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**FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS AS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE FOR EMPLOYMENT IN EASTERN CROATIA**

**VJEŠTINE STRANOG JEZIKA KAO PREDNOST PRI ZAPOŠLJAVANJU U ISTOČNOJ HRVATSKOJ**

**ABSTRACT**

Language is a sophisticated, yet basic tool in our ability to communicate. Foreign language skills, which enhance the ability to communicate with people from around the world, have become valuable due to the requirements of the multicultural and multilingual labor market. Foreign languages are taught at higher education institutions (HEI) in Croatia, as twenty-first century graduates are expected to have acquired the skill of at least one foreign language. The aim of this research is to develop an understanding of foreign language skills, which are needed in general, but also considered and valued as an advantage for employment in Eastern Croatia. In the research conducted in April 2015, a questionnaire (for three subgroups - employers, students and HE educators from Eastern Croatia) was used to evaluate the perception of the importance of foreign language skills. Although the research demonstrates that foreign language skills are regarded as a highly-valued skill mainly due to the fact that businesses in Eastern Croatia compete in international markets and are export oriented, a disparity is noticed as students gave foreign language skills a slightly higher importance for employability than educators and employers. Knowing how to communicate in a foreign language makes graduates competitive and contributes to a more successful career. Both the academic and business sector might benefit from the results about the necessity of foreign language skills gained in this research. While our world is changing rapidly, the only thing that remains is the language which is the instrument for the future. The need for foreign language skills is higher than ever, and the skill itself should therefore be cared for.

**Key words**: foreign language skills, graduates, employability, employers, higher education institution (HEI)

**SAŽETAK**

Jezik je sofisticiran, premda osnovni alat u našoj sposobnosti komuniciranja. Vještine stranog jezika koje unaprjeđuju sposobnost komuniciranja s ljudima diljem svijeta, postale su dragocijene zbog potreba multikulturalnog i multijezičnog tržišta rada. Strani se jezici uče na visokoškolskim institucijama u Hrvatskoj te se od studenta dvadest i prvog stoljeća očekuje posjedovanje usvojenih vještina barem jednog stranog jezika. Cilj je ovog istraživanja razviti razumijevanje za vještine stranog jezika, koje su potrebne ne samo općenito, nego se i cijene kao prednost pri zapošljivanju u istočnoj Hrvatskoj. U istraživanju provedem u travnju 2015.godine korištena je anketa (za tri podgrupe - poslodavci, studenti te profesori visoko obrazovnih institucija iz istočne Hrvatske) kako bi se procijenila percepcija važnosti vještina stranog jezika. Premda istraživanje prikazuje da se vještinama stranog jezika pridaje visoka važnost većinom zbog činjenice da se poslovi u istočnoj Hrvatskoj natječu na internacionalnim tržištima te su orijentirane prema izvozu, primjećen je raskorak među podgrupama jer su studenti vještinama stranog jezika dali neznatno veću važnost pri zapošljivosti od profesora i poslodavaca. Sposobnost komuniciranja na stranom jeziku čini studente konkurentnima te doprinosi uspješnijoj karijeri. Akademski i poslovni sektor mogu profitirati od rezultata o potrebi vještina stranog jezika koji su istraženi u ovom istraživanju. Premda se naš svijet brzo mijenja, jedino što ostaje je jezik koji je instrument za budućnost. Potreba za vještinama stranog jezika veća je nego ikada, a sama vještina bi se trebala njegovati.

**Ključne riječi**: vještine stranog jezika, studenti, zapošljivost, poslodavci, visokoobrazovne institucije

1. **Introduction**

International business communication is achieved by only one means, language. It has become crucial to global business effectiveness to understand the complicated relationship between foreign language skills and their effect on day-to-day operations (Brannen et al, 2014). As Itani (2014) noticed, foreign language skills represent a key career competence today because of internationalization, reduced job security, and a shift in career ownership to the individual. Furthermore, Stöhr (2015) mentioned that graduates with foreign language skills grease the wheels of international business relations. It is important to notice that without foreign language skills, businesses in the world, and especially businesses in Croatia cannot compete on the multilingual multinational market. In addition, Stöhr (2015) noticed that specifically English language has become the key qualification in many occupations. However, the question of ensuring and acquiring language skill in Croatia is still not sufficiently articulated. Are all students as well as graduates equipped with enough foreign language knowledge to be able to acquire skills which they will then use for future employment in businesses with international contacts? Higher education institutions in Croatia provide different foreign language classes and it is up to students to work on acquiring foreign language skills during their HE in order to become more competitive for employment.

