PARALLEL TEACHING AND EVALUATION OF EMPLOYABILITY AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPETENCIES IN TECHNICAL LANGUAGE TRAINING

ZITA HAJDU[1] –ILDIKÓ TAR[2] – TÍMEA LÁZÁR[3]– JÁNOS FARKAS[4]– MÁRIA CZELLÉR[5]

Abstract

An increasingly important expectation of today's labour market is the group of employability skills. That is the reason why the Institute of Business Communication and Professional Language Studies at Debrecen University found it essential to introduce the development of these highly demanded competences in the curriculum of the technical language courses. The paper describes how workplace skills and foreign language competencies can be compiled in one curriculum with particular emphasis on the application of IT skills in foreign language courses. Since a major task of universities is to prepare students for the tasks of assessment centres and other stages of the selection process, the testing of non-cognitive skills should also be integrated into the teaching material. The expected results of the program include: achieving a higher level of professional language and soft skills, increased student confidence in workplace situations and improved general communication skills.

Keywords: employability skills, foreign language competencies, skill assessment, curriculum

Introduction

What are employability skills?

In summary, these are competencies that are not related to a specific job but help employment. Competencies belonging to one sector or occupation are called sector-specific, occupation-specific or job-specific skills, whereas skills related to a broad range of sectors and occupations are referred to as transversal skills (European Commission 2018). Several terms and adjectives are used to describe them: universal, transversal, non-domain, generic, core, basic, personal, interpersonal, social, non-cognitive, non-technical, non-specific, workplace skills, people skills or life skills. The most frequently used phrase is soft skills; however, the authors of this study prefer talking about employability skills as the most important goal of higher education courses is to equip the students with competencies needed in the labour market.

---

[1] lecturer, UD, Faculty of Economics and Business, Institute of Business Communication and Professional Language Studies

[2] associate professor, UD, Faculty of Economics and Business, Institute of Business Communication and Professional Language Studies

[3] language teacher, UD, Faculty of Economics and Business, Institute of Business Communication and Professional Language Studies

[4] language teacher, UD, Faculty of Economics and Business, Institute of Business Communication and Professional Language Studies

[5] associate professor, UD, Faculty of Economics and Business, Institute of Business Communication and Professional Language Studies

According to the McKinsey Global Institution (Avrane-Chopard et al 2019) soft skills, commonly defined as non-technical skills, enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with others. These skills are essential for organisations; they can impact culture, mindsets, leadership, attitudes and behaviours. They can be classified into the following groups:

- advanced communication and negotiation skills
- interpersonal skills and empathy
- leadership and management skills
- entrepreneurship and initiative-taking
- adaptability and continuous learning skills
- teaching and training skills

When discussing the importance of personality in economic and social life, the economists Heckman and Kautz (2012) allege that – apart from the measurable factors such as school grades and IQ – success in life depends on many personality traits that predict and *cause* outcomes. Soft skills include personality traits, goals, motivations and preferences appreciated in the labour market and other life areas.

The importance of employability skills in the labour market and higher education

Transforming the training of higher education institutions towards a more practice-oriented approach demanded by the labour market is a crucial point for all universities. One of the most determining phenomena in the current labour market is the increasing need for soft skills. New technologies enhance the importance of skills and tasks for which no substitute exists. Machines are generally much better at performing routine tasks of explicit rules. However, people are still much better at tasks that require flexibility, creativity and judgment (Autor 2015). Based on a 2021 investigation of the McKinsey Global Institution, companies started to put more emphasis on skill building after the pandemic as remote work demanded a higher level of digital competencies and revealed further skill gaps. Areas of soft skills where enterprises experience a need for reskilling are leadership and management, critical thinking and decision-making, project management, adaptability and continuous learning, basic digital skills, interpersonal skills and empathy, and complex information processing and interpretation (Billing et al 2021).

Due to several reasons, cognitive or hard skills started to lose value in the job market after the year 2000, and this tendency has also shown its impact on wages (Castex-Dechter 2014). In addition to qualifications and experience, organisations expect graduates to have other competencies today. As a result, the importance of soft skills has increased since these competencies are not fixed to a specific job but can be used and transferred between several sectors of employment or even jobs. Employers value employees with the right competencies and personality traits to contribute to the organisation's success through productivity (Tang 2019).

