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Let employers **tALK**. Boosting students' employability.

“A child born today in the USA has a 50:50 chance of reaching 104.
Some will live much longer”

David Sinclair, a professor in the Department of Genetics at Harvard Medical School

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving global economy and in view of increasing longevity, it has become increasingly important for teachers to equip business students not only with language skills but also with a comprehensive set of employability skills that will enhance their competitiveness and prepare them for the labour market.

Employability skills (also “soft” or “work” skills) refer to a set of general skills and key personal attributes that are highly valued by employers and essential for effective performance in the workplace. (“Employability skills - Careers Centre - The University of Sydney”) Unlike professional or technical skills, they are generic in nature, rather than job-specific, and are common to all employment levels and in all sectors. According to Small et al. (2020: 4), employability is:

“capacity to be self-reliant in navigating the labour market, utilising knowledge, individual skills and attributes, and adapting them to the employment context, showcasing them to employers, while taking into account external and other constraints”.

Currently, as career paths are extended and may change over a lifespan, employability refers to attributes that are not only discipline-specific but rather a set of skills that are transferrable to a broader range of jobs (Williams et al. 2019).

However, according to Pearson's research (Bakshi et al., 2020), only 11% of employers believe educational institutions effectively prepare students for work, while 96% of academics believe they prepare students for future employment.

The same research proves that the majority of recruiters (90%) look for 21st-century skills in university graduates and base their hiring decisions on them.

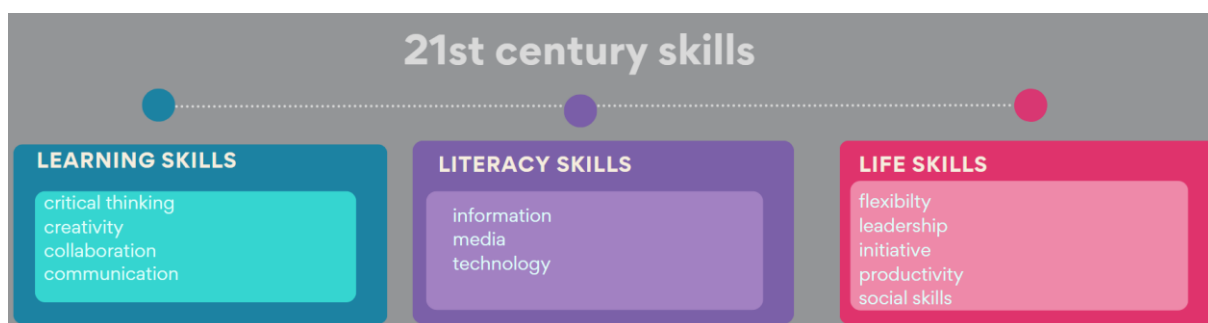


Figure 1: 21st century skills

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At Kozminski University (pol. **ALK** – Akademia Leona Koźmińskiego), a leading business university in Poland, we teach Languages for Specific Purposes. We, therefore, want to know what makes our students employable, so that we can model our courses and teaching materials accordingly and give students the possibility to develop the required skills before they graduate.

We adopted a student-centred approach based on the principles of Target Needs Analysis which according to Jack C. Richards and Richard Schmidt in the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics 4th ed. (2010: 175) concentrates on examining and understanding how the language is used in the specific discourse community and concentrates on defining the skills that the learners should obtain by the end of the course.

Therefore, in the academic year 2022/2023 we conducted a target needs analysis among 22 HR specialists from companies of different sizes operating in Poland, e.g. Mercedes Benz, BNP Paribas, Athlon, Achem, Arkuda, Sygnis. Our aim was to explore what competencies and skills employers consider vital in entry-level jobs, how they test language skills during recruitment, and what tasks young employees are expected to be able to perform.

Our purpose was to gain insight into changes and tendencies in the job market, to increase the awareness of these among our staff so that they know how to boost the attractiveness of our graduates and to close the gap between what we teach and what is valued by employers.

Target Needs Analysis

Needs and needs analysis have always been a fundamental element of English for Specific Purposes (Selinker & Trimble, 1976; Munby, 1978; Widdowson, 1981; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 2002; Bhatia, 2004; Hyland, 2007; Brown, 2016). Views on what must be analysed and the very concept of needs have changed over time.

