

A SURVEY ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE USE IN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION: THE CASE OF WEST TRANSDANUBIAN COMPANIES

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Summary

The present study reports on the findings of a questionnaire survey carried out in the Western Transdanubian region. First it reviews the literature on genre use in a foreign language in Hungary and outlines the investigation's purposes, data and methods. Then it presents and discusses the findings concerning the foreign language knowledge of the respondents, which languages they use at the workplace, what activities they are involved in and which genres they use most frequently. The paper concludes that in the region it is almost as important to be able to speak German as English and also that specific purposes foreign language instruction should not neglect the development of reading and writing skills.

Keywords

foreign languages, professional genres, Western Transdanubia, workplace communication

Összefoglalás

A tanulmány egy, a nyugat-dunántúli régióban végzett kérdőíves felmérés eredményeit tárgyalja. A bevezető részben a magyar szakemberek által idegen nyelven használt műfajokkal foglalkozó szakirodalmat tekintjük át, majd ismertetjük a kutatás céljait és módszereit. A második rész a vizsgálat eredményeit ismerteti és tárgyalja az idegennyelv-tudás, munkahelyi idegennyelv-használat és az adatközlők által a leggyakoribbnak ítélt tevékenységek és műfajok vonatkozásában. A tanulmány végkövetkeztetése az, hogy a vizsgált régióban a német nyelv ismerete csaknem olyan fontos, mint az angolé, valamint az, hogy a szaknyelvoktatásnak a jövőben sem szabad elhanyagolnia az idegen nyelvi olvasás- és íráskézség fejlesztését.

Kulcsszavak

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Introduction and background

The change of the regime in 1989 and Hungary's accession to the European Union in 2004 has made economic cooperation with foreign companies easier and cheaper due to the Schengen Agreement, which allows for the free movement of people, goods, services and capital, and the abolition of duties. At the end of the 1980s, Hungarian educational institutions saw the abolition of Russian as a compulsory foreign language.

At tertiary level it resulted in Russian for Specific Purposes (RSP) teaching falling into the background and giving way to the teaching of Languages for General Purposes (LGP), in many cases at the basic or lower intermediate level. However, since the middle of the 1990s, Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) teaching has been gaining ground with revised objectives, content and teaching techniques (see, for example, Tóthné Kurtán 1994 and Heltai and Ötvösné Vadnai 1994), as distinct from former RSP instruction, which mostly dealt with reading and translation in order to equip students with specialist terminology.

LSP teaching aims to satisfy pre-work and in-work needs – it deals with skills students need to conduct studies or to do scientific research in a foreign language (Languages for Academic Purposes) as well as skills needed to function effectively in the workplace (Languages for Occupational Purposes). Given this, the 1990s saw the emergence of needs analyses carried out among university students and in-work professionals. A nationwide needs analysis of vocationally-oriented foreign languages learning and teaching (Teemant et al 1993) indicated that students were motivated to study the Russian, Italian and Spanish languages mostly for the general purpose of everyday communication whereas they considered the learning of English, German, French and Latin as important from the point of view of their future career. It also found that the majority of Hungarian business professionals used a foreign language (with German known and used as the first priority, English as a second, Russian, French and other languages as a third priority) only a few times a year or not at all. With regard to tasks carried out in a foreign language, telephone conversations, face-to-face contact, business socialising, negotiation and correspondence were identified as the most frequent, while working with foreigners and attending training courses were ranked the lowest (Teemant et al 1993: 455).

Smaller-scale analyses confirmed and further shaped this picture. For example, Kurtán (1997) surveyed the use of English for professional purposes among pre-work and in-work chemical engineers at the University of Veszprém. Lecturers and students ranked the reading of notices, warnings, short messages and letters the highest, followed by scientific publications, operating procedures, reports and minutes. With regard to the other three linguistic skills, the rankorder is the following: listening: telephone conversations/messages and academic lectures; speaking: telephone conversations/messages and introduction to place of work; writing: reports, minutes, product descriptions (Kurtán 1997: 163-164).