If universities wish to stay competitive, they need to include both hard and soft skills in their training programs so that they can be developed simultaneously, as it is widely done at companies where a lot of training programs aim to develop and improve both groups of skills together to increase workers' productivity (Balcar 2014). To conclude, it can be stated that ongoing communication between educational institutions and employers has become vital.

Goals of the study

The primary aim of our study is to present good practice at the University of Debrecen's Faculty of Business and Economics and to show how the employability skills required by the labour market can be integrated in the Faculty's business language courses. As they are becoming increasingly important in the labour market, employers are seeking to screen candidates in this respect. Thus our additional goal was to include the selection process assessment of soft skills in the training programs.

Our study aims to answer the following research questions: How can the developing of soft skills be combined with the acquisition of business language competencies and language functions? How can students be prepared for the soft skills assessment part of the selection process? In particular, the content part of the language courses needs to be fine-tuned so that students can develop their interpersonal, communication and foreign language skills through teamwork alongside a broad knowledge base. Active learning, a core element in the program, means a simulation or game approach, where students learn to think responsibly, use the acquired knowledge and skills appropriately and correctly, and thus develop the expected approach placed in a broader professional and social context. Since in today's job market many business graduates find a job where the tasks are specific to the given organisation, and therefore the employers will provide specialised, in-house trainings, universal, non-domain competencies and personality traits have gained importance in the application process and in the students' future career.

Integrating workplace skills into the curriculum of vocational language courses

While organisations develop soft skills primarily through experience, fieldwork and field training or team-building events, educational institutions can only rely on simulating work-related tasks and events. In order to develop language and work skills parallel, we integrate content, tasks and projects into the business language courses which introduce prospective employees to the world of work through workplace situations, give them linguistic and situational confidence, and develop technical and technological skills, thus providing an opportunity for experiential learning.

Parallel development of employability and foreign language skills

Designing a curriculum

When designing the course aiming at concurrently developing workplace and foreign language skills, the primary goal was to assist students' employability. Therefore the world of work themes, contents, situations and tasks form the skeleton of the program, but the focus is on skills development. Studying and developing practical competencies directly applicable to their future careers will hopefully enhance students' self-esteem and provide calmness for their later assessment-centre assignments. Effective use of the language in real-life situations also justifies how much language proficiency is intertwined with professional success. Students can see the direct connection between the curriculum and the labour market demands in their field of study, which motivates them to engage more actively in their studies.

Table 1. shows the soft skills, language functions and foreign language competencies to be developed in the framework of business themes.

Table 1. Teaching employability and foreign language skills simultaneously through business themes

Business theme	Language functions and skills	Employability skills
Job search	• vocabulary building • reading comprehension	• self-awareness • planning • research • (self-)critical thinking
Job application (CV, Interview)	• sentence structure • writing skills • asking politely • pronunciation	• convincing speech/writing style • clear speech • reflection • negotiating skills
The first days in a new job	• accurate speech and text comprehension • polite questions/requests • asking for permission • asking for clarification	• ability to pay attention • adaptability • intercultural sensitivity and awareness
Multicultural work environment	• differences between high and low-context languages • ways of keeping or altering reality • short or long ways of expressing thoughts • degrees of directness • small talk • asking and requesting • the language of numbers and measurement	• adaptability • intercultural sensitivity and awareness • openness • empathy • respect • tolerance • diverse non-verbal communication tools • areas of intercultural conflict and taboos
Meetings	• clear speech • introducing and changing subject • stating and asking for opinion • expressing (partial) agreement and disagreement politely • polite interruptions	• active listening • effective speaking • problem-solving • flexibility • punctuality • time management • body language

	• polite handling of interruptions • asking politely • asking for clarification or paraphrasing • explaining/interpreting • suggesting • being concise • listening comprehension	
Telephoning and working online	• listening comprehension • clear and concise speaking • asking for clarification	• degree of politeness • patience • IT skills
Project management	• all the above-mentioned language skills and functions • saying what needs to be done • asking someone to do something • expressing disappointment • expressing and asking about preferences and compromise • giving permission • refusing to do something • threatening • encouraging	• leadership • planning • organising • time management • decision-making • motivation • problem-solving • handling conflicts • cooperation • teamwork • presentation skills

Source: Authors' compilation

Studying professional language competencies and soft skills parallel is mutually beneficial as this way the would-be employees develop the capacity to analyse business situations, evaluate alternatives, and propose practical solutions by engaging in case studies, discussions and simulations in the given foreign language. Recruitment experts highly seek these competencies as they contribute to innovation, adaptability and productivity within the workplace, as demonstrated by the example below.

