

LABOUR MARKET, VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND LSP TEACHING

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Abstract

This paper has three objectives: The first is to provide a brief description of the labour market tendencies and trends and how these affect vocational training. The second is to focus on the current state situation of LSP teaching – as an integral part of vocational training – in Hungary. Furthermore, how an LSP teacher should respond to labour market expectations. The third is to report the findings of a survey planned, executed and analysed by the author. The survey is concerned with how the average Hungarian company (employer) sees the importance of linguistic and LSP competence.

Keywords: competence-based training, LSP (language for specific purposes) teaching, linguistic and specialist competence, selection of text, survey.

1. Labour Market and Vocational Training

The economic, technological and political changes taking place all over the world the past few decades have created serious challenges to education. Since the responses often fail to be adequate, fast and effective enough, we can read more and more about the crisis in (world) education. What are the changes that have a decisive influence on the educational, training and vocational training systems all over the world? The training and vocational training systems that must equip school-leavers with vocational skills and knowledge meet the needs of the labour market.

1. The globalisation of economic life: the formation of huge multinational companies, national economies becoming more and more open and the consequent migration of people of working age, companies' efforts to find regions with cheaper and better trained and skilled labour force. Increasing labour mobility needs foreign language knowledge and very often LSP competence as well.
2. Economic development presupposing a better trained, more committed and more flexible labour force.

Foreign language knowledge is part of well-rounded education and training.

3. Technologies going out-of-date fast, consequently the need for an effective and flexible further- and retraining system that can provide individualised training.

While reading in a foreign language the time of keeping pace with the latest technical literature can be reduced.

4. The rapid and extensive development of the telecommunication industry making information and knowledge transfer possible and transcending geographical boundaries.

The use of knowledge networks presupposes foreign language competence – that of the contact language.

5. The globalisation of scientific life and education, the information revolution and the emerging information superhighway, the necessity of sharing and transferring information, the utilisation of information technology in education and research. Students' and researchers' mobility also supposes foreign language competence.

If the Hungarian educational system wishes to satisfy the demands made on future employees by the employers, a fundamental change of attitude must take place in the training and vocational training system. This change of attitude must be followed by changes in the educational and training structures, the conditions, the curricula and last but not least, changes in the social scale of values or respectively in the students' and the teachers' attitude.

One of the changes taking place is that traditional knowledge-based vocational training courses are replaced by competence-based ones. Competence-based training focuses on the professional content (knowledge, skills, abilities) and non-profession specific skills, competencies (core skills) as well. Among other things skills, abilities enabling for independent learning and information acquisition; flexible adaptation to new tasks and jobs; working in team; communication and the use of information and communication technology. There is a continuous feedback between those entering the course, the training and those leaving the course. The syllabus is designed and the material is selected on the basis of the learners' needs. Economic-political goals, international and Hungarian labour market trends, learners' target groups, training needs, learning strategies, assessment and the available resources are regularly analysed and if needed the course content and the teaching practices are changed.

When examining job adverts – this is when future employees first meet employers' expectations – and analysing their demands, expectations we will find that:

Employees need to be able to perform specific jobs so they need to be equipped with the necessary skills and abilities. They do not only need the knowledge any more which used to be the basis of training. This means that

the employers' and consequently the employees' expectations of the training institutions have changed.

The importance of language and LSP teaching in vocational training is only questioned by a few if any.

2. LSP Teaching

Teaching LSP is a special aspect of language teaching. Although the curricula before World War 2 also contained LSP teaching objectives, its approach did not fundamentally differ from that of general language teaching. The only important difference was in the texts. Teaching LSP meant reading and word-by-word translation of special texts, grammar and vocabulary substitution exercises. The situation changed in the 1960s - 1970s, first in the teaching of general language, then in the teaching of language for specific purposes. The communicative approach began to dominate, replacing the structuralist approach. Grammar-based syllabuses were replaced by function-based ones.

What are the characteristics of LSP teaching today?

LSP is primarily taught and studied in graduate - college and university - and postgraduate courses. Thus students of LSP are mainly adults. (Except for the pupils of dual-language or non-Hungarian-language secondary schools, that have to acquire certain LSP knowledge and skills to be able to study special subjects in a foreign language.) Furthermore, LSP courses are offered for those who are already mastering the language (the level of the intermediate level state language examination). In a few higher educational institutions, LSP courses are only offered for those having passed this examination.

