

Harmonizing (L2/SP) competencies with labour market needs

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Abstract

Competencies, as learning objectives, are the key to planning programs in higher education, if higher education is to remain focused on supplying the fast-changing, globalized labour market with knowledgeable graduates with useable skills. Whether in vocational training or arts and sciences, the paradigm shifts evident in today's market sectors equally encompass a need for educational change in the weight given to foreign language teaching and L2/SP competencies as factors for employability. This paper explores these issues, especially regarding their weight in the Northern Great Plain region of Eastern Hungary, as well as how the Bologna Process will change the manner in which (L2/SP)competency building is addressed.

Keywords: competences, L2 skills, employability, Bologna Process

Introduction

Globalisation, perhaps the most often mentioned phenomenon at the turn of the millennia, strongly affects the whole economy and society, labour market processes and thus the tasks of the education and training system. Mobility, which has been typical in the case of products and services for a long time, has become increasingly common, both for organizations and employees, as well. For this reason, persons searching for jobs, as well as educational institutions and regions trying to attract investors, have had to face fierce competition. As a result of the expansion of secondary and tertiary education at the end of the twentieth century a great number of highly qualified employees appeared in the labour market, which – apart from quantity forecasts – appreciates the value of early projections for concrete needs and quality. The results of these needs analyses are essential for all actors of the labour market. (See Hrubos)

Hungarian higher education can be characterized by the process of quick and sometimes radical changes. In Hungary, higher education fills an increasingly important role in society; it is one of the engines of economic development, the focal point of life long learning. Higher education institutions have to prepare an efficient and successful employee for the labour market. However, it is not enough only “to bombard” the student with knowledge, and thereby hopefully prepare the graduate to meet all the knowledge requirements of a workplace. Rather, higher educational institutions have to train experts in professional knowledge and logical thinking, in acquainting the student with the problems to be met in their speciality. Investment in education is not something quantifiable merely in economic terms, but in human terms, living standard and quality of life, as well.

The importance of speaking foreign languages can also be examined from the aspect of potential employees. Besides qualifications, the value of competencies is appreciated in the selection process. In jobs requiring a degree, computing and communicational skills – and these include command of a foreign language - have become essential. Employers'

expectations of employees bear special importance in regions with employment problems. Foreign investors creating a high number of jobs prefer developed regions where human resources are highly qualified and equipped with up-to-date competencies. Foreign language skills are obvious expectations for foreign organisations, and indispensable in tourism and the exporting activity of local companies, and for each of these sectors, “continuous updating of knowledge” is required, in order to “ensure competency”. (Várgáné, 243)

The performance of the private sector forcefully influences a region’s competitiveness. According to research commissioned by the agencies of the European Union, European enterprises lose business and sales opportunities because of the lack of foreign language skills. (See Wiwczarowski, 215ff.) “Marked paradigm shifts have occurred and are occurring in education, culture and mass media, as well as on the job market” and the need for foreign language skills is increasing in proportion to these shifts. (Silye, 235) Hungary, and especially the North Great Plain region in its East, earned an extremely poor ranking in foreign language knowledge, in comparison with other European nations.

There is hope to be seen in recent changes in European education, if these are implemented properly. The changes are defined by the Bologna Process, the aim of which is to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. (Compare Hrubos *et al.*) The Bologna Process is based on international cooperation and academic exchange. These are attractive to European students and staff, as well as to students and staff from other parts of the world, mostly from the United States and Asian countries. The three priorities of the Bologna Process are: the introduction of the three cycle system: bachelor, master, doctorate courses; quality assurance and recognition of qualifications and periods of study. In every second year, the ministers of higher education meet to measure progress and to set priorities for action.

The activity of educational institutions can be characterized by how quickly a graduate is able to find an appropriate job. The chance of graduate young people to be accepted to a workplace on the basis of one’s university studies can be increased only by developing a quality higher educational system. The quality of education is assessed on the basis of the general quality of all the skills, competences and knowledge that students acquire which are accepted by their employers upon hiring. In other words, these skills, competences and knowledge must meet the requirements of the participants in the labour market. Moreover, the ways and means higher education in Europe use in meeting these requirements are steered by the tasks set down in the agreements which initiated the Bologna Process. (Hrubos *et al.*)

According to the stipulations set out in the Bologna Process, in determining the structure and contents of their degree courses, higher education institutions must foremost meet the requirements of labour market. This is crucial, as in order to develop a successful employee, i.e. to meet the ultimate goal of higher education, any obtained knowledge must support future workplace tasks. Yet, and with foreign languages this is no different, knowledge is merely one prerequisite for hireability: today’s job market is more interested in what one can do, than in what one simply knows. Employers expect their job applicants to come to them with competencies. Rote knowledge is merely assumed.

