

## FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPETENCE AS A PART OF THE COMMUNICATION CAPITAL OF MANAGERIAL STAFF

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**Abstract:** Education and training have become the cornerstone for the development of today's knowledge society and economy. The goal of the European Union (EU) is a challenging one—to become the most competitive, active, and dynamic knowledge-based economy worldwide, featuring sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs. The purpose of this article was to identify genres and foreign language competencies used by managerial staff in everyday work situations at C1 level. The article addresses the communication capital, made up of language competence, communication competence, and intercultural competence necessary for managers working at any level of the organizations. A linguistic language methodology was employed to determine language competence of managerial staff. Following the primary need analysis, an interview containing open-ended questions with managerial staff was performed. Having analyzed the responses, a questionnaire for the managerial staff was developed. To make the survey respondent-friendly, a genre approach (genre as a text type) was selected and respondents described their competence while referring to individual genres. After investigating the responses, a list of language competencies required for managerial staff was developed. It was found that managers are faced with fifteen genres in their everyday work situations, which require fifty five foreign language competencies (“can do” statements) at C1 level. The competencies required for managerial staff can serve as guidelines for language teachers and course designers. On one hand, they can be used to underpin the fundamental lexical, structural, and functional syllabus of the course. On the other hand, the competencies required help to determine the teaching methodology applied in the course delivery. Thus, students in business and management will be able to acquire the skills that are transferable in nature and can be employed in a wide range of managerial situations.

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### Introduction

The European Union top representatives have emphasized that education and training are essential to the development of today's knowledge society and economy. Concerning this fact, Krajňáková & Vojtovič (2012, p.43) stated: “at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we witnessed the world entering the informative revolution and the basics of the so called informative or knowledge society (economy) were created.” It has been acknowledged that innovation and knowledge are the cornerstones of being competitive in the global labor market. To understand intellectual capital means to understand intellectual property acquired and owned by various interest groups. Under the current process of globalization, these groups are not bound to one country, region or ethnic area. Based on the aforementioned, mutual ownership of intellectual capital simply refers to working with multiple sources in various languages in the input phase and transmitting the information received in various foreign languages in the output phase. Today, the ability to use more than one foreign language represents the key comparative advantage at both individual and institutional levels (Delgadová & Šajgalíková, 2008). An array of initiatives has been developed to make this commitment a reality and make people move around the European Union in order to take advantage of their study, work, or other activities. Being competitive means putting qualified people where the vacancies are. In this respect, we agree with Krajňáková & Vojtovič (2015, p.87): “the key asset of any country are human resources.” As free movement is one of the fundamental rights granted to every EU citizen, European Union nationals have unrestricted rights to live and work in any EU member

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country without being discriminated against. The European Union's goals to promote linguistic diversity and language learning were included in the Action Plan of 2004–2006 titled “Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity,” which was launched by the European Commission in July 2003. The Commission Action Plan was welcomed by the European Council, which called for further action “to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age” (Barcelona European Council, 2002, p.19). With regard to language learning, the Heads of States and Governments in Barcelona in 2002 noted the absence of data on the citizens' actual language skills, and called for the establishment of a European indicator of language competency. Such an indicator was to provide valuable data for decision-makers in the field of education and training. Since language skills have not been assessed equally throughout the European Union, it has been complicated for employers to assess language skills of applicants applying for a particular position. Naturally, this undermines credibility and transportability of language examination results and may hinder the free movement of workers throughout the European Union countries. Obviously, the aims of the Commission are to increase the mobility of the workforce and thus make a contribution to a successful establishment of the most competitive and dynamic economy in the world. In order to standardize the assessment of language competence, two fundamental documents were published by the Council of Europe, namely the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages and the European Language Portfolio. CEFR describes language ability on a scale of levels from elementary (A1) up to advanced mastery of foreign language (C2), thus providing a basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications and facilitating educational and occupational mobility. The latter is designed to support the development of learner autonomy, plurilingualism, and intercultural awareness and competence and allow users to record their foreign language learning achievements and their experience of learning and using foreign languages. In terms of higher education institutions (HEI) and employability, we obviously refer to the C foreign language ability level. In addition, the European Union encourages its citizens to be able to speak two languages at “working” level (i.e. for the purposes of their study and employment) in addition to their mother tongue. Consequently, foreign language learning and teaching are to be systematic, structured, and effective in relation to the required foreign language competence. It is therefore essential that all those concerned understand what foreign language competency can and should be acquired in a given period of time. In addition to standardization of foreign language competence, transparency of the competence descriptors, and indicators is to be guaranteed.

