

# KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION AS THE EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORT FACTOR

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## Abstract

Economic and social changes as well as changes in technologies can transform the character of professional life and building one's career. Across regions of the Slovak Republic, these processes lead to differences between the level of completed qualifications of human resources and the creation of job opportunities. The focus is on an active foreign language proficiency, which is viewed as a key factor supporting employability. The ability to successfully communicate on-the-job or when applying for it is discussed on the basis of long-term experience in learning and teaching English for Specific Purposes as well as research in language education and intercultural communication. Results of a survey on the importance of studying languages for professional purposes carried out in four student groups at a non-economic faculty in Bratislava, Slovakia are analysed and evaluated in two chapters. The presentation is a partial result of the second stage of the research carried out under the research project *KEGA 006EU-4/2013* – “Methods and principles applied in the preparation of structure and content of the subject disciplines supporting the development of economics knowledge and business skills in students of non-economic study programmes of the second cycle of higher education”.

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**Keywords:** Key/core skills, employability, language education, languages for specific/professional purposes

## Introduction

Modern society, economy and technology, especially information and communication technologies in the 21st century have brought significant changes in people's professional lives and building their careers. Old jobs disappear and new ones come into being. The labour market places new requirements on potential holders of the job positions produced by the changes in technique and technology. As a result, re-qualification is

becoming a current part of working life; many jobs for which individuals prepared themselves have ceased to exist, as a result of which the employees are facing the necessity to acquire new knowledge and skills, and often in other fields, if they wish to remain employable.

Career may be defined as a lifelong process of developing oneself; it is a self-development process in one's profession, which enables an individual's competitiveness on the labour market. The aim of career is to gain a particular job position in a competitive environment of the labour market and maintaining this position. The starting-point of the career is to gain the qualification required on the labour market and its permanent development and increasing in connection with conditions of development.

A general aim of the paper is to describe LSP competences as the principal supporting factor of employability. The present paper is a partial result of the authors' involvement in the research carried out under the second stage of the research project No. 006EU-4/2013 KEGA, "Methods and principles applied in the preparation of the structure and content of course supporting the development of knowledge of economics and entrepreneurial skills in non-economics study programmes of the second level of higher education".

### **Basic Characteristics of Requirements on the Performance of Working Activities:**

The human resource potential in a company can be described as a sum of competences, explicit organisational knowledge, tacit knowledge, managerial and facilitating practices, which are shaped by the corporate culture. The focus of this part of the paper is on competences.

The concept of competence is often used as a synonym for the possibility of giving one's opinion about some problem or authority or eligibility to decide about something. An individual's position also affects their educational needs. In this case, competence is an expression related in its meaning to other predominantly sociological terms, e.g. power, influence, or authority (Vališová, A.; Kašíková, H., 2007). Competence refers to obligations, powers and responsibilities that an individual or a group of people have, while these obligations or rights can be delegated. If we use the term competence in this meaning, we refer also to an individual's social position, e.g. a higher social position makes an individual as a person in authority eligible to take decisions. The decision-making power is also connected with responsibility for the results of the decision-making process, while these results are directly proportional to acquired knowledge and reflect an overall individual's aptitude.

On the other hand, competences stand for a specific set of knowledge, aptitudes, experience, methods, and procedures, as well as for

example attitudes, which individuals utilise to successfully deal with diverse tasks and life situations, and which enable them personal development and fulfilment of their ambitions in all the main areas of their lives. Ambitions that relate mainly to the labour market concern employability and the application of their education in their future jobs.

In educational and management theories and in practice these two meanings of the concept of competence are complementary:

- Competence as a sum of decision-making powers and resulting responsibility for consequences of one's decisions;

- The potential that an individual acquires in the processes of learning and education in order to successfully cope with one's work duties. (Veteška, Tureckiová, 2008, p. 25).

