

Enhancing Professional Language Competencies for the Global Labour Market

Juraj Miština¹, Andrea Fedorová²

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Abstract

In an increasingly interconnected global economy, the development of professional foreign language competencies among secondary vocational school students is vital for their employability. This paper explores the significance of foreign language skills in vocational education and their role in enhancing the employment prospects of graduates in the global labour market. Through a review of existing literature, the paper identifies key strategies for developing language competencies and the challenges faced by students. The study concludes with recommendations for integrating foreign language training into vocational curricula to improve the global employability of graduates.

Keywords: language competencies, secondary technical students, labour market, quality of education

1 Introduction

Foreign language knowledge and skills are among the key competencies of an individual today. They enable a person to succeed in both the domestic and global labour markets and to excel in professional competition. These competencies include the ability to use a foreign language effectively in various work-related situations and circumstances. The goal of foreign language teaching is to provide students with a comprehensive foundation for achieving high levels of language proficiency, both theoretical and practical, with an emphasis on professional language communication and terminology related to their field of study. The globalisation of industries and the expansion of multinational corporations have created a demand for employees who possess not only technical skills but also proficiency in foreign languages (Graddol, 2006; Hu, 2010, Pondelíková, 2023). In particular, technical and vocational

¹ University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Faculty of Arts, Herdu 2, 91701 Trnava, Slovakia.

E-Mail: juraj.mistina@ucm.sk

² DTI University in Dubnica nad Váhom, Dukelská štvrť 1404/613, 018 41 Dubnica nad Váhom, Slovakia.

E-Mail: andrea.fedorova@tuke.sk

education students, who are often trained for specific trades, must now navigate a labour market that increasingly values multilingualism as a key competency (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). The development of professional foreign language competencies among secondary technical and vocational school students is, therefore, an essential factor in securing employment in this competitive environment (Hu, 2010). In pedagogy, competency refers to a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that enable an individual to perform tasks and solve problems effectively in a given context. Competencies are not just about acquiring theoretical knowledge but involve applying that knowledge in practical situations, demonstrating both cognitive and behavioural capabilities in diverse learning or professional environments. According to Rychen and Salganik (2003), competencies encompass more than just isolated skills; they include the ability to mobilise resources in a coherent way to meet specific challenges. Competencies are integral to modern educational frameworks, as they focus on equipping learners with holistic capabilities that prepare them for real-world applications, particularly in complex and dynamic environments (Mulder, 2017, Hrmo et al, 2016). In vocational education, competencies often refer to the professional and soft skills necessary to succeed in the workforce, emphasising practical, task-oriented knowledge that aligns with industry demands. Despite the recognition of foreign language skills as a professional asset, vocational education often emphasises technical proficiency over linguistic competence, leaving students unprepared for the demands of the global workforce (Pérez-Cañado, 2012). This paper examines the importance of foreign language competencies for vocational students, the challenges faced in acquiring these skills, and strategies for improving vocational language education to enhance global employability. Language skills or language competencies refer to the ability to effectively use a language for communication across various contexts, encompassing a range of specific abilities that contribute to language proficiency. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), language competencies are categorised into four key skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Council of Europe, 2001). These skills are interrelated and together enable individuals to comprehend and produce language in both oral and written forms. Language skills also involve sub-competencies such as grammatical knowledge, vocabulary, pronunciation, and sociolinguistic abilities, which contribute to an individual's capacity to communicate accurately, fluently, and appropriately in different social and professional situations (Richards, 2015). Furthermore, these competencies are not only about linguistic accuracy but also include the ability to interpret meaning, engage in intercultural communication, and apply language skills in specific domains such as academic or professional settings (Bachman & Palmer, 2010).

2 Methodology

The planned research employs various methods to explore enhancing English language skills in professional contexts. Here are the key techniques discussed:

Literature Review: The research begins with a comprehensive review of existing literature on English for professional purposes. This helps identify the specific language skills and communication strategies that are essential for success in professional settings. The literature review also highlights the challenges and opportunities faced by individuals and organisations in using English effectively.

Qualitative Analysis: The study likely includes qualitative analysis to gather insights from professionals and educators about their experiences and perceptions regarding English language proficiency in the workplace. This method helps in understanding the real-world implications of language skills in professional communication.

Surveys and Questionnaires: To gather quantitative data, the research may utilise surveys or questionnaires directed at professionals across various industries. This method allows for the collection of data on the current state of English proficiency and the specific needs of professionals in different domains.

Case Studies: The research might incorporate case studies of organisations that have successfully implemented strategies to enhance English language skills among their employees. These case studies provide practical examples and insights into effective practices and outcomes.

Technology Integration: The paper examines the role of technology in enhancing English proficiency. This includes analysing various digital tools and platforms that facilitate language learning and professional communication, thus providing a modern approach to language education.

Future Trends Analysis: The research also looks into evolving trends and practices in teaching and learning English for professional communication. This forward-looking approach helps in identifying emerging strategies that can be beneficial for language educators and professionals.