Example task for the parallel development of employment and language skills

You are working in a call centre for a major UK telecommunications company. You have received a call from a customer who is waiting for an engineer who failed to arrive within the scheduled time slot. The customer is upset and is talking in a raised

voice. Out of the following options, indicate which would be the most effective action to take first of all:

1) Apologise to the customer and say you will arrange a rescheduled appointment.
2) Listen to the customer's feedback and tell them that you can understand why they are upset and that it must be convenient for them.
3) Explain that the engineer has a very busy schedule and it's difficult for her to always be on time, but you're sure she will arrive soon.
4) Ask the customer to hold while you contact the engineer to establish where she is.

Simulating job-related situations gives students an insight into the world of work. With undergraduate students, it is advisable to analyse the answers from the aspect of effectiveness and what it would tell an employer about the candidate's skills and potential in a call center job. The most effective answer is the last one as it directly takes control of the situation, and by calling the engineer, the call centre worker will receive the necessary information to make a well-found decision. After contacting the engineer, the call center employee will know whether he should reschedule the appointment, or it will not be needed. Although customers do not like being put on hold, it is the only way to solve the issue (Internet 1).

Out of the major soft skills, the situation above primarily checks active listening, decision-making, problem-solving and effective communication. Regarding the foreign language functions, the situation allows for the practice of the following skills and functions: listening or reading comprehension, checking that you have understood something, apologising, asking for information, showing interest, talking about what might happen, asking about preferences, offering to do something for someone and summing up information.

In the course of combined development of employability and language skills, instructors are expected to encourage student engagement, which significantly impacts their performance, motivation, and the development of various competencies. In our case, involvement refers to the amount of time and energy a student invests in his studies or a specific task.

Using IT skills in professional language teaching

Benefits of applying digital tools in education

Education, especially academic education, is an expanding sector where best practices are sought to ensure operational sustainability. SSC (shared service centres) are increasingly common for education networks, and this concept is applied with technology support (Internet 2). Incorporating IT skills into professional language teaching offers numerous benefits for learners in today's digital age. Integrating IT skills enhances learners' digital literacy and enables them to navigate and utilise various digital tools and platforms relevant to their specific fields. This proficiency is essential for success in modern workplaces relying heavily on technology. IT skills in professional language teaching facilitate authentic and interactive learning experiences. Learners can engage with real-world tasks and projects that require IT tools, such as creating presentations, conducting online research, or collaborating on shared documents, e.g., Google classroom.

This practical application of language skills enhances learner engagement and motivation. These skills expand learners' access to vast resources and learning

opportunities. Through technology, they can explore authentic materials, access industry-specific websites, participate in online communities, and engage in virtual simulations or role-plays that simulate professional contexts. This exposure lets learners stay updated with industry trends, deepen their knowledge, and develop a broader understanding of their professional field.

Furthermore, IT skills promote effective communication and collaboration among learners. Online platforms and communication tools facilitate asynchronous and synchronous interactions, allowing learners to connect, discuss and collaborate with peers from different locations, for example, Kahoot, Zoom, Quizlet, and Zoom. This virtual collaboration improves language skills and fosters cross-cultural understanding and teamwork.

IT skills in professional language teaching also encourage learners to develop critical thinking and problem-solving, for instance, Google Forms, and Flipgrid. Using technology, they can analyse and evaluate information, think creatively, and propose innovative solutions. These skills are essential for addressing real-world challenges and adapting to the rapidly changing demands of the workplace.

Additionally, incorporating IT skills in professional language teaching prepares learners for the digital demands of their future careers. They gain familiarity with industry-specific software, data analysis tools, project management platforms or specialised applications relevant to their field, e.g., creating and managing Excel tables. This technological competence enhances their employability and positions them as competent professionals in the digital workplace.