Content and curricular requirements of e.g. a Master’s degree program in Hungary, must therefore, under Bologna, satisfy the National Qualification and Outcome Requirements. The program should teach general knowledge, as well as professional competencies (information, knowledge, skills and proficiencies) and should systematically provide support for students

interested in conducting research towards their professional development or, if desired, towards eventually pursuing doctoral studies.

The definition of competency is the set of observable performance dimensions of an individual, including individual knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours. Competencies are e.g. used individually or collectively in a team, in a process or in organizational activities, which facilitate the successful accomplishment of any given task. To develop a student's competency, it is necessary to empower him or her to be capable of acting in an environment in which the need for him/her to do/perform specific activities is currently unknown to them. In order to define and examine a student's competences and to be able to compare such a set of competences with those required by the student's chosen profession, it is essential to determine the criteria needed to set up a competence profile:

A competence can be considered profession specific if:

- it is essential for fulfilling a key professional task,
- its state of development highly influences the success and performance of the professional.

On the basis of the above mentioned criteria, profession-specific competencies can be considered key professional competencies.

In key professional competencies, there are three distinct groups:

- personal competencies with aptitude and characteristic competence groups
- interpersonal competencies with cooperation, communication and conflict handling competence groups
- methodological competencies with thinking, problem-solving and work style competence groups.

In the labour market, requirements set for a specific type of employee can be examined as a competence necessary for solving a pre-defined task. Therefore, it is crucial to be able to present the analysis of working activities and personal characteristics as basic documents, in addition to one's actual diploma. This document is called a competence profile. The connection between a graduate's knowledge, competence, personal characteristics and the requirements of a profession will thereby become comprehensible, even for people without any knowledge of the profession. Moreover, by rendering competences transparent, planning careers – both by students and employers - can be made easier.

The competence profile consists of a work task profile and an attribute or feature profile. Professional requirements of a qualification define the expected competencies of an employee. In this context, competencies mean the suitability and capability of performing a work task. In detail, it covers the work tasks as a manifestation of work activity; on the other hand, this appears as the attributes of the employee as prerequisites of the work activity. Therefore, a competency profile of a qualification comprises of two projections of the person's standard competence set: the work task profile and the attribute profile. The work task profile is the ordered listing of those work tasks which can be performed by an employee based on his or her qualification.

The attribute profile describes the capability of a person for completing work activities corresponding to his or her qualification, namely professional knowledge and skills in the system of attributes characterizing the person. The attribute profile contains those competencies, which can be attained during training and practical work, and needed predominantly after receiving a qualification and consequently holding a position.

The categories of the attribute profile are the following:

- professional competencies
- personal competencies
- social competencies
- methodological competencies

As part of the attribute profile, professional competencies contain professional requirements of the qualification, which are exclusively applied in the course of a work activity.

Knowledge directly applied during work can include, among others:

- the sequence of procedures, technological regulations,
- complex use of instruments and sources,
- the applied numeric parameters and quantitative features,
- the use of regularly occurring decisive data and information during work,
- data and information related to the behaviour of materials, objects, tools, instruments applied in the procedures,
- data and information related to the conditions and effects of the work as well as risks and consequences of deviation from work instructions and safety regulations.

Apart from professional knowledge, professional skills are components, elements or actions operating automatically, without direct control of the senses. Skills are usually less complex actions or smaller elements of actions. They generally develop as a result of longer processes such as studying and practice. Profession-specific methodological, social, interpersonal and personal competencies are those, which are essential for the successful completion of professional tasks.

