills. Language competences do not automatically imply communication competences in context with other cultures. Acquiring foreign language skills is thus closely related to cultural awareness, and this in turn is an important step towards intercultural competences.

#### 4. Language skills

*Our main objective* was to obtain empirical data on foreign language competence of graduates from technical universities and colleges in the position of freshly recruited employees of small and medium-sized enterprises. For the purpose of our research we designed a „Questionnaire for investigating the quality of foreign language skills and communication abilities“ comprising 19 items. Only some of the items of the questionnaire (five items altogether) have been selected for analysis in this paper: the ones that most clearly illustrate the respondents' foreign language knowledge and communication ability.

##### *Hypothesis:*

H 1: It is assumed that respondents have sufficient knowledge of a foreign language only in relation to their profession (knowledge of basic terminology).

H 2: It is assumed that respondents will declare dissatisfaction with their competence to communicate in the foreign language.

##### *Research methodology:*

When selecting suitable research methods (experimental, statistical), we preferred to use a standardized questionnaire which normatively limits respondents' answers. The questionnaire was chosen for its practical properties and for the possibility of processing the results using mathematical and statistical methods. Descriptive statistical methods were applied for processing the data into clearly arranged graphs and tables and for calculation of basic characteristics.

Inductive statistical methods helped in the summarizing the results and allowed a deeper analysis of the acquired data.

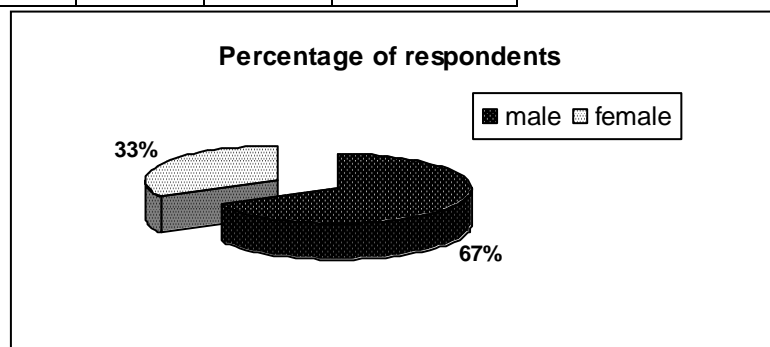
The obtained values (reliability coefficient, root mean square deviation values) confirm that the questionnaire was suitably constructed. The reliability calculated by Cronbach's alpha is high (0.816) for questions with open answers, implying that this part of the questionnaire is reliable. The root mean square deviation value (6.14) is an excellent indicator of uniform distribution of unvalued questionnaire score.

*Description of sampling group:*

At the end of the summer semester in 2010, a questionnaire was constructed for graduates of the Technical University of Kosice prior their entry into employment with the aim of determining their foreign language and communication competences. The selected sample of respondents (N = 140) was randomly chosen (no specific selection mark) and comprised 94 males and 46 females. The age of the respondents was 24 – 25 years (Figure 1).

**Analysis of obtained results:**

Age	24	25	N	%
Males	62	32	94	67%
Females	31	15	46	33%
N	93	47	140	100%



*Figure 1: Number of respondents by sex and age*

Source: own study

Figure 1 showed that the representation of respondents according to age and sex was partially different, which is caused by higher percentage of males studying at the technical university. Males represented a quantitatively larger sample – 67%, compared to females who represented 33% of the research sample.

Looking at the results (Figure 2), 50% and more respondents declare language skills (30%) and communication abilities (21%) to be the key competences they lack most of all. They are not confident in using the language and are afraid to use it in communication. 3% of respondents state professional presentation as a less developed competence and 15% declare solution of problems as their weak side. Entrepreneurship, which is not the domain of fresh graduates, has a slightly lower percentual representation (11%). As much as 70% of managers in small and large companies worldwide complain that their employees lack entrepreneurship, and half of them think their employees have sufficient conditions to manifest their entrepreneurship (Záčková, 2001). The ability to learn (3%) and teamwork (7%) appear to be the competences lacking the least. The trend of the future starts to be the growth of the importance of cultural awareness

(Černá, 2008, p. 25). Its low preferences today are probably caused by the fact that the majority of respondents do not work in an international environment.

