

HOW TO MEET THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY REQUIREMENTS OF ORGANISATIONS - INTERVIEWS WITH LSP TEACHERS

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Abstract: *Globalisation and internationalisation have caused enormous changes in several fields of life all over the world, with significant transitions in Hungary. The emergence of multinational companies has remarkably affected the labour market. These companies increasingly require intercultural communication competencies and a high level of foreign language skills from graduate entrants. The primary responsibility of universities is to educate and prepare students for a new environment and expectations in the international labour market. Although intercultural communication and foreign language skills have become key competencies in the labour market, recent graduates' levels in these competencies do not meet the requirements of organisations. The importance of the topic is significant since it would be the common interest of universities, students, and organisations to have more and more employees with excellent language competencies who can perform well in a diverse, multicultural environment. The main goal of this paper is to detect the roots of the problem in tertiary education and define some proposals for improving the quality of university training, based on the recommendations of LSP (Languages for Specific Purposes) teachers at the University of Debrecen. Furthermore, another fundamental goal of the research was to get LSP teachers' opinions on issues pertaining to meeting or missing the needs of organisations. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 LSP teachers at the University of Debrecen. According to the results, the main problem at the university is that students who enrol in the foreign language training programmes of the university do not possess the necessary level of general foreign language knowledge to learn languages for specific purposes. If the students' prior foreign language skills are not sufficient, the number of foreign language lessons available is not enough for students to acquire a high level of LSP proficiency. LSP teachers also missed the intercultural competency component of language programs. Several suggestions were made by LSP teachers to improve the situation, but above all, ongoing dialogues between educational institutions and employers were emphasised upon. Further stages of the research include employers' demands, and we are also planning to involve LSP teachers of other universities.*

Keywords: intercultural communication competencies; internationalisation of higher education; labour market requirements; multinational companies; foreign language knowledge; languages for specific purposes

1. Introduction

Globalisation and internationalisation, with significant transitions in Hungary, have caused enormous changes in several fields of life all over the world. The emergence of multinational companies and SSCs (Shared Service Centres) has affected the international and domestic labour market. These companies increasingly require intercultural communication competencies and a high level of foreign language skills from graduate entrants. Whether students will work for a multinational company in Hungary or abroad, they will likely have to work in a culturally diverse environment with foreign colleagues and partners.

Due to these changes, universities should address the challenge of preparing their students for the expectations of the international labour market. Regarding recruitment, all sectors can be characterised by the increase in the importance of soft skills, which are not specific to a particular job. One of them is intercultural competence. Fluency and an advanced level in a foreign language are also crucial parts of students' employment prospects (Czellér and Nagy, 2019). It is the common interest of universities, students and organisations to have more and more employees with excellent competencies, employees who can perform well in a diverse, multicultural environment.

However, the current situation differs from the ideal one because foreign language training in higher education cannot completely fulfil the requirements of organisations regarding foreign language skills and intercultural communication competencies. In order to contribute to the employability of their students, universities need to identify why graduates fail to meet labour market expectations. Then, they should adjust the content and length of their foreign language programs according to the needs of the job market. To find out the reasons for not fulfilling the foreign language and intercultural skills demands of the labour market, we conducted a two-phase survey. In the first stage, we asked foreign language teachers at the University of Debrecen about their opinion about the causes of failing to meet employers' expectations; we were also interested in the teachers' suggestions on improving the current situation. In the next stage of the research, we collected the employers' current requirements and their assessment of recent graduates' performance in foreign languages and intercultural competencies. In this study, the analysis of the teachers' survey at Debrecen University is presented.

2. Literature Review: The impact of internationalisation on foreign language teaching

After Hungary had joined the European Union, foreign language teaching and learning changed considerably. The EU considers the integration between member states essential, and one of its goals is the acquisition of two foreign languages. In public education, foreign language learning is free, but it is not enough if students aim to obtain the language examination certificate as soon as possible. Therefore,