The North Great Plain Region: Employer expectations and L2

Employers' expectations of employees bear special importance in regions with employment problems. Foreign investors creating a high number of jobs prefer developed regions where human resources are highly qualified and equipped with up-to-date competencies. Foreign language skills are obvious expectations for foreign organisations, and indispensable in tourism and the exporting activity of local companies. The performance of the private sector forcefully influences a region's competitiveness. According to research commissioned by the agencies of the European Union, European enterprises lose business and sales opportunities because of the lack of foreign language skills. Hungary and especially the North Great Plain region possess an outstandingly poor ranking in this field in Europe.

The importance of speaking foreign languages can also be examined from the aspect of potential employees. Besides qualifications the value of competencies has been appreciated in the selection process. In jobs requiring a degree computing and communicational skills including foreign language command have become essential.

The extent of practical component in the curricula is an everlasting dilemma of education. The role of training or education is to provide the basics of the theoretical part of a science or field of study and endow students with skills allowing for adaptation to constant changes. When planning curricula, heads and teachers of educational and training institutions should more and more rely on the experience and expectations of employers.

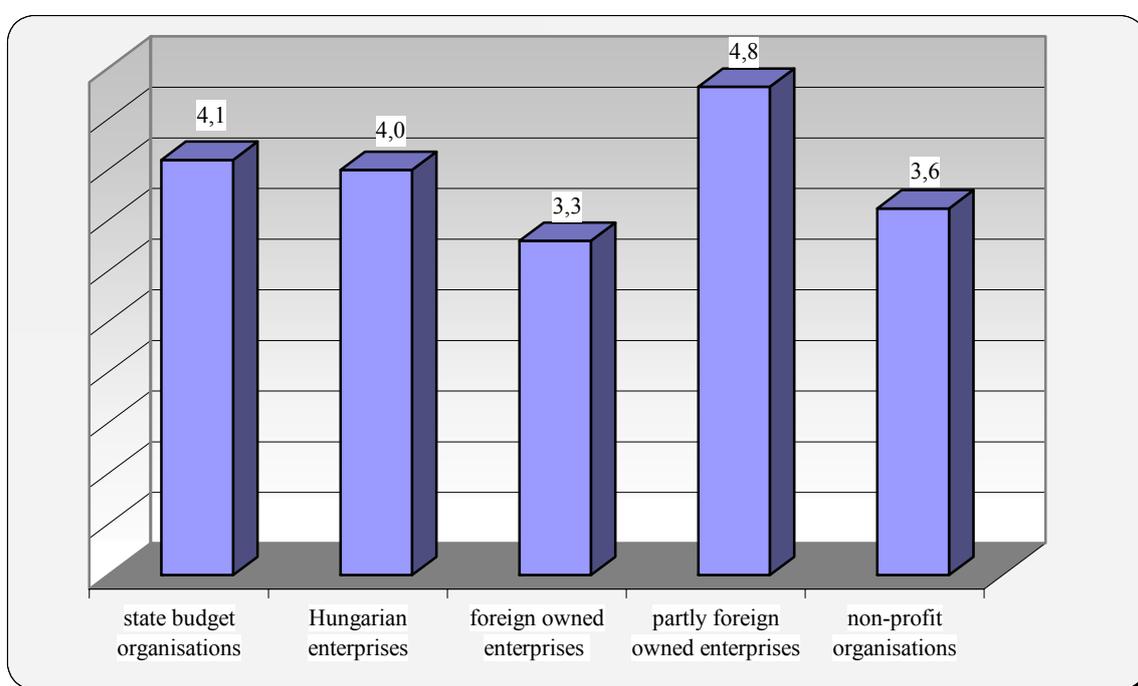
One question asked the representatives of the organisations about the importance of involving employers in curricula planning for higher education institutions. Employers of the North Great Plain region have given a score of 3.9 on a scale between 1 and 5. As 4 was the

equivalent of very important one can state that employers would find it expedient if their experience and expectations were applied in course and curricula design.

Regarding the importance of harmonising the content of curricula between employers and training institutions and based on the results of statistical examinations (Kruskal-Wallis analysis) it has been established that employers of the North Great Plain region belonging to different ownership categories expressed a significantly different opinion ($p=0.006$). Foreign owned companies found it least important, scoring 3.3, followed by non-profit organisations with 3.6. Hungarian business organisations and government agencies attributed approximately equal importance to the question (scoring 4 and 4.1 respectively), and the issue was ranked highest by partly foreign private organisations (4.8) (Figure 1.).