Since the world has become immensely technology infused, the businesses even in a small country such as Croatia have to keep up the pace of growth and change if they want to prosper and should therefore strive for not just local but also international success. Based on our experience, companies need employees with IT skills, international awareness and foreign language skills in order to be internationally successful.

The aim of this research was to compare the perception of foreign language skills from employers’, educators’ and students’ perspective as well as to compare the assessed contribution of teaching at HEI to the development of mentioned skills. Research in Croatia on the influence of foreign language skills for employment is rather limited. This paper contributes the existing body of literature by comparing employers’ educators’ and students’ assessment of importance of foreign language skills for employment, as well as their evaluations of the contribution of teaching at HEI to acquisition of foreign language skills.

The paper consists of an introduction with four research hypotheses, detailed literature review on foreign language skills, employability skills and employers’ view of foreign language skills, followed by methodology used for the research, results and discussion. Further study, as well as limitations are mentioned in the conclusion.

For this research the following hypotheses have been constructed:

H1: Employers in Croatia value the importance of foreign language skills.

H2: Students, educators and employers in Croatia have different perceptions of the

importance of foreign language skills for employment.

H3: Employers in Croatia rate the importance of foreign language skills higher than

students and/or educators.

H4: Employers in Croatia are satisfied with the contribution of teaching at HEI to the

development of foreign language skills.

1. **Literature Review**

The need for communication among businesses worldwide is higher than ever because companies need to compete in international markets (Fernandez-Sanchez, 2016). It is foreign language skills in particular that serve as a medium for international communication. Research on the need of foreign language skills dates back as early as 1998 (T. Evers et al, 1998). During their HE, graduates are expected to acquire the skill of foreign languages not only because the skill ads to their competitiveness in the labor market but, according to employers, it also enriches their personality by enabling them to resolve problems quicker and make decisions more easily (Born Global, 2014).

* 1. **Foreign Language Skills**

Interestingly, in the beginning of 2000’s foreign language skills were regarded as the least important skill for employability (Bennet, 2002), therefore it is not surprising that during that time period graduates were regarded as being the worst at foreign languages, initiative and self-confidence. Nonetheless, after less than a decade the situation changed drastically. Foreign language skills have become an essential requirement for future graduates (Eurobarometer, 2010). Acquisition of foreign language skills gives competitive advantage to both the individual and the company that the individual works for. Foreign language skills have, in the past decade, been given high emphasis for employability among graduates due to the needs of language variety in the labor market. Also, the mere ability to communicate in a foreign language is considered to be the key to accomplishing a prosperous career (Fernandez-Sanchez, 2016). The need for foreign language skills in business is evident from numerous multicultural and multilingual partnerships in countries around the world. Therefore, if there is active participation in the knowledge society and economy, communication in languages other than the mother tongue should be enabled. However, in 2007 a study reported 11% of SMEs across wider Europe to be losing export business on account of the lack of language skills (CILT, 2007). With businesses expanding and goods being exported onto foreign markets, the necessity for graduates with foreign language skills is growing apparent. Since graduates are the future of a company, their communication skills in foreign language are tools for creating a more lucrative outcome for the company they work for.

* 1. **Employability Skills**

Employability skills, or as Lee (2001) puts it job-getting skills, are skills that are relevant for securing and preserving jobs. International experience, foreign-language skills and intercultural competencies are all considered an advantage for graduate employability (Messelink, 2015). They are core skills that consist of generic and discipline-specific skills required for performance in a work situation (Bridgstock, 2009). In addition, graduate recruiters believe that graduates should contribute to the company 'from day one' (Atkins, 1999). International and overseas professional work experience adds to graduate employability as well as demonstrating entrepreneurial qualities, such as innovative approaches, creativity and collaboration. Apart from skills and attributes, there are also plenty of inter-related competences which promote employability such as open-mindedness, adaptable graduates (Little, 2010), proactive graduates who use critical thinking (Harvey et al., 2002), and graduate’s awareness of opportunities in the labor market (Rothwell and Arnold, 2007). Some of the many skills employers in European Union believe that the HEI should develop in students are a deeper understanding and respect for global issues, more favorable attitudes toward other cultures, stronger intercultural communication skills, improved personal and professional self-image, better foreign language skills, self-confidence, ability to handle ambiguity, insight into their own value systems and overall maturity (Cai in Salisbury et al. 2009).