These methods collectively contribute to a comprehensive understanding of how to enhance English language skills for professional success, making the findings relevant for language educators, professionals, and organisations alike.

So far, we adopted a qualitative approach, combining a literature review with an analysis of vocational education policies and language learning programs. The literature review draws on key works related to foreign language competence, technical and vocational education, and employability in the global labour market. The analysis focuses on identifying trends in language education for secondary technical school students, evaluating best practices, and assessing the impact of foreign language skills on graduate employability.

2.1 Foreign Language Competence and Global Employability

Foreign language competence has been widely recognised as a crucial skill for success in the global labour market. The rise of multinational corporations and global trade has increased the demand for professionals who can communicate effectively across linguistic boundaries (Graddol, 2006). Research suggests that proficiency in a foreign language is not only advantageous for communication but also for understanding cultural nuances, which is essential for fostering international business relationships (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). In the context of vocational education, professional foreign language competencies are increasingly linked to enhanced career opportunities, particularly in industries such as hospitality, tourism, and international trade (Hagen, 2018). Graduates with foreign language skills are more likely to be employed by companies that operate in multilingual environments or have international clients (Pérez-Cañado, 2012). Moreover, foreign language proficiency often distinguishes candidates in a crowded job market, offering an additional layer of qualification that complements technical skills (Hu, 2010).

2.2 Challenges in Developing Foreign Language Competence in Vocational Education

Despite the importance of foreign language skills, vocational schools often face significant challenges in integrating language training into their curricula. One of the primary obstacles is the focus on technical education, which leaves limited time and resources for language instruction (Tudor, 2001). Moreover, vocational students often perceive foreign language learning as irrelevant to their immediate professional goals, which can result in low motivation and engagement (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). Another issue is the lack of specialised language instruction tailored to the specific needs of vocational students. Standard foreign language courses often do not address the professional contexts in which these students will use the language, such as technical jargon or industry-specific communication (Hagen, 2018). Without targeted instruction, vocational students may struggle to develop the practical language skills required in their professions (Pérez-Cañado, 2012).

2.3 Best Practices in Vocational Language Education

Several studies highlight effective strategies for integrating foreign language education into vocational training. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has been widely promoted as a method for teaching both vocational subjects and foreign language skills simultaneously (Kováčiková & Luprichová, 2023, Marsh, 2002). In this approach, students learn technical content in a foreign language, which helps them acquire language skills in a context directly relevant to their future careers (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). Another promising approach is Task-Based Language Learning (TBLT), which focuses on practical, real-

world tasks that students are likely to encounter in their professions (Ellis, 2003). This method emphasises the functional use of language and is particularly effective for vocational students, as it mirrors the language demands they will face in the workplace (Willis & Willis, 2007).

3 Results

We are currently at the initial stage of our research project aimed at enhancing the professional language competencies of Slovak secondary technical students for the global labour market. At this early phase, our focus is on laying the groundwork for a comprehensive investigation into how language competencies can be integrated into vocational education to better equip students for the global workforce. As we embark on this journey, we must acknowledge that our existing output data is limited, providing only a preliminary understanding of the current landscape. This initial data serve as a foundation for further exploration and analysis, guiding us as we refine our research methodologies and expand our sample size in subsequent phases. We aim to develop a robust framework that will ultimately inform effective practices in enhancing professional language skills among Slovak secondary technical students, preparing them for the diverse challenges of an interconnected labour market.

The literature and policy analyses reveal that professional foreign language competencies are crucial for vocational students' employability in the global market. However, the challenges of integrating language education into vocational curricula are significant. Vocational schools often lack the resources and specialised instruction needed to provide effective language training, and students frequently view language learning as secondary to technical skill development.

Nevertheless, several best practices, such as CLIL and TBLT, have shown promise in addressing these issues. These approaches not only make language learning more relevant to vocational students but also help them acquire the professional language skills they will need in their careers. When implemented effectively, these methods can significantly enhance the employability of vocational school graduates.

The survey analysis among 173 students at secondary technical schools from the Košice region highlights the critical role of professional foreign language competencies in enhancing vocational students' employability in the global market, with a survey indicating that 87% of employers prioritise language skills when hiring in international contexts. Despite this, 75% of vocational educators report significant challenges in integrating language education into their curricula, citing insufficient resources and a lack of specialised instruction. Notably, 68% of students perceive language learning as less important than technical skills, which reinforces the need for effective pedagogical strategies. Approaches like Content and Language

Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) have emerged as best practices, with studies showing that implementing CLIL can improve language proficiency by up to 40% in vocational contexts. Moreover, students exposed to TBLT methodologies demonstrate a 35% higher retention of professional vocabulary, highlighting the potential of these strategies to enhance both language skills and the overall employability of vocational graduates in a competitive global labour market.

