

AN EXAMINATION OF LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS FOR NEWLY-GRADUATED STUDENTS BY QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

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Abstract

Nowadays the rising unemployment rate for newly-graduated students poses a considerable problem. Although obtaining a degree and certificate are not enough on the labour market, it is a fact that college graduates' unemployment rates over all are still lower than the national average. These days the successful graduate job applicant has to (fluently) speak foreign language(s). In order to ensure that candidates can fulfil this requirement, universities and colleges have to modify the language teaching strategy according to the needs of the labour market.

Keywords: Language, education, labour market, student, employee

▪ INTRODUCTION

According to our examination of what is expected from graduates we can state that employers have serious expectations with regards to applicants' foreign language skills. These days, with Hungarian companies knowledge of at least one foreign language is the minimum requirement for a management position. Generally, proficiency in written and spoken English is expected. At the moment, this demand can be fully fulfilled neither by existing employees nor by newly-graduated students. Today, when we typically have an over-supply on the job market, only the best members of the workforce can hope for successfully finding employment. On this vigorously competitive job market only those specialists that measure up to global challenges are recruited, especially for management positions. Primarily, this means a complex and extensive knowledge of vocational competencies. But this is just one necessary condition and in itself not

sufficient. Apart from being professionally well-trained, employees have to meet the expectations of the international market, that is, proficient use of at least one foreign language. Obtaining this knowledge does not only require a lot of energy from the employee (student), but also sets a serious task for institutions of higher education. They have to release students to the job market who do not only have complex professional knowledge, but also meet the expectations of employers as far as foreign language knowledge is concerned.

▪ **OBJECTIVES OF OUR RESEARCH**

What is described in the introduction are no easy tasks for institutions of higher education, as different companies have differing demands as far as foreign language knowledge is concerned (technical, business or general vocabulary, oral or written communication, formal or informal conversation, etc.). But language courses do not only have to focus on these demands, they also have to take into account the needs of students who come into higher education with differing levels of foreign language skills.

The objective of our research was to examine the attitude of businesses in the Eastern and Central parts of Hungary – with special focus on companies in the catchment area of the College of Szolnok – in order to improve the College's language courses and align them to market requirements. Another aim was to measure the expectations potential employers of students of the College of Szolnok have regarding the language knowledge of existing or future employees. In the course of our research we examined the importance of different foreign languages in business, the relation between written and oral communication, specialist languages and possible forms of foreign language training courses specifically designed for employees of companies.

▪ **MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY**

Our research activity was divided into two parts, a qualitative and a quantitative research part. In this paper we present the findings of the quantitative research, that is, the results of our online questionnaire. The sample was made up of companies that thanks to their geographical positioning might serve as potential employers for students of the College of Szolnok, with foreign language use as part of their everyday business life (there was no advance pre-selection).

It can be seen as one success of the research that we were able to exceed the planned 50 companies for our sample by far. In fact, the sample that was questioned consists of 113 businesses. This proves that we did our research on a topic that is not only an important question for the College of Szolnok (a high number of graduates that is able to find employment), but

that also serves the interest of the business world (recruits with foreign language proficiency and business expertise).

Questionnaires could be filled in in July and August 2013. As graduates of the College of Szolnok find employment in a wide variety of areas, we tried to make our sample as wide as possible. In other words, we wanted to give all companies that might play a role as potential employer of our graduates a chance to express their opinions. The final sample is – in accordance with our goals – especially heterogeneous and representatives of numerous branches of the national economy are included.

These companies lay claim to the expertise of well-trained specialists with degrees of higher education, which also ensured our secondary condition – the expression of serious and determined need for the improvement of language teaching. The companies questioned are active in several counties; the distribution of headquarters is shown in the following table:

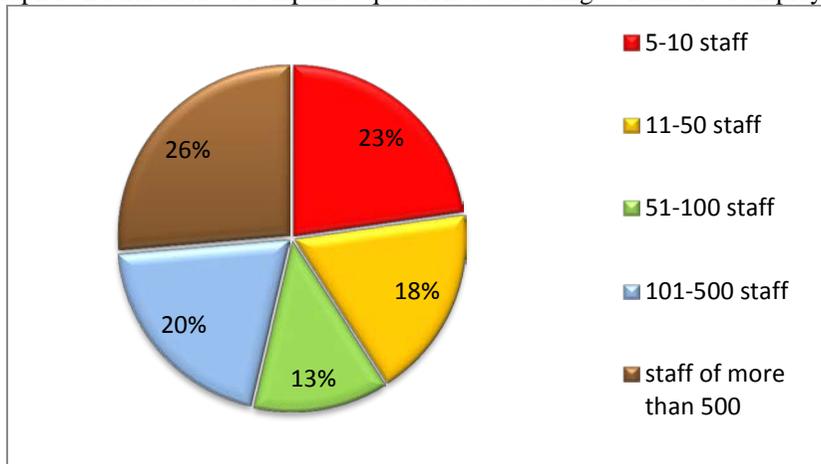
Table 1: Distribution of sample according to county