* 1. **Employers’ View on Foreign Language Skills**

The road to a successful international career is facilitated by language skills. Foreign language skills are important and especially useful in strengthening relationships with clients, customers and suppliers and aiding staff mobility within the organization (Born Global, 2014). Nevertheless, year after year employers point out to the low quantity of foreign language skills of the new graduates which are further accompanied by low levels of international cultural awareness. According to Eurobarometer (2010) employers who have international contacts consider foreign language skills highly important for recruiting graduates (58% for those with more than 50% of “international” day-to-day operations, compared to 17% for those with no international contacts), but also see international mobility and language skills as important capabilities in a new graduate (Archer and Davidson, 2008). As Kelly (2016) stated, in order to work efficiently we need to be able to communicate effectively, which is why graduate recruiters consider ‘communication skills’ to be their key requirement in recruiting staff. English language skills are clearly needed in interactive service jobs (Kurekova, 2015), but language skills and the ability to use new technologies for example, have been identified as most important for the development of marketing degree curriculum, according to an investigation of marketing graduates in Portugal (Mansour and Dean, 2016). HEI are responsible for “delivering employable global graduates” (Messelink, 2015) and that is the reason why today’s 21st century graduate should have foreign language skills acquired throughout the HE. A recent research (Božić, Pintarić, 2017) was conducted at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, Computer Science and Information Technology at the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek establishing that as much as 81,9% of employers expect graduates to have an advanced knowledge of foreign language skills, especially the English language.

1. **Methodology**

The purpose for this empirical research was to examine how important foreign language skills are for student employability from the perspective of Croatian employers, students and educators, and to find out how much they value the contribution of teaching at HEI to the development of foreign language skills. This assessment is presented in order to raise the awareness among educators and students at all levels, regarding the advantage of the foreign language for employment.

The survey used for this research was modelled by two previously conducted surveys in Europe: the European Commission’s Eurobarometar 2010 titled “Employers’ perception of graduate employability” and the UK Commission’s Employer Skills Survey 2013: UK results (Winterbotham et al., 2014). The questionnaire entailed a seven-point Likert scales as answers, one being not important and seven being extremely important. In total, 625 interviewees (students, educators and employers) participated. 67% were students from the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, 21.4% were employers and 11.5% were educators from the University.

**4. Results and Discussion**

The survey examined the importance of foreign language skills and the contribution of teaching at HEI in Eastern Croatia to the development of graduates’ foreign language skills. Although certain agreement is noticed in opinions regarding the importance of foreign language skills and the contribution of teaching at HEI to the development of graduates’ foreign language skills, considerable differences are also evident.

As expected, all three groups of interviewees value the importance of foreign language skills much more than contribution of teaching at HEI to the development of foreign language skills.

As can be seen from the Table 1, foreign language skills were rated by both students (6.25) and employers (6.04) as highly important for employment. Surprisingly, educators assessed the importance of foreign language skills lower, with a mean of 5.93. The contribution of teaching at HEI to the development of foreign language skills is valued higher by educators (4.93) and employers (4.68) than by students, who rate the contribution of teaching at HEI lower with a score of 4.51. Employers ranked the contribution of teaching at HEI among the highest to development of foreign language skills, similar to educators (Rank 9) whereas students believe HE teaching contributes to other skills more than to foreign language skills.

**Table 1 Assessment of Importance for Employability and Contribution of HEI to the Development of Foreign Language Skills**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  | Employers |  |  | Students |  |  | Educators |  | *p Value\** |  |
|  |  | *Mean* | Std.Dev. | Rank | *Mean* | Std.Dev. | Rank | *Mean* | Std.Dev. | Rank |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Importance of foreign language  skills for employability |  | 6.04 | 1.07 | 9 | 6.25 | 1.15 | 1 | 5.93 | 0.91 | 7 | 0.0091 |  |
|  | Contribution of teaching at HEI to the development of foreign language skills |  | 4.68 | 1.61 | 3 | 4.51 | 1.69 | 13 | 4.93 | 1.39 | 9 | 0.3940 |  |

\*p-value is given for Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA test

The next section discusses similarities and differences in rating given to foreign language skills and some other employability skills evaluated in the survey. In Table 2, a comparison of the importance of foreign language skills and grade point average from employers', students' and educators’ perspective is shown. As expected all three groups of interviewees rated the importance of foreign language skills much higher than grade point average. Foreign language skills (6.04) are significantly more important to employers than grade point average (3.95). Students rate foreign language skills with an average value of 6.25, while GPA with 3.96. Educators value GPA much higher than students and employers with an average value of 5.30, but still lower than foreign language skills (5.93).

