

# Business Professionals' Attitudes toward Foreign Language use

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**Abstract** - The purpose of this study is to determine what business professionals' attitudes are toward foreign language use and whether the company sector, organizational size and age are important variables in the use of foreign language. The majority seems aware of the importance of foreign language use and claim they would like to hone their language skills in the future. Furthermore, the findings show that business professionals in internationally oriented sectors (e.g. transport, tourism, IT,...) believe foreign languages are more important than those who work in locally oriented sectors (e.g. processing industry, civil engineering, public service).

**Keywords** - foreign language use, sector, age, organizational size

## 1. Introduction

According to Kachru (1990), knowledge of the language is Aladdin's lamp which makes the access to different areas of life, including international business easier [10]. The close bond between language and internationalization is obvious in the world of business where collaboration would be difficult or even impossible without a common language for communication (Ehrenreich, 2010) [6]. This is especially important for companies operating in small economies such as the Croatian, which is characterized by multicultural environment,

workforce mobility and tourism (Badrov & Jurković, 2017) [2].

Business communication involves talking to different types of people, for instance, customers, competitors, employers, employees and colleagues (Gordon, 2009) [8]. The clarity of information is crucial in getting one's message across and picking the right medium or word in a foreign language is a demanding task. Therefore, honing the four skills (namely, speaking, writing, reading and listening) in order to be able to deliver a message is not a simple endeavor, which takes both practice and diligence (Pop & Sim, 2011) [15]. Business professionals know this firsthand, as it is not always easy to communicate efficiently, especially with professionals from foreign companies. One of the important intricate features of business communication is culture, which shapes the language, style and tone. The cultural component determines good communication (Špiljak, 2007) and this has inevitably become more important in a globalized market [18].

English is extensively used in international communication in diplomacy, academia, and business (Melchers & Shaw, 2003, Špiljak, 2007) [14], [18]. In the European context, business English lingua franca (BELF) has become the biggest lingua franca so far (Rogerson-Revell, 2007) [17]. It is used in a range of intercultural situations by speakers of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Pullin, 2015) [16]. From small and medium-sized enterprises to multinational companies, there has been a rise in the use of the English language (Incelli, 2013) [9]. Other languages, including the national language, are used in these companies as well.

According to Drljača-Margić & Vodopija-Krstanović (2016), contextual business-related factors affect the level to which English is used within the company: interaction on the international market, the company background (e.g. English being dominant in corporations from the Anglo-Saxon context, Fredriksson, Barner-Rasmussen & Piekkari, 2006); the company sector (the difference between the services, marketing, finances, IT, telecommunication industry and accounting and other locally oriented sectors (Fredriksson, Barner-

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Rasmussen & Piekkari, 2006, Didiot-Cook, Gauthier & Scheirlinckx, 2000), the staff's role and position within the company (Fredriksson, Barner-Rasmussen & Piekkari, 2006) "intercultural and international communication skills" (Ainsworth, 2013:32) [5], [7], [4], [1]. Research has shown that sectors such as the services, marketing, finances and IT industry show the prevalence of English, whereas accounting belongs to the group of locally oriented sectors where English is not dominant (Didiot-Cook, Gauthier & Scheirlinckx, 2000) [4].

Regarding the use of other foreign languages besides English in the Croatian context, it might seem that business professionals use Italian, German, Slovenian and French most frequently. This might be explained by the proximity of the markets and the historical ties to the Italian, German and Slovenian language. The most useful languages for business communication appear to be German, Italian, Russian, Hungarian and French (Drljača Margić & Vodopija-Krstanović, 2016) [5].

In terms of the use of language skills, Didiot-Cook, Gauthier & Scheirlinckx (2000) assert that the productive skills (writing and speaking) are considered either of equal importance or the advantage was given to speaking. Kostić-Bobanović & Bobanović (2013) state that a great number of managers report using foreign language in the written (e-mails) and oral (telephoning) form. Similarly, research carried out among Croatian students of engineering, humanities and social sciences and nursing also confirms that speaking skills are regarded as the most important element of foreign language competence (Badrov & Jurković, 2017) [4], [12] [2].