Koster and Radnai (1997) surveyed companies in and around Pécs. Their research confirmed that German was the language most often considered the first priority in business context, followed by English, with French, Russian, Spanish and other languages lagging behind considerably. They identified the frequency of occurrence of various language activities in German and English and also areas of difficulty. Their results concerning frequency of occurrence of tasks in English are the following: reading/writing letters/faxes, telephone/business/personal conversations, reading business magazines/reports, taking part in meetings, giving presentations, negotiations, listening to presentations and negotiations. The German rankorder list is very similar to the English one except that conducting business conversations and giving presentations seem less frequent (Koster and Radnai 1997: 40).

In the framework of a national project one of the authors (Tompos 2001) carried out a survey in order to identify broad genres employed by professionals working in the areas of agriculture, business and economics, engineering, law and medicine. She found

socialising/personal conversations, telephone conversations with professionals and non-professionals, negotiations with professionals, interviews, consultations with professionals, professional meetings and short presentations to non-professionals to be the most frequently used genres, which were also considered important ‘oral genres’ by her subjects. As for ‘written genres’, the rankorder was the following: notices/internal messages, responsive letters to professionals, short reports, initiative and responsive faxes and e-mail messages.

Since the millennium several examinations have taken the local or regional perspective. For example, Bajzát (2010, 2012) carried out research among employees working for companies operating in Northern Hungary. She examined how their foreign language knowledge and intercultural skills contribute to their professional performance. Mohácsi (2012) mapped out companies’ expectations regarding work-related foreign language use in the north-eastern region while Földi et al (2013) studied what potential employers of Szolnok College graduates look for in terms of foreign language competencies. In Győr and its area Konczosné Szombathelyi (e.g. 2005a, 2005b, 2007, 2008) examined the language needs of managers while Szőke (e.g. 2013, 2014) studied the intercultural challenges they meet.

In Western Transdanubia, an Austro-Hungarian project set out to develop the intercultural and information technology-related competencies of small-and medium-sized enterprises operating in the border regions, with the ultimate aim of supporting cooperation and enhancing their competitiveness (Ablonczyné Mihályka and Tompos 2011). The research found that the foreign language skills of Hungarian employees are lower than those of their Austrian counterparts and also that Hungarians tend to attribute miscommunication to their insufficient foreign language knowledge rather than to the lack of their intercultural skills (Tompos 2012).

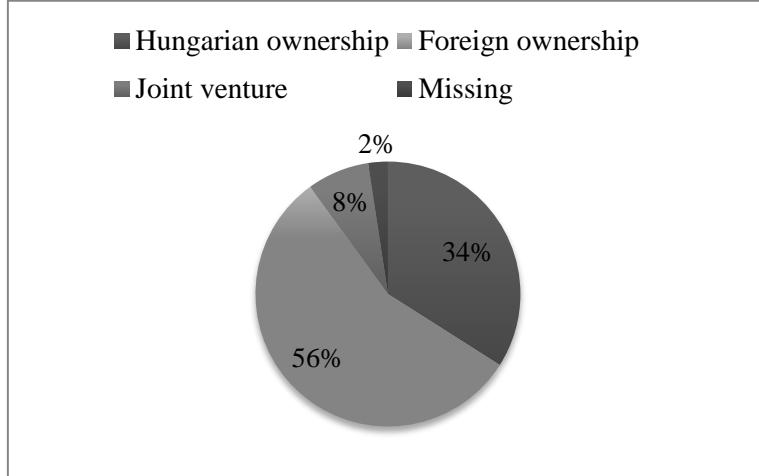
Purpose, methods and data

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to research on work-related foreign language use. In particular it addresses the question of which foreign languages employees working in the West Transdanubian region speak and what genres they use in internal and external communication. The data come from a questionnaire designed to map out language use, organisational behaviour and negotiating habits (Ablonczyné Mihályka and Tompos 2013).

