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Cherednichenko G., PhD.

*National University of Food Technologies, Kyiv*

## THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE SKILLS WITHIN EUROPE

Learning a foreign language is an enriching experience. It encompasses much more than grammar and conversation exercises from textbooks. Not only is language a communication system, it is also a cultural code which transports complex information about cultural norms, values, traditions and rules of conduct. Foreign language competencies therefore enable deeper insights into other cultures and lifestyles.

They broaden horizons, promote intercultural communication and help to overcome personal and national barriers. In the age of globalisation and internationalisation of political, social and economic relations, it becomes increasingly important to speak several languages fluently.

Language skills provide the basis from which an understanding and appreciation of different cultures can grow. Over the last twenty years, this has led to a great deal of change in the way languages are taught. Instead of simply being institutions which teach vocabulary and grammar, many schools and training centres have developed courses which emphasise the development of cultural knowledge. However, there is still a great deal of work to be done in order to develop an awareness of the necessity for pluri-lingual education across the member states. This necessity is recognised by the Council of Europe which from 2002, through its Language Policy Division, has produced some important suggestions guidelines for improving language learning.

In our modern and globally interconnected world, the importance of multi-lingual skills in industry, trade and politics is obvious. There is a growing need for multilingual and culturally competent employees to be capable of handling work-related situations in and with foreign countries. Therefore, an increasing number of companies with customers or suppliers abroad require staff who speak at least one foreign language.

Being aware of these facts many companies in the fields of trade and commerce nowadays conduct their entire communication in English, even if none of the workers possess any foreign language skills. Examples of German companies who have run such trials have shown excellent results, especially companies that work closely together with global partners, whose headquarters are based in another country, or who are parent companies of international subsidiaries. These companies began by conducting company meetings solely in English and then extended this approach to further business activities. Such action helped international business contact, by providing standard words for the vocational field so that projects and procedures could be explained in a clear and straight forward manner.

The companies also found that the focus on speaking English had a positive impact on the workers' ability to express themselves at international conferences,

during telephone conversations and other communication related activities. However, it should be noted that many staff do not appreciate these innovations. Some of the opponents feel that it is a sign of low self-esteem for a company to neglect its own language. There is also an unease that it leads to that exalted position of English as «lingua franca» which the European Council would like to counteract.

Today’s educational systems must meet these needs, especially as the tendency for industrial global networking is increasing. A team of well-trained foreign language speakers greatly increases the value of a company.

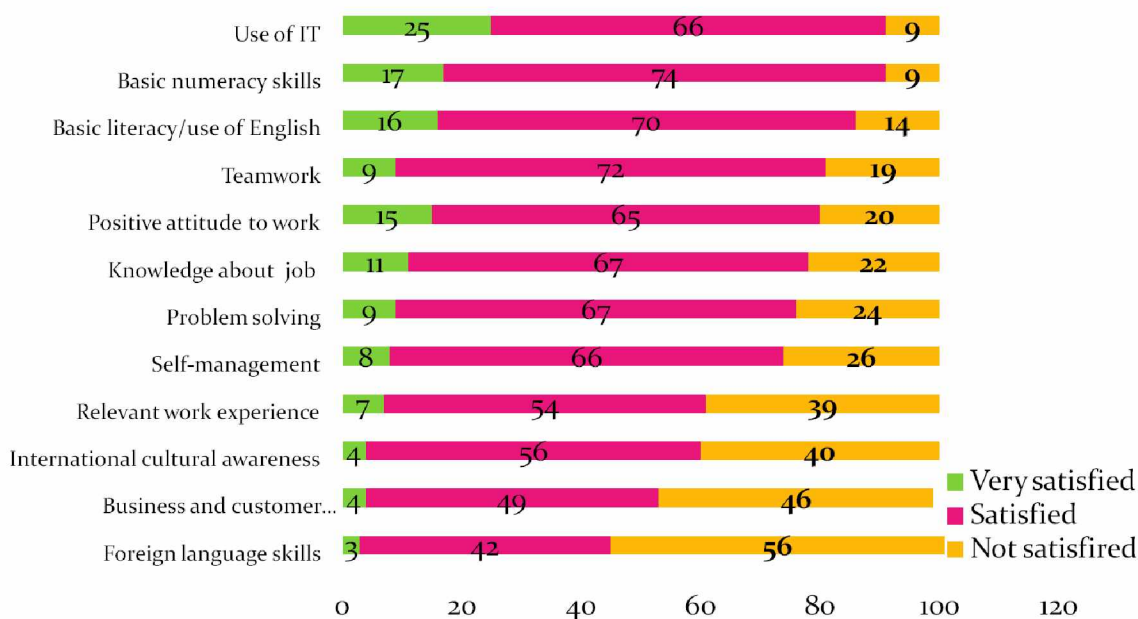
According to a study of the University of Manchester, the attributes that come along with proficient language skills are, amongst other things:

- communicative skills (effective team work ability, supporting and motivating ability)
  - self-management skills (time management, self-reliability etc.)
  - interpersonal skills (leadership, awareness of cultural diversity)
  - intellectual or cognitive skills (ability to think under pressure, critical judgement skills, organising ideas appropriately, general knowledge of subject related topics)
- practical and applied skills (using reference material, library research, self-aware independent learning)[2]

These varied skills are highly appreciated in globally operating companies. The same study found that «language graduates ‘have the highest employability rates of all humanities graduates’ .

Language learning greatly enhances general communication skills. And, according to a UK survey, it is communication skills which are most commonly sought by employers[3].

The following graph shows the percentage of how UK employers rate their employees’ skills:



The importance of a direct and accurate understanding of another language, without the intervention of a translator is obvious. There will always remain a gap of understanding between an original version of an idea and the same idea conveyed through an interpreter. Moreover, the more translation bridges a presentation has to cross, the more boring it becomes and the less clear the message. So, emphasis will increasingly be placed upon enhancing the multi linguistic skills of a company's personnel and away from hiring translators for specific business activities.

International markets demand multilingual communication strategies which often have to be tailor-made to the requirements of a company. The target must be to reach clients as efficiently and effectively as possible. The ability to communicate and understand the intercultural nuances of your business partners', is not only an advantage, but almost a prerequisite for good international sales representatives as well as for administrative staff. Although low skilled workers do not explicitly need language skills for their jobs, they sometimes face situations in which the knowledge of a certain language can be very helpful, e.g. when they come across manuals, handbooks, descriptions and procedure instructions which have not been translated into their own language.

### References

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