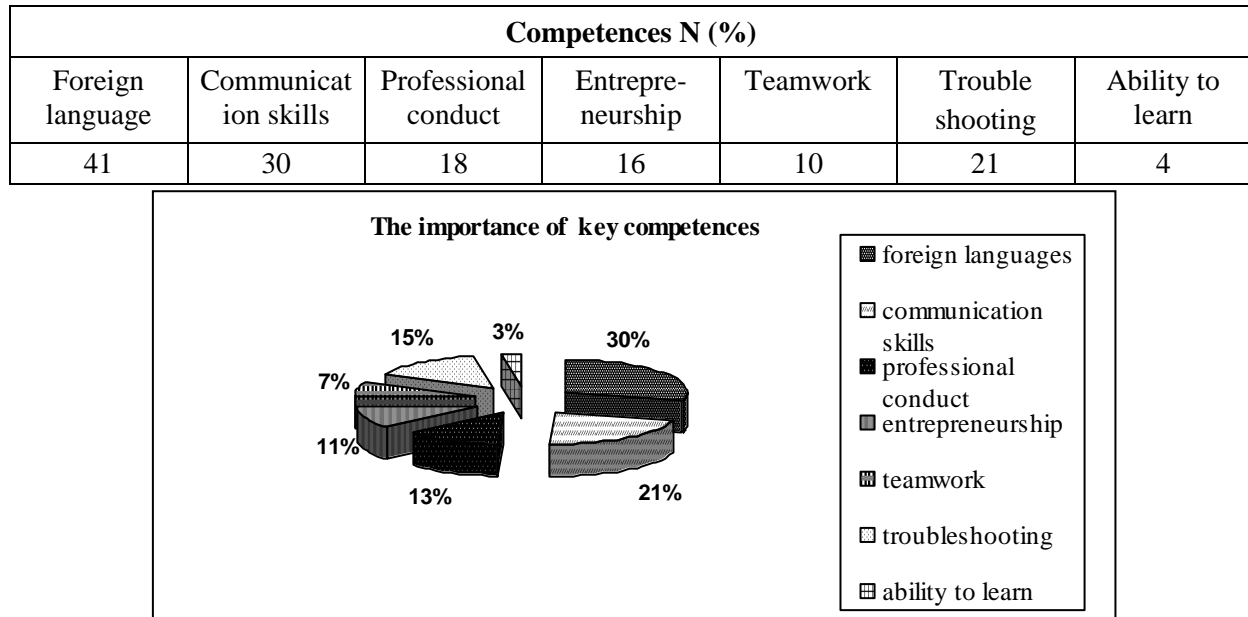


Figure 2: Selected competences in which respondents feel they have reserves

Source: own study

Figure 3 illustrates the number of foreign languages the respondents declared they knew. The percentage of people learning one foreign language is growing (males 38%, females 20%), however the average number of foreign languages people speak is falling behind the objectives established in Barcelona 2002. Research results suggest that the Barcelona formulation „mother tongue plus two foreign languages” is being fulfilled very slowly (males 19%, females 9%). Three foreign languages are spoken by 10% of males and 4% of females. The need for speaking two foreign languages besides the mother tongue has also been declared by the Council of Europe (Sojková, 2004).

In the technological sector, however, it is sufficient if the employee is able to communicate in a single foreign language – English. Of course, at the leading posts or in jobs where communication with people is necessary, passive knowledge of a language is not enough, and neither is the knowledge of a single foreign language. „Active communication in at least one foreign language is the basic requirement on not only the European, but also on the Slovak labour market. According to human resources agencies, candidates for posts in middle and higher management of international companies do not have any chance of getting these positions without the knowledge of a foreign language” (Sojková, 2004).