The basic condition for the performance of each job is qualification. Qualification is a system of knowledge, skills and habits needed to acquire an official aptitude (usually recognized by the state) for the performance of some job. Qualification (from Lat. *qualis* = *what kind*, *-ficatio* = *doing*) in the broadest sense of the word means man's ability to repeatedly perform some professional activity on a particular required level. (Výchova a vzdelávanie dospelých. Andragogika. Terminologický a výkladový slovník 2000, p. 220). The process of recognising individuals' assumptions to do some job is assessed by an external authority.

In the current practice of employer entities, the role of an external authority is fulfilled by an employer: in micro-businesses and small-sized businesses it is the owner, in larger entities this role is performed by a line or mid-level manager or a top manager. It is the employer together with the company personnel department who decides on the recognition or non-recognition of applicants' competences for employment in the process of recruitment or deployment of human resources after taking in-company courses in further education.

For the purposes of education, however, it is necessary to maintain the balance between objective qualification, i.e. demands on the performance of particular work activities, and subjective qualification, i.e. actual working aptitude of an individual. Z. Palan defines the subjective qualification as a "set of abilities, skills, habits, experience(s), attitudes, and key qualifications acquired during one's life which are potentially applicable for the performance of some activity" (1997, p. 62). This definition implies that subjective qualification may be the result of both non-formal<sup>1</sup> and informal education<sup>2</sup>. This meaning of the concept of qualification significantly approaches to that of competence. This is also reflected in the inclusion of key qualifications known as core or basic skills in the definition of subjective qualification.

Key qualification (core/basic skills) may be defined as learned or acquired abilities, aptitudes, attitudes and strategies, needed for acquiring new competences for various areas of activities. The term key qualification was used for the first time in a lecture delivered by the German scientist Dieter Mertens, a specialist in labour and education (1962). Mertens is also the author of the first written definition of this term. He understood key qualifications as the key opening a rapidly changing professional (technical) knowledge, which, as a rule, is not the outcome of formal school education; instead it is acquired and develops continuously during one's life (Kľúčové kvalifikácie (Core skills) <https://managementmania.com/sk/klucove-kvalifikacie-core-skills>).

In an English-speaking environment the term *core skills* or *basic skills* corresponds that of key qualifications. Also the Slovak equivalent of this term *základné zručnosti* is a literal translation of the English *basic skills* (e.g. in the document “Memorandum on Lifelong Education” (2001)). The term *core skills* (or key qualifications) may be encountered e.g. in the acquired degree of qualification, in job offers, in reviews or evaluations, etc.<sup>1</sup> Most authors list the following core skills (e.g. Veteška, Tureckiová, 2008): abilities to think in connections; problem-solving abilities; autonomy; flexibility; communication abilities; team-working ability; cooperation skills; ability to assert oneself; interest in cognition and learning; readiness to learn; reflection and optimisation of one's own learning processes, and the ability of updating the knowledge attained; creativity and creative thinking.

It is mainly the core skills that are interesting or important from the aspect of adult education. As indicated in the “Memorandum on Lifelong Education of the Year 2000” (p.17), the present-day labour market requires continuously updated profiles of skills, qualifications and experience. Those who for any reason have failed to acquire adequate core skills have to be given an opportunity to not only acquire the skills needed but also update them and maintain a required level of core skills by means of formal and non-formal education and learning.

According to the conclusions of the Lisbon session of the European Council (Article 26) new core/basic skills include the skills related to: information technologies (digital literacy), foreign languages, technology culture, business, and social skills (self-confidence, self-guidance, self-assertion, and assuming risk on oneself). This list of skills is not made up of merely a sum of courses or disciplines. It covers a wide range of knowledge and competences of interdisciplinary nature: for example, learning foreign languages includes acquiring language/linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic (including discursive and functional) skills to successfully communicate in a foreign language in non-native environment, as well as in diverse situations. This example shows that general, professional/vocational and social skills are increasingly overlapping in terms of content and function.