Some linguists prefer the democratic approach of replacing needs with rights, allowing stakeholders like students, teachers, departments, and policymakers to participate in ESP course design decisions (Hyland: 380-381).

Target needs analysis, aiming to prepare learners for effective communication in future situations requiring a foreign language, proves to be a beneficial approach. For an ESP course, this analysis involves examining language use in specific discourse communities, like legal professionals or graduates in corporations, gathering samples of correspondence, identifying interlocutors, and dominant language skills.

Brown (2016) discusses various analysis options for ESP: target situation use analysis, target situation linguistic analysis, means analysis, and present situation analysis. Other types of analyses, such as rights analysis, gap analysis, individual differences analysis, classroom-learning analysis, and classroom-teaching analysis, may supplement needs analysis depending on the situation. Needs analysis, however, is always a negotiation process that benefits ESP course participants and the teaching institution, providing advantages to teachers in terms of teaching conditions and professional development.

Research Method

At Kozminski Language Centre we designed research on boosting students' employability whose part one comprised target needs analysis conducted among 22 companies – among which the majority (64%) constituted international corporations and the rest Polish companies. Half of the companies employ more than 250 employees and the rest between 10 and 250. The most often represented branches were finance, HR and payroll and new technologies.

The research was conducted by means of an online questionnaire composed of 22 questions, four of which were open questions, not required though. A copy of the questionnaire can be found here:

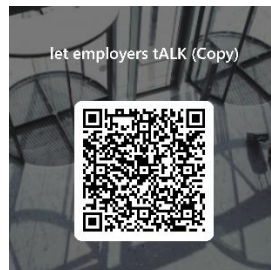


Figure 2: Let employers tALK questionnaire QR Code

Research Results

Foreign Languages and the Field of Studies

The most desired candidates are graduates of finance and accounting (15%), economics (13%), management (7%) and law (6%).

We asked our respondents what foreign language they expect graduates to know. All of them chose English and usually indicated B2 level. Only around a quarter of them require C1 or above level.

Overall, the survey highlights the vital role of foreign language proficiency in boosting students' employability. In an interconnected world, these skills are essential for career growth and success.

The results give us insight into how employees use foreign languages in many different situations. The most common use is for correspondence, like letters, emails, and messaging apps, mentioned by almost all respondents (91%). Additionally, over 80% of respondents said that foreign languages are frequently used in the office and within Poland as well as on the phone. Moreover, almost 60% of respondents said they use foreign languages during trainings and workshops, and half of them reported using them during business trips. Foreign languages are also used abroad by almost half of respondents, showing how important multilingual skills are for international business interactions.

Recruitment Purposes

At Kozminski Language Centre we are very much focused on preparing our students for the challenges of the labour market and we want them to be successful at job interviews. One of the aims of our research was, therefore, to obtain information on how language skills are verified by recruiters.

Our research showed that recruiters employ a range of methods to assess candidates' language skills during job interviews, as evidenced by the survey results. The most common approach, utilized by the majority of respondents (86%) involves engaging candidates in conversations in a foreign language to gauge their fluency and communication abilities. Additionally, four respondents (18%) reported using text translation tasks to evaluate candidates' written proficiency. Another four mentioned conducting assessment centres, involving tasks, discussions, case studies, and presentations, to assess language competency in diverse scenarios. Moreover, only three respondents employ grammar tests to evaluate candidates' linguistic accuracy. In rarer cases, only one respondent used recorded video statements to assess language skills.

At Kozminski Language Centre one of our main objectives is to prepare students for international certificate examinations, i.e. TOLES (Test of Legal English Skills), LINGUASKILL Business and Goethe-Pro-Test. We, therefore, were interested in which certificates are recognized by the employers. Surprisingly, the majority of our research subject confirmed that they do not require a certificate. They voiced their reasons which have been collated in the Figure 6 below:

We are interested in a person's ease of communication. We are now observing that there is a kind of international English, of people communicating in it, who at the same time are not native speakers of these languages. This results in a simplification of the language forms used. People with certificates, especially of the higher C1/C2 levels, tend to create complex constructions - this turns out to be incomprehensible to international partners (Germans, Swiss, French etc.),

The certificate may have been issued several years ago, it is important for our company to verify the level of the foreign language that is current at the time of the candidate's admission. In addition, using a single language authority that verifies the language level of candidates unifies the