FOREIGN LANGUAGE AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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Abstract. Learning a foreign language is not the aim for students of the bachelor's study programme *External Relations of Organisations*. English as a foreign language is integrated into the study process and has become a tool in acquiring professional competence. ESL standards, worked out at the Center of Applied Linguistics in Washington, DC, have been taken as a basis in achieving learning outcomes. Blended learning, which includes both traditional and non-traditional methods and means of learning a foreign language, has proved to be successful in reaching the main goals: business and life communication, work with different sources of information and its presentation, cross-cultural communication.

Key words: communicative competence, procedural language knowledge, foreign language as a tool, CAL ESL standards, blended learning

Methods of the research

1. Theoretical: analysis of scientific literature on philosophy, psychology, education and international experience;

2. Empirical: quaziexperiment, which includes:

participants pedagogical observation (monitoring); discussions; interviews with employers and graduates of the study programme – an opportunity to do a needs analysis; focus group discussions; reflection within the framework of portfolio method on the students' competence assessment; students' and their practice supervisors' questioning; Mann-Whitney U test; Cramer V coefficient.

Research base

All the students of the Latvia University of Agriculture 2nd level professional study programme *External Relations of Organisations* during the whole study period (96 students in 2005 and 72 students in 2009) and 88 their practice supervisors, 63 respondents – employers and 6 study programme graduates – young specialists.

Communicative Competence of the Head of External Relations Unit

The concept of communicative competence has a wide range of interpretation, therefore for the purpose of external relations needs an analysis of communicative competence concept in the

comprehension of linguists (Canale, Swain, 1980; Surigin, 2000; Kostomarov, 1999; Kunin, 1996 and others) and sociologists (Vaclavik, Bibin, 2000; Ezera, Graudina, Dreiberga, 2000; Edeirs, 1999 and others) has been done.

Linguists pay attention to language and speech aspects, as shown in Figure 1.

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                          │   competence    │
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              ┌────────────────────┴────────────────────┐
     ┌────────▼────────┐                        ┌────────▼────────┐
     │ Speech competence│                        │    Language     │
     │                 │                        │   competence    │
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    │Situations│ │Speaking│              │Morphology │ │       │ │Syntax │
    │ topics  │ │ skills │              └───────────┘ │       │ └───────┘
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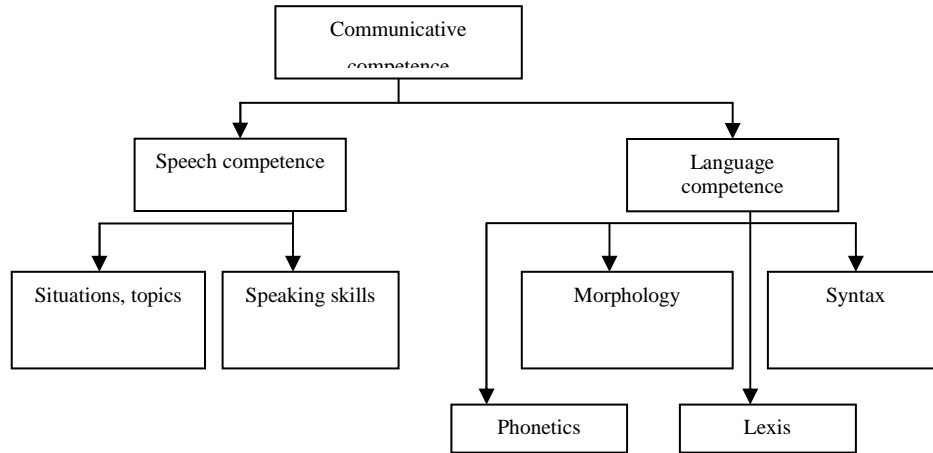
Figure 1. Communicative competence in the understanding of linguists (Surigin, 2000:69).

In the current research *the communicative competence of the head of external relations* is understood as one of five competencies which create professional competence. *Communicative competence* is one of the main managerial professional competence components (Boyatzis, 1982; Wood and Payne, 1998; Tuning Educational Structures…, 2002; Burganova, 2008 and others), as all the management functions are tightly connected with communication.