LSP is studied because the specific knowledge and skills provided are necessary either for study (acquiring or sharing knowledge) or occupational purposes (promotion, better job prospects, etc.). That is LSP is studied for practical purposes and the students thus have a strong instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation (identifying with social and cultural aspects) is rarely characteristic of LSP students. Thus LSP teachers are rarely faced with the task of eliminating motivation problems. More often than not, students of LSP are also aware of their linguistic shortcomings and tend to have little tolerance of what they consider irrelevant. Even knowing LSP learners' needs and their attitude to learning, it is not easy to select text (material) for an LSP course. What makes the selection even more difficult is the fact that, while general language teaching is sentence-based, LSP teaching is text based. *Table 1* shows the possible situations and the differences in linguistic or respectively specialist competence of potential students of LSP and the difficulties in selecting text (material) implied in these differences.

Table 1. Problems of selection of text

Linguistic competence	Specialist competence	Text/Material
Low	Low	Simplified technical texts, low-level technical books
Higher than specialist competence	Low	Simplified technical texts, low-level technical books
Low	Higher than linguistic competence	Authentic technical books are not too useful since they were not written for language teaching purposes, simplified technical texts cannot be used

The first two situations – low-level linguistic and specialist competence or respectively low-level specialist competence and somewhat higher-level linguistic competence – are normally characteristic of first- and second-year college and university students. In these situations authentic ('genuine') or adapted (simplified, synthesised) texts seem to be the best choice. Although, using less complex materials can make language teaching more effective, using popular scientific texts should be avoided.

The third possible situation – low-level linguistic competence and higher-level specialist competence – is normally characteristic of third- and fourth-year students or those who have been working in the given profession for some time and either learnt the language a long time ago or have been learning it for a short time. Here the selection of texts also raises problems. Obviously adapted, simplified texts cannot be used. On the other hand, authentic texts focus on transferring information, conveying a real message, that is were written for some other purposes than language teaching.

In conclusion it can be said that selection of texts must be a function of the students' linguistic, specialist and conceptual competence. Since at the Technical University of Budapest students can take LSP courses (General Technical Language I, General Technical Language II and subject-specific language courses) at any time during their studies, obviously it is hard if not impossible to 'predict' their linguistic and specialist competence, that is to prepare for any 'possibility', to fulfil all learners' needs. However, in order to sustain the learners' motivation, texts that provide new information both in the use of language and in the specialist content must be selected. Consequently, it seems to be the best solution if the teacher herself/himself develops ('creates' and 'synthesises') materials, although most teachers turn to this solution only driven by necessity. Materials development presupposes thorough grounding, among other things, in pedagogy, methodology and linguistics and it is time consuming. (The necessary knowledge and skills should be included in the syllabus of (language) teacher training courses.)

The fact that the LSP teacher – so to speak – does not master the specialist knowledge is a serious problem in both LSP teaching and LSP materials development. The third- and fourth-year – professionally more advanced – students are willing to ‘help’ the language teacher when it turns out that she/he lacks specialist competence. Nevertheless, teachers have long become accustomed to being the providers of new information and find it embarrassing to be in need of help. An obvious, but partial solution to the problem can be consultation with special subject teachers. LSP teachers may have to face a shift in paradigm and change their attitude to teaching much sooner than their colleagues, that is accept the fact that they are ‘only’ facilitators of learning, inductors of acquiring knowledge and skills.

3. Survey

In order to get a better picture of Hungarian employers’ expectations of prospective employees’ general language and LSP competence, I am conducting a survey. I planned a questionnaire consisting of 24 questions and sent it to Hungarian engineering or mixed profile companies and joint ventures. The companies can be taken to be fairly representative since they were randomly chosen from newspaper adverts. I have analysed the questionnaires returned so far and found the following results.

(An English-language copy of the questionnaire is to be found in the Appendix.)

1. Over 50% of the companies are engineering companies, the rest are primarily economic and financial or respectively mixed profile ones.
2. In the case of their graduate employees, 100% of the companies consider language knowledge important and partly necessary. 43% of them consider it very important or of decisive importance.
3. In the case of the future graduate employees, all companies consider language knowledge important and partly necessary. 57% of them consider it very important or of decisive importance.
4. Language knowledge is a precondition of employment only in 30% of the companies, it is a precondition of employment primarily in the case of those either holding a leading post or a special post. 70% of the companies partly consider as a precondition of employment. *None* of the companies said that language knowledge is *not* a precondition of employment.
5. All the companies are satisfied with knowledge of *one* language. In this respect the Hungarian employers’ viewpoint is far behind that of the European Union, where knowledge of *at least two* languages is desirable.