Figure 1.

Evaluating the importance of involving employers in curricula planning for higher education institutions



Source: own research results (2006).

N=112

Foreign language skills expected by employers

Foreign language skills (high level of general language proficiency, high level of vocational language knowledge, the combination of general and vocational language, good negotiating skills, intercultural communication competency, confidence and initiative in using a foreign language)

Examining the need for the skills above the following can be established: vocational language knowledge is least needed in education and catering since the technical language of these professions are part of general language knowledge. High level of technical language skills have most been required by organisations in the field of commerce. In commercial areas especially in foreign trade language knowledge is almost useless without possessing the special technical terms and being aware of the meaning of clauses and provisions. Professional language skills have gained relatively high appreciation in the civil service

profession as well. A lot of public administration offices perform specified tasks with highly specific language requirements, e.g.: environmental agencies, agricultural public administration offices coordinating EU projects etc. In other professional areas average values have been attributed to technical language knowledge. The combination of general and technical language skills counts most in trade and industry and least in education and catering. Confidence and initiative in language use is most appreciated in commerce and catering (Table 1).

Table 1.

The evaluation of foreign language skills by economic branches

Economic branch	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
Agriculture	2.5	2.3	2.5	3.3	2.2	3.0
Industry	2.4	2.4	3.0	2.7	2.4	2.6
Commerce	2.6	2.8	3.2	3.2	2.8	3.4
Catering	1.8	1.8	2.2	3.4	2.0	3.2
Economic services	2.7	2.2	2.7	2.8	2.6	2.5
Public administration	2.4	2.5	2.6	3.0	2.3	2.9
Education	2.0	1.5	2.2	2.4	2.1	2.9
Average	2.5	2.4	2.9	2.9	2.5	2.9

Source: own research results (2006).

N=112

1. high level of general language proficiency, **2.** high level of vocational language knowledge, **3.** the combination of **1.** and **2.** **4.** good negotiating skills, **5.** intercultural competency, **6.** confidence and initiative in using a foreign language.

Table 2.

Kruskal-Wallis analysis results of the correlation of languages with the economic branches

Economic branch	English	German	Russian	Spanish	Romanian	Italian	French
Agriculture	4.424	2.375	0.327	0.355	0.254	0.133	0.073
Industry	4.878	2.710	0.377	0.236	0.660	0.049	0.511
Commerce	4.818	1.546	1.273	0.273	0.364	1.000	0.000
Catering	4.400	3.800	1.200	0.000	0.000	0.200	0.400
Economic services	4.735	2.687	0.360	0.000	0.573	0.054	0.380
Public administration	4.812	1.687	0.751	0.000	0.751	0.000	0.438
Education	4.846	3.693	0.308	0.077	0.308	0.000	1.385
Total	4.776	2.384	0.697	0.183	0.481	0.344	0.343

Source: own research results (2006).

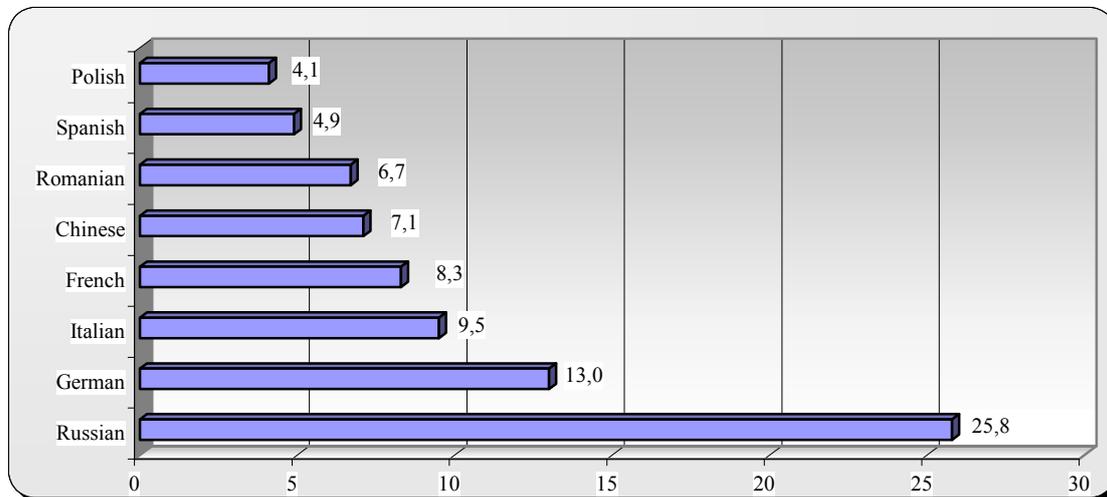
Foreign languages potentially useful in the future