County	No. of companies	Percentage of sample (%)
Bács-Kiskun county	5	4
Békés county	9	8
Csongrád county	5	4
Hajdú-Bihar county	8	7
Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok county	28	25
Pest county	35	32
Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county	2	1
others	21	19
altogether	113	100

Source: Own research, 2013

The highest proportions in the sample are represented by the counties Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok and Pest. As the College of Szolnok is mainly targeting young adults living in those counties, and most of its graduates find employment there, it can be explained rationally why those counties have the strongest weight in the sample. Of the companies questioned 52% are in Hungarian ownership, 41% operate with a background of foreign ownership and 7% have mixed ownership. Graph 1 illustrates the distribution of the number of staff of the questioned companies in 2012:

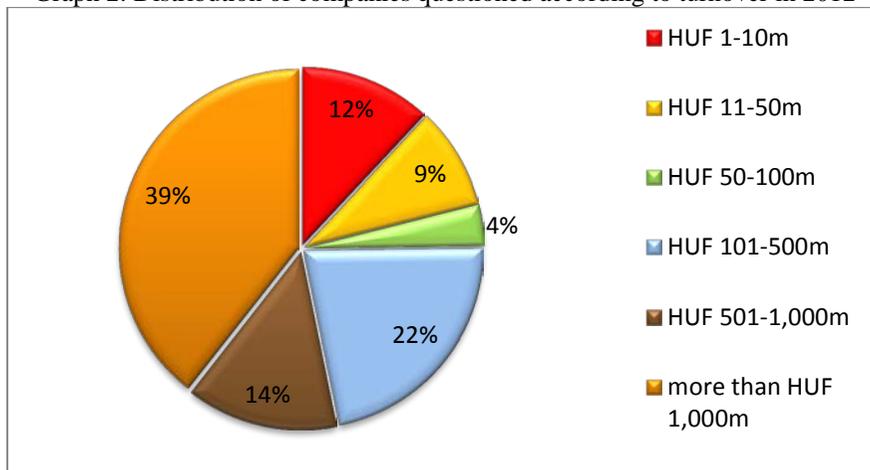
Graph 1: Distribution of companies questioned according to number of employees



Source: Own research, 2013

The majority of companies involved consisted of small to medium-sized enterprises, because primarily these are the types of company that recruit graduates from the College of Szolnok. The institution basically trains a workforce that could find placement in this sector. Apart from that, a satisfactory proportion consists of those companies that rank among the biggest employers (with more than 500 employees). Graph 2 illustrates the distribution of the companies included in the sample according to turnover in 2012:

Graph 2: Distribution of companies questioned according to turnover in 2012



Source: Own research, 2013

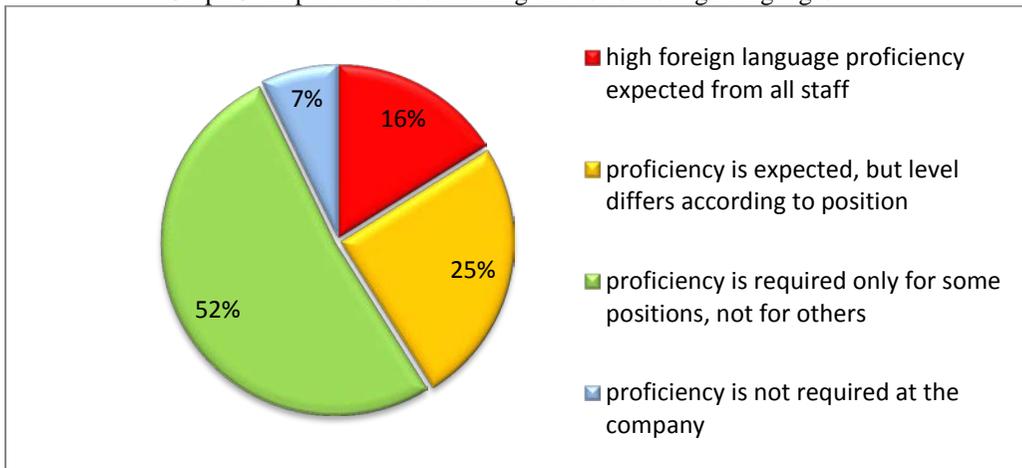
Graph 2 above well illustrates that turnover in 2012 for a decisive majority of the companies questioned (39%) exceeded 1 billion Hungarian forints.

▪ **RESEARCH RESULTS**

▪ **General expectations considering foreign language knowledge**

The companies included in the sample expressed serious expectations with regards to applicants' foreign language skills. This underlines what we referred to in the introduction and shows that even those regions are affected by global competition that do not actively take part in the circulation of worldwide trade. The expectations concerning the use of foreign languages are illustrated in graph 3. Of the companies included in the sample, only 7% stated that their employees do not have to use foreign languages at all in the course of their work. Among the companies that stated this, we most likely find those that do not even indirectly deal with export or import activities. Graph 3 clearly shows that a successful employee cannot forgo foreign language knowledge on the job market, as without it their professional qualities cannot be developed to adequate measure. It should also be noted that none of the companies in foreign ownership in the sample stated that their employees could do without the use of foreign languages.