The respondents were selected by quota sampling. The quote was established on the basis of Hungarian Central Bureau of Statistics data on the ratio of economic sectors which companies operating in the Western Transdanubian region represent. A total of 268 answers were received. SPSS 18.0 was used to process and analyse data. The following analysis relies on the responses given by 250 subjects due to data cleaning. 68% of the respondents work in the service industry, 25.2% is employed in industry and 3.2% in agriculture, while 3.6% did not give information on the economic sector. The answers of 125 male and 114 female subjects are considered (plus 11 respondents who did not give information on their gender), 62.8% of whom represent the younger generation (between 20-35), 28.8% the middle-aged generation (between 36-50) and only 6.8% the 51+ age category. 205 of the respondents hold a bachelor’s or master’s degree.

155 companies operate in one of the county seats (Győr, Zalaegerszeg, Szombathely), 82 in other towns and only 8 in a smaller settlement. 137 companies have more than 250 employees, 50 of them between 50 and 249, 41 between 10 and 49 and only 17 enterprises employ 2-10 people. The company ownership figures reflect the fact that all three of the region’s counties are located along the Austro-Hungarian border, since 56% of them are owned by foreign investors, 34% are owned by Hungarians, while 8% are joint ventures (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Company ownership



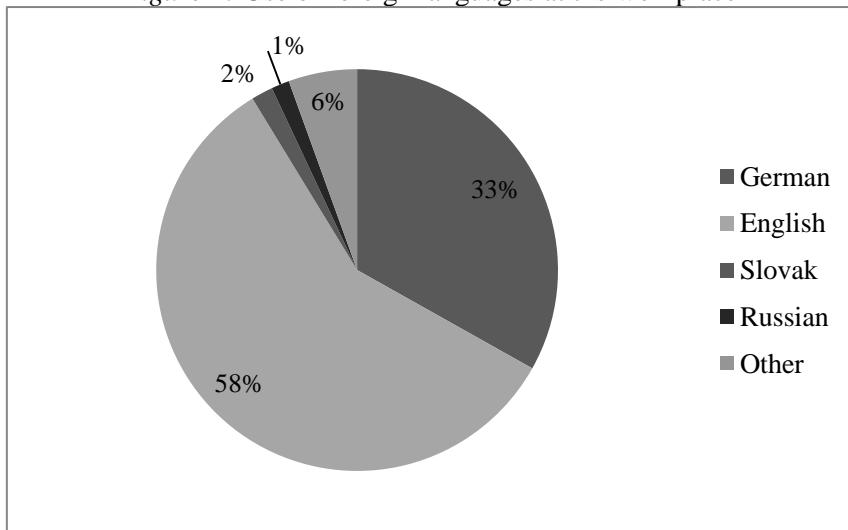
Source: own data

Findings and discussion

246 respondents speak at least one foreign language (English or German) at least at B2 level (CEFL), 180 speak a second foreign language and 72 even a third one. 222 subjects speak English, 164 German, 24 Russian, 15 Spanish, 12 French, 9 Italian, 8 Slovakian and 4 Romanian. The Chinese, Bulgarian, Dutch and Portuguese languages are spoken by 2-2 respondents, whereas Catalan, Polish, Swedish and Turkish by 1-1. The figures for the more commonly spoken foreign languages are believed to reflect the interplay between border location, company ownership and company size. The finding that English and German are followed by Russian although more than half of the respondents are younger than 36 years of age, which means they did study Russian as a compulsory language in primary and secondary education, is attributed to Hungarian companies' recent efforts to break into the Russian market.

As shown in Figure 2, English is spoken most frequently at the workplace, closely followed by German, with the other foreign languages considerably lagging behind. The primacy of English is considered a small wonder, whereas the relatively high frequency of German is attributed to the examined region's geographical closeness to Austrian and German markets as well as the high presence of German and Austrian companies in Western Transdanubia.

