STUDENTS' FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES BASED ON A SURVEY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

LÁZÁR Tímea
University of Debrecen Faculty of Economics and Business, Debrecen, Hungary
lazar.timea@econ.unideb.hu

Abstract: *Globalization, internalisation and the development of information technology have led to enormous changes in the labour market all over the world. The spread of international companies entails some new trends in employers' requirements. Graduate entrants consider being employed by an international company as an attractive opportunity in their careers. When selecting new entrants, companies are increasingly looking for 'soft skills', intercultural communication competencies and foreign language skills. Some employees may have plans for international careers and assignments. Even if they do not want to work abroad, employees at international companies may have to work in an intercultural environment in their home countries. The new requirements of employers encourage institutions of higher education to offer educational programmes and courses which prepare young graduate entrants for these new requirements. The internationalisation of colleges and universities is also a challenge because they should offer international educational programmes in a foreign language. Universities need to adapt their programmes, their facilities and teaching staff for international students. English language knowledge is essential for graduates in the labour market and employers also require intercultural communication competencies and other 'soft skills'. Universities have significant responsibilities in providing the means necessary to achieve and develop the level of foreign language knowledge required to fulfil the expectations of employers. Acquiring intercultural communication competencies is indispensable for working in an international environment. Institutions of tertiary education ought to help their students to obtain the skills needed to develop cultural awareness and sensitivity which can contribute to their chances for better employability. This study describes the results of a survey which was carried out at the University of Debrecen concerning students' foreign language and intercultural communication competencies. The collection of data took place in autumn, 2019 at three different faculties of the University of Debrecen with the help of personally assisted data collection procedure. The survey instrument consisted of two parts. In the first part, there were questions regarding the respondents' age, gender, forms of language studies, language exam certificates. The second part of the survey questionnaire consisted of a 20-item Likert-type scale with 5-point responses. The items were formulated based on literature about measuring intercultural communication competencies. The results show that 71,9 % of students possess an intermediate general language exam certificate and 14,4 % of them have already acquired the intermediate professional language exam certificate. The majority of students surveyed stated that being able to communicate in a foreign language is essential today. Furthermore, they like learning about other*

cultures and languages. Travelling abroad, watching films in a foreign language and interacting with foreigners were considered to be essential for them too.

1. Introduction

As a result of globalisation and internationalization, the different parts of our world are more connected, and economies are integrated in a cultural, demographical and political sense. (Gács, 2007) We can see new types of organisational forms emerge, for instance, global virtual teams from the early 2000s which are spread geographically all over the world having a diverse cultural background and communicating with each other only through electronic media. (Zander et al. 2012, Matveev, 2017) The number of multinational companies and consequently the number of people employed by them just as the number of expatriates and people working in foreign countries is increasing worldwide. (Ross és Thornson, 2008, Schnabel, 2015) Multinational companies play an important role in Hungary's economy as well. In our globalised world, we can talk about globalised consumers whose culture, history, religion, language and society might be different and multinational companies may consider it as a challenge of the global competition to gain these consumers. (Shieh et al. 2009) Knowledge sharing was essential for multinational companies to maintain their competitive advantages. From time to time, it could cause problems as subsidiaries were scattered geographically and the makeup of employees was diverse. (Makela et al. 2007) The different socio-cultural and political environment of the subsidiaries located in other countries makes the standardisation of HR policy difficult. Cultural differences might appear on a daily basis in different work styles, cross-cultural communication influenced by high or low context cultures. Intercultural training and development within the company can be important but so can the rotation of employees among the subsidiaries when they can spend a longer period in countries with different cultural backgrounds. (Ananthram és Chan, 2013) Companies are looking for entrants with university or college degrees because they are responsive, objective, creative, critical, ambitious, confident and enthusiastic, have better communication skills, problem-solving skills and can adapt to changes. By employing the right applicants, companies can shorten the training periods and they can achieve significant cost-savings. (Gordon, 1983The competencies needed to perform well at the workplace include communication skills, time management skills, teamwork, leadership skills, conflict management skills and interpersonal skills. (Sharma, 2009) 'Soft skills' have an important role in every sector but especially in service sectors. Skills like human interaction (teamwork, service orientation, presentations), organisational interaction (ability to work under pressure, multi-tasking) and general skills (independent, flexible, highly motivated, creative) have become essential nowadays. (Lavy and Yadin, 2013)

