

PROFESSIONAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPETENCE FOR SUCCESSFUL INTEGRATION INTO THE LABOUR MARKET

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Abstract. *Good knowledge of a foreign language is an important factor contributing to the professional recognition and career prospects. In order to improve professional foreign language competence, the study of the situation in professional foreign language teaching and learning was carried out in three business sectors: logistics, transport, service industry. The survey was carried out among three target groups: employers, foreign language teachers and students. Employers were asked to name language skills which employees need most to perform work, to express an opinion on the role of employers in the English language learning process as well as to identify topics, most common words, phrases, or specific professional terms which would be important for their employees to know. Students were asked about motivation and foreign language needs, training environment and teaching methods as well as about their learning styles. Foreign language teachers' questionnaires contained the evaluation of teaching process and methods used, lessons preparation and evaluation of learning. The study results show that foreign language competences are considered by employers as one of the most important for the employees. However, the level of language competences varies according to the position and role within the company. Based on the findings, suggestions and recommendations were developed for acquiring a professional foreign language in the three business sectors.*

Keywords: *English, foreign language competence, professional foreign language.*

Introduction

As the modern, constantly changeable labour market is open for international manpower movement, the demand of the knowledge of foreign languages is huge. Good knowledge of a foreign language may be an important factor contributing to the professional recognition and career prospects. The knowledge of languages increases the opportunities of finding a job and pursue a career not only in companies operating in one's own country, but also in international companies. It is interesting to note that employers consider the knowledge of foreign languages

as a very important basic skill for job success not only in Latvia. For example, the results of the survey carried out among employers in the United States rated foreign languages among the top five basic important skills for graduates entering the labour market (The Conference Board, 2006).

According to the employers in the mentioned research, knowledge of foreign languages opens broader perspectives on the issues of globalization, global markets and serves as a tool for understanding other nations, markets and cultures thus enhancing the employability of young people. Employability by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) in its Skills Panorama Glossary is defined as “a combination of factors (such as job-specific skills and soft skills) which enable individuals to progress towards or enter into employment, stay in employment and progress during their careers”.

For that reason, it is necessary to get and improve professional foreign language competences. As regards language education for employability, competence means to carry out certain language activities in some general or particular professional context. It includes the readiness and ability to communicate successfully, the criteria of success being defined by the nature and purposes of the tasks which are set and by the contextual and situational parameters that are determined by a particular professional challenge or environment.

Literature review

The teaching of language for special purposes for students of different specialities in educational institutions is meant to develop competences necessary for the world of work to enhance the employability of students. Study courses of foreign languages for special purposes or ESP, if the foreign language is English, are designed according to the needs analysis and mostly are content-based. Students at the university improve their language skills acquired during the secondary school, and gain new skills and the knowledge necessary for the future carrier. In ESP classes students improve their language skills acquired during the secondary school, and gain new skills and the knowledge necessary for the future carrier and the academic environment. “European Reference Framework” (2018) has included communication in foreign languages among eight key competences for lifelong learning stating that essential skills for communication in foreign languages consist of ability to understand, express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions both in spoken and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in an appropriate range of social and cultural contexts according to one’s wants and needs EC (2018). The research describes the experience of teaching professional English language. ESP researchers (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) define ESP

teaching/learning as a study course that is designed to meet specific needs of adult learners and is related in content, methodology and activities to a specific subject field or occupation focusing on those language aspects of syntax, vocabulary, text structure, semantics and so on that are appropriate to such content. During ESP classes students develop knowledge and skills necessary for the reception (reading and listening) of professional texts to broaden students' understanding of their subject field and production (speaking and writing) in relation professional activities. The teaching/learning is built on blended learning, printed and online authentic materials, popular science publications, free online resources, tailor-made tasks and activities. The ESP study courses include acquisition of terms in the subject field, their use in the authentic texts. There are various definitions of the term that could be summarized as follows: the term is a word or a collocation denoting or designating a specific concept of a particular subject field which in turn belongs to a system of concepts which maps out the structure of the subject field (Bušs et al., 2007; Anderman & Rogers, 1999).

Methodology

Background rationales of this research are based on the needs to understand the situation in the professional foreign language teaching and learning and to carry out a further analysis. The problem has been approached by analysing and evaluating the scientific literature as well as a number of information sources and reports, taking into consideration the authors' reflection, experience and observations. For the development of the methodological basis of the research, theoretical analysis of topical issues as the definitions of professional terminology, listening, speaking, writing skills, etc. has been performed.