Because of the necessity to establish and maintain contacts, create and maintain partnership relations, to present the organization, which are the main external relations functions, a *language acquisition skill* becomes one of the *life-long learning skills* and an important component of *the head of external relations unit's communicative competence.* The use of foreign languages is a link and tool for successful and resultful study subjects' acquisition, development of different competences. Limited foreign languages skills impose restrictions in the work of business people; prevent Latvia from getting involved into international projects and activities, in the result of which the European and world markets have partly been missed out.

Expertinterview results show that all experts name communicative competence as the main competence of the head of external relations unit, with the help of which all the other manager's competences are synthesised and realised. As the most important reasons of non-successful communication Latvian employers name a language barrier and lack of information, business culture and etiquette.

However, the knowledge of foreign languages is not a guarantee for a high level of communicative competence, as *communicative competence* consists not only of *communication skills* (speaking, listening, reading, writing, non-verbal and foreign languages skills*)*, but also *the skills to accept and present information* (ICT use, presenting (oral and written) skills, performing*)*, which supplement informative competence, and vice versa.

The curriculum of the *External Relations of Organizations* study programme includes such study subjects as *Countries studies*, *Business communication*, *Business correspondence* (all together 15 subjects are taught in English), *Speech and writing culture*, *Business etiquette and communication* and others, in the study process of which the necessary communicative skills are developed.

Languages at the Study Programme *External Relations of Organisations*

The English language is widely used in 16 EU countries. According to Eurostat data, almost half of adult citizens in these countries (47 %) speak English. In comparison, only 34% of Latvia respondents can communicate in English (Svesvalodu izmantosana ES valstis un Latvija, 2005).

The results of both, expertinterviews and interviews with the graduates of the study programme *External Relations of Organisations*, show that language competency is one of the most important external relations specialist's competencies. In the process of language acquisition students develop their professional competence, as they develop all communication aspects: interpersonal, interpretive and presentational.

Not only methodological, but psychological factor as well influence the process of language learning with different groups of students. Generally speaking, nowadays people understand the necessity of knowing a foreign language. Nevertheless, the level of students' knowledge of English varies a lot.

According to the data of Latvia Ministry of Education and Science, "quite a big proportion of young people finish school with low, or very low key skills, especially in natural sciences and foreign languages. Eurostat data prove that Latvia has one of the lowest results in EU" (IZM, 2008:1).

English as a subject is not included in the curriculum of the study programme *External Relations of Organisations* at Latvia University of Agriculture, but it is widely used as a tool in the acquisition of the study programme. Because of the situation that the students' level of knowledge of English is different, *English Grammar* is a compulsory subject for the first two semesters.

Getting prepared for the seminars, students have to read a lot in English in practically all the subjects of the curriculum. K.Cho and S.Krashen in the USA (Cho and Krashen, 1994), F.Hafiz and I.Tudor in UK (Hafiz and Tudor, 1989), F.Lai in Hong Kong (Lai, 1993), as well as current research results prove that reading in a foreign language improves listening and speaking skills, in the result of which communicative competence is developed. In the study programme *External Relations of Organisations* languages are used as a means for the development of professional competence, and languages, especially the English language, acquisition is integrated into the study programme and shows the level of professional competence of external relations specialists.

Because of a comparatively very short period of time available for the third foreign language acquisition, searching for the best foreign language teaching style, different methods are used. Each approach is based on different concepts of languages learning and aids, the use of specific techniques. German for Specific Purposes, which is an obligatory subject, has 9 ECTS credits; but basics of French, Italian, Russian and Spanish are optional courses for 3 to 9 ECTS credits each. The question is if a student can choose a third language to learn, and if s/he chooses it, what level of language skills s/he will have. The question arises, as in total the curriculum allows not more than 9 ECTS credits in total for all optional courses.