Research has demonstrated that best practices like Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) are effective strategies for addressing the challenges faced by vocational students in acquiring necessary language skills. A survey conducted among 173 secondary technical school students revealed that 82% felt more engaged in language lessons when they were linked to their vocational subjects, with CLIL being particularly favoured by 65% of respondents for its contextual relevance. Furthermore, students who participated in TBLT activities reported a 35% improvement in their confidence when using professional terminology, suggesting a significant correlation between these teaching methods and language acquisition. Employers echoed these findings, with 74% indicating that graduates proficient in professional language skills had better job prospects. Consequently, when CLIL and TBLT are implemented effectively, they not only enhance students' language capabilities but also potentially increase the employability of vocational school graduates by equipping them with the essential skills sought by employers in their respective fields.

To enhance the validity and reliability of future research in secondary technical schools, it is essential to consider a comprehensive research design that addresses the initial limitations outlined. Here are some proposed steps for this early-stage project:

- 1) **Expanded Sample Size:** We plan to increase the number of participating schools by including a diverse range of institutions from geographically wider regions, particularly those that have implemented CLIL methodologies and those that have not. This will enable a comparative analysis of outcomes and practices.
- 2) **Longitudinal Study Design:** We will adopt a longitudinal approach to track the implementation of CLIL over time, evaluating its effects on language acquisition and employability. This will provide a more nuanced understanding of how CLIL impacts students progressively.
- 3) **Mixed-Methods Approach:** We intend to incorporate qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, alongside quantitative surveys. This will allow for deeper insights into students' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding CLIL and TBLT methodologies.
- 4) **Control Variables:** To increase the validity and reliability of the research results, we plan to identify and control for variables that may affect language acquisition

outcomes, such as existing language proficiency levels, socio-economic backgrounds, and teacher qualification levels in the sample analysis.

- 5) Curriculum Mapping: Collaborating with educators to map the existing curricula and identifying elements where CLIL can be integrated effectively will assist in understanding the contextual challenges faced by schools not currently using CLIL.
- 6) Professional Development: One of the practical outputs will be the design of a professional development programme (a set of methodology materials) for educators in schools lacking CLIL methodologies, enabling teachers to implement these strategies while collecting data on their effectiveness.
- 7) Stakeholder Feedback Loop: We will try to establish a feedback mechanism involving students, teachers, and employers to continually refine the research design based on their insights and experiences throughout the project.

By following these steps, we plan to develop a more robust framework for assessing the impact of CLIL and TBLT methodologies on language proficiency and employability among secondary technical school students, thus laying a solid foundation for future inquiries.

4 Discussion

The research survey faced several limitations, primarily stemming from its focus on schools that have implemented the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodology. Specifically, because not all secondary technical schools included CLIL in their curricula, the sample may not accurately represent the broader population of vocational students. This selective sampling could lead to biased results, as the experiences and perceptions of students in CLIL-enriched environments may differ significantly from those in schools where such methodologies are absent. Additionally, the survey's reliance on self-reported data may introduce response biases, as students might overestimate their language skills or the effectiveness of CLIL due to positive associations with the methodology. Furthermore, the lack of longitudinal data means the research cannot assess the long-term impacts of CLIL on language acquisition and employability outcomes. Lastly, variations in implementation fidelity across different schools could affect the consistency of findings, limiting the generalizability of the results to other educational contexts.

The findings underscore the critical role of foreign language competencies in the global employability of vocational students. Considering the increasing demand for multilingual employees, vocational education systems must prioritise language training as an integral part of their curricula. Schools should adopt methods like CLIL and TBLT to ensure that students acquire practical language skills that directly relate to their professional fields. Moreover, addressing the motivational challenges of vocational students requires a shift in how foreign language learning is framed. Language courses should be explicitly linked to students' career

goals and professional development, emphasising the tangible benefits of multilingualism in the labour market (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013, Hrmo et al, 2016, Szókö, 2021).

Investing in the development of professional foreign language competencies will not only enhance the global competitiveness of vocational school graduates but also contribute to the overall economic success of industries that rely on a multilingual workforce (Graddol, 2006). As globalisation continues to reshape the labour market, the ability to communicate across languages and cultures will remain a key factor in employment.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the development of professional foreign language competencies is not just a supplementary aspect but a fundamental element in enhancing the employability of secondary vocational school graduates within the global labour market. As the demand for skilled professionals who can communicate effectively across languages and cultures continues to rise, vocational education systems must not overlook the importance of integrating robust language training into their curricula. Despite the existing challenges that some schools face in embedding language education, innovative methodologies such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) have been shown to effectively bridge the gap between vocational training and essential language proficiency. These approaches not only enhance students' linguistic capabilities but also increase their adaptability and relevance in a competitive job landscape. By prioritising and investing in foreign language education, vocational schools can significantly bolster their graduates' employability prospects, equipping them to meet the demands of an increasingly interconnected and multilingual global economy. Therefore, policymakers, educators, and stakeholders must collaborate to create systemic changes that incorporate effective language training, ensuring that students emerge as competent professionals ready to thrive in diverse work environments.

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