The research was carried out in the framework of Nordplus Adult education development project NPAD-2015/1000. The project was implemented during September, 2015 and August, 2018 by five adult education institutions from three Baltic States with the aim to strengthen the link between adult learning and working life. The result to be achieved in the project was to develop innovative teaching materials for acquiring a foreign language and communication skills that could be applied in real daily work. Therefore, the views of all stakeholders on foreign language skills, difficulties and expectations for learning a foreign language had to be identified. In companies language requirements vary according to the position and the role within the company. Therefore, three directions of interest of all partners were chosen: logistics, transport, service industry.

The research consisted of four parts: surveys of employers, students, vocational teachers and English language teachers. In total, 85 employers' representatives participated in the survey: 42% were senior managers, 43% were managers and 15% others (Nordplus Adult education ..., 2015).

Further, 38 vocational teachers took part in this research. Most of them have work experience more than 10 years. They teach different subjects: auto mechanics, the maintenance and car repair, accounting, economics, business, IT subjects: computer networks, operating systems, etc., logistics, customs procedures, marketing, professional ethics, social studies, international transportation, catering service, tailoring, etc.

In total, 163 students were asked about the needs, difficulties and expectations of learning a foreign language and language skills that are necessary for their profession.

Sixteen English teachers expressed their views in the questionnaire available here. The English teachers' characteristics in terms of their experience are as follows: 56% of English teachers have more than 10 years work experience, 13% - more than 20 years.

A number of diagnostic blocks were included in the questionnaire, but all respondents were questioned about the necessary foreign language skills in the relevant professional fields, as well as on methodological and organizational issues of foreign language acquisition. The characteristics of a sample is given in Table 1.

Table 1 The research sample

	Employers	Vocational teachers	Students	English teachers
<i>By country</i>				
Latvia	39%	31%	42%	38%
Lithuania	36%	45%	42%	39%
Estonia	25%	24%	16%	23%
<i>By gender</i>				
Woman	67%	80%	47%	81%
Man	33%	20%	53%	19%
<i>By age</i>				
14-20	0%	6%	88%	0%
21-30	6%	18%	9%	19%
31-40	41%	39%	1%	68%
41-50	47%	27%	2%	0%
51-70	6%	10%	0%	13%
<i>By professional field</i>				
logistics	25%	22%	20%	n/a
transport	26%	20%	23%	n/a
service industry	48%	40%	48%	n/a

n=302

Research results and discussion

According to the research results, the most important foreign language skill for logistic, transport and service industry is a speaking skill. Respondents were asked to rank different language competences (reading, writing, listening, speaking, knowledge of professional terminology) in the scale from 1-5. 63% of professional teachers, 52% of employers, 33% of students think that speaking is the most important language skill. 27% of English teachers pay more attention to speaking skills.

Professional terminology was the most commonly referred to as the second most important issue: 79% of professional teachers, 46% of employers, 18% of students, 23% of English teachers held such an opinion. The listening skill was considered as the third most important.

The results of English teachers' survey show that the least attention is paid to writing and reading skills: only 14% of teachers consider that these skills should be focused on in teaching English. Also, students (15%), employers (21%) and vocational teachers (13%) consider writing skills to be less important.

Most often (in 46% of all the cases) speaking skill was evaluated by employers in the selection process of potential employees, in 37% of the cases - listening skill and only in 25% of the cases – the knowledge of professional terminology. Figure 1 depicts employers' answers regarding the evaluation of their employees' knowledge of English (Figure 1).