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2. Requirements for institutions of higher education

Due to globalisation, technical advances and the acceleration of global competition the complexity and diversity of the working environment have increased. This complexity requires having the skills which are necessary for functioning in an intercultural environment both from managers and employees. Global leaders should be able to manage a global workforce and have a global mindset. (Hanges et al. 2016, Matveev, 2017) Managers of international companies should transform cultural differences into competitive advantages by creating a cultural synergy but as a starting point, they should respect and value cultural differences instead of ignoring them. (Tutar et al. 2014)

As a consequence, there has been a change in the role of universities and colleges, and there are more co-operation between them, more international research and projects, international publications and conferences. Also, there is more need for international training and education at universities and colleges. (Edelstein, 2014) When companies define their requirements for competencies properly, it enhances their long-term competitiveness. The new requirements of employers for young graduate entrants encourage institutions of higher education to offer educational programmes and courses which successfully prepare young graduate entrants for these new requirements. This expectation means that universities and colleges must complete their education with practice-oriented programmes where competency-based training has a significant role. (Tótnhé, 2016) English language knowledge is essential for graduate entrants wishing to work for multinational companies. There are new requirements concerning the English language lessons: the curriculum should develop learners' personality so they must obtain confidence when learning how to communicate in English. During language lessons teaching methods should include role-plays, discussions, group work, developing interpersonal skills and group dynamics, knowledge of body language and etiquette. (Sharma and Sharma, 2010)

As companies are looking for candidates with 'soft skills', forming and developing these skills are extremely important in the institutions of higher education. It is a difficult task for the institutions as these skills are non-visible but help improve students' personality. The skills can include positive attitude, active listening and time management skills, strategic planning and leadership skills, analytical thinking, communication and interpersonal skills, teamwork, body language, etiquette, sales and presentation skills, self-confidence, enthusiasm and confidence. (Rani and Mangala, 2010) It can be difficult to measure 'soft skills' that is why students show resistance and cannot see why these skills could be important for them. The development of 'soft skills' happens in a practice-based environment and there is no guarantee that the methods will work in a real situation so it might help if universities co-operate with companies in gathering data, case studies and practical tasks. (Gibb, 2014) There should be a continuous co-operation between universities and companies so that universities could offer practice-oriented programmes and courses that eventually meet companies' requirements. (Bata and Herneczky, 2017)

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Today the number of students obtaining international degrees is increasing. In this case, the labour market and the institution of higher education are in different countries. The institutions offering international programmes for international students should pay attention to the requirements of the international labour market concerning the understanding and respect of global issues, tolerance for other cultures, effective intercultural communication skills and high-level foreign language knowledge. Employers should have an insight into the curriculum of universities and colleges so that they could help them meet the requirements of international education. Companies can be involved in the programmes by dissertation consultancies, offering internships and developing teaching material. (Cai, 2013)

Hungary's labour market can also be described by increasing requirements for global competencies, among which the most important ones are foreign language knowledge and intercultural communication competencies. It is difficult for universities to meet these requirements as the need for language knowledge varies from sector to sector and the language knowledge of students, when they are accepted to the university, is different. In most cases, applicants with university degrees or even employees are not able to meet the employers' requirements of foreign language knowledge although there are different methods at recruiting to find the candidates with the best language skills such as job interviews, professional tasks, simulations, teamwork and case studies in a foreign language. (Szűcs et al. 2013)

The other most important area that universities should focus on in their education besides foreign language knowledge is intercultural competencies. Intercultural communication competencies can be improved in the frames of foreign language teaching. (Polyák et al. 2014)