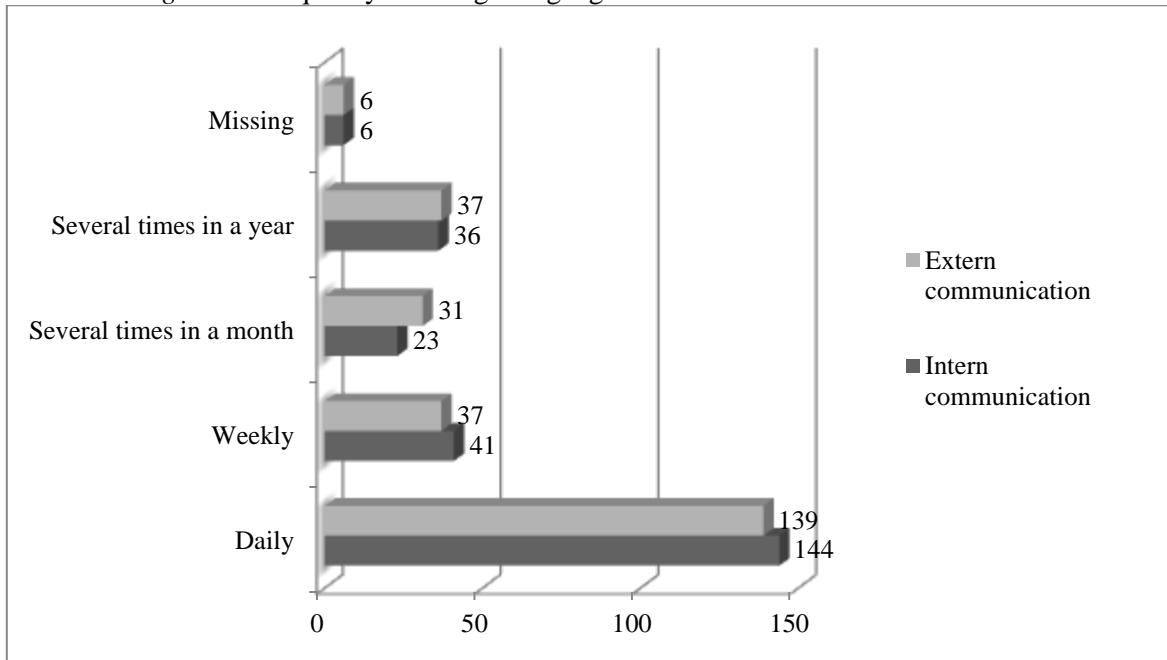
Figure 2: Use of foreign languages at the workplace



Source: own data

Figure 3 summarises the frequency of foreign language use in internal and external communication. The majority of the subjects use a foreign language/foreign languages on a daily basis both in internal and external communication. A further 37 respondents use a foreign language weekly in external communication and 41 in internal communication. It is thought an interesting finding that several subjects who use a foreign language on a daily or weekly basis claimed they use it more often in internal communication than in external settings.