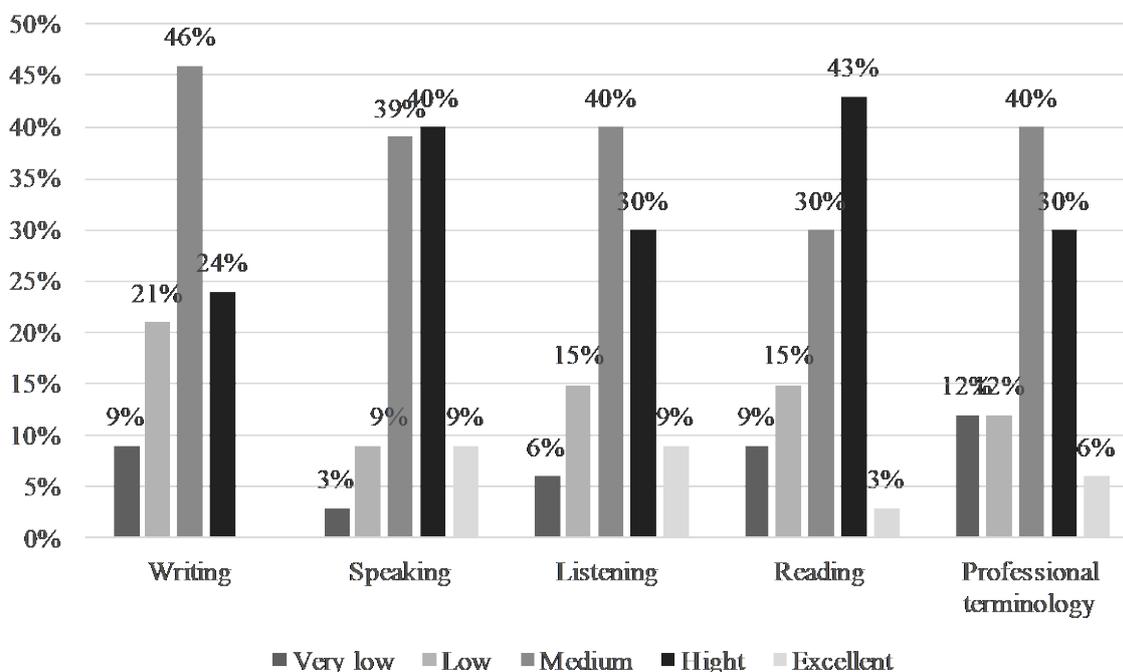


Figure 1 English language skills of employees in the assessment of employers

21% of employers are ready to organise language training courses in their companies in order to improve English language skills of their employees, 17% of employers can finance employees' English language learning outside their company. However, 34% think that it should be employees' individual responsibility to improve their foreign language skills, but 28% of employers expect that education institutions will teach professional English.

Employers and also vocational teachers were asked to name the topics that would be important for employees / students to know in everyday and professional English. The topics given by employers could be grouped in six groups:

- 1) Terminology of transport/ service/ business.
- 2) Everyday communication, polite expressions.
- 3) Clarification of customers' needs and desires.
- 4) Emotional and social areas.
- 5) The organisation of work process.
- 6) Greetings.

The following topics appear to be important for vocational teachers:

- 1) Professional terminology.
- 2) Communication phrases: everyday and vocational; conversations with customers, polite customer service, business communication, etiquette etc.
- 3) Dialogues, role plays.
- 4) Vocabulary learning.
- 5) It's important to understand the content and structure of sentences.
- 6) Conflict solution.
- 7) Social etiquette.

The study also highlighted the most important topics in each of the professional areas: logistics, transport and service industry.

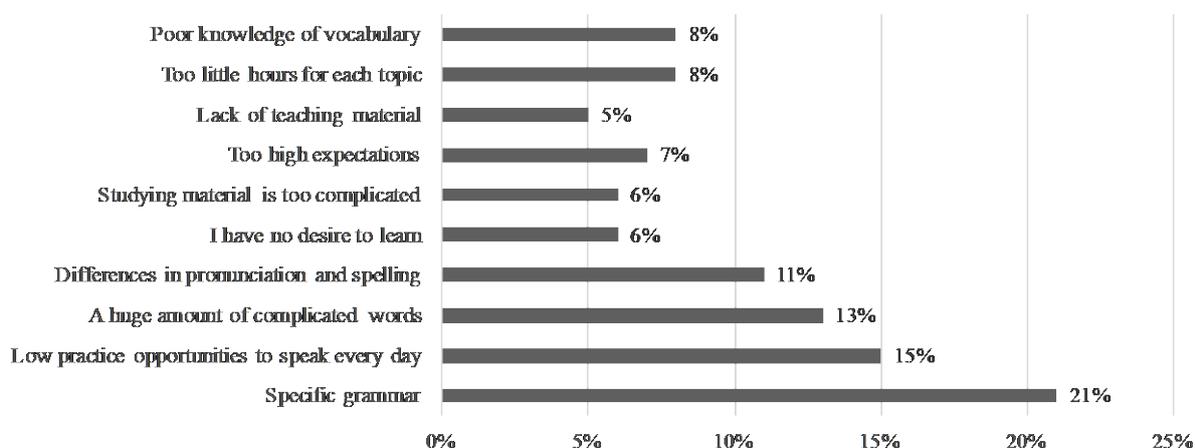


Figure 2 Students' main difficulties in learning the English language

As Figure 2 shows, the main difficulty in learning English refers to specific grammar areas. Therefore, grammar rules (Past Simple, Past Continuous, Present Simple), spelling and pronunciation were the most important topics for students in the learning process.