There is not a single perfect method of language teaching, good for everyone. For the purposes of the study programme *External Relations of Organisations,* an integrated study system, the so-called *blended learning*, which combines different methods, is used. Students and teachers, both think that the system is contributory and motivating. ICT use helps the students acquire a foreign language at their own pace, independently from their groupmates. The results of this system usage are seen in the students' self-evaluation and in the employers' evaluation of the students' skills.

ESL standards (ESL, 2002), worked out at the Center of Applied Linguistics in Washington, DC have been used as most compatible with the Professional Standard for the head of external relations unit (Profesijas standarts, 2003). Thus, English is not taught as a study subject, it is a means for other subjects' content acquisition.

Table 1.

ESL Standards (ESL, 2002) in Comparison with the Head of External Relations' Professional Competence Criteria

Goals of ESL use	ESL Standards (ESL, 2002)	Fields of ESL use by students	ESL Standards eligibility to professional competence criteria
Goal 1: To use English to communicate in social settings, which corresponds with communicative and collaborative competences.	Standard 1	Social interactions	Collaboration competence
	Standard 2	Interaction in, through, and with spoken and written English for personal expression and enjoyment	Collaboration and communicative competences
	Standard 3	Use of learning strategies to extend communicative competence	Communicative, informative and learning competences
Goal 2: To use English to achieve academically in all content areas, which corresponds with communicative, skills to put knowledge into practice and communicative competence.	Standard 1	Interaction in the classroom	Collaboration competence
	Standard 2	Obtaining, processing, constructing, and providing subject matter information in spoken and written form	Requirements coincide with informative competence life-long learning skills
	Standard 3	Use of appropriate learning strategies to construct and apply academic knowledge	Learning and self-management competences, which include self-assessment, self-reflection, self-confidence and self-discipline
Goal 3: To use English in socially and culturally appropriate ways. In Professional Standards these are collaboration and communicative competences	Standard 1	Use of appropriate language variety, register, and genre according to audience, purpose, and setting	Collaboration and communicative competences
	Standard 2	Use of nonverbal communication appropriate to audience, purpose, and setting	Collaboration and communicative competences
	Standard 3	Use of appropriate learning strategies to extend sociolinguistic and sociocultural competence	Collaboration and communicative competences

In the table (Table 1) ESL standards are compared with professional competence criteria of the head of external relations. The table is worked out on the basis of ESL standards (ESL, 2002) and Professional Standard for the head of external relations unit (Profesijas standarts, 2003).

Conformity to the study programme objectives is seen in the standards for foreign language learning by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Standards..., 1996):

COMMUNICATION: Communicate in Languages Other Than English

- *Standard 1.1:* Students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions.
- *Standard 1.2:* Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics.
- *Standard 1.3:* Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics.

CULTURES: Gain Knowledge and Understanding of Other Cultures

- *Standard 2.1:* Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied.
- *Standard 2.2:* Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied.

CONNECTIONS: Connect with Other Disciplines and Acquire Information

- *Standard 3.1:* Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language.
- *Standard 3.2:* Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures.

COMPARISONS: Develop Insight into the Nature of Language and Culture

- *Standard 4.1:* Students demonstrate understanding of the nature of language through comparisons of the language studied and their own.
- *Standard 4.2:* Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.

COMMUNITIES: Participate in Multilingual Communities at Home & Around the World

- *Standard 5.1:* Students use the language both within and beyond the school setting.
- *Standard 5.2:* Students show evidence of becoming life-long learners by using the language for personal enjoyment and enrichment (Standards..., 1996).

To find out the students' communicative competence level a questionnaire was given to the students and their practice supervisors, which consisted of the same questions. The questionnaires were fulfilled by the same students in 2007 and 2009 at the end of practice period in the 2nd and 4th study years after the criteria for each indicator (competency). All together 137 students' and 89 practice supervisors' questionnaires were analysed.

Table 2.