Furthermore, IT skills foster our students' autonomy and self-directed learning. Learners can leverage online resources such as ProZ.com term search, language learning apps like Quizlet and multimedia materials to practice and reinforce their language skills independently. It empowers them to take ownership of their learning process and tailor it to their needs and goals.

Moreover, IT skills facilitate assessment and feedback processes. Technology-enabled assessments, such as online quizzes, interactive exercises or multimedia presentations, provide immediate feedback to learners and enable teachers to monitor progress effectively. This real-time feedback promotes learner reflection, self-assessment and continuous improvement.

Lastly, integrating IT skills in professional language teaching prepares learners for lifelong learning and professional development. By familiarising themselves with technology and its applications in their field, learners develop a mindset of adaptability and openness to acquiring new IT skills throughout their careers.

In conclusion, IT skills in professional language teaching provide learners with essential digital competencies, enhance their learning experiences, and prepare them for modern workplace demands. They empower learners to communicate effectively, collaborate, problem-solve, and navigate the digital landscape, equipping them with the necessary skills.

Advancing digital competencies in technical language courses

Digital tools help young generations acquire knowledge, express themselves to others, fulfil their need to belong to a group, give and receive information, and discover new things, primarily through visual experiences. University students can be accessed most quickly and easily through digital devices, and the constant advances in technology (e.g., smartphones, laptops, tablets, PCs and other devices,

features and apps) are amplifying and accelerating this process. Consequently, language teachers should be adept at using technology in their classrooms. They should be familiar with relevant educational technology tools, online learning platforms, multimedia resources and digital assessment methods.

This chapter of the present study presents, without claiming to be exhaustive, online tools and applications from the everyday practice of the Institute of Business Communication and Professional Language Studies at the University of Debrecen, which are available to everyone, and which significantly facilitate the learning process. These tools and applications help students improve their memory techniques, vocabulary, grammar, written communication proficiency, etc. enjoyably: 1. Quizlet 2. Online vocabulary 3. Creation of a mini online project in the language class. These programs and methods help to practice the use of IT tools and applications, as well as the foreign language learning process, interactively. Below, the paper highlights our Institute's most often used professional language skills acquisition methods.

Self-use dictionaries are beneficial tools for students to enhance their IT skills actively. These dictionaries are particularly helpful when students can access online resources that provide professional information and specialised vocabulary essential for their future work. These resources can be found in bilingual or multilingual collections of terms for professionals and in various professional forums. Our language courses will introduce several vital online dictionaries and translation forums to support language learning: Glosbe, Linguee, Hunglish Korpusz, Kudoz terminology search, and the EUR-LEX multilingual search database for advanced-level translation groups or students.

In our instructional approach, we familiarise students with the necessary competencies, basic operations and practical strategies for utilising online dictionaries. Students are encouraged to develop and hone their skills for online dictionary use, which they then practice in the language lessons and assignments. For instance, in the case of tourism students, we assign them the task of creating a bilingual glossary containing terms commonly used on an aircraft, e.g., leg space, in-flight meal, overhead locker, etc. This task can be completed individually or in groups, and the resulting glossary is shared with the class through the e-learning system.

By engaging in these activities, students enhance their professional language skills by building vocabulary and also develop technical competencies in using search engines and navigating e-learning platforms. This approach fosters the development of ICT skills among group members, equipping them with essential professional knowledge. Additionally, the collaborative nature of language learning allows for the effective cultivation of hard and soft skills, such as teamwork and knowledge sharing.

Enhancing written communication using ICT tools is crucial for meeting the demands of the modern workplace. It involves utilising software such as Microsoft Word and Excel, and mastering the art of composing professional emails, American-style CVs, cover letters, reports and memoranda that are expected in any work setting. Additionally, it encompasses utilising electronic tools that align with intercultural and intercommunication needs, along with engaging in internet-based project work and presentations. The objective of language lessons is to acquaint students with different types, lengths, styles and formats of written work, emphasising the importance of quality and the evaluation criteria used to assess it.