many students choose paid forms of language learning, such as language schools and private teachers (Mohácsi and Spiczéné, 2012). As a result of the recent changes worldwide, the different needs of the labour market, the altered learning environment of young people, public education has to undergo changes. Since the 1990s, there has been an intercultural approach in foreign language teaching methodology; the elements of everyday culture are more dominant in foreign language teaching materials. The emphasis is on improving communicative competencies and successful communication. In Hungary, foreign language teaching can be characterised by many contact lessons, small groups, and bilingual programmes. Despite all these, the feeling of failure, being under-motivated and shifting responsibility is typical in foreign language teaching. Due to the rapid increase in the number of university students, students with weaker competencies and foreign language skills are also accepted to higher education (Einhorn, 2015). The lack of language examination certificates, not getting university degrees in time, and a lower rate of students' international mobility can be attributed to the low efficiency of foreign language learning (Novák and Morvai, 2017). In Hungary, since the 1990s, foreign language acquisition has become essential in language teaching because of the economic and political changes. As requirements of the labour market have changed, foreign language competencies have become dominant in everyday communication in the workplace (Nikolov and Vigh, 2012). In a program investigating the importance of language knowledge when finding a job, all newly employed respondents stated that they would not have been hired if they had lacked foreign language skills, regardless of their qualifications (Czellér and Nagy, 2019). Universities try to join global processes and move towards internationalisation in the forms of distance teaching, taking part in international educational networks, accepting international students and training programmes in foreign languages. In the course of internationalisation, it is vital to prepare students for a globalised world and improve their intercultural competencies. (Falkné and Kolláth, 2016). Intercultural education means that you have to learn to accept different people from various cultures, to be able to live with them. Hence, the core of intercultural training is communication skills and communicative competencies (Forray, 2003). In higher education in Hungary, LSP (languages for specific purposes) teaching appeared in the 1970s. For successful LSP, teaching the knowledge of cultures is essential. Students are not motivated to learn LSP because there is often no connection between foreign language content and the subject content. We can see the need for cross-cultural training and less frequently used languages as a second foreign language. Higher-level LSP education is the basic prerequisite of university degrees and employment opportunities in Hungary or abroad. Therefore, LSP teaching aims to develop competencies and skills based on employers' requirements, language awareness and developing intercultural and professional competencies side by side. Due to internationalisation, teaching subject content in foreign languages is an important motivator for Hungarian students to recognise the importance of foreign language knowledge during their university years. (Bárdos, 2015). Students who cannot get their university degrees at the end of their studies are at a disadvantage in the labour market. The most common reason for delayed graduation is the lack of a required foreign language examination certificate. Since the structure and requirements of university education are challenging for students, they often do not have the time and stamina to acquire the necessary language competencies and to

get the compulsory language examination certificate during their university education (Szabó, 2017). Language teaching today should not only be about preparing students for language examinations but also about preparing them for competition in the international labour market. Therefore, foreign language teaching focuses on developing intercultural awareness and intercultural competencies. Students with higher intercultural awareness are successful in their work (Schäffer, 2017). Language learners who want to become successful language users need to develop intercultural communication competence. To communicate successfully in a foreign language, the intercultural speaker must acquire excellent language skills and acquire and consciously use cultural knowledge, communication and interpersonal skills, as well as positive attitudes (Holló, 2019). The development of intercultural communication competencies could most obviously occur within the framework of foreign language classes. However, the question is how open foreign language teachers are to this and what opportunities they have to develop these competencies in language classes. So that foreign language teachers could recognise the importance of developing language learners' intercultural communication competence, they also need intercultural experience. (Fekete, 2014). Students can improve their intercultural competencies outside the classroom during study trips, exchange programmes or intensive language courses, but these opportunities are not available for everyone. Nevertheless, technical advancement has made online communication more easily available for many people, and this is a good way of developing real intercultural communication (Lázár, 2008). Erasmus scholarships, university exchange programmes and dual degree opportunities at universities contribute to the internationalisation of higher education. Not only do Erasmus students come to Hungarian universities, but more and more international students take part in undergraduate, master and doctoral courses (Loch, 2017). Today, the new challenges in the workplace are forcing universities to provide competency-based education. An integral part of good-quality higher education is to increase students' motivation, maintain relations with the representatives of the given professions to learn about the expectations, and integrate them into the teaching material (Siklósi and Sisa, 2018). LSP teaching in higher education institutions in Hungary aims to contribute to acquiring high-quality professional knowledge and developing appropriate communication competencies. Nevertheless, the concept of language teaching focuses mainly on the graduation requirements and the language examination certificate acquisition. In most cases, there is no adequate cooperation between LSP teachers and those teaching professional subjects (Kurtán, 2016). In conclusion, the European Union places high emphasis on multilingual competence when defining key competencies. The EU language policy supports linguistic diversity and a positive attitude towards intercultural communication and cultural diversity. These changes have had an impact on foreign language teaching in Hungary, and the intercultural approach is included in the language teaching methodology.