Educational institutions also need to have information about foreign languages considered to be advantageous in the future. New foreign languages in the array of an organisation can open up new business or cooperation opportunities. More than half of the organisations stated that

the use of certain foreign languages –besides the currently used ones – would be valuable for their future activities.

Figure 4.

Percentages of foreign languages most frequently mentioned as potentially useful in the future by the employers of the North Great Plain region



Source: own research results (2006).

N= 65

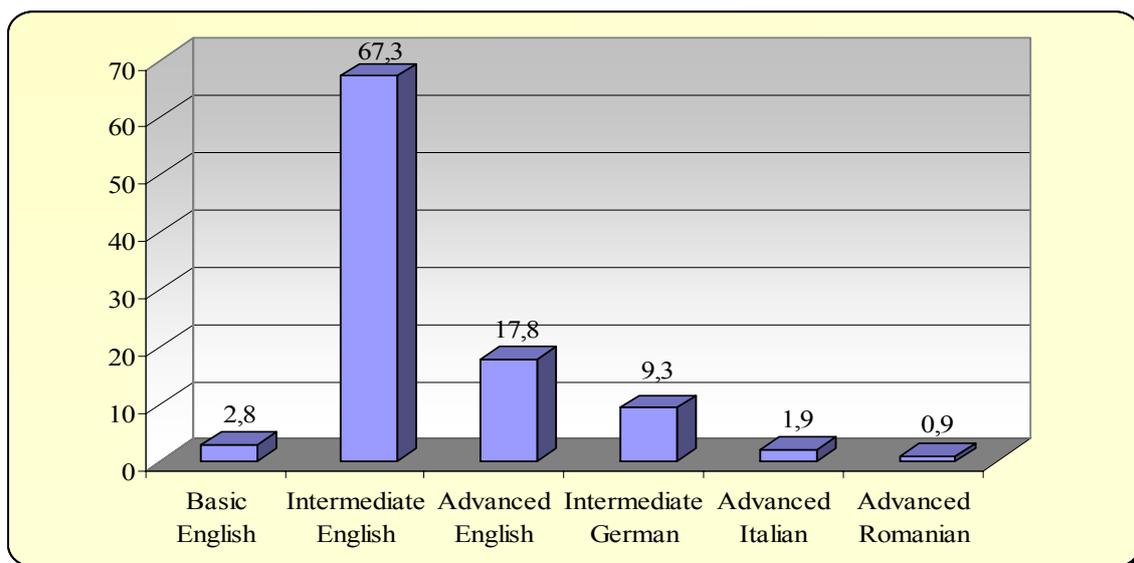
Considering the total answers of the organisations, the education of Russian language would definitely deserve more attention although it has been neglected in the past two decades. Concerning the predicted use of Russian, German and Spanish languages significant differences have been found between the different economic branches. Russian is thought to be most needed in agriculture, catering, public administration and various economic services (finance, logistics, postal and telecommunication services). German was said to be useful in commercial and agricultural businesses, while Spanish is most wanted by trading and educational organisations.

Foreign language expectations in the labour market

Results of the empirical research justified the hypothesis that intermediate level English language knowledge is the most common requirement of organisations in the North Great Plain (*Figure 5*).

Figure 5.