Figure 3: Frequency of foreign languages in internal and external communication



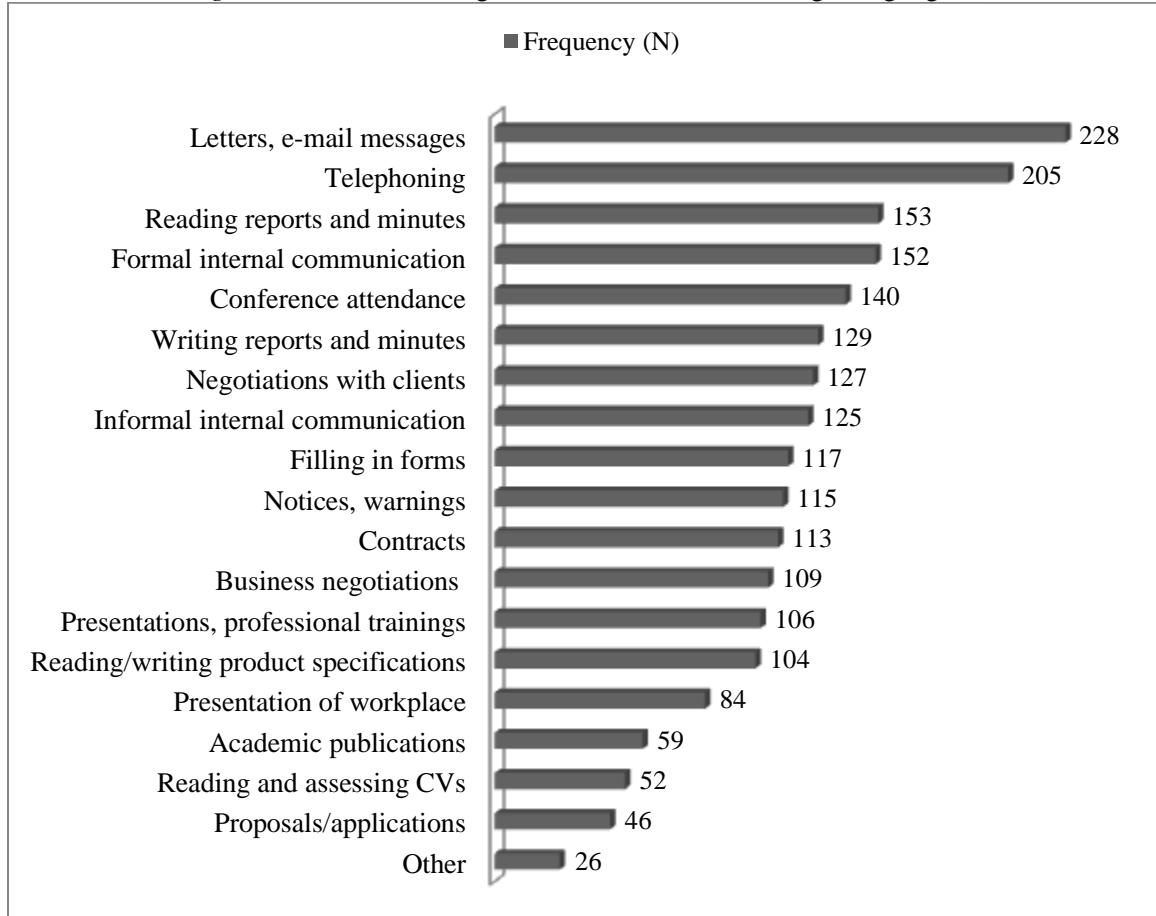
Source: own data

Figure 4 shows the genres and activities the respondents use and carry out in a foreign language. The vast majority of the subjects employs (electronic) correspondence and telephone conversations. This latter genre has been on top of frequency lists for a long time (cf. e.g. Teemant et al 1993, Koster and Radnai 1997, reviewed above). The reading and writing of letters is believed to have gained greater importance due to the increase in electronic correspondence. Reports come second after letters in terms of reading and writing. The high ranking of internal communication in a foreign language is attributed to the fact that the majority of respondents work for international companies or joint ventures.

Genres related to face-to-face communication, such as negotiations, trainings and presentations seem to be much less frequent. Socialising, personal conversations at the workplace are also ranked lower than in previous pieces of research (e.g. Teemant et al 1993, Tompos 2001). At the bottom of the frequency list we can find academic publications, cv-s and proposals/applications. These genres are related to specific tasks, for example the reading and assessment of cv-s, typical in the area of human resources management, whereas academic publications are read (and perhaps written) only by professionals involved in research.

The respondents were given the opportunity to add further genres and activities to the list. Very few of them did so. Six subjects added the reading and writing of technological procedures and product specifications, while the reading of statutes and measures were named by two of them. Further genres and activities which were mentioned include orders and bids, translation, invoices and bills.

Figure 4: Activities and genres related to use of foreign language(s)



Source: own data

Conclusion

The above-presented results show that foreign language knowledge is a competence employees of Western Transdanubian companies are expected to have. More than half of the respondents claimed to use a foreign language both in internal and external communication on a daily basis. Given this, it is a small wonder that almost 90% of the survey subjects speak at least one foreign language and more than 70% a second one as well. In this region, the knowledge of German seems to be almost as important as that of English.

The results have important information for those involved in LSP instruction and language policy as well. They show that the development of reading and writing for specific purposes is indispensable, no matter how popular the ‘spoken’ courses (e.g. presentations and/or negotiations) are. The teaching of how to write letters in a foreign language is a big challenge and takes much effort due to the relative lack of published genre-based ESP instructional materials, but it seems it pays.

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