The original list of Mertens' core skills (key qualifications) has been considerably enlarged: as many as 300 of them are estimated to have been listed to date. According to statistics, 291 key qualifications have been listed in fifty-two published works ([www.bwl24.net/blog/2009/04/09/schlüsselqualifikationen](http://www.bwl24.net/blog/2009/04/09/schlüsselqualifikationen)). It follows that the current understanding of the concept of core skills (or key qualifications) is much wider than the original one.

At this point, we think it may be interesting to look at the problems connected with the translation of this term. The fact that the German term *Schlüsselqualifikationen* is translated in many countries as the equivalent to *key competences*, but also a limited content of the concept of core skills (key qualifications) have resulted in preferring the broader concept of key competences.

Competence, from Lat. *competéns = relevant, capable, responsible; competentia = aptitude, ability* is most frequently understood in two meanings. In legal terminology competence denotes the delimitation of authority/power, a sum of obligations and the scope of province, usually codified by a legal norm. Frequently, the competence understood in this way is accompanied with the requirement to gain a required qualification.

In its broader sense, competence may be defined as the human ability to utilise all the knowledge, skills, ways of thinking and experience gained during one's life, including individual aptitudes, abilities and potentials. It also includes the ability to assess some phenomena either within a broader context or from a specific aspect. In contrast to key competences, which include general requirements, competence has a personal dimension; it is an individual's ability to act with responsibility in their personal, professional life as well as in various social situations.

In both of these meanings or rather senses of the concept, we can trace a strong emphasis on job-relatedness, i.e. understanding competence in relation to work activities or functions.

There are several competence models, which were constructed as a result of efforts for defining the concept of competence according to various areas. These areas include personality competences, professional competences, methodology competences, and social communicative competences. Comparison of these models may be found in J. Veteska and M. Tureckiova, who discuss in detail how the concepts of key qualifications and key competences developed in their two works, namely in Veteska and Tureckiova (2008a; 2008b).

Let us reflect on the nature of social communicative competences as these are necessary for an effective communication in professional environment. Social communication competences may be described in terms of various abilities, while not all of them are directly related to language –

namely cooperation ability; ability to communicate and get along with other people; or to join others in the creative fulfilment of various tasks and problems. Important ingredients of this competence group are of course empathy, sensitivity, and the ability to express one’s views, conflict resolution abilities, as well as team-working abilities, etc. While many of these competences are gained in the course of formal education; other may be attained and further developed also under adult education system, e.g. further education, both in formal, non-formal and informal education and learning as part of lifelong education and learning.

The following figure contains the explanation of the difference between the terms “competence” and “competency” based on a British source cited below.

Figure 1 Competence and Competency

COMPETENCE Output career model	Acquired skill Output based Focus on managers’ behaviour Manager’s effectiveness defined in terms of actual achievement
COMPETENCY Input career model	Innate skills Input-based Focus on personality traits

Source: Based on text in *Dictionary of Business and Management*, 2003, p. 78-79.

The difference between the two concepts discussed above may be summarised, in accordance with the explanation in *The Dictionary of Business and Management* (2003); while the former is understood as a higher category, which refers to an acquired skill that focuses in the output (result) of the process and managerial behaviour, the purpose of which is an organisation’s success. By contrast, competency is presented in this source as an inborn skill, which is based on the input and focuses on personality traits (rather than the overall achievement-oriented behaviour). From this point of view, the concept of competency is subordinate to that of competence. There is also difference in using these terms in two English-speaking countries: while the National Vocational Qualification system in the UK prefers the term “competence”, in the United States, by contrast, the term competency is more widespread.

The authors of the Dictionary emphasise that “At an organisational level, idea of core competence success is gaining popularity.” In the same source, key competence is defined as follows: “a key ability or capacity of strength that an organisation has acquired that differentiates it from others, gives it competitive advantage, and contributes to its long-term success.” (Dictionary of Business and Management, 2003, p. 87). Likewise Slovak authors are aware of the difference between the two English terms, e.g. F.