The percentage of first listed foreign language knowledge expected of professionals in the North Great Plain region



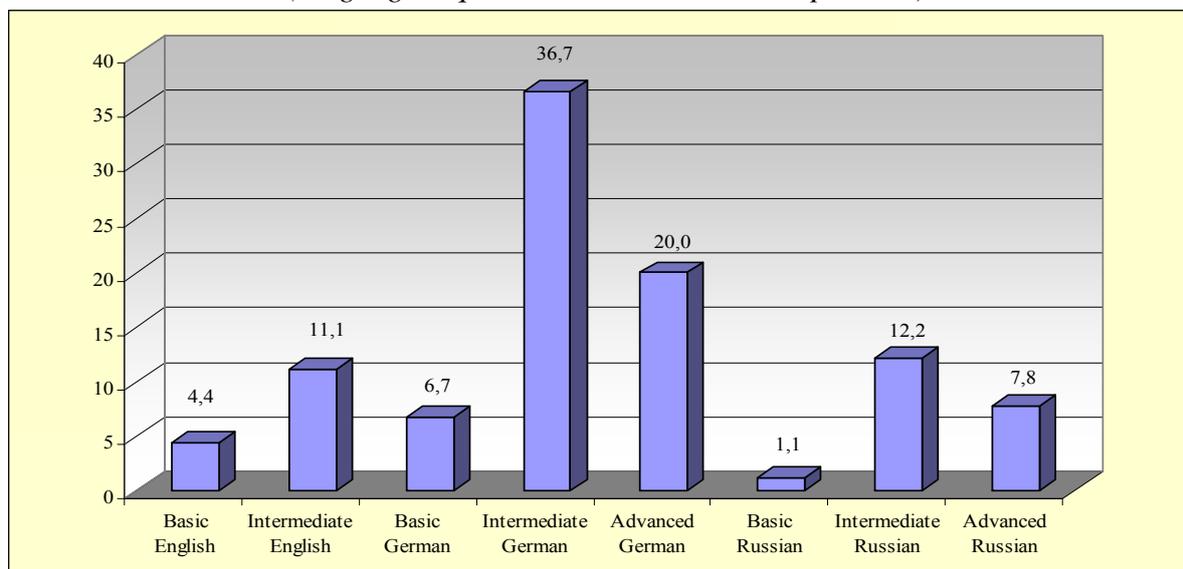
Source: own research results (2006).

N=107

Employers' expectations are strongly influenced by harmonising labour market demand and supply, and recent graduates' language proficiency is forcefully determined by the degree requirements: in higher education institutions five-year-courses can only be completed with a language exam certificate of intermediate degree and three- or four-year courses with a certificate of basic or intermediate degree. Advanced level language proficiency has not usually been prescribed by universities. German language command at intermediate level proved to be the second most common expectation of employers (*Figure 6.*)

Figure 6.

The percentage of foreign language expectations of organisations (language requirements listed in second position)



Source: own research results (2006).

N=90

Since the research deals with expectations of recent graduates in the labour market of the North Great Plain region, it is worth comparing the ratio of the region's higher education students studying different foreign languages to the ratio of employers' foreign language requirements and foreign language demand for the present and the future. One can establish that the ratio of students

studying English is below the level of demand for English. The regional labour market would also need a higher proportion of students speaking Russian, Italian and Spanish. The number or ratio of students learning Romanian is not even registered in the official statistics (*Table 3.*)

Table 3.

The percentage distribution of students studying specific foreign languages in proportion to the total number of students studying any foreign language in the North Great Plain region, 2005/2006 school year

<i>Foreign language learnt</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
English	66.0
German	27.0
French	2.5
Russia	2.1
Italian	1.5
Spanish	0.3

Source: own compilation based on the Hajdú-Bihar, Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county Statistical Yearbooks of the Hungarian Statistical Office, 2006