3. Research methodology

Interviews are valuable tools to supplement the data collected by questionnaires with further empirical data based on the literature. Since there is personal contact

between the interviewee and the interviewer during the interview, this method gives a new dimension to the research. The interview allows us to pay attention to the interviewee's body language. In case of misunderstandings, there is an opportunity for immediate clarification. However, there can be some difficulties in conducting interviews. For example, the interviewer has to be prepared, respond immediately, and, in addition, results assessment is more complex (Greener, 2008). In the course of the research, it is worth choosing a non-standardised interview, the results of which are processed qualitatively. This type of interview is worth choosing if we want answers to open, complex questions from interviewees. In such cases, the interviewer must ask the right questions during the interview (Saunders et al., 2007). The semi-structured interview has essential benefits for the research objectives among the interview techniques. During the semi-structured interview, the questions must be formulated in advance and then followed – to varying extents – during the interview, although it is possible to discuss a topic in more detail. This method also provides an opportunity for a current, up-to-date conversation (Molnár, 2010). During the interview, the interviewer can ask clarifying questions, which is of great importance for more accurate data collection. There is a need for the interviewer to listen, think, and ask questions simultaneously during the interview (Babbie, 2000).

The interviews conducted with LSP teachers were semi-structured. They were conducted based on a previously prepared draft containing the relevant questions in March 2020 at the University of Debrecen. Altogether, we conducted 12 semi-structured interviews. The emphasis was on finding answers to the following question: to what extent can foreign language training at university meet organisations' needs, and what recommendations can be made to improve the situation from the LSP teachers' point of view? They also gave their views regarding the skills they could improve during the lessons. The respondents had several years of experience in LSP teaching and examining, so they all had well-founded opinions.

Table 1: Presentation of the sample of LSP teachers (n=12)

	Languages taught	Experience in LSP teaching at university	Experience in LSP examination
1. interviewee	English	23 years	15 years
2. interviewee	German	27 years	20 years
3. interviewee	English	40 years	20 years
4. interviewee	Russian	30 years	0 years
5. interviewee	English	30 years	18 years
6. interviewee	English	29 years	20 years
7. interviewee	English	28 years	20 years
8. interviewee	German	24 years	18 years
9. interviewee	English, French	35 years	10 years
10. interviewee	English, German	26 years	20 years
11. interviewee	English, German	26 years	20 years
12. interviewee	English	29 years	18 years

4. Results

At the beginning of the interviews, the aim was to determine LSP teachers' assessment of the first-year students' foreign language skills. It is essential because LSP education at universities should be built on these skills. Then the teachers were asked whether they found these skills appropriate for LSP learning. Each interviewee agreed that most students (60-70%) lacked proper foreign language competencies before entering university. A significant percentage of them stated that first-year students' language skills differed significantly, especially in the case of correspondence students. It is particularly true for students who need two LSP exams for the degree, specifically in their less advanced foreign language.

Provided students' language skills reach intermediate (B2) level on entering, LSP learning is timely. However, if the first-year students' language competencies do not reach the intermediate level, they should be improved. It requires a more extended period, and LSP education can only begin afterwards.

"Learning LSP should definitely be preceded by an adequate level of general language. The order cannot be changed."

The interviewees were also asked why students did not possess intermediate-level language knowledge when starting university. They thought that the problem was caused by inefficient language teaching in secondary and elementary schools. There are too many students in a group and not enough contact lessons to motivate the given age group. The ordinary level of the secondary school-leaving exam only equals the B1 level. Further reasons could be students' lack of interest, their demotivation and inappropriate individual attitude. In the case of Russian, the problem is that it is taught in few schools, while in the case of German and French, the issue is caused by the fact that students only had a few language classes in secondary school.

"Further reasons are high teacher turnover, and students do not know effective methods of studying or simply lack individual motivation."

In the next part of the interview, they were asked about LSP teaching at university. Firstly, they were asked whether there were enough lessons to prepare students for LSP examinations. All teachers said that the number of lessons would only be sufficient if students entering university possessed intermediate language competencies. More lessons are required, especially in the second foreign language, if that is not the case.

Afterwards, discussions focused on whether there were enough lessons for students to acquire appropriate LSP skills. The answers were unanimous: the number of contact lessons is not enough because more practice would be required for first-year students without intermediate-level language competencies. If the required language competencies are acquired, the current number of classes would be sufficient, but unfortunately, this is not typical.

"High-level LSP competencies can only be built on appropriate general language competencies."

The next question referred to the skills that could be improved during the lessons. The answers unanimously show that every skill (reading skills, writing skills, speaking skills, listening skills) required for LSP exams needs to be improved. Interviewees were also asked if they found it possible for students to acquire appropriate LSP skills in two languages during the lessons. The interviewees thought it was only possible if students had intermediate language competencies in both languages.

Another question referred to the possibility of improving students' intercultural communication competencies.

According to the majority of the interviewees, there are not enough opportunities for it during classes; although essential, it would also require a much higher number of classes. It is vital to choose the right coursebook as only some of them develop these competencies. Doing particular reading and communication tasks could provide the right opportunity to develop these competencies.

"Mixed groups of Hungarian and international students could be genuinely efficient, as students would participate in projects which could contribute to the improvement of intercultural communication competencies. Furthermore, it would be advisable for students to take part in different international activities, international forums and study trips abroad."