Structure and Criteria of the Head of External Relations Unit's Communicative Competence

Competence	Criteria	Grades				
COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE	Criterion *Communication skills*					
	1. Indicator *Speaking*	1	2	3	4	5
	2. Indicator *Listening*	1	2	3	4	5
	3. Indicator *Reading*	1	2	3	4	5
	4. Indicator *Writing*	1	2	3	4	5
	5. Indicator *Non-verbal*	1	2	3	4	5
	6. Indicator *Foreign languages skills*	1	2	3	4	5
	Criterion *Skills to accept and present information*					
	1. Indicator *ICT use*	1	2	3	4	5
	2. Indicator *Presenting (oral and written) skills*	1	2	3	4	5
	3. Indicator *Performing*	1	2	3	4	5

The grades description is generalized, it is concretised by indicators.

Research Results

Data validity and reliability are guaranteed by mixed research methods use, which is a necessary condition to get generalised information on the research field. The research is done to evaluate the students' competence development during the whole study period and the results validity and reliability are maintained by the employers' – practice supervisors' participation in the research.

To check the qualitative data, non – parametric data processing methods of SPSS Statistics 17.0 software were used. As the questionnaires results reflect subjective evaluation and are non – parametric, Mann-Whitney U test for 2 independent samples was used (Paura, Arhipova, 2002), with the help of which interval, relations and ordinal scale data were processed.

The reliability of the data is proved with the calculated p-value (Sig.) in statistical tests and 95% - 100% max.value level (0,05>V>0,000), Mann-Whitney U test for 2 independent samples and Cramer's V coefficient.
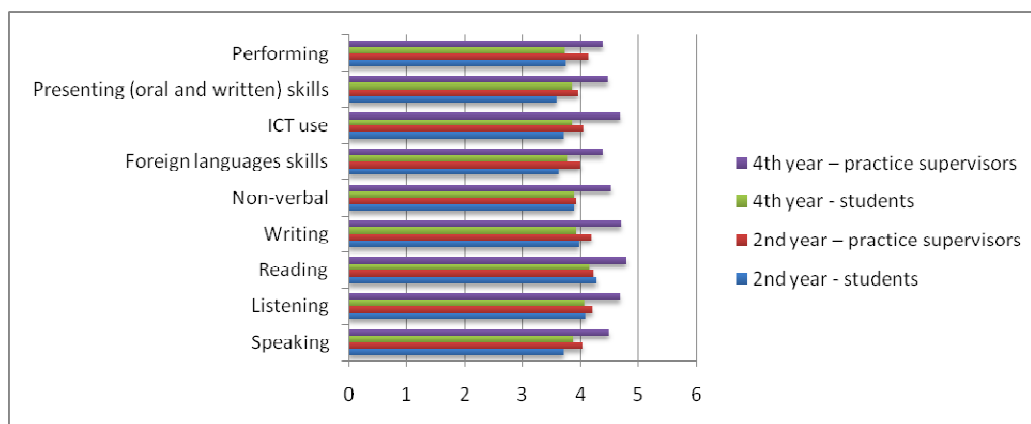
Figure 2. Assessment of the Same Students' Communicative Competence Skills in the 2nd and 4th Years of Studies (in 5 grades).

The comparison of the students' skills assessment results in the 2ⁿᵈ and 4ᵗʰ years of studies show that whether the students are too critical to themselves or the results of their studying are not good enough. However, their self-evaluation results are in conflict with employers – practice supervisors' opinion about the students' skills, the research data, interviews and observation results. In the result of that the students' and employers' assessment coherence was researched to check the students' accuracy of self-evaluation.

The empirical research results allow concluding that:

- with 100% max.value (V=0,000) the evaluation of practice supervisors is disparately higher in comparison with the students' evaluation of the indicators „reading", „writing", „information and communication technologies use";
- practically with 100% max.value (0,05>V>0,001) the evaluation of practice supervisors is disparately higher than that of the students for the indicators „non-verbal skills", „foreign languages", „presenting skills", „performing", „teamwork" and „managing people and resources".

Conclusions

1. Language is a tool for the head of external relations unit's professional competence development, which contributes to communicative, informative and learning competences development;

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2. Taking part in annual students' conferences and international conferences helps students develop their presentation skills, as presenting in a foreign language in an unknown environment is a challenge, which helps to collaborate better in the future.

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