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Aims and research methodology

The purpose of conducting this study is to determine business professionals' attitudes in order to get an insight for future tailoring of language learning programs. The study aims to explore the status of English and other foreign languages in the Croatian business environment. The research questions which guided the study are as follows:

- a) Are foreign languages important in conducting business in all sectors?
- b) What foreign languages are currently perceived as the most important among business professionals?
- c) What foreign language skills are perceived as the most important among business professionals?
- d) Does foreign language use depend on organizational size?
- e) Does the use of foreign language depend on the company sector?

f) What is the attitude toward improving foreign language skills in relation to the age of employees in Croatian companies?

### Research hypotheses:

In order to meet the aims of the study, the following hypotheses were proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Foreign languages are perceived as highly important by internationally oriented sectors, whereas they are considered unimportant by locally oriented sectors.

Hypothesis 2: English, German and Italian are the most important languages among business professionals.

Hypothesis 3: The productive skills (writing and speaking) are needed more than the receptive skills (reading and listening).

Hypothesis 4: The level of foreign language use is higher in larger companies than in smaller companies.

Hypothesis 5: Younger employees are more inclined to improve their foreign language skills.

Hypothesis 6: Foreign language use depends on the company sector.

### 2.2. Sampling procedure

An online questionnaire was administered in January and February 2018 using a snowball sampling method. The questionnaire was sent via e-mail and the aim was to include business professionals from various sectors in order to get an insight into population characteristics.

### 2.3. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was written in the Croatian language because it was aimed at Croatian business professionals' attitudes, hence, ensuring they fully understand the questions and are able to respond to the best of their abilities. The questionnaire comprised two parts: sample characteristics and foreign languages use. The first part consisted of four questions in relation to the participants' personal data - gender, age group, the company sector and company size.

The second part enquired into foreign language use and it encompassed 8 questions. Specifically, two yes-no questions looked at the difference in foreign language use, and whether the participants would like to continue working on their foreign language skills. Four Likert-type questions investigated the importance of foreign languages at work in general, the importance of six foreign languages in particular (English, German, Italian, Russian, French, Spanish),

the importance of the four skills (listening, reading, writing, speaking) and different ways of using foreign languages (e-mails, presentations, reports, meetings/negotiations, phone calls, team-work, training – courses, workshops). A 5-point Likert scale that ranged from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5) was used. Two open-ended questions asked for other important foreign language the respondents use in their companies and additional situations in which foreign languages are used.

#### 2.4. Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used in order to clearly and efficiently display the obtained results. In order to compare the answers from different groups regarding age, gender or organizational size, t-tests were used to determine whether the results are statistically significant.

### 3. Results

The participants were 66 business professionals employed in various sectors and companies in Primorje-Gorski Kotar County and Istria County. Almost a quarter of the respondents (22.7%) work in education, while others are employed in tourism (15.2%), civil engineering (10.6%), professional, scientific and technical services (9.1%), transport (9.1%), wholesaling and retail (6.1%), Business administration (4.5%), processing industry (4.5%), catering (4.5%), public service (3%) health (3%), information and communication (3%), agriculture (1.5%), finance and accounting (1.5%), entrepreneurship (1.5%). All of the respondents are native speakers of Croatian. The participants are 58% female and 42% male, and majority of them work in large companies (48.5%). The most represented age group of the participants is the one between 25 to 35 years old (66.7%).

The strong majority of the respondents (58%) deem that foreign language use is extremely important in their respective companies in terms of their working obligations. Out of the total number of participants there are 23% of those who consider foreign language use in performing their everyday working activities very important, but not extremely important. Only 6% of the respondents think foreign languages are not very important and nobody believes they are not important at all (max=5, min=2).

In order to analyze the answers from the participants in relation to organizational size regarding the importance of foreign language use in a working environment, a t-test was carried out in order to determine if the difference is significant or not.

Table 1. Two-Sample Assuming Equal Variances (Importance of foreign language use by organizational size)

Description	LARGE	SMALL and MEDIUM
Mean	4.4375	4,322581
Variance	0.705645	0,892473
Observations	32	31
Pooled Variance	0.797528	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	61	
t Stat	0.510629	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.305727	
t Critical one-tail	1.670219	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.611454	
t Critical two-tail	1.999624	

Source: research results

The importance of foreign language use of participants working in large companies (M=4.43, SD=0.84, n=32) was hypothesized to be greater than among the participants working in small and medium-sized companies (M=4.32, SD=0.94, n=31). This difference is not statistically significant ( $t(14)=0.51, p=0.30$ ).