3. Literature Review: Intercultural Communication Competence

Intercultural communication competence was defined by Arasaratnam- Smith as: 'effective and appropriate communication between persons of different cultural worldviews.' (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017:1). Intercultural communication competence can broadly mean interpersonal communication between people from different cultural backgrounds and can be interchangeably used with intercultural competence, cultural competence and intercultural effectiveness. It is generally accepted that there are three dimensions of intercultural communication competence: cognitive (knowledge), affective (emotions) and behavioural (skills). In an international business context, intercultural communication competence has a key role in employability because very often it defines the success or the failure of negotiation, deal or transaction. Intercultural communication competence is also relevant in the educational sector as there can be examples of culturally diverse classrooms or groups and most educational institutions offer international education in a foreign language. Consequently, intercultural communication competence is necessary for students and teachers as well who learn or teach in a culturally diverse environment. (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017)

Different factors can forecast the successful communication in a culturally diverse group: the type of the organisation and the group, the members' perception of the

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cultural differences and the type of interaction. (Larkey, 1996) Those who are open to learning about other cultures, open to others, have some experience in different cultures, are aware of cultural differences and show interest in them can be successful in intercultural communication. (Arasaratnam and Doerfel, 2005) Formal training and informal experiences can develop intercultural communication competence, but improving cultural awareness is also important. (Kim, 2004) Knowing a foreign language and culture can positively affect intercultural communication competence. (Peltokorpi, 2010) Intercultural corporate communication has an important role in relationship building, co-operation and knowledge sharing. Cultural differences must be learned and understood by continuous coordination and interaction. (Laurig, 2011) Intercultural communication competencies can influence crisis communication at multinational companies. In a crisis, there is a need for the quick problem- solving which can be accelerated by effective communication. Understanding and respecting cultural differences are essential to avoid and prevent a multicultural crisis. (Oliveira, 2013)

Students who study abroad can develop their intercultural communication competence more quickly and effectively than those who do not go for scholarships or exchange programmes. Intercultural communication competence can be improved within one's country of origin in different ways: making friends with people from other cultures, taking part in foreign language or cultural courses, visiting ethnic celebrations, watching films in foreign languages or any other possibilities where there is an opportunity to interact with people from different cultures or to learn about them. (Williams, 2005)

4. Methodology

This study measured the foreign language and intercultural communication competencies of students at the University of Debrecen. The collection of data took place in autumn, 2019 at three different faculties of the University of Debrecen (Faculty of Economics and Business, Faculty of Informatics and Faculty of Engineering). We used personally assisted data collection procedure.

5. Measures

The survey instrument consisted of two parts. In the first part, there were questions regarding the respondents' age, gender, in what form they study or studied foreign languages, what languages they studied, whether they have language examination certificates and if so what level and type. There were some statements concerning the importance of teaching foreign languages at universities and the importance of speaking foreign languages when they want to find a job. The second part of the survey questionnaire consisted of a 20-item Likert-type scale with 5-point responses ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The items were formulated based on literature about measuring intercultural communication competencies.

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6. Participants

Participants (N = 1234) were university students at the University of Debrecen (Males = 546, Females = 688). The majority of participants were between the ages of 19 and 21. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire anonymously.

7. Results

Regarding the forms of studying foreign languages, most students study in public education: at primary schools, secondary schools and university (93,2%). The second most popular form of studying foreign languages was with private teachers (45,1%). The minority of students said that they were studying at language courses (13,5%) and with friends and relatives (12,6%). A small percentage of students said that they were studying abroad (10,4%). Most students study only one foreign language at university (58,7%) and it is English (51,3%), German (5,2%), French (0,3%), Russian (0,8) and other (1,1%). 41,3% of students said that they do not study foreign languages at university. Only 10,9% of students said that they also study a second foreign language at university which is mostly German (7,5%). 71,9% of respondents have an intermediate general language exam certificate, the majority in English (61,8%), then in German (15,6%) and French (3,5%). 20,7% of students have an advanced general language exam certificate. As for professional intermediate language exam, 14,4% of respondents have already passed it.
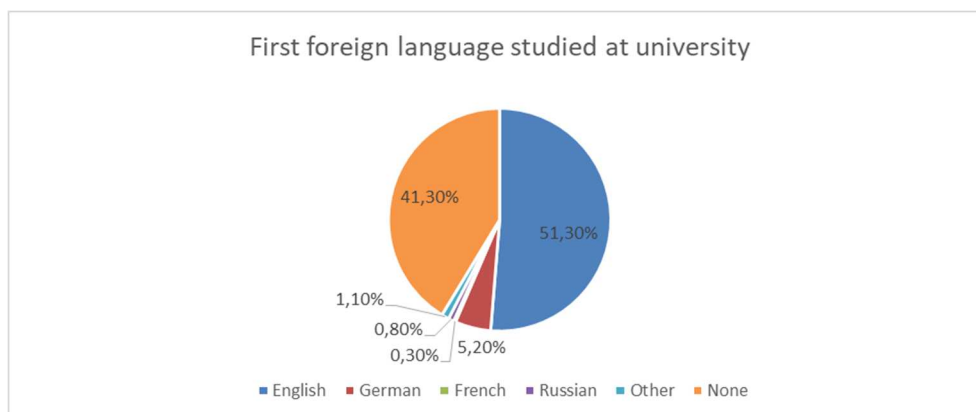