Verifying language knowledge

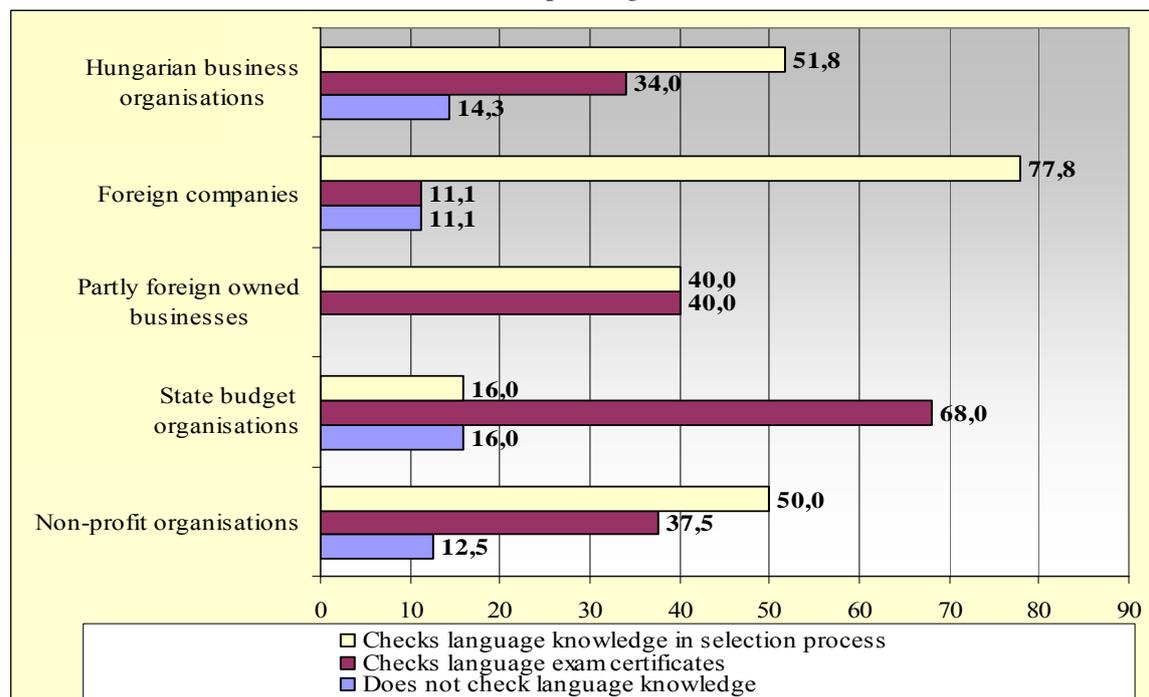
One of the most important and direct task of foreign language education in higher education is to help students succeed in job applications. In order to reach this goal a thorough knowledge of the recruitment procedures and assignments is fundamental.

When asked about the selection criteria employers gave answers in harmony with the concrete expectations (*Figure 5. and 6.*). Only 11.8 per cent of employers accepted the statement that the advanced language command of one foreign language is more valuable than the intermediate knowledge of two languages. On contrary to advanced language proficiency *real language knowledge* was favoured by the organisations. Based on the total sample 54.5% of employers accepted the statement that real language knowledge was worth more than language exam certificates. Results of statistical analysis justified that different *ownership forms* of organisations have significantly different views in this issue. The theoretical preference of real knowledge was outstandingly high at foreign and partly foreign companies (76.9%, 100.0%). Hungarian private enterprises attributed a lower significance to this issue, only 51.0% agreed with it, and the figure was even lower at non-profit organisations (42.9%); the value of this statement was lowest at state budget institutions (38.5%). The loglinear analysis applied for checking significance found a significant difference between the ownership categories in the issue of theoretically preferring real language knowledge as opposed to certificates ($p=0.0094$).

The *practical effectiveness* of the above mentioned principles has also been investigated. Based on the results of the analyses it was established that the *ownership form* of the organisation influences whether employers check applicants' language knowledge themselves in the selection process. It is typical at foreign companies (77.8%) and Hungarian and non-profit organisations also undertake this recruitment task in a fairly high proportion (51.8% and 50.0% respectively). Surprisingly, only 40.0% of partly foreign organisations check actual language command although in theory all of these employers agreed with the preference of real language knowledge to language exam certificates. Government owned organisations are the ones where actual language knowledge is least checked (16%) and the importance of certificates is highest (68%) (*Figure 7.*)

Figure 7.

Percentage of methods for checking language knowledge in the selection process by ownership categories



Source: own research results (2006).