The research was designed to identify foreign language competencies of managerial staff at C1 CEFR level. The linguistic language methodology was employed to determine foreign language competencies used by staff with managerial and supervisory responsibility on a daily basis. Moreover, the research was intended to contribute to the understanding of C1 CEFR level descriptors and help the sectors and spheres identify their needs in foreign language competence.

### **Data and methodology**

First, primary need analysis was carried out and an interview containing open-ended questions was performed with employers. Having analyzed the responses, a questionnaire for staff with managerial and supervisory responsibility was drawn up. Most of the respondents work as middle managers and have a higher education qualification in management and business. On average, they have been in a management position for more than 12 years and can speak English fluently. Analyses of responses obtained were meant to verify or modify the conclusions gained from the interview. To make the survey respondent-friendly, a genre approach (genre as a text type) was selected and respondents described their foreign language competences with reference to individual genres. Text is defined as “a relatively closed unit of communication fulfilling propositional and pragmatic functions based on its

contextual and illocutionary structure” (Dolník & Bajzík, 1998, p.10). Having investigated the responses, foreign language competencies required for the managerial staff to function efficiently on a daily basis were identified.

## Results and discussion

It was shown that a broad variety of genres are used by managerial staff in everyday working situations. Based on the data obtained, we have identified sixteen genres: presentations, negotiations, teamwork, workshops, presentations of projects and products, managerial staff practice listening and speaking skills during social events, business lunches, etc., with 55 descriptors of foreign language competencies. Concerning the *genre of telephone calls*, managerial staff practice listening and speaking skills during social events, such as business lunches, breakfasts, dinners, etc. and need the following competencies: ability to speak on the telephone in a polite, clear, and effective manner, and initiate mediation if necessary; ability to understand a variety of accents on the telephone; ability to utilize an appropriate repertoire of clichés typical for telephone calls. Concerning the *genre of memorandums and e-mail messages*, managerial staff practice writing and reading skills during the first contact situations and need the following competencies: ability to read and understand informal pieces of writing, such as memos and e-mails in a business context; ability to compose informal pieces of writing, such as memos and e-mail messages using standard formulae, appropriate tone, and register.

Concerning the *genre of instruction manuals and business letters*, managerial staff practice writing and reading skills and need the following competencies: ability to read and understand technical documents, ability to restructure the facts by using own words, ability to read and understand formal business letters, and ability to write formal business letters using standard register.

Concerning the *genre of the reporting cases with analyses and recommendations*, managerial staff practice writing and need the following competencies: ability to write coherently, ability to use linking words and connectors, and ability to use the correct technical vocabulary.

Concerning the *genre of projects*, managerial staff practice reading and writing skills and need the following competencies: ability to read and understand the terminology of international projects and ability to write international projects using the correct register.

Concerning the *genre of commercial documents*, managerial staff practice reading and writing skills and need the competencies as follows: ability to understand, interpret, and use various types of commercial documents; ability to understand standardized abbreviations, as well as ability to compose various types of commercial documents with respect to the language and format.

Concerning the *genre of technical reports*, managerial staff practice writing skill and need the following competencies: ability to maintain coherence over an extended piece of writing, ability to use an appropriate writing style, and ability to compose concise informative reports following the standard format.

Concerning the *genre of presentations*, managerial staff practice speaking and writing skills in presenting domain-specific information and need competencies such as ability to make a well-structured and audience-oriented presentation comprising domain-specific information and ability to use visual aids.

Concerning the *genre of team work and workshops*, managerial staff practice speaking and listening skills and need the competencies as follows: ability to argue to defend their views and opinions; ability to work with others in teams; ability to explain solutions to complex technical problems in a coherent and clear manner; ability to speak fluently in extended discussions; ability to invite others to

collaborate, express views, ideas, opinions, etc.; last but not least, ability to run a workshop attended by experts.

Concerning the *genre of presentation of projects or products*, managerial staff practice speaking and listening skills and need the following competencies: ability to express their points of view in a concise manner; ability to address the audience in an appropriate fashion; ability to present information on the given topic in a clear and concise manner, while using accurate and correct language; ability to understand product-related terminology; ability to comprehend and correctly interpret descriptions of graphs/numerical data; ability to follow a presentation on products and select the relevant data; ability to use humor, if necessary; ability to employ suitable methods of presenting; ability to talk about products, production processes, etc., while using correct technical lexis and explanations for non-specialists; and, ability to adapt the language of the presentation to that of the audience.

Concerning the *genre of video presentations*, managerial staff practice listening and writing skills and need the ability to follow a video presentation on technical subjects and take notes.

Concerning the *genre of offers and tenders*, managerial staff practice speaking skills and are required to possess competencies, such as ability to read and understand highly specialised and in-depth texts related to the deal, ability to communicate in a polite manner and to handle enquiries, ability to understand technical lexis and slang expressions, and ability to understand and use the specialized vocabulary related to commerce.