Changes in the labour force expectations and in the employers’ attitude seem to be necessary in order that the judgement of the importance of learning languages should change. A questionnaire survey

is not able to reveal the actual reasons – resulting from the realistic gauging of the situation and the opportunities – behind the answers.

- 6.-7. Despite the fact that 70% of the companies accepts state language examination certificates and 15% of them does not, each employer wishes to ensure applicants' language knowledge in a certain form. Almost 30% of them do so on the basis of a foreign language CV, another 30% of them do so on the basis of an interview in the given language with a native speaker, 40% of them wishes to do so on the basis of an interview in the given language with a Hungarian person, and only one employer wishes to make sure of the language knowledge during the term of probation.
8. Half of the companies wishes to make sure of candidates' LSP knowledge partly during the interview and partly during the term of probation. The other half of the companies believes that the employees will acquire the necessary LSP knowledge and skills at work.
9. 70% of the companies that responded believe that their employees holding a degree need to use foreign languages daily, the other companies believe that their employees use them more rarely (weekly or monthly).
10. Although the English language obviously has a 'leading' role, one company considers French and another one considers German important.
11. 70% of the companies asked think that at least intermediate knowledge of a foreign language is needed, one company thinks advanced level is required and 60% of the companies think that LSP knowledge and skills are also important.
12. Speaking is unanimously considered to be the most important skill, writing, reading and listening skills are considered to be of equal importance. This opinion coincides with the objectives of the educational institutions that all the four skills should be developed and the students should master and be able to use all the four skills.
13. As far as the companies' satisfaction with the language knowledge of those starting their career is concerned the answers vary: 45% of the companies is satisfied, 15% is not satisfied and 30% is partly satisfied. This survey is not adequate to analyse this problem. But such factors as individual skills, abilities, motivation and the differences of the language teaching methods of different educational institutions obviously influence the answers.
14. The answers for this question vary greatly: LSP knowledge and skills are found to be lacking but so are speaking and negotiating skills. The answers coincide with the involved language teachers' opinion, that is there is still much to be improved in language teaching. The development of communication skills and that of LSP knowledge and skills are becoming more and more important.

15. 75% of the companies provides regular and organised opportunities for language learning. Two companies provide occasional opportunities and with one company learning languages is only possible with a private tutor. The fact that a high percentage of the companies provides regular and organised opportunities on the one hand underlines the importance of language knowledge, on the other hand might suggest dissatisfaction with the language knowledge of those with a university degree starting their career.
16. 45% of the companies provide general language teaching, 15% LSP teaching and 30% provide both when required.
17. As much as the character of further training is concerned the answers also vary: professional trainings abroad and on-line computer language programs - as possible ways of language learning - were also mentioned besides the possibilities on the questionnaire.
18. They regard their experience in distance learning as insufficient.
19. They think they might 'experiment with' distance learning but they unanimously lack experience.
20. 75% of the companies know about distance teaching institutions, though only 15% know of three or more and 15% do not know of any such institutions.
21. 100% of the companies think that general language teaching and LSP teaching must be an integral part of the higher educational curricula.
22. Prior to this survey none of the companies were sought by a higher educational institution to inquire about their expectations concerning the language knowledge of those starting their career and to be employed.
23. 75% of the companies find such an inquiry of higher educational institutions and the co-operation useful, and 15% of them have solved the problem of language teaching, consequently they do not find the co-operation important.
24. The answers concerning the necessity of refreshing and improving LSP knowledge and skills vary: 30% of the companies thinks it should be refreshed continuously, 30% think it should be done every 3-5 year and 15% think it should be done every 5-10 years.