Most respondents link foreign language skills with „computer language skills” and with technical terms used during negotiations or consultations with their foreign colleague, or during work on their diploma thesis when using foreign resources. The objective of language education at universities is to help students open the door to the local and foreign labour market.

Knowledge of languages	1 language	2 languages	3 and more languages	%	N
Male	54	26	14	67%	94
Female	28	13	5	33%	46
N	82	39	19	100%	140

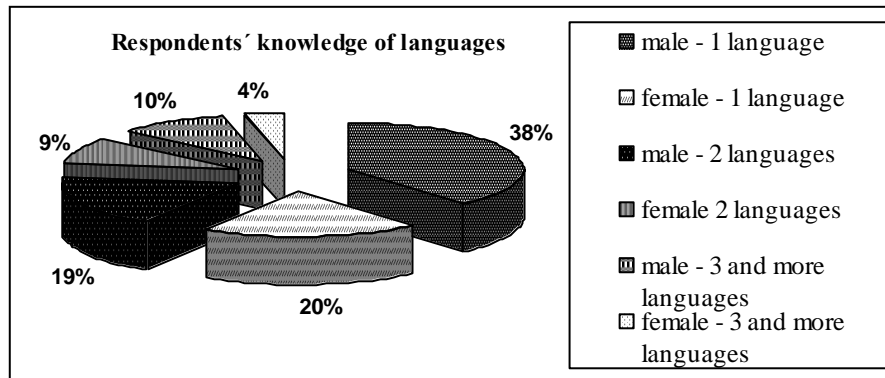


Figure 3: Representation of language knowledge by sex

Source: own study

As illustrated in graphs 4 and 5, English is still the most frequently spoken foreign language, having scored 55% for males and 42% for females. English is a global language and it is the language used most of all in technology, computer work, science, research, etc. The second most required and spoken language is German, quoted by 35% of females and 19% of males. German is mostly required in enterprises doing business with western neighbours of Slovakia. Hungarian is on the rise (males 16%, females 16%), which is caused by geographic proximity. The representation of French, perceived mainly as the language of diplomacy and thus not so widespread among graduates of technical education, is rather small (males 3%, females 3%). The Russian language, still more or less undervalued, has rated 3% for males and 4% for females; knowledge of other languages was 3% for males and 3% for females. The proficiency level in most of the cases investigated was declared as pre-intermediate or active level.

Languages	English	German	Russian	French	Hungarian	Other	N	%
N	19	16	2	1	6	2	46	100%

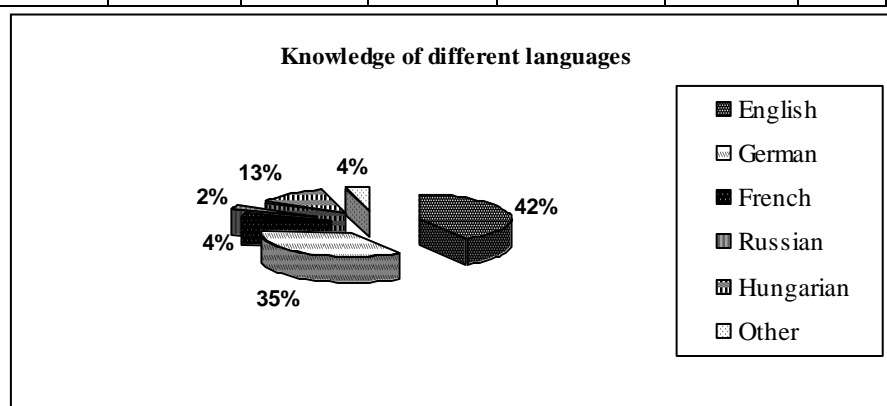


Figure 4: Representation of languages - female respondents

Source: own study



Languages	English	German	Russian	French	Hungarian	Other	N	%
N	51	18	3	4	15	3	94	100%