The findings were analyzed to determine if the importance of foreign language use is more significant in certain industries. In order to pinpoint certain industries the answers were analyzed using median and standard deviation.

Table 2. Importance of foreign language use across industries

Field of work	Mean	SD
Processing industry	3	0.00
Civil engineering	3.28	1.25
Wholesale and retail	4.5	0.58
Transport and storage	4.28	0.84
Catering	4.66	0.58
Tourism	4.77	0.42
Entrepreneurship	5	-
Finance and Accounting	3.75	-
Information and Communication	5	0.00
Professional, scientific and technical services	4.22	0.41
Education	4.64	0.49
Business administration	4.25	1.00
Public service sector	2	0.00
Healthcare and social services	4.5	0.71

Source: research results

On the one hand, the results suggest that professionals who work in transport (A=4.28),

catering (A=4.66), tourism (A=4.77), entrepreneurship (A=5), information and communication (A=5), professional, scientific and technical services (A=4.22), and education (A=4.64) deem the importance of foreign language use extremely high. On the other hand, public services sector (A=2), processing industry (A=3), civil engineering (A=3.28) and finance and accounting (A=3.75) rate foreign language use less important.

In relation to specific foreign languages and their use, English is seen as very important or extremely important for carrying out tasks in their companies by the overwhelming majority of the respondents (85%). Only 6% of the participants believe English is not very important for their jobs. The German language is thought to be (very) important by 33% of the respondents, whereas 36% of the respondents think it is not very or not important at all. The importance of the Italian language is similar to that of German, that is, 32% find it very or fairly important, while 41% of the respondents hold that Italian is slightly important or not important at all. The large majority of the participants assert that Spanish (62%), Russian (62%) and French (64%) are not at all important and the minority of the participants deem it very or fairly important, 2%, 3% and 2% respectively.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics: Foreign language importance

Language	Median	Mode	SD	Range	Max	Min
English	5	5	0.90	3	5	2
German	3	3	1.31	4	5	1
Italian	3	3	1.28	4	5	1
Russian	1	1	0.97	4	5	1
French	1	1	0.94	4	5	1
Spanish	1	1	0.90	4	5	1

Source: research results

When asked about other important languages for business, only 4.55% of the respondents specified other languages. The languages that are mentioned: Swedish, Czech, Slovakian, Bosnian and Serbian. Given that all of the participants wrote their answers in Croatian, the answers were translated into English by the authors.

*Swedish - the company's headquarters are in Sweden*

*Czech and Slovakian – a lot of cargo is exported or imported from these two countries*

*Serbian and Bosnian*

The large majority of the participants see the four language skills as equally important. Reading is regarded by the respondents (77%) as very or fairly important, followed by speaking (74%) and listening (72%). Writing is considered very or fairly important by 65% of the respondents.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics: Importance of foreign language skills

Skill	Median	Mode	SD	Range	Max	Min
Listening	4	5	1.10	4	5	1
Reading	4	5	1.12	4	5	1
Writing	4	5	1.22	4	5	1
Speaking	4	5	1.01	4	5	1

Source: research results

In relation to the importance of use of business foreign languages, e-mails are believed to be very or fairly important by 76% of the respondents. E-mails are followed by meetings (61%) and presentations (59%). Writing reports is thought to be very or fairly important by 56% of the respondents and making phone calls by 54%. The majority of the participants (50%) believe that using business foreign languages in team work and professional education/training (53%) is very or fairly important. The other mentioned activities in which the use of foreign business languages is important are: "writing EU-funded projects", "business trips" and "tourism", "teaching".

Table 5. Descriptive statistics: Importance of using foreign language in different situations

Situations	Median	Mode	SD	Range	Max	Min
E-mail	5	5	1.30	4	5	1
Presentations	4	5	1.47	4	5	1
Reports	4	5	1.53	4	5	1
Meetings	4	5	1.41	4	5	1
Phone Communication	4	5	1.39	4	5	1
Teamwork	3.5	5	1.42	4	5	1
Professional Education	4	5	1.38	4	5	1

Source: research results

The overwhelming majority of the participants (89%) assert they would like to work on one of their language skills, while 11% say they would not.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics: Willingness to improve foreign language skills

Description	Number	%
Yes	59	89%
No	7	11%
TOTAL	66	100%

Source: research results

In terms of willingness of the participants to improve foreign language skills in relation to their age groups, all groups show a high level of willingness to work on their skills.