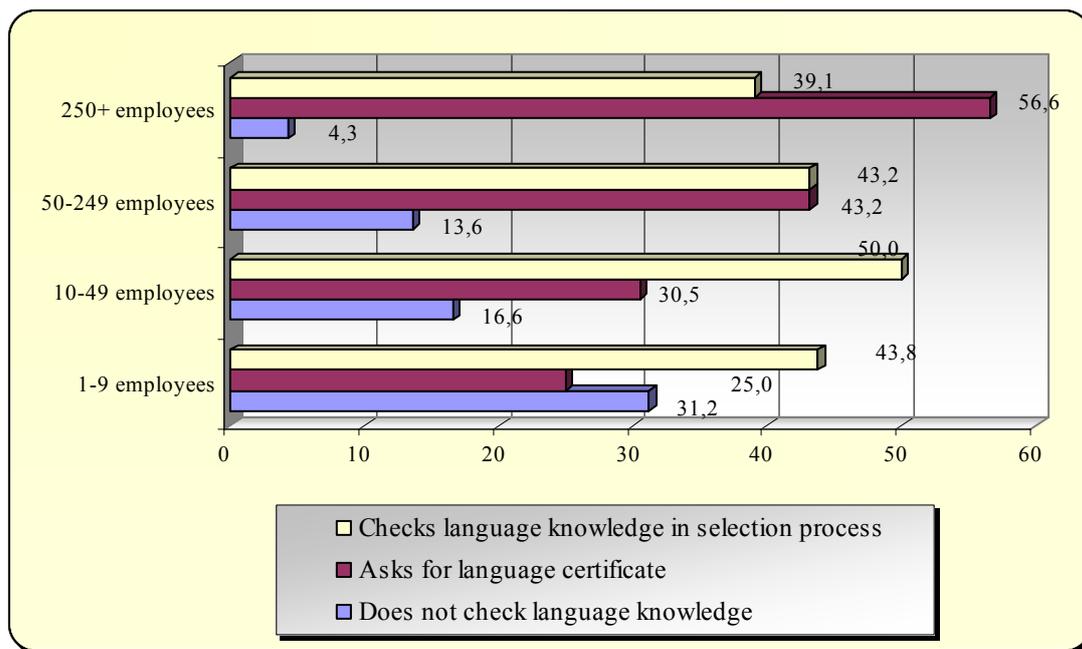
N= 111

The statistical verification (log linear analysis) confirmed the percentage results: the actual level of language knowledge is least checked by state budget organisations, and most by foreign owned companies. Verifying language proficiency in the selection process proved to be significantly different in different ownership categories ($p=0.028$).

On the basis of the statistical analysis of the data it has been established that *organisational size* also affects the way language knowledge is checked. The lack of verifying language command in the selection process is most typical in micro organisations (31.2%), then in small organizations (16.6%), while less common in organisations employing 50-249 employees (13.6%) and least typical in big organisations (4.3%). It can be established that checking language knowledge is in inverse proportion with organisational size whereas the verification of language knowledge by exam certificates is in direct proportion with the size of the organisation (Figure 8).

Figure 8.

Percentage of methods for checking language knowledge in various organisational sizes



Source: own research results (2006).

The statistical (log linear) analysis showed a significant difference between the organisations of different size in the lack of checking language knowledge and in checking language knowledge by looking at the certificates only ($p=0.043$ and 0.011). Checking language knowledge in the selection process did not show a significant difference by organisational size.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

The European cohesion policy focuses on knowledge, research and innovation thus on human resources. Economic development built on human capital and the relating increase in the number of jobs are both parts of the *Development Concept of the North Great Plain* region.

- Apart from qualifications the labour market competitiveness of recent graduates is strongly influenced by the competencies they possess. From the aspect of employability *foreign language proficiency is one the most demanded competences*.
- At the same time potential employees' motivation for language learning could be ensured by better work or income possibilities.
- Investing in human capital should be as cost-effective as other forms of investment. To achieve this, the early detection of employers' needs and the adjustment of the training accordingly are vital. In terms of qualification requirements there is a need for more professionals with technical and economic/business degree. However, the majority of students in the region study humanities. Required qualifications in the region also show the needed technical language. In respect of skills having the possibility to fit in technical language programs problem-solving emerged as the most wanted by employers, and the difference between the importance and employers' satisfaction with the particular skill proved to be the biggest in the case of problem-solving also. Foreign language skills (high level of general language proficiency, high level of vocational language knowledge, good negotiating skills, intercultural competency, confidence and initiative in using a foreign language) have been given nearly equal importance by the North Great Plain employers, which is a useful piece of information for course planners in language training.

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