Concerning the *genre of interview*, managerial staff practice speaking skills and need the following competencies: ability to present themselves, their own views, ideas, opinions, and company and create a positive image; ability to present information in a clear and concise manner, while using accurate and correct language.

Concerning the *genre of negotiations*, managerial staff practice listening and speaking skills and need the competencies, such as ability to express contrasting opinions in a polite and adequate manner; ability to introduce and defend their views, standpoints, and ideas; as well as ability to react to unexpected situations.

Concerning the *genre of miscellaneous arrangements*, managerial staff practice all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) as a part of cultural awareness and need the following competencies: ability to identify, understand, and adapt to the social rules and conventions typical of the both national and professional culture and respect them; ability to identify and understand clues of non-verbal communication, paralinguistic elements typical in national/managerial culture, as well as those typical in the second language (L2); ability to adjust their body language to the target culture to avoid misunderstandings; and, ability to react in an adequate manner in conflict situations.

Concerning the *genre of miscellaneous arrangements*, managerial staff practice listening and speaking skills during various kinds of social events (e.g. business lunches) and need the following competencies: ability to join a small talk in an adequate fashion, ability to identify cultural differences and to be sensitive to intercultural issues when talking to L2 representatives, and ability to participate in general discussions on general topics related to their partner's country.

## Conclusion

It was found that the managerial staff consider the following five foreign language abilities of utmost importance for their everyday business situations:

1. ability to express negative views, opinions, and standpoints (negotiating with business partners),

2. ability to express views, opinions, and standpoints related to products/projects in a concise manner (presentation of projects and products),
3. ability to use a suitable register in addressing the audience (presentation of projects and products),
4. ability to avoid making mistakes that could hamper negotiations (negotiation with business partners),
5. ability to read and understand the specific terminology of international projects (projects).

On the other hand, the following four foreign language abilities and genres are of least interest for the managerial staff in their everyday business situations:

1. ability to identify accents and dialects (negotiation with clients at the front office),
2. ability to interpret sarcasm and irony (negotiation with clients at the front office),
3. ability to identify accents and dialects (negotiation with business partners),
4. ability to understand administrative business terminology (communication with people outside of their profession).

The findings related to the identification of foreign language competencies needed for managerial staff can be used by language teachers and course designers. Language courses for graduates in business and management with B2 level of general language competence should be provided with the aim of enhancing their command of foreign language to C1 level, thus making them competent users in their area of expertise. The importance of identifying the foreign language competence is twofold. First, they can be used to determine the syllabus of the course considering lexical, structural, and functional aspects. Next, being aware of the competencies identified, the most effective methodology can be adopted to prepare learners to be able to function effectively in specific business-related situations. Thus, learners will be able to develop such transferable skills that are actually needed and can be utilized in a wide range of business-related situations.

Bearing in mind the identified foreign language competencies required for staff with managerial and supervisory responsibility, we outline the foreign language course structure that will help those applying for managerial positions acquire the competences required by their potential employers. We propose to run an 80-hour language course, whereas the course is designed for students with a general B2 level of foreign language competence. The course outline focuses primarily on the specific tasks students should be able to perform and does not make any recommendations in terms of foreign language teaching methodology.

- Concerning the tasks encompassing *negotiations with business partners, workshops, ad team work* to develop and improve integrated skills of professional listening and speaking: 10 hours.
- Concerning the tasks encompassing *small talk, different topics, and group work* to develop and improve integrated skills of personal listening and speaking: 5 hours.
- Concerning the tasks encompassing *resolving intercultural conflicts, different topics, and group work* to develop and improve integrated skills of professional listening and speaking: 5 hours.
- Concerning the tasks encompassing *reading articles, reports, etc. and presenting an opinion or argument based on their content* to develop and improve integrated skills of professional listening and speaking: 15 hours.
- Concerning the tasks encompassing *searching for information in the target language using the Internet* to develop and improve integrated skills of professional reading: 5 hours.

- Concerning the tasks encompassing *making presentations based on published material using audio-visual aids* to develop and improve integrated skills of professional reading, writing, and speaking: 15 hours.
- Concerning the tasks encompassing *telephone calls, introducing oneself and a company using appropriate style and conventions* to develop and improve integrated skills of professional listening and speaking: 10 hours.
- Concerning the tasks encompassing *taking and leaving telephone messages* to develop and improve integrated skills of personal and professional listening and speaking: 5 hours.
- Concerning the tasks encompassing *giving technical reports and understanding official documents* to develop and improve integrated skills of professional reading and writing: 5 hours.
- Concerning the tasks encompassing *writing business letters, commercial documents, and e-mails* to develop and improve integrated skills of professional reading and writing: 5 hours.

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