Hroník claims that “competence” denotes the formation of work standards, i.e. qualification requirements which ensure that the performance of some job is up to the standard; “competency” refers to the way how an employee achieves the performance.

### **Language Education for Professional Purposes – Basic Key Competence Supporting Employability:**

According to eight key competences listed in the European Framework of Reference in the document of the “Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning” (2006/962/ES) ([http://www.cmepius.si/files/cmepius/userfiles/grundtvig/gradivo/key\\_comp\\_etencies\\_2006\\_en.pdf](http://www.cmepius.si/files/cmepius/userfiles/grundtvig/gradivo/key_comp_etencies_2006_en.pdf)), crucial key competences of mobility include communication in foreign languages, social and citizen competences, and cultural awareness.

In this part of the paper, we will discuss the perceived importance of teaching languages for professional/occupational purposes in the Slovak Republic and explore this kind of language education at a non-economic higher education institution.

At the beginning, we can state that in the course of recent twenty years, we have witnessed a rising focus on the output model of competence described in the second chapter. At the same time, the relevance of teaching foreign languages for specific/professional purposes as compulsory courses at non-philological higher education institutions has been repeatedly questioned for various reasons. Fortunately, owing to those who had the knowledge and competence (the first meaning of the concept) to decide about this matter, language education for professional purposes has maintained its place in the curricula of Slovak non-philological faculties. These people, Slovak and Czech teachers of languages, spared no efforts explaining how important it is for future economists and managers to be able to communicate on job-related topics in professional environment in foreign languages, and encouraged their students in developing their communicative skills. At this point it is suitable to mention the help of British and US lecturers, to whom Slovak English-language teachers at non-philological faculties referred as “experts in ESP”. The journal *ESP Spectrum Slovakia* published with the support of the British Council Slovakia in the second part of the 1990-ies and the early 2000s enabled us to share our knowledge and experience in teaching courses in professional communication not only within Slovakia but also with colleagues from e.g. Romania, the Czech Republic or Poland. It is interesting to observe that the contents of this journal followed the lines of the well-known Hutchinson’s and Waters’ book (1987). The topics of the ESP content, ESP syllabus design, the issue of

integrating and developing skills, learner independence and learner autonomy, or the role of ESP teacher were regularly discussed in articles written by domestic and foreign authors. *The English Teaching Forum* (ETF) published in the United States and distributed by the US embassies was an inexhaustible well of knowledge and inspiration, both to young teachers as well as experienced but “tired” teachers, who could benefit from the exchange of experience in teaching languages for specific purposes.

### **Research into Learning Languages for Specific Purposes**

The following part of the paper contains results of the survey we carried out in four groups of students at a non-economic faculty in Bratislava, Slovak Republic.

#### **Aim of the Research**

The aim of the research was to:

- a) establish if respondents – students of a non-economic faculty are interested in learning English for professional purposes offered in their current programme of study;
- b) find out whether students are aware of the importance of knowledge and skills provided by ESP courses for their future career, and if they perceive proficiency in this area as a competitive advantage in their future workplace;
- c) obtain respondents’ opinions of the time and scope of studying professional communication.

#### **Respondent Profile and Method of Research**

The research was carried out by means of the questionnaire method in two Bachelor courses and two Master’s courses. All respondents have already completed a course in English for Specific Purposes within their studies, so they could be expected to be able to estimate the relevance of the knowledge and skills in ESP to their future careers. We worked out two questionnaires: Questionnaire 1 with the title “Learning Foreign Languages for Specific Purposes” was designed for Master’s students only; Questionnaire 2 on “Professional Communication and my Future Career” was completed by all three respondent groups, i.e. both Bachelor and Master’s students.