Table 6. Willingness to improve foreign language skills by age group

Age Group	Yes	%	No	%
18-25 yrs	4	100%	0	0%
26-35 yrs	38	86%	6	16%
36-45 yrs	11	100%	0	0%
46-55 yrs	5	100%	0	0%
55+ yrs	1	50%	1	50%
TOTAL	59	89%	7	11%

Source: research results

#### 4. Discussion

The importance of foreign language in conducting everyday activities in the Croatian business environment has been corroborated by the findings of this study. These results are in accordance with research (Ehrenreich, 2010, Kachru, 1990) that has been carried out in other countries [6], [10]. These findings are in line with the fact that most business professionals in small and open economies, such as Croatian, deem foreign language use very highly in their working environment. That might be so because everyday activities either rely on communication with foreign business partners and clients or their branch of work/sector relies heavily on foreign practices and foreign know-how. The latter can be especially true for the Republic of Croatia as a significant part of successful companies in the Republic of Croatia (that are also major employers) are Croatian branches of well-established European or other foreign companies. These companies implement their know-how in Croatian companies by documentation, education and training, exchange of technical and managerial staff, research and development to name but a few. The influence of foreign language in these instances can be considered as very strong.

The company sector is one of the factors that affect the use of English (Drljača Margić & Vodopija-Krstanović, 2016), or other languages. It is clear that foreign language is, to some extent, important in each and every of these. Certain differences have been established between sectors. Industries such as transport, catering, tourism, entrepreneurship, information and communication, professional, scientific and technical services and education hold foreign language use very or extremely important, which might be supported by the fact that these industries are internationally oriented and rely heavily on communication, often with foreign partners (transport, entrepreneurship, information and communication, professional, scientific and technical services) and/or foreign clients (catering, tourism) [5]. The importance of

foreign language usage in education can be linked to foreign literature and know-how that is used in their teaching or research activities. As presented in the results section of this research, the participants who work in public service, processing industry, civil engineering and finance and accounting believe that foreign language use is not that important. Public service sector does not rely heavily on foreign language communication because it caters mostly to domestic population, as it is the case with other mentioned industries. Thus, our hypothesis that foreign languages are perceived as highly important by internationally oriented sectors, whereas they are considered unimportant by locally oriented sectors was confirmed.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) are highly important for European economies and for the Croatian economy as well, given the fact that out of the total number of the companies operating in the Republic of Croatia 47.6% of them are small or medium-sized (7.6%) ([https://www.dzs.hr/Hrv\\_Eng/publication/2017/11-01-01\\_01\\_2017.htm](https://www.dzs.hr/Hrv_Eng/publication/2017/11-01-01_01_2017.htm), May 28, 2018) [3]. In order to compare the answers between the participants working in small and medium-sized companies and those working in large companies, a t-test was carried out. The difference was not statistically significant, which might indicate that there is no need to tailor specific foreign language courses for SME or large companies. Therefore, our hypothesis that the level of foreign language use is higher in larger companies than in the SME was not proven.

The unquestionable lingua franca of the business world remains the English language (Špiljak, 2007; Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salmien & Karhunen, 2015; Drljača Margić & Vodopija-Krstanović, 2016) whose status was clearly confirmed by the participants [18], [11], [5]. Its dominance in relation to other languages was not endangered by the vicinity of Germany, Austria, Italy, Hungary and strong economic ties to these countries and their languages (Median=5, Mode=5, SD=0,90, Range=3, max=5, min=2). Nevertheless, German (Median=3, Mode=3, SD=1,31, Range=4, max=5, min=1) and Italian (Median=3, Mode=3, SD=1,28, Range=4, max=5, min=1) hold important position in the Croatian context as well, possibly due to the traditionally strong business and social bonds, influence of their economies and their proximity to the Croatian market. The status of English, German and Italian corroborated earlier research conducted in this region (Kostić-Bobanović & Bobanović, 2013). However, Kostić-Bobanović & Bobanović (2013) found that Russian was considered fairly important in Istria County, which was not corroborated by our study [12]. Furthermore, our findings are in line with other research that says that other languages are used as

well and that they serve as a very useful tool (Ehrenreich, 2010) [6]. Other languages mentioned, such as Swedish, Czech and Slovakian seem to depend on a single company and its particular ties to a certain country. The hypothesis that English, German and Italian are the most important languages among business professionals was confirmed.