Since the survey is likely to end in a few months' time, final conclusions can only be drawn then.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

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Profile of the company:

1. What diploma do most of your graduate employees?
 - (a) Engineering
 - (b) Law
 - (c) Economics
 - (d) Medicine
 - (e) Finance
 - (f) Other (Please, give details.)
2. How important is language knowledge in case of your present graduate employees?
 - (a) Not important
 - (b) Partly necessary
 - (c) Important
 - (d) Very important
 - (e) Of decisive importance

3. How important is language knowledge in case of your present and future graduate applicants?
 - (a) Not important
 - (b) Partly necessary
 - (c) Important
 - (d) Very important
 - (e) Of decisive importance
4. Is language knowledge a precondition of employment?
 - (a) Yes
 - (b) No
 - (c) Partly
 - (d) No, but it is a bonus
5. If your answer for the previous question is 'yes', knowledge of how many languages is necessary for employment?
 - (a) One
 - (b) Two
 - (c) Three or more
6. Do you accept language certificates (state language examination certificate or university language examination ('szigorlat') equivalent to the state language examination)?
 - (a) Yes
 - (b) No
 - (c) It depends on the higher educational institution.
7. If your answer for the previous question is 'no', do you test the applicant's language knowledge in the interview (or at any other time before the employment)?
 - (a) Yes, on the basis of his/her CV written in the foreign language
 - (b) Yes, in an interview in the foreign language
 - (c) Yes, in an interview with a native speaker of the foreign language
 - (d) Any other way (Please give details.)
8. Do you test specific language (LSP) knowledge?
 - (a) Yes
 - (b) No, we provide LSP training
 - (c) No, he/she will learn it at work.
 - (d) Other (Please give details.)
9. How often do your employees use foreign languages?
 - (a) Daily
 - (b) Weekly
 - (c) Monthly
 - (d) Occasionally, but not more often than twice or three times a year.

10. Which languages are important for your company?
- English
 - German
 - Russian
 - French
 - Other (Please give details.)
11. What level of competency in languages used is necessary?
- Basic
 - Intermediate
 - Advanced
 - LSP competence (basic, intermediate, advanced level – Please, underline the appropriate.)
12. Please, rank the skills which your employees need most. (1. not important 2. partly necessary 3. important 4. very important 5. of decisive importance)
- | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Speaking (negotiations, discussions) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Writing (letter writing) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Reading (special literature, reports) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Listening (phone calls) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
13. Are you satisfied with the language competence of those graduates who are starting their career?
- Yes
 - No
 - Partly
14. If your answer for the previous question is 'no', what do you think the greatest problem is? (Tick several if appropriate.)
- Poor LSP competence
 - Poor speaking skill (negotiating, discussing)
 - Poor reading skill
 - Poor writing skill (writing letters)
 - Poor knowledge of grammar
 - Other (please, give details.)
15. Do your employees have opportunities to learn languages?
- Yes, regularly and in an organized form
 - Yes, occasionally and in an organized form
 - No, (only with a private tutor)
16. If your answer for the previous question is 'yes', what sort of language training do you provide?
- General language
 - LSP
 - Both
 - When required

17. What is the language training like? (Tick several if appropriate.)
- (a) On-site course in office hours (with a full-time or part-time language teacher)
 - (b) On-site course after office hours (with a full-time or part-time language teacher)
 - (c) Course in a language school in office hours
 - (d) Course in a language school after office hours
 - (e) Distance learning course
 - (f) Other (please, give details.)
18. How satisfied are you with distance learning if you have experimented with it?
- (a) Very satisfied
 - (b) Partly satisfied
 - (c) Dissatisfied
 - (d) Experience is insufficient
19. If you do not have any experience with distance learning, do you consider it as a possible method for your employees to learn languages?
- (a) Yes
 - (b) No
 - (c) Possible
 - (d) Information is insufficient.
20. Do you know any educational institutions which offer distance learning courses?
- (a) Yes - one or two
 - (b) Yes - three or more
 - (c) No
21. Do you think language teaching should be an integral part of higher educational curricula?
- (a) Yes, only general language
 - (b) Yes, LSP too
 - (c) Yes, both (general language and LSP)
 - (d) No, not necessary
22. Has any college or university sought you out to inquire about your expectations concerning the linguistic competence of those graduates about to take up employment?
- (a) Yes - several times
 - (b) Yes - once
 - (c) No

23. Do you think such inquiry is useful and would you cooperate (E.g. by providing authentic texts to be used for language teaching purposes)?
- (a) Yes. (Please give details.)
 - (b) No
 - (c) Possibly - it depends (Please give details.)
24. How often should LSP knowledge and skills be improved and refreshed in your opinion?
- (a) Every 3 years or less
 - (b) Every 3-5 years
 - (c) Every 5-10 years
 - (d) 10 years or over