#### **Analysis of Survey Results and Discussion:**

##### **Analysis of Replies to Questions in the Questionnaire on “Learning Foreign Languages for Specific Purposes”**

The first questionnaire contains five questions, two closed questions, one multiple choice and two open questions, namely:



In the first two questions, respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they were interested in studying the language of professional communication. Not only were their answers unanimously affirmative, but they also supported their answers to the first question with the following comments:

The knowledge of Business English is a pre-requisite of success; it is necessary in view of fierce competition on the labour market; the knowledge of English for professional purposes is useful for working with projects (and not only school projects); courses on Business English, etc. should be “definitely” included in our study... because this is an interdisciplinary faculty; it is important for future interpreters and translators to understand professional communication.

Several students mentioned particular situations in which they, as future interpreters (interpreter is an option included in the graduate profile) may be required to work at academic conferences.

In their replies to the second question respondents either marked option a) (definitely yes) or b) rather yes than no. Nobody marked option d) reply indicating respondents did not see the knowledge and skills gained in these courses related to their future profession.

In answer to the third question, respondents have suggested the following topics/ disciplines in which they wish to study in ESP courses, also including courses in ESP skills: Marketing and Management, Legal English (English for Law), Human Resource Management, Banking and Finance, International Marketing, Tourism, Accountancy, Business Negotiations, Business Communication, Business Correspondence, Company Communication (related to clients, leaders, suppliers, etc.), English for Telephoning, Negotiations, Media Language; World Economy, Economy of the Slovak Republic, European Economy, and socio-political situation, political events.

In answer to the fourth question, majority of respondents marked option c), i.e. expressed their wish to study professional communication at both Bachelor’s and Master’s levels. They also suggested:

- offer more ESP courses at Bachelor level;
- offer a specialised language course each term, i.e. one term, a course in ESP for insurance, followed by one-term course in marketing, then in HRM, etc.;
- teach economic subjects in the English language throughout Bachelor and Master studies;
- offer an optional course in English for Economics and Law (with focus on text samples and exercises);
- start offering additional ESP courses (in addition to the existing two terms of ESP course) as soon as possible, i.e. on Bachelor level.

In answer to the fifth question concerning the preferred method and techniques of learning and teaching professional communication, respondents suggested the following methods and approaches: working with authentic materials and numerous exercises; attending lectures given by native speaker/host professors; reading and writing academic articles; written assignments; writing papers and projects; presentations; new vocabulary for business topics; and practise skills in a multicultural company once in a week.

The recommendation “less theory more practice” was repeated several times, and mainly such interactive methods and techniques as case studies, role plays, or negotiation simulations (which learners experienced in their studies at our university) were emphasised.

### **Analysis of Replies to Questions in the Questionnaire on “Professional Communication and my Future Career”:**

The second questionnaire on “Professional Communication and my Future Career” was completed by 113 respondents, i.e. both Bachelor and Master’s students. The focus was on links between the knowledge and skills of professional communication, in particular terminology, and students’ future career. The questionnaire included seven (7) questions; six (6) multiple choice questions and one (1) open question.

In answer to the first question, majority respondents have agreed that the knowledge of terminology of economics and business in the English language is necessary for a successful communication both at their future workplace and outside it.

Replies to the third question indicate that our students think that they will learn the basics of business terminology both at their future workplaces as well as during their studies at their non-economic faculty.

Their positive answers to the fifth question about the knowledge of economic terminology and their chances for a good job show that learners are firmly persuaded about it (options: *definitely yes* and *rather yes than no* were marked by 95 respondents).

The sixth question relates to links between the ability to communicate about work-related topics while using the right terminology and the chance of finding a good job. Respondents’ replies show that this is something that the majority (105 respondents of the total of 113) are certain about.

The same degree of certainty is expressed in answers to the seventh question. Again, a great majority of students are persuaded that the ability to communicate about work-related topics will enable them to find *employment abroad* (geographical mobility, job mobility), or represent a local firm abroad (chances for promotion).