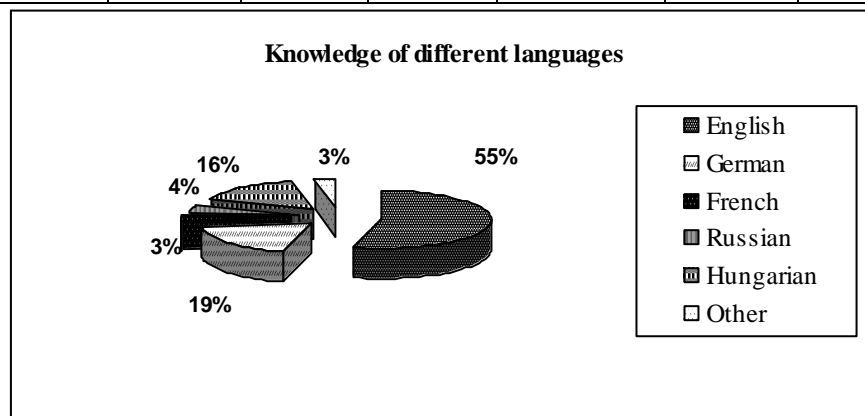


Figure 5: Representation of languages - male respondents

Source: own study

Languages	Rather agree	Rather disagree	Definitely agree	Definitely disagree	I cannot evaluate	N	%
N	49	21	35	24	11	140	100%

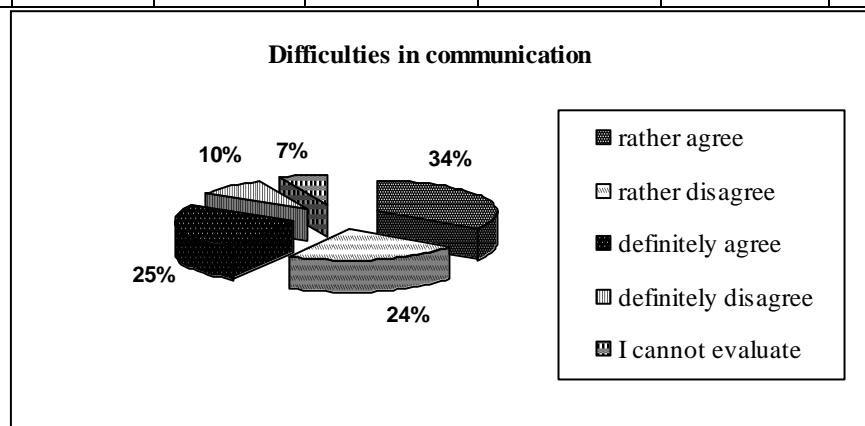


Figure 6: Level of skills in foreign language communication

Source: own study

Whoever wants to make a successful career in the globalized world must be able to communicate also outside the borders of his home country. He need not necessarily speak perfectly or fluently, but he should understand the questions asked and be able to communicate his response clearly. However, two accompanying phenomena have to be also considered: stage fright and anxiety, the feelings that can be obstacles in communication. According to the results (Figure 6), more than half of the respondents admit insufficient skills in communication in a foreign language or with a partner from a different culture. „Definitely agree” is declared by 25% of the respondents, „rather agree” is declared by 35% of respondents. From whole group of respondents, only 17% declare „definitely disagree”. 15% of respondents declare „rather disagree”. 8% of respondents could not evaluate the quality of their communication.

## 5. Practical implications

The requirements of employers as regards the language competence of their potential employees are proportional to two essential factors: the language used for communication within the company and the language used in contact with their business and other partners. A common denominator is always the requirement for active or working knowledge of the particular foreign language. „Each year thousands of European enterprises lose business opportunities due to their employees' insufficient language competence and cultural aspects. For companies of today it is a challenge to integrate in their business different cultures and to communicate in more efficient ways in order to achieve better results that are a decisive factor in competitiveness, growth and employability (EK, 2009). Several researches are proof of the above (ES, 2007). Surveys have yielded the unequivocal standpoint that „a manager or an employee at a particular level of management must know foreign languages. Everyone in the business or academic environment should be able to communicate in one world language – the English language, because this has become the global standard”, (Dvořák et al., 2010, p. 3). Companies today prefer language users that are active, self-reliant and are able to work with any style of a language. Graduates, experts and specialists in technical branches have to stand up to this fact probably most of all, considering the fast changes in science, technology and economy.