Concurrent evaluation of soft skills and language functions

An outstandingly important task of foreign language teaching in higher education is preparing students for the selection process's assessment parts. Organisations' recruitment and assessment staff test hard skills through CVs, job-related assignments or role-specific interview questions. Soft skills are checked with the help of:

- soft skills questions
- situational interview questions
- behavioural interview questions
- applicant's overall personality characteristics (Internet 3).

The latter includes the analysis of a candidate's character through the stages of the hiring process and is out of the scope of business language courses. Therefore, the current paper only describes the first three in details with relevance to the parallel evaluation of foreign language functions.

Soft skills questions

Human resources experts often ask questions that test one particular soft skill. For example, a candidate's decision-making skill can be examined with questions such as: What was the most challenging decision you have had to make? In a vocational language class, this question can also test the student's level in the following language functions: expressing being pleased or displeased, being sure, comparing, giving reasons, regretting something and telling what one should have done.

   Another typical question about customer service positions is: How can you calm upset customers? The answer provides insight into the candidate's adaptability, communication and problem-solving capabilities. At the same time, the response also reveals if the applicant possesses the language tools needed to express interest, show polite disagreement or partial agreement but avoid giving an opinion, reassure or calm someone, change his opinion, offer to do something for the customer and above all an employee at a call centre has to understand a client's complaint thus needs to have an advanced level of listening comprehension.

Situational interview questions

Situational interview questions test how candidates would react in work-related situations. Recruiters and hiring managers choose hypothetical situations that candidates have never experienced. Situational interview questions help human resources staff find out how candidates would handle a problem that is likely to occur in the given organisation. Skills that can be assessed using situational questions are:

- communication skills

- adaptability

- creativity

- handling conflict

- decision-making skills

- problem-solving skills (Can the candidate suggest effective solutions?)

- organisational/prioritising skills

- managerial or leadership skills

- collaboration skills

- stress management

These interview questions provide ideal grounds for checking the acquisition of the relevant language functions or grammar structures as well. When acted out as a business role-play, a higher number of language functions can be checked, assessed or corrected. Although evaluating and analysing students' soft skills is part of the study program, students' performance in employability competencies does not contribute to their exam and semester marks of professional language courses; these marks are entirely based on their achievement in the technical language competencies.

Table 2. An example for testing soft skills and language functions simultaneously with a situational interview question

Type of assessment question	Example	Tested soft skills	Tested language functions and grammar structures
Situational interview question	If you realise that you have organised two meetings at the same time, what would you do?	• prioritising • problem-solving • decision-making • organisational skills • collaboration skills	• apologising • suggesting • asking for permission • asking about preferences • asking for approval • asking if someone agrees • living reasons • conditional sentences

Source: Authors' compilation

Behavioural interview questions

University students are very often unfamiliar with these issues and questions as most of them have never worked. In this case, giving alternative responses is recommended. When faced with the question, "As a team leader, how would you tell one of your subordinates that he has been underperforming for months and has to leave the team?", most students need some alternatives to rely on. For instance: a) I would talk to him privately and explain that the group does not benefit much from his contribution, or b) I would send him an official email detailing the reasons, or c) I would ask my superior to arrange it. After choosing a solution, they can be asked to justify their answers. In the selection process, the answer gives information about the

candidate's independence, whether he is willing to undertake responsibility and confrontation, and how he handles conflict. Regarding language skills, the following can be checked: telling bad news politely, giving an opinion, asking for an opinion, saying you are disappointed, giving reasons and suggesting.

Conclusion

Integrating workplace skills fosters a holistic approach to education by preparing learners for the expectations of the modern workforce. It equips them with the necessary competencies, attitudes and approaches that employers seek in potential candidates. Instructors of business language in higher education institutions need to explore and exploit opportunities for providing up-to-date knowledge, and they should also integrate active learning into their technical language courses. To achieve this, it is worth rethinking and transforming their traditional teaching strategies and moving towards a skills-based teaching process.

Based on the feedback from the students of courses combining employability and foreign language competencies, we can state that their self-confidence and self-assurance have increased significantly and their oral and written communication skills have also improved. In addition, they showed a much greater willingness to accept the opinions of others and greater respect for their fellow students and other cultures. They became aware of the importance of workplace skills.