The following are the results of analysis of respondents' replies to the second (open) question, in which respondents were expected to list working activities for the performance of which they are going to need to master the fundamentals of economic terminology. Our intention in this case was to find out if our students thought that they would need what they learned at school (content of our ESP courses) for their future employment. In their answers, they listed the following activities: translating economic texts, communicating at workplace, translating and interpreting, participating in (intercultural) negotiations/ negotiations with foreign business partners, writing/ giving professional presentations for clients, activities related to finance, statistics, or monitoring of various data, job interview, business correspondence, preparing/editing contracts, giving a speech at a conference, understanding internal and external processes in the company, teaching at university, and managing an American or German company.

Respondents also completed comment sections in the second questionnaire. Their comments show that they are aware of the requirements placed by the labour market and are determined to accept the challenge. Let us quote from their comments:

*Knowledge of special terminology is required by employers.../is an advantage at workplace.*

*Not only knowledge of business terms but also to understand what they stand for and be able to use them in real-life situations are important.*

*...The knowledge of economic and business terms enables us to make a good impression/succeed at a job interview.*

Respondents' answers show their optimism about their future employability and ambitions even in these difficult times. They see the possibility of acquiring the knowledge and skills as an advantage that will enable them to find a job and remain competitive at workplace. On the other hand, it is satisfactory for us, teachers, to observe that our students view the content of their study linked to the needs of practice. Frequently, universities are criticised by the media or their own students (e.g. on social networks) for the deficiency in this respect.

The results of our analysis have confirmed our expectations that respondents' answers will indicate if students relate the content of ESP courses to "practical things" they need to study, and also if they see the knowledge and skills in this area as an important component of key competences which may enable them to succeed on the labour market in Slovakia and possibly abroad.

In their comments respondents referred to the knowledge and skills of specialised business and economics terminology as an advantage as early as at a job interview. As mentioned before, respondents were certain that the ability to communicate about work-related topics would enable them to find

employment abroad, or represent a local firm abroad (chances for promotion).

Respondents' lists of activities for which this kind of knowledge is needed in their future employment correspond on the one hand to activities in which students are involved in their ESP courses; on the other hand, the skills and micro-skills they mention can also be found in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Analysis of respondents' replies shows that most learners have a clear idea of what particular knowledge and skills they will need to successfully communicate in an organisation and on the labour market. Moreover, respondents have demonstrated the awareness of contemporary methods used in language learning and teaching (e.g. case study method, role-playing, or negotiation simulations).

## **Conclusion**

In the present paper the competence of professional communication is treated as one of key factors supporting employability. We consider this kind of competence as an "acquired skill that focuses on the output of the process and behaviour, the purpose of which is an organisation's success".

Results of our survey show that learners are aware of the connection between the ability to communicate about work-related topics while using adequate terminology and the chances to succeed on the labour market.

In order to increase the chances of graduates from our non-economic higher education institutions and to enable them to find an adequate employment and maintain it, it is important for us to consider the possibility of meeting respondents' wish to teach ESP courses throughout their Bachelor and Master studies, as well as to continuously update profiles of skills, qualifications, and experience in our study programmes in accordance with the labour market expectations and in view of ideas in the "Memorandum on Lifelong Education of the Year 2000". These conclusions also correspond to the tasks solved under the project solved by the authors of the present paper.

## **Notes**

<sup>1)</sup> Although non-formal education may be organised in some way: it is carried out along the mainstream education and professional preparation and usually is not concluded with an official certificate. It may be described as a mixture of various educational activities, e.g. interest and cultural education, health campaigns, communal education, etc. This type of education is based on the participant's interest. Non-formal education may be held at work and within activities of civic associations and organisations (e.g. youth organisations, trade unions, etc.), as well as organised by

institutions which supplement formal education (e.g. musical, sports and other interest groups, private classes in various areas, and the like).

<sup>2)</sup> Informal education, also called non-institutional, is learning from experience, within everyday communication and social life, or under the influence of the mass media, etc. In contrast to formal and non-formal education, it need not be deliberate. It is neither organised, so the term could be replaced with the term of *learning*. It involves various direct or indirect stimuli, which an individual receives from the outside.

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