Graph 3: Expectations concerning the use of foreign languages

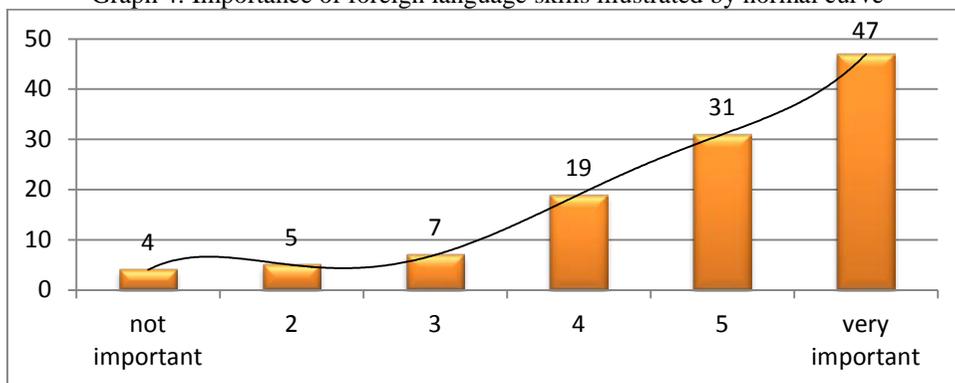


Source: Own research, 2013

Altogether only seven companies in Hungarian ownership do not require their employees to be able to communicate in a foreign language. These companies obviously belong to the group of those lagging behind as these days foreign language knowledge is indispensable for the use of most computer software. According to the graph above and a cross table analysis we can state that for recruitment at multinational companies and more demanding positions foreign language knowledge is essential.

The companies questioned evaluated the importance of foreign language skills at their company with the help of a six level Likert scale (1-not important at all, 6-very important). Graph 4 below shows the detailed data.

Graph 4: Importance of foreign language skills illustrated by normal curve

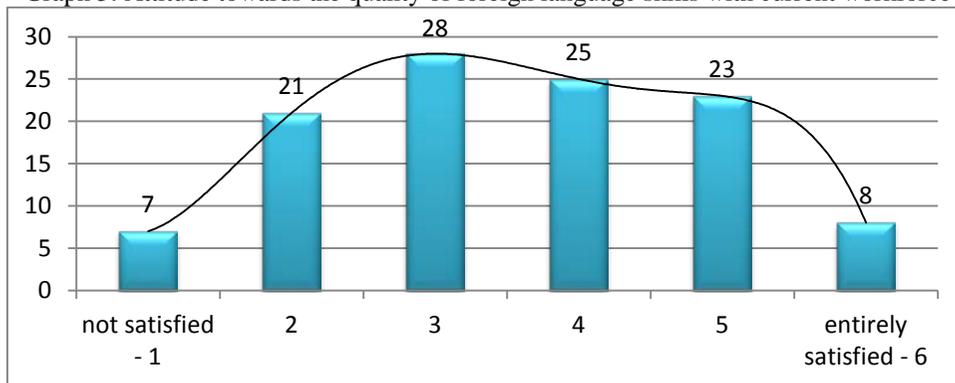


Source: Own research, 2013

The graph above clearly shows that companies place a great importance on confident use of foreign languages by their employees. Of the 113 companies responding to the questionnaire 47 opted for the highest value 6 (very important). An examination of the the graph reveals an asymmetry on the right side, which clearly attests that foreign language knowledge is considered as a prerequisite. The average result for the importance of foreign language skills from the answers of the companies questioned is 4.85, which can be considered as extraordinarily high on a six level scale.

Even though foreign language skills are highly expected by employers, this does not mean that employees are able to entirely fulfil these expectations. The divergence might lead to tension at the workplace or even dismissals because of a lack of foreign language proficiency. The employers described the foreign language proficiency of their current workforce with the help of a six level Likert scale, whose extremes had the following meaning: 1-not satisfied with foreign language knowledge, 6-entirely satisfied. Detailed results can be seen in graph 5 below.

Graph 5: Attitude towards the quality of foreign language skills with current workforce



Source: Own research, 2013

The graph above shows that the companies' current workforce is not able to fully satisfy the expectations of companies. Taken together, graph 4 and graph 5 support this claim. With regards to the foreign language proficiency of the current workforce we can state that the average of the answers received places foreign language skills at a value of 3.53 at the companies questioned, which can be interpreted as a medium result on a six level scale.

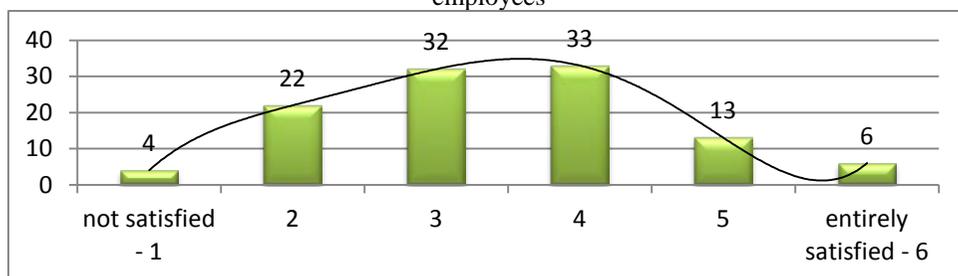
For the College of Szolnok this state of language skills of the companies' current workforce presents a potential opportunity in the form of language courses. This might mean a source of revenue for the college, an increase in its reputation and the expansion of relationships with companies, in addition to a growing positive PR value.