The respondents were asked to evaluate, which was the best location to learn English. The answer was that definitely during exchange programmes abroad. 64% of employers and 50% of vocational teachers chose this option as the most important opportunity. Learning English in working environment was chosen as the second most important opportunity (10% of employers and 39% of vocational teachers). Learning English during travelling or on the Internet was ranked as the third choice. However, students also preferred the classroom as the best learning environment (39%). Watching TV (movies, shows) was mentioned as the second choice.

Group work and discussions were preferred by students in English language classes (Fig. 3). Such methods as role-plays, story telling/picture descriptions, essay /letter writing were not very popular among students.

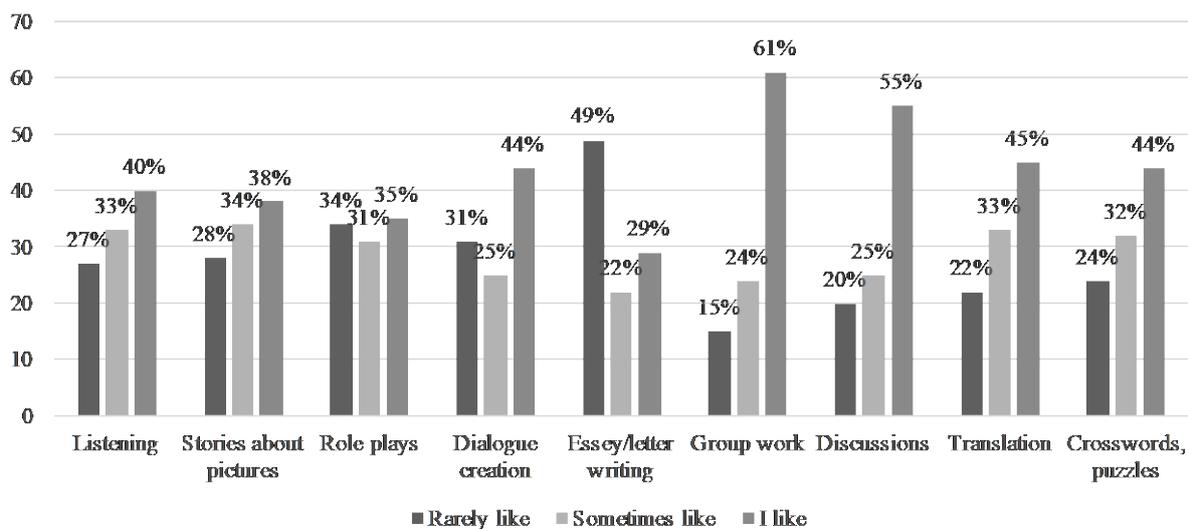


Figure 3 English teaching methods' evaluation by the students

Listening and multiple choice tasks were most often used methods by teachers in English classes. Songs, also stories about the picture and games were not very often used methods by teachers (Fig. 4).