We were interested to know whether there was enough opportunity to develop students' high-level LSP skills during classes. The interviewees thought that the opportunities were only enough for students with prior intermediate general language competencies. In order to achieve full potential, language learning should be extended to more semesters, and first-year students ought to have at least intermediate general language competencies. Long-term scholarships abroad would be beneficial.

In the final part of the interviews, interviewees expressed their opinion whether LSP language training at universities meets organisations' expectations, and they shared their suggestions to improve the situation.

The interviewees thought that LSP language training at university could not meet all organisational expectations and made the following development suggestions:

- Continuous conversation and coordination between higher education institutions and labour market representatives to provide feedback for both parties.
- To follow a training structure checked by LSP teachers and labour market representatives.
- It would be ideal if trainings within organisations were held by LSP teachers, as teachers could experience the expectations firsthand.
- To develop appropriate curricula (based on needs analysis) together with employers.

- To initiate internship programs with (multinational) organisations, where foreign language competencies can be used.
- To have a higher number of lessons and terms during the training.
- To practice language skills for more semesters. To provide more practice before graduation, because many students pass the language requirements in the first year, they have no further opportunity to improve.
- Students should participate in more study tours and scholarships abroad.
- To improve language teaching in secondary education.

5. Summary

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 LSP teachers who teach languages for specific purposes at the University of Debrecen. The interviews aimed to reveal their opinion on whether foreign language training at university fulfilled the requirements of organisations. We had predicted negative answers, and it was confirmed by teachers; therefore, we wanted to identify the reasons for not meeting the requirements of organisations. The interviews also served to make suggestions on how language training could be improved because it would be the primary goal of organisations, students and universities in the long run.

According to LSP teachers, if universities want to meet the expectations of organisations, continuous dialogue and coordination between the two parties are essential. It would be necessary for language teachers and organisations to collaborate and combine expectations and expertise. Moreover, internships at multinational organisations would be beneficial for students. A major problem is that the majority (60-70%) of first-year students lack appropriate language competencies on which further LSP teaching should be based. Less advanced students would need more than two semesters to learn the language in a higher number of lessons. More emphasis should be placed on developing intercultural communication competencies to meet the expectations of the job market. When compiling the curriculum, teachers try to select textbooks containing intercultural communication competency development tasks (in reading comprehension, situations, case studies). In addition, scholarships and study tours could contribute to developing intercultural communication competencies.

6. Conclusions

Based on the research results, the final proposal is the following: as employers have high expectations regarding foreign language skills and intercultural communication competencies, it is an immediate task of universities to provide adequate foreign language skills by improving communication-based foreign language teaching. The changes in universities should involve a higher number of language classes over a higher number of semesters. In addition, language courses should include the development of soft skills such as intercultural communication competencies. For those students who have reached at least an

intermediate level of language proficiency, a further goal would be to design a soft skill development course in a foreign language, aimed to raise the students' awareness of the importance of these employability skills and provide a no-risk practice ground to develop and improve these competencies. The design and implementation of these plans definitely demand collaboration with the representatives of employers. That is why the second stage of the research program includes them as active course designers. Foreign language teachers could also be active advocators of extracurricular activities such as internship and scholarship programs, which would enhance foreign language and intercultural competencies. Setting up consortia with the aim of providing students with skills needed in the labour market would be in the mutual interest of employers, would-be employees and higher education institutions. In order to cover a broader spectrum and obtain a sharper image of how LSP teaching is or can be adjusted to labour market expectations, we are planning to expand the research sample and interview LSP teachers from other universities, especially from faculties of economics and business. Furthermore, investigating the research theme with a quantitative analysis would contribute to gaining numerical and thus more accurate research results; therefore, this should be the next phase of the research.

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Appendix

Questions for the interviews

1. How many years of experience in higher education do you have?
2. What language(s) do you teach?
3. How many years of experience do you have in professional language examinations?
4. How do you assess the foreign language skills of incoming students? Is it sufficient to learn LSP?
5. If students come to university with inadequate language knowledge, what do you think the reasons are?
6. What skills can be developed during language lessons? Why?
7. Are there enough lessons to prepare students for the professional language exam?
8. Are there enough lessons to enable students to acquire a high level of LSP skills?
9. Do you think it is feasible for students to acquire a high level of language proficiency in two LSP during their university language studies? If not, why?

10. Are there opportunities to develop students' intercultural communication competencies during the language classes? If not, why?
11. Do you have the opportunity to develop students' LSP skills during the language classes? If not, why?
12. Is it possible to prepare students for the professional language examination during the language classes? If not, why?
13. Do you think the current university language training is in line with the organisations' expectations regarding foreign language skills and intercultural communication competencies?
14. If it is not in line, what do you think could be done to improve the situation?