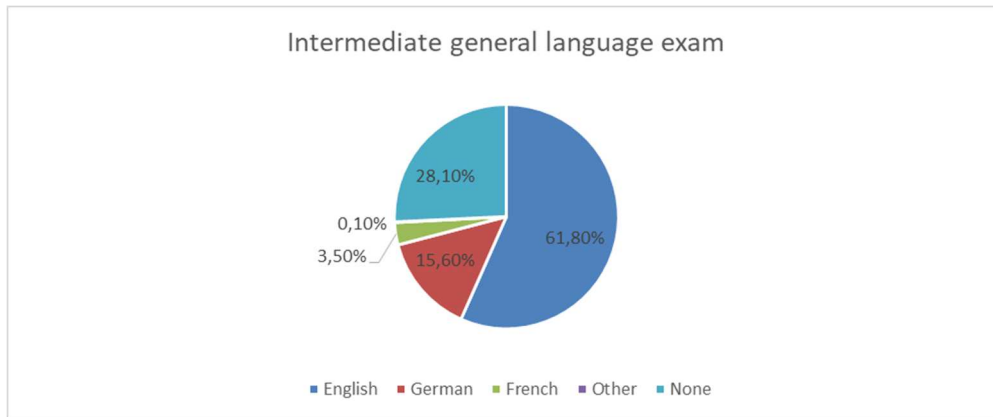**Figure 1:** First foreign language students study at university

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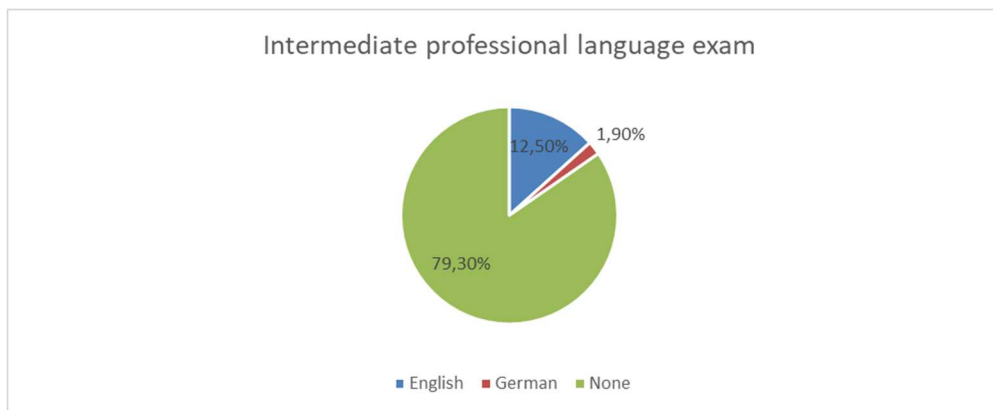**Figure 2:** Intermediate general language exam certificates