The participants believe reading, speaking and listening are equally important, whereas writing was rated very or extremely important by a smaller percentage of participants (65%). This is interesting and in contrast with the finding that e-mail, as an example of written communication, is the most important part medium of foreign language use at work. Median for *e-mails* was 5, while for the other situations it was 4 and 3.5 for *teamwork*, which indicates that participants deem *e-mails* slightly more important than other forms of foreign language use. These results are akin to what Didiot-Cook, Gauthier & Scheirlinckx (2000) discovered in their study [4]. Namely, productive skills (writing and speaking) are seen as equally important or there is a slight advantage given to oral skills. They believe that whether one skill is more important than others varies from one position to another and that e-mail as a form of written communication is similar to oral communication and does not follow the rules of academic writing. The respondents in our study give precedence to *e-mails*, *presentations* and *meeting*, however, other forms of foreign languages use such as *reports*, *phone calls*, *team work* and *training* are deemed important as well. We might add that depending on the position, the participants added other ways of using foreign languages, for example, *writing EU-funded projects*, *business trips* and *teaching*. The hypothesis that the productive skills are needed more than the receptive skills was rejected.

Given the increasing global and international outlook for business operators in the foreseeable future, it is extremely important for business professionals to continue improving their foreign language skills during their working life span. What is more, according to Kostić-Bobanović, Novak & Bobanović (2016), managers' foreign language skills positively affect the company's success [13]. Our research suggests that majority (89%) of the participants are willing to work on one or more of their foreign language skills in the future regardless of their age group. These findings reject our hypothesis that younger employees are more inclined to improve their foreign language skills than the older employees. In their study Kostić Bobanović, Novak & Bobanović (2016) discovered that language training for employees is a linguistic measure being the most valuable in overcoming linguistic barriers in international business operations of SMEs in Istria

County [13]. The research proves that Croatian business professionals are aware of the advantage they have once when they are able to use the clients' country's language, rather than using intermediaries such as professional translators.

## 5. Study Limitations

There were several study limitations that should be addressed in this section. First of all, sample size is limited (66 respondents), hence the findings should be generalized with caution.

Furthermore, the geographical scope of the study encompasses only two counties in the Republic of Croatia, Primorje-Gorski Kotar and Istria. Therefore, the study presented the results obtained only for these specific parts of the Republic of Croatia.

Another limitation that must be addressed is the age of the respondents. More than half of them are between 26 and 35 years of age that certainly poses a limitation regarding the results of the research study. It would be interesting to investigate how older age groups respond to foreign language use in their respective working environment.

The structure of the company sectors presents another factor that should be taken into account. Namely, 22.7% of the total number of participants works in education.

## 6. Conclusion and further research

In the Croatian context, English is regarded as inevitable in doing business. To a lesser extent, German and Italian are present in some companies; therefore, they should not be neglected in formal education, especially due to the fact that we live in the multilingual business world and Germany and Italy represent strong, nearby economies. On the other hand, French, Spanish and Russian are not considered important by business professionals in conducting everyday activities at work for the majority of the respondents. In addition, some non-world languages (Swedish, Czech, and Slovakian) are present in several companies due to their specific economic ties with certain countries.

The company sector has proven to be an important factor in foreign language use. Namely, it has confirmed our hypothesis that foreign language plays a more crucial role in internationally oriented sectors.

All the four language skills were deemed almost equally important. Interestingly, writing was considered less important than the other skills. Generally, it seems that business professionals are aware of the importance of both productive and receptive skills. The most important media of foreign language use are e-mails, presentations and meetings,

which corroborate the importance of productive skills. Therefore, these, if they still are not, should be addressed within the curriculum. Furthermore, reports, phone calls, team work and training are also situations in which foreign languages are used, but to a lesser degree.

Generally, no matter how old they are, business professionals are aware of the importance of foreign language use, especially of the fact that the majority of them would like to continue working on their language skills.

Further research might consider including a larger sample and should focus on a particular sector or age group. Also, given that our research was geographically limited, more research should take into account participants in other Croatian counties, as well as other countries, to see whether there are any differences among these and why these occur.

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