The results of our survey point at the importance, but at the same time at the deficiencies in language and communication competences of graduates who are potential employees on the labour market. Among the key competences they lack most the respondents have listed foreign language competence and communication; the foreign language competence is at pre-intermediate level, and the level of foreign language knowledge is not sufficient for quality performance (it is not backed by relevant professional knowledge in the field of business, economy finances, etc.), they are not able to adapt to communication in a foreign language in spite of the theoretical and practical skills they have acquired and they are not making much effort to continuously develop their existing foreign language competences.

**Measures recommended** for enterprises in relation to their newly hired employees can be summarized as follows:

1. Firstly, the choice of foreign languages taught in schools should be made wider. More practice-oriented language teaching modules should be implemented starting from secondary through higher education, including vocational education. Especially at higher levels of education focus should be made on programmes, forms and methods that are aimed at practical needs. Language competences should receive appropriate acknowledgement and appreciation within higher education and later in evaluation of potential employees.
2. Investigate and revise recruitment and mobility policies and development strategies in human resources management in enterprises at all levels of the enterprise. Set goals for employees' foreign language competence that will correspond to their particular tasks, evaluate the existing level of knowledge and compare it with the established needs.
3. Reassess the existing language and communication competencies within the enterprise and employ them strategically according to the needs, available resources and limitations. Encourage employees to use and develop the competences they have and offer them further language learning possibilities compatible with the company's needs, in a motivating way. Include language study into the lifelong learning programmes for employees. Include foreign language study into the company benefit scheme (which will give employees the feeling that the company is concerned about his needs, and the company will benefit from an employee with better language and communication competences).
4. Increase employees' language skills either in further on-the-job education courses, or through external education agencies, in language courses starting from individual teaching (one-to-one courses) up to team in-company courses employing creative (communication) methods

(event learning, talk shows, etc.), utilize distance learning methods, online courses, correspondence courses, coaching, internships, or provide quality technical and popular literature in the foreign language.

5. Organize training courses for all levels of staff (salesmen, technical staff, operators, administrators, lower and upper management, etc.) and tailor the courses for their recipients; prepare the curriculum in cooperation with the particular company.
6. Promote and support local multilingual business environment by means of language groups and conversation groups involving several companies, and by organizing multilingual markets and similar events in industrial zones or through free-time activities (theatre performances, art, music, hiking, sporting events, travel).
7. Build partnerships between the private and public sectors, including local higher education institutions, assist local enterprises in organizing language courses and in the development of new methods in vocational training institutions in order to improve their foreign language teaching strategies.
8. Use staff meetings and sessions for exchange of experience using a foreign language. Enable organization of three (if applicable) homogeneous groups according to the level of foreign language competence – for team work. Create a favourable environment for dissemination and popularization of technical and scientific knowledge in a foreign language.
9. Apply a wide spectrum of foreign language management strategies, i.e. invest in teaching a foreign language for special purposes, employ native speakers speaking various languages, and cooperate with translators, interpreters and cultural mediators. Complement and motivate for foreign language study by providing contacts with the target culture and language through contacts with other partners.

## 6. Conclusion

„You are being assessed according to your ability to write and speak and your value in the world of science and technology does not depend only on your knowledge, but also on your ability to communicate your knowledge and your thoughts“, (Barras). This quotation reflects the importance of one’s ability of expression, and the need for increasing the level of communication and of investigating the use of language in communication. Globalization, internationalization of the work environment, possibilities for studying, working, running a business or doing an internship abroad, using modern forms of communication – all this results in the increasing need for communication, dissemination of information and experience in a foreign language. The report on the implementation of the Action Plan „Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity“ emphasizes the role of the European Commission in helping Member States to promote multilingualism. The main benefits have been recognized as improvement of employees’ professional skills, increase of their competitiveness in the labour market and adaptability to the changing work conditions and facilitation of intercultural dialogue between the EU Member States.

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