**Table 2 Comparison of the Importance of Foreign Language Skills and Grade Point Average**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  | Employers |  |  | Students |  |  | Educators |  | *p Value\** |  |
|  |  | *Mean* | Std.Dev. | Rank | *Mean* | Std.Dev. | Rank | *Mean* | Std.Dev. | Rank |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Importance of foreign language  skills for employability |  | 6.04 | 1.07 | 9 | 6.25 | 1.15 | 1 | 5.93 | 0.91 | 7 | 0.0091 |  |
|  | Importance of Grade Point Average (GPA) for employability |  | 3.95 | 1.66 | 33 | 3.96 | 1.56 | 33 | 5.30 | 1.21 | 28 | 0.0000 |  |

\*p-value is given for Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA test

Table 3 shows the comparison of the contribution of teaching at HEI to the development of foreign language skills and skills of critical thinking from employers', students' and educators’ perspective. While employers rate the contribution of HEI to developing foreign language skills with 4.68, they are censorious regarding critical thinking (3.85). Students also rank foreign language skills higher (4.51) than they do critical thinking (4.08). As expected, educators value the contribution of HEI to the developing of both skills more (4.93 for foreign language skills and 4.30 for critical thinking) than do employers and students.

**Table 3 Comparison of the Contribution of Teaching HEI on Foreign Language Skills and Critical Thinking**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  | Employers |  |  | Students |  |  | Educators |  | *p Value\** |  |
|  |  | *Mean* | Std.Dev. | Rank | *Mean* | Std.Dev. | Rank | *Mean* | Std.Dev. | Rank |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Contribution of teaching at HEI to the development of critical thinking |  | 3.85 | 1.60 | 19 | 4.08 | 1.50 | 27 | 4.30 | 1.33 | 28 | 0.3081 |  |
|  | Contribution of teaching at HEI to the development of foreign language skills |  | 4.68 | 1.61 | 3 | 4.51 | 1.69 | 13 | 4.93 | 1.39 | 9 | 0.3940 |  |

\*p-value is given for Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA test

At the level of 5%, differences between employability skills can be seen in Table 4. Rank of foreign language skills compared to problem solving, willingness to learn, IT usage, teamwork, critical thinking and public speaking is provided. Employers rank foreign language skills (Rank 9) slightly more important than teamwork (R 11), and much more important than critical thinking (R 25) and public speaking (R 28), yet give a higher rank for employability to problem solving (R 1), willingness to learn (R 3), and IT usage (R 8). Foreign language skills are ranked the highest by students (R 1) followed by willingness to learn (R 2), IT usage (R 3), problem solving (R 4), public speaking (R 6), and teamwork (R 8). Critical thinking was ranked (R 30) among the least important employability skills with students. Educators rank foreign language skills (R 7) much higher than teamwork (R 13), critical thinking (R 16), and public speaking (R 24), but rank willingness to learn as highly important for employment (R 3), followed by problem solving (R 4) and IT usage (R 5).

**Table 4 Comparison of Importance of Various Employability Skills**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  | Employers |  |  | Students |  |  | Educators |  | *p Value\** |  |
|  |  | *Mean* | Std.Dev. | Rank | *Mean* | Std.Dev. | Rank | *Mean* | Std.Dev. | Rank |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Problem solving |  | 6.30 | 0.97 | 1 | 6.15 | 1.08 | 4 | 6.00 | 0.98 | 4 | 0.1823 |  |
|  | Willingness to learn |  | 6.16 | 0.95 | 3 | 6.16 | 0.99 | 2 | 6.03 | 0.89 | 3 | 0.5633 |  |
|  | IT usage |  | 6.08 | 1.04 | 8 | 6.16 | 0.99 | 3 | 5.93 | 0.83 | 5 | 0.1939 |  |
|  | Foreign language |  | 6.04 | 1.07 | 9 | 6.25 | 1.15 | 1 | 5.93 | 0.91 | 7 | 0.0091 |  |
|  | Teamwork |  | 5.99 | 1.04 | 11 | 6.03 | 1.16 | 8 | 5.77 | 0.90 | 13 | 0.1272 |  |
|  | Critical thinking |  | 5.45 | 1.20 | 25 | 5.20 | 1.27 | 30 | 5.73 | 1.11 | 16 | 0.0270 |  |
|  | Public speaking |  | 5.21 | 1.37 | 28 | 6.09 | 1.18 | 6 | 5.43 | 1.04 | 24 | 0.0000 |  |