Apart from the language knowledge of the current workforce, another important question is the foreign language skills of newly recruited employees (graduates). The question is interesting from several perspectives:

- The substitution of current employees is feasible if the language proficiency of newly recruited staff exceeds the language knowledge of the existing workforce. In this case, however, the company has to absorb a temporary decline in previous work experience.
- If fresh graduates offer a competitive advantage compared to a company's existing workforce as far as foreign language skills are concerned, this poses high short term career prospects for graduates if they also possess satisfactory specialist skills. This also opens up an opportunity for the College of Szolnok.
- If the foreign language skills of newly graduated applicants are not significantly higher than that of the existing workforce, a substitution would not be a rational choice. This in turn means worse chances for fresh graduates.

Employers were also asked to evaluate foreign language skills of newly recruited employees with the help of of a six level Likert scale, whose extremes had the following meaning: 1-not satisfied, 6-entirely satisfied. Detailed results can be seen in graph 6 below.

Graph 6: Attitude towards the quality of foreign language skills with newly recruited employees



Source: Own research, 2013

As can be seen in graph 6, the companies asked did not rate the foreign language skills of potential new employees as significantly better than that of their present workforce. From the perspective of newly graduated students, this is the worst possibility. In this case, an exchange of employees on the basis of foreign language proficiency does not seem justified. Apart from the fact that the employers will not get a new employee with significantly better foreign language skills, they also have to take into account a short period of training on the job for the new recruits.

When analyzing the foreign language skills of newly recruited employees we can state that the answers lead to an average value of 3.42, which can be seen as a medium result on a six level scale. The companies asked rated the foreign language knowledge of their current workforce slightly higher (3.52) than that of newly recruited employees (3.42).

This means that new recruits face a competitive disadvantage against existing employees in the area of foreign language skills. For the College of Szolnok this points to a serious challenge for the reform and rethinking of its foreign language teaching, of its restructuring to fulfil the expectations of companies, in order to give their students the means to compensate their lack of practical job experience and find employment with greater success.

Summing up, we can state that from the side of employers there is a serious demand for professionals who are able to communicate at a high level in a foreign language (besides their professional knowledge). According to the results of our research, at the moment this demand is not met by the current workforce; but neither are newly graduated students from institutions of higher education able to reach the expected level. The structuring of foreign language teaching according to companies' needs (real and effective, "living informal contact", co-operation with the companies) offers an opportunity for the College of Szolnok, which might lead to a significantly shorter time period for its graduates to find employment.

▪ **The importance of the languages spoken in the life of companies**

In today's global world it is not enough for employees just to speak a foreign language. Today, the English language has reached the position of a world language with the help of which people can get by at any place in the world, from everyday situations and computer software to handling complete negotiations. It is not enough that an employee speaks one or several foreign languages at the required level; it is absolutely necessary to take into account which languages those are. With regard to foreign language learning we can detect several "fashion waves" for languages which are in part useless on the job market and do not lead to a competitive advantage for the applicant as far as finding employment is concerned.

The acquisition of those languages is important and must not be undervalued; this is attested by the saying "you are as many men, as many languages you speak". On the other hand, it is a fact that wisdom is not really valued on the job market and cannot be directly converted into income. Keeping this in mind, it is important to note that language teaching at the College of Szolnok does not follow changing trends (especially with regard to the first foreign language, the language most competently spoken), but focuses on those languages that employers consider as important and in demand.

Employers expressed the importance of different foreign languages in the life of their company with the help of a six level Likert scale, whose extremes had the following meaning: 1-not important at all, 6-very important. Detailed results can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Importance of different foreign languages and average value of importance according to employers

Importance/ Language	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average value
English	4	4	3	10	17	63	5,20
German	14	11	9	18	20	28	4,02
French	49	14	16	9	6	5	2,24
Italian	57	10	13	12	3	5	2,08
Russian	50	12	17	8	9	4	2,26
Spanish	65	15	9	4	3	3	1,77
Chinese	74	11	12	1	0	1	1,44
others	60	15	10	8	2	6	1,96

Source: Own research, 2013

Table 2 above clearly shows that employers expect their workforce (existing and newly recruited) to confidently speak primarily English or German. The importance of those two languages is illustrated by the average value of 5.2 and 4.02 respectively on the six level scale, which are exceptionally high average values.