Figure 3: Intermediate professional language exam certificates

Students' intercultural communication competencies were measured by 20 items which were formulated in the first person, and they referred to concrete observable behaviour. Students could give their answers on a 5-point scale. The table below shows the items arranged in the order of increasing scales. On average, students like communicating in a foreign language in the lessons or outside the lessons. They would like to communicate in a foreign language in their workplace. They think that speaking a foreign language and understanding talks in a foreign language is more complicated than understanding texts and writing. Higher scales show that students would like to work with foreign colleagues and they like making friends with foreigners. Hungary is considered to be an attractive country for multinational companies because of its favourable location and highly skilled workforce. At multinational companies, employees may come from different cultural backgrounds to Hungary; thus, well-qualified Hungarian graduates have the chance to build relationships with foreign colleagues provided that they have the relevant and necessary intercultural communication competencies. The majority of students are

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open to reading newspapers in a foreign language and they have a positive attitude towards reading about other cultures. Nowadays, cultural sensitivity is an expectation in the world of labour and could be beneficial for job seekers and employees. With the internationalisation of universities, it is a required competency as there are a lot of international students studying at the University of Debrecen, too. Higher education is continually changing because it is a melting pot of different cultures; therefore, universities ought to provide an appropriate atmosphere where teachers and students are able to co-operate efficiently. We can see the influence of globalisation as students' scales were really high for travelling abroad and watching films in a foreign language. Travelling abroad can enhance students' cultural sensitivity significantly since they are able to witness other countries' traditions, lifestyle and gather experiences which can contribute to their intercultural communication competencies. With the help of technological advances, it is not a challenge any more to have access to films with subtitles in the original language which can promote students' foreign language skills. As a result of continuous improvement after a particular time, they will be able to understand films without subtitles which will be useful when it comes to an understanding live talks for example during the lessons or at their workplace in the future. The highest scales show that students are aware of the importance of learning and speaking a foreign language and they agree with the statement that teaching foreign languages is essential. It means that they acknowledge the requirements of graduating (they must have a language exam certificate) and the requirements of the job market and their future workplace. Furthermore, it is also true that teachers should attend further training to be able to fulfil the expectations set by our globalised world adequately. In this way with the acquired knowledge and skills, they can prepare students for the challenges of studying and working in a culturally diverse environment.

Table 1: Items measuring students' intercultural communication competencies

	Mean	Std. deviation
1. I like communicating with foreign students in the lessons and outside the lessons.	3,02	1,209
2. I like studying with foreign students.	3,13	1,223
3. I like communicating in a foreign language in the lessons.	3,15	1,087
4. I would like to communicate in a foreign language both in speaking and writing at my workplace.	3,36	1,075
5. I would like to work and study abroad.	3,44	1,192
6. I enjoy the company of foreigners.	3,47	1,049
7. My oral foreign language skills are good.	3,49	1,013
8. I like communicating in a foreign language outside the lessons.	3,51	1,064
9. I can easily understand the talks in a foreign language.	3,53	,940
10. My foreign language skills are good at writing.	3,55	1,005
11. I can easily understand texts in a foreign language.	3,59	,925

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	Mean	Std. deviation
12. I would like to work with foreign colleagues.	3,59	1,019
13. I like making friends with foreigners.	3,64	1,080
14. I like reading newspapers and news in a foreign language.	3,66	1,190
15. I like reading and learning about other cultures.	3,66	1,064
16. I like learning foreign languages.	3,93	1,001
17. I like watching programmes and films in a foreign language.	4,10	1,027
18. I like travelling abroad.	4,38	,894
19. I think teaching foreign languages is important	4,40	,816
20. I think speaking foreign languages is essential.	4,50	,741

8. In conclusion

This paper describes the foreign language and intercultural communication competencies of students at the University of Debrecen. As a result of globalisation and internalization, there are more multinational companies all over the world. Employees at these companies often have different cultural backgrounds. If they want to work effectively, they need to have 'soft skills', they need to understand and respect each other's culture. It means that universities must include in their educational programmes the development of these competencies. With the internalisation of universities, they need to offer international programmes for international students. This research aimed to measure students' competencies so that adjustments and recommendations could be made in the future to meet the changing requirements in higher education and the labour market. The results show that students understand the importance of foreign language learning and speaking and they are open to learning about other cultures and working with foreigners. It is undoubtedly essential for their future career.

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