\*p-value is given for Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA test

Table 5 represents the comparison of employers', students' and educators’ perception of contribution of teaching at HEI to the development of foreign language skill, subject knowledge, IT usage, teamwork, public speaking, critical thinking and intelligence. Contribution of teaching at HEI to the development of foreign language skills (R 3) is together with subject knowledge (R 1) and IT usage (R 2) valued the highest by employers. Meanwhile, students rank the contribution of teaching at HEI to the development of foreign language skills (R 13) as high as the acquisition of subject knowledge (R 10), but higher than to shaping critical thinking (R 27) or to reinforcing intelligence (R 29). Similarly, compared to other employability skills, educators value the contribution of teaching in HEI to development of foreign language skills higher (R 9) than to reinforcing intelligence (R 26) or critical thinking (R 28).

**Table 5 Comparison of Contribution of Teaching at HEI to the Development of Various Employability Skills**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Employers | |  |  | Students | |  |  | Educators |  | *p Value\** |  |
| *Mean* |  | Std.Dev. | Rank | *Mean* |  | Std.Dev. | Rank | *Mean* | Std.Dev. | Rank |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Subject knowledge | 4.91 |  | 1.54 | 1 | 4.65 |  | 1.36 | 10 | 5.63 | 0.85 | 2 | 0.0004 |  |
| IT usage | 4.87 |  | 1.54 | 2 | 5.03 |  | 1.45 | 3 | 5.37 | 1.13 | 3 | 0.4577 |  |
| Foreign language | 4.68 |  | 1.61 | 3 | 4.51 |  | 1.69 | 13 | 4.93 | 1.39 | 9 | 0.3940 |  |
| Teamwork | 4.68 |  | 1.61 | 4 | 5.53 |  | 1.29 | 1 | 5.33 | 1.09 | 4 | 0.0001 |  |
| Public speaking | 4.51 |  | 1.57 | 8 | 5.49 |  | 1.43 | 2 | 5.63 | 1.07 | 1 | 0.0000 |  |
| Critical thinking | 3.85 |  | 1.60 | 19 | 4.08 |  | 1.50 | 27 | 4.30 | 1.33 | 28 | 0.3081 |  |
| Intelligence | 3.46 |  | 1.71 | 30 | 3.96 |  | 1.70 | 29 | 4.38 | 1.35 | 26 | 0.0133 |  |

\*p-value is given for Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA test

Concerning the hypothesis set for this research the following conclusions can be made: employers, students and educators have different perceptions of the importance of foreign language skills for employment, therefore the second hypothesis has been confirmed. The first hypothesis has also been proven as employers in Croatia value the importance of foreign language skills. The third hypothesis has been rejected as the results show that students in Croatia consider foreign language skills more important for employability than employers. Finally, from the data presented one can conclude that employers are quite satisfied with the contribution of teaching at HEI to the development of foreign language skills in students, so the fourth hypothesis is also accepted.

In line with the literature review, the findings of this study indicate that foreign language skills offer a competitive advantage for employment, not only for the new graduates themselves, but also for the company and all stakeholders in the process of the acquisition of foreign language skills, i.e. students, educators, need to be aware of that.

1. **Conclusion**

Aim of this research was to show how important foreign language skills are for employment from the perspective of employers, students and educators. In this research, employers’ perception is given more emphasis due to the fact that employers are the ones who recruit graduates, their opinion is crucial when considering employability.

Despite the fact that the sample is not large and does not portray all the corporations that employ graduate students in Eastern Croatia, the study has a number of implications. First, students need to be aware of the changes regarding foreign language skills which they should be acquiring during HE because it will be an advantage for them while applying for their future jobs. Secondly, based on the findings educators might decide to redesign their courses and put more emphasis on developing foreign language skills. This will improve the quality of the teaching at HEI, better prepare students for the labor market and therefore raise the level of their satisfaction with education at HEI. Finally, employers will, thanks to the changes, be more pleased as the new graduates will have a set of skills needed on the workplace.

Further research is needed which will include other HEI in comparison. Also, comparison of employers’ perception of importance of foreign language skills with other countries in the European Union could be insightful and should therefore be explored.

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