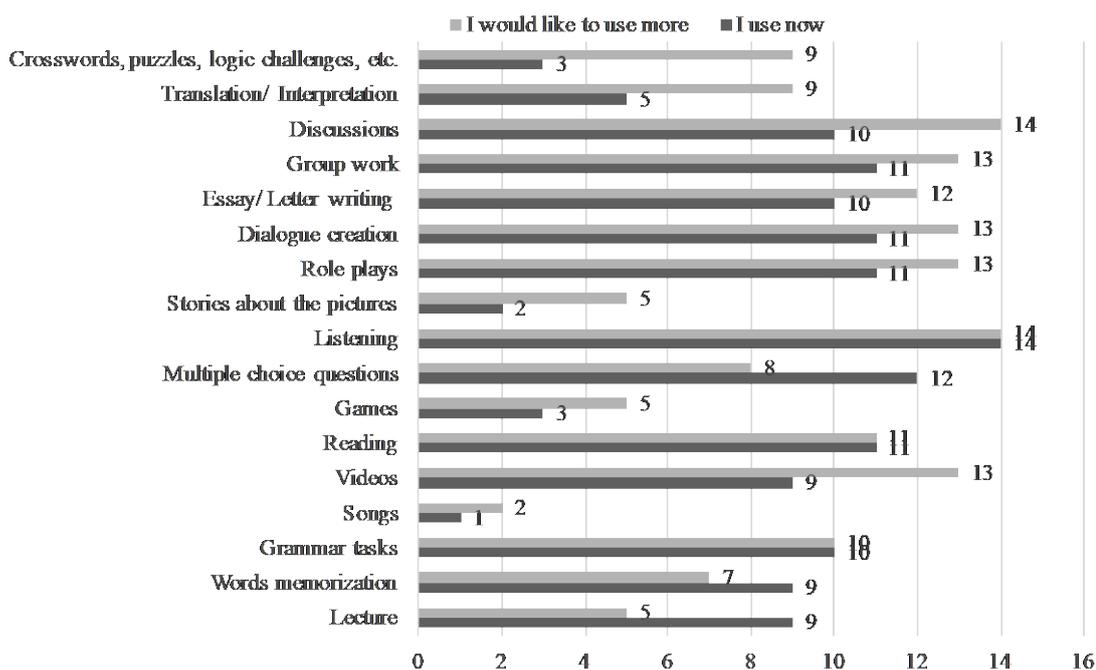


Figure 4 English teaching methods used by the teachers

To prepare lessons, English teachers most often use materials made by colleagues (more in 50% of cases) or they use professional textbooks (in 50% of cases), the Internet resources are used in 44% of the cases. Only 19% of English teachers who participated in the survey use self-made materials which prove the importance of this project's objectives. The research results show that different materials are used additionally to teach the English language:

- 1) Video materials with the tasks
- 2) A prepared textbook for the particular sphere
- 3) Authentic materials, the ones used in real working life
- 4) IT smart boards
- 5) Materials for advanced level
- 6) Materials for auto mechanics
- 7) More updated materials prepared by professional English teachers

Teachers were questioned about the main difficulties in teaching English. The lack of students' motivation was the most often mentioned difficulty. The survey results show that students' motivation and interest play a decisive role in the preparation of lessons and choosing teaching methods and materials.

According to the students' answers, the most important benefit of the English language knowledge is expanding career opportunities. Students' motivation is displayed in Figure 5.

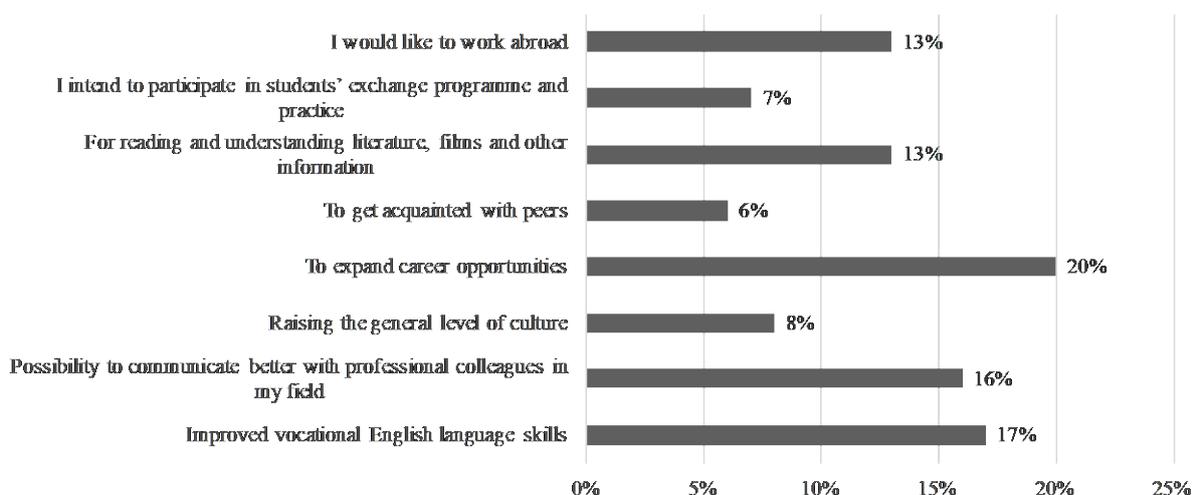


Figure 5 Students' motivation to learn English

Conclusions and recommendations

Speaking is the most important English skill for the specialists of logistics, transport and service industry, as well as the knowledge of professional terminology.

The speaking skill in a foreign language is often evaluated in the process of selecting potential employees. In general, employers are content with their employees' English language skills being below average. Only one fifth of employers are ready to organise language training in their company in order to improve English language skills, but 34% of employers think that it should be employees' individual self-education process.

There is a need for new innovative and interactive English teaching materials since only 19% of English teachers use self-made materials to prepare lessons.

To summarize the answers to the open questions of the survey, the most common language learning problems were identified. They are: students do not identify their needs, they cannot determine their goals, they are not able to plan the time for learning, students learn words by heart but they do not know how to use them and do not see the language interconnections, they try to talk (in English) by translating words from the native language, acquire communication minimum, etc.

In order to encourage students, it would be desirable to use an action-oriented approach and different interactive teaching methods, enrich the teaching process with modern tools for language learning (e-courses, video courses, online tests etc.), facilitate the students' ability to learn, increase motivation, promote a positive atmosphere for students to support each other rather than compete, support students by using positive evaluation and praise.

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