This expectation leads to several important conclusions for the College of Szolnok:

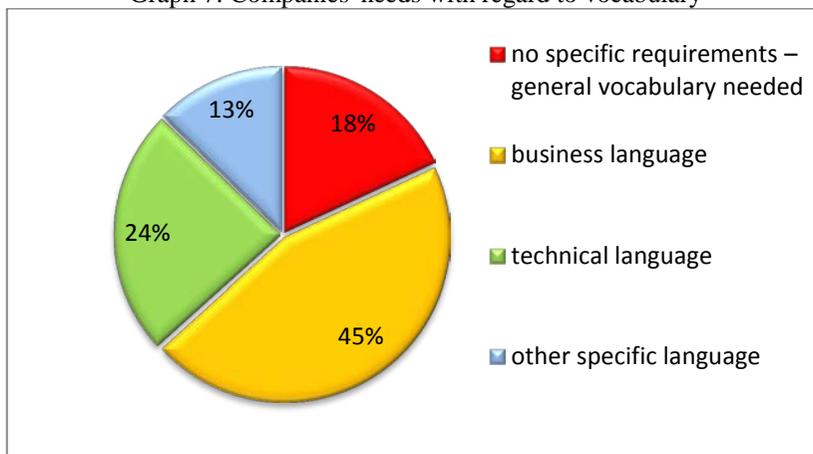
- The basic requirement for newly graduated students of the College of Szolnok in their successful search for employment as soon as possible is high proficiency in the English language. It is in the best interest of the students to fulfil the expectations of the job market as far as foreign languages are concerned. In the case of pre-existing knowledge of other foreign languages, it is expedient to at least acquire a basic knowledge of English in the course of higher education studies.
- For the College of Szolnok the English-taught programme (especially if it is strictly based on the demands of companies) presents a

"marketable" service that might lead to an opportunity for extra income. Through this the language skills of companies' current workforce might be improved. At the same time, it has to be noted that companies would be willing to spend on courses only if they cater exactly to their specific needs (as far as topics, methods, group size, time and place are concerned).

- The teaching of those languages that are currently rare, but will be of increasing significance (like Chinese) does not seem to be a marketable service with a high demand at the moment. These languages right now function as "niche markets"; there is still no high demand for them, but for those students who speak these languages well, this might mean a serious competitive advantage with the right company. For the College of Szolnok courses in those languages with still low demand does not seem financeable, as the lack of serious demand will not secure opportunities for employment for a high number of graduates.

Companies express their demands with regard to foreign language skills precisely; they know exactly what their needs are. In this area the College of Szolnok clearly has to meet the companies' needs if it wants to market its language teaching services successfully. Graph 7 illustrates what kind of language knowledge companies expect from their current and future workforce.

Graph 7: Companies' needs with regard to vocabulary



Source: Own research, 2013

It can clearly be seen that general vocabulary is the least useful in the business sphere. Instead, there is a serious demand for business, technical and other professional vocabulary (and courses that teach it). From this perspective, the position of the College of Szolnok is especially good, as it teaches professional business language.

We also examined the importance of the knowledge of different languages in the companies' business life according to counties with the help of a six level Likert scale. The extremes had the following meaning: 1-not important at all, 6-very important. The grouping of opinions in different counties was done on the basis of the subjective judgement of employers. Detailed results can be seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3: The average value of the importance of different languages according to counties

Language/ County	English	German	French	Italian	Russian	Spanish	Chinese	others
JNSz	4,61	6,80	1,55	1,83	1,57	1,27	1,19	1,76
Békés	5,22	4,56	2,75	2,38	2,67	1,38	1,38	1,43
Csongrád	5,25	2,50	1,50	1,50	1,50	1,50	1,50	2,00
Hajdú-Bihar	4,63	3,75	2,75	1,63	2,13	1,86	2,25	2,00
Szabolcs	6,00	5,00	5,00	2,00	2,00	2,00	2,00	2,00
Bács-Kiskun	5,50	6,00	2,33	2,67	3,50	1,67	1,00	2,75
Pest	5,59	3,82	2,35	2,19	2,32	1,92	1,37	2,03
others	5,60	4,60	2,14	2,14	2,64	1,93	1,71	1,64
average value	5,20	4,02	2,24	2,08	2,26	1,73	1,45	1,96

Source: Own research, 2013

In the course of the examination of the average values in the table above, one has to take into account that for some counties (Csongrád, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Bács-Kiskun) the number of companies that gave answers was very low compared to the other counties; here the average values are based on the opinion of only very few companies. For these counties, chances are higher for extreme values which should not lead us to far-reaching conclusions. To rule this out, we undertook a statistical examination of a higher order (Cramer-type measure of association), on the basis of which we can state that there is only a weak connection between the county of the company answering and the language(s) that the company considered most important for its operations ($C=0.23 - 0.321$). In other words, independently from counties the companies named two languages as dominant (English, German). This confirms the earlier determination of the dominant languages.

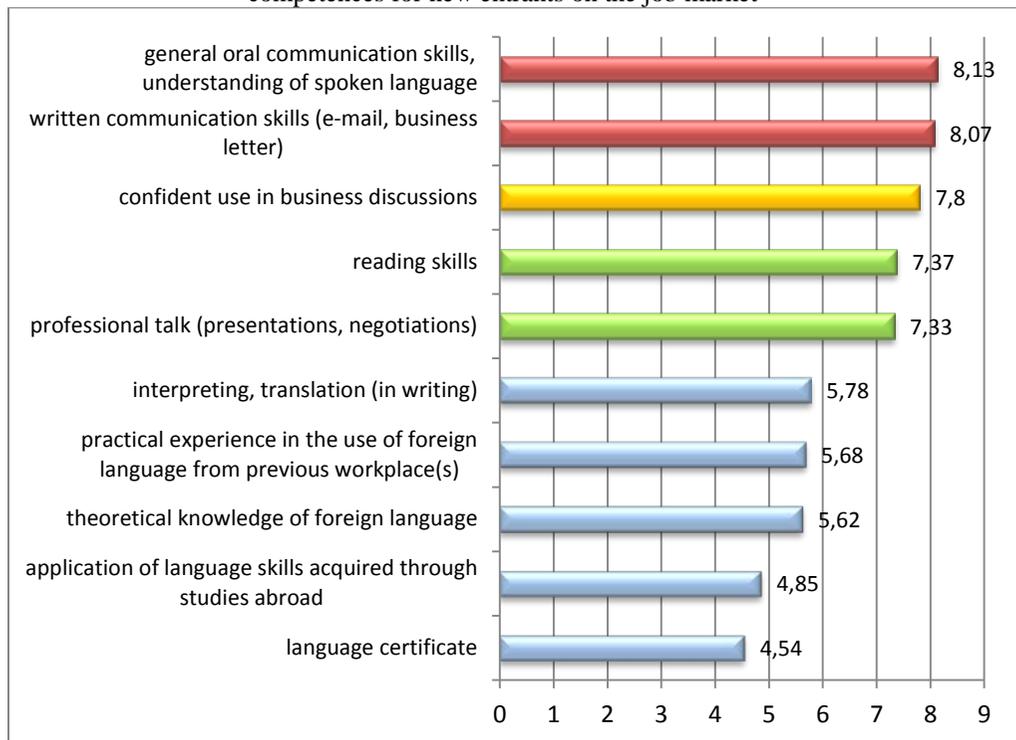
▪ **The ranking of foreign language competences according to employers**

Employers are able to express their expectations as precisely as possible. They are clearly able to express which competences new entrants on the job market (young people starting out on their career) must have in

their field of business, and which of those competences are important and which ones can be delegated to the background. From the perspective of developing marketable and competitive language courses these precisely expressed needs must be taken into account by the College of Szolnok.

Potential employers were asked to rate the different language competences in the life of their company with the help of a ten level Likert scale, whose extremes had the following meaning: 1-competence is not important at all, 10-the competence is very important. After taking the average for the different ratings given in the answers, we can present a ranking on the relative importance of the different competences. Detailed results can be found in Graph 8 below.

Graph 8: Ranking of the average values for the relative importance of different language competences for new entrants on the job market



Source: Own research, 2013

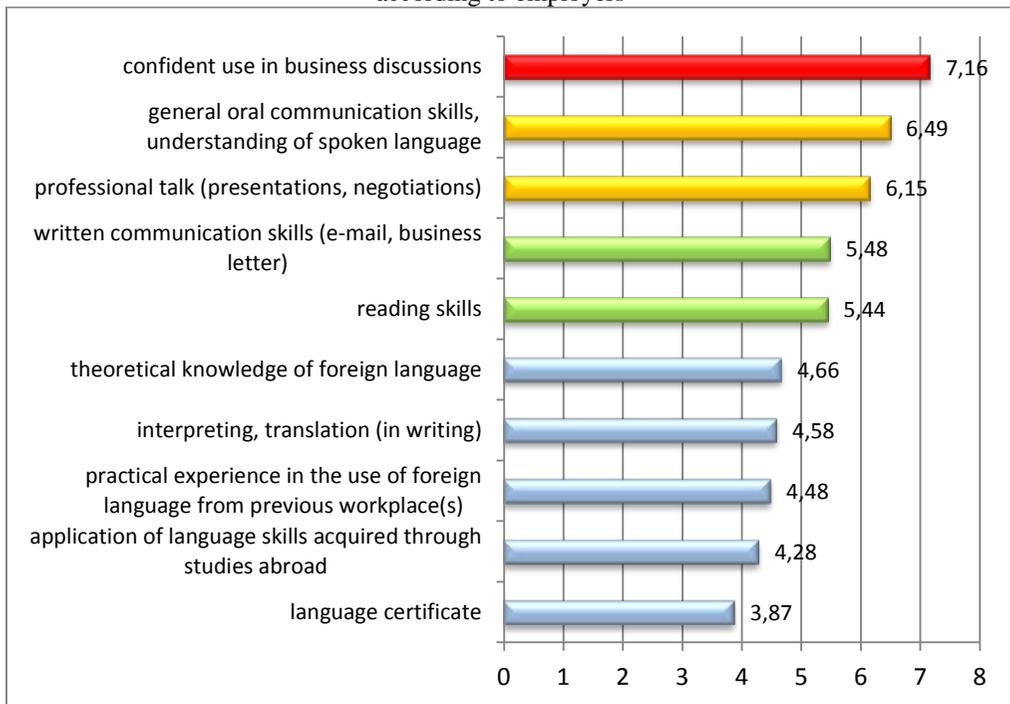
In Graph 8 above we marked those skills in red that are especially important for new entrants on the job market according to employers. In our opinion, these expectations are not too excessive, as oral communication skills and the potential employee's ability to understand what he listens to are the most important ones.