Naturally, content development and the exploration of new methods are ongoing. Finding and applying methods that are not only motivational and beneficial but also enjoyable or entertaining is a strong intention of the instructors. Playful activities creating a relaxed atmosphere and reducing language anxiety definitely contribute to efficiency and the acquisition of new information. In the next part of the project, we plan to consult local employers and incorporate their requirements and experience into the curriculum.

References

Autor D. H. (2015): "Why Are There Still So Many Jobs? The History and Future of Workplace Automation", *Journal of Economic Perspectives,* 29(3), pp. 3-30. https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.29.3.3

Avrane-Chopard J., Potter J. és Muhlmann D. (2019): How to Develop Soft Skills (McKinsey Global Institution)

Balcar J. (2014): Soft skills and their wage returns: Overview of empirical literature. Review of Economic Perspectives, 14(1), pp. 3-15. https://doi.org/10.2478/revecp-2014-0001

Billing F., De Smet A., Reich A. és Schaninger B. (2021): Building workforce skills at scale to thrive during—and after—the COVID-19 crisis, In: Seiler D. (ed): Mckinsey Global Surveys, 2021: A Year in Review. Mckinsey & Company. mckinsey-global-surveys-2021-a-year-in-review.pdf

Castex G. és Dechter E. (2014): "The Changing Roles of Education and Ability in Wage Determination," *Journal of Labor Economics,* 32(4), pp. 685-710. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2012.05.014.

European Commission (2018): European Skills, Competencies, Qualifiactions and Occupations (ESCO). European Commission. Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/european-skills-competences-qualifications-and-occupations?locale=en (Letöltés időpontja: 2023.05.23.)

Heckman J. J. és Kautz T. (2012): Hard evidence on soft skills. Labour Economics, 19(4), pp. 451-464. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2012.05.014

Tang K. N. (2019): Beyond Employability: Embedding Soft Skills in Higher Education. Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology-TOJET, 18(2), pp. 1-9.

Internet references

(Internet 1) https://www.assessmentday.co.uk/situational-judgement-test.htm (Letöltés időpontja: 2023.05.23.)

(Internet 2) https://ellevo.com/en/ssc-in-the-field-of-education-find-out-the-benefits-to-unify-activities-in-this-area/ (Letöltés időpontja: 2023.05.23.)

(Internet 3) https://resources.workable.com/hr-terms/hard-skills-vs-soft-skills (Letöltés időpontja: 2023.05.23.)

A FOGLALKOZTATHATÓSÁGI ÉS IDEGEN NYELVI KÉSZSÉGEK FEJLESZTÉSE ÉS ÉRTÉKELÉSE A SZAKNYELVI KÉPZÉSBEN

HAJDU ZITA – TAR ILDIKÓ – LÁZÁR TÍMEA – FARKAS JÁNOS – CZELLÉR MÁRIA

A munkaerőpiac egyre inkább elvárt követelménye a foglalkoztathatósági vagy más néven puha készségek megfelelő szintje. Ezek a munkahelyi kompetenciák nem tartoznak konkrét munkakörhöz, de különösen a gazdasági, üzleti élet területén váltak kiemelten fontossá. A Debreceni Egyetem Gazdaságtudományi Karának Gazdasági Kommunikációs és Szaknyelvi Intézete ezért tartotta elengedhetetlennek, hogy a szaknyelvi kurzusok tantervébe beépítse e kompetenciák fejlesztését. A dolgozat bemutatja, hogyan lehet a munkahelyi készségeket és az idegen nyelvi kompetenciákat egy tantervben integrálni, különös tekintettel az informatikai készségek alkalmazására az idegen nyelvi kurzusokon. Mivel az egyetemek egyik fő feladata a hallgatók álláskeresésének támogatása – ideértve a kiválasztási folyamat szimulációs feladatait és az interjú erre vonatkozó specifikus kérdéseit – az idegen nyelvi képzések tananyagának összeállításkor ezeket a munkaerőpiaci elvárásokat kiemelt szempontként kell kezelni. A programtól várt eredmények: a szakmai nyelvi és a puha készségek magasabb szintjének elérése, a hallgatók nagyobb magabiztossága munkahelyi helyzetekben és jobb általános kommunikációs készség.

Kulcsszavak: foglakoztathatósági készségek, idegen nyelvi kompetenciák, készségek értékelése, tananyag