Apart from those, it is also very important that they are able to communicate in written form, and are able to write e-mails or business letters

in a foreign language. Beyond that we marked those factors in yellow and green that were also considered important, but not extremely so, for example preparing presentations and being able to negotiate in a foreign language. These skills tend to make up a competitive advantage, as during the application and job interview process they might tip the scale in favour of the potential employee who possesses them.

The reasonableness of the demands is illustrated by the fact that studies abroad, interpreting and language certificates, as documented "on paper", are not considered as important factors. As far as course content is concerned, we have to highlight that theoretical/professional knowledge in a foreign language is seen as less relevant by employers. For them it is much more vital that the new entrant on the job market is able to speak fluently and confidently and is able to write in a foreign language, even if the writing includes some grammatical errors. Restructuring language courses according to this observation is especially important. Employers were able to mention numerous competences which need to be rectified with new entrants on the job market in the field of foreign languages. Graph 9 shows those foreign language competencies they are apt to miss most when employing newly graduated staff.

Graph 9: Ranking of the language competences missed with new entrants on the job market according to employers



Source: Own research, 2013

Potential employers rated language competences missed with the help of a ten level Likert scale, whose extremes had the following meaning: 1- competence is not missing, 10- competence is very much missing.

After taking the average for the different ratings given in the answers, we can establish the skills that are missing most with newly graduated entrants on the job market according to employers:

- confident use of a foreign language,
- general communication skills, understanding of spoken communication, professional conversation skills,
- competence in writing (ability to write e-mails and business letters),
- ability to read written texts.

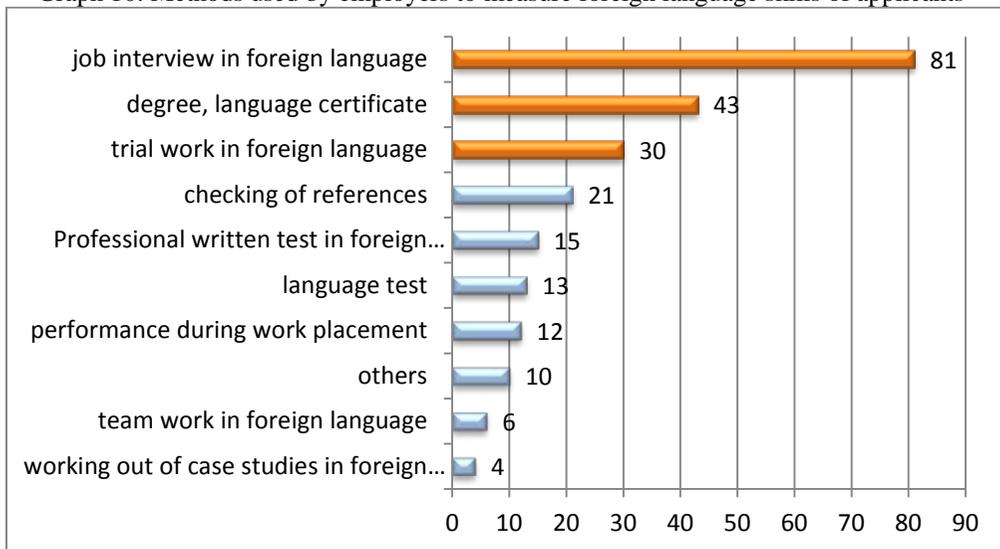
The deficiencies listed here are in accord with the elements in Graph 8 discussed above therefore the answers have to be considered consistent. The task and responsibility of the College of Szolnok is to improve certain skills during their courses according to the answers given; those skills that are considered less important by employers can be relegated to the background, as others (the important expectations) take prominence. The implementation of this might be a guarantee of successful job search on the labour market.

▪ **Preparing for challenges – Recruitment procedures and demand for training**

In the light of what we described in detail above, all institutions of higher education, including the College of Szolnok, have to strive for preparing their students to be able to fulfil those serious expectations. On the one hand, this is a responsibility of the institution of higher education; on the other hand, one should neither forget the responsibility of the students to recognise the fact that the job market will not only put their professional knowledge to the test, but their foreign language skills as well.

Employers typically apply several methods to measure the foreign language skills of applicants in order to choose those with the highest proficiency. Graph 10 below gives an overview of the frequency and importance of the methods used in the course of the recruitment and selection process.

Graph 10: Methods used by employers to measure foreign language skills of applicants



Source: Own research, 2013

Through intensive application and practice of methods skills can be acquired and routine can be gained through which the anxiety that is generated in the course of a job interview by the unfamiliar situation can be overcome. Thus, the results of newly graduated entrants on the job market can be improved. The methods applied during the recruitment process should become part of the learning process, where instead of focussing on static test exercises (which often only meet the demands of language examinations and are remote from real life) emphasis should be placed on everyday needs in order to improve language proficiency.

Apart from this, the fact that generally employers are not satisfied with the language skills of existing and newly recruited employees might indicate a market for the College of Szolnok and its Department of Foreign Languages that should not be neglected. Language courses as a marketable service might present a market opportunity and potential revenue. Companies do not necessarily expect specialized language knowledge, but rather the stabilization of existing foreign language skills, in the course of which the language skills of the companies' new or existing employees can be improved.

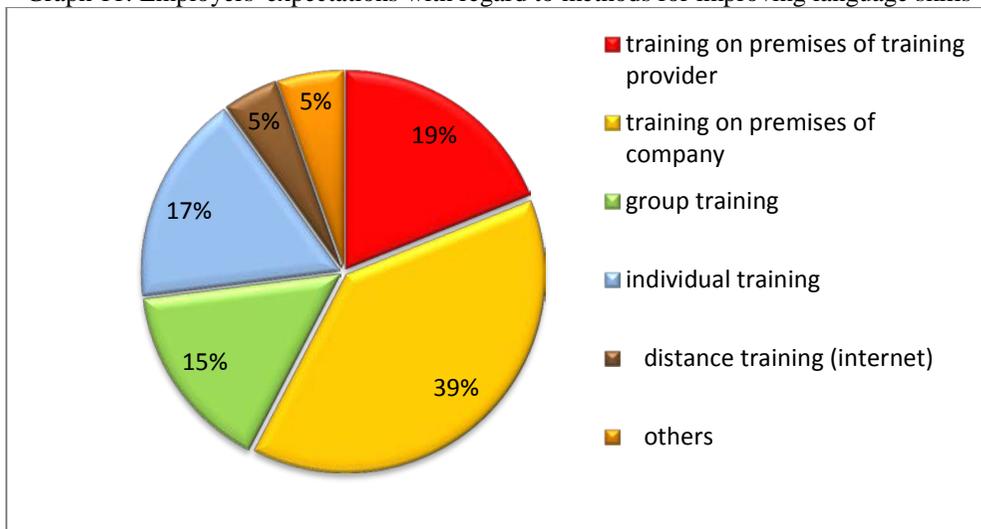
In our opinion, this presents only a partial solution. We believe the commercial exploitation of language courses is an unexploited opportunity. Time of classes, place of teaching, levels of teaching, group sizes, etc. should reflect the needs of the company requesting the course to the highest degree. On the other hand, it is clear that it is not the task of language teachers to market the courses. Sales is a trade which is successful only if it is done in a

professional way. The basic activity is language teaching, the sales activity hat to be assigned to a team for whose members sales is a profession and their principal activity. Casually, a market cannot be gained.

This service might present a source of revenue for the College of Szolnok as well as for the teachers involved in the courses. The current study only draws attention to this opportunity; to work out the particular details of the courses, the calculation of the attainable revenue to be expected was not part of our research, but the potential opportunity seems to be a given.

Employers also expressed several expectations in connection with the improvement of their current workforce, which can be seen in Graph 11 below. The graph clearly shows that from the point of view of the companies the most preferable venue for training is on the company premises (39%), to which group training is the most likely method of teaching. Most likely for members of senior management personal lessons would be the desired course form. Apart from this, it should not be neglected that for some companies a solution would also be acceptable that is preferable to the College of Szolnok, i.e. to have employees take part in language courses on the premises of the college.

Graph 11: Employers' expectations with regard to methods for improving language skills



Source: Own research, 2013

▪ SUMMARY

In the course of our study we reached numerous conclusions, which we now try to present to the reader summarised in the points listed below:

- The traditional methods of language learning and teaching must not be ignored, as opinions differ with regard to the question which of the applied tools is the most effective. The stronger inclusion of IT devices in classes seems to be expedient. For today's youth solving tasks at a

computer seems to be easier and more interesting than traditional tasks on paper and listening to exercises played from CDs. The focus should lie on the preparation of tasks and papers that can be solved on computer, where the solutions can be shown on the screen, etc. The preparation of these kinds of tasks most likely has to involve IT staff.

- Although the possibilities for the college are limited, the inclusion of general and professional newspapers and magazines in foreign languages must not be ignored. Students cannot be obliged to buy copies, apart from the fact that they might be impossible to get in Szolnok, but having one copy at the Department of Foreign Languages and working with photocopies might present a compromise.
- The majority of language classes should be held in classrooms that have access to the Internet. Sites that improve general and even specific professional foreign language skills can be very useful for teaching.
- Tasks that include the use of computers might be conducive to the improvement of language competences. In addition to written and oral exercises tasks that have to be done on a computer and have to be sent in by e-mail might improve students' interest in the tasks. That means that language teaching should more extensively take into account the devices that students prefer; above all, the possibilities given by computers and the Internet should be used to serve language teaching. Compared to traditional teaching methods, this means a lot of extra work, but it could lead to better results.
- The majority of companies seem to be willing to support the improvement of their employees' language skills financially. The opportunities implied in this for the college should be scrutinized in further research. After the development of syllabi for short and longer courses offers can be made to employees in different sectors and positions.
- As a service for the SME sector, studies can be offered that help the start of operations of companies abroad. Those studies about specific countries should be prepared by using international information and media. In practice, these so-called country studies could be prepared for enterprises in different sectors about all those countries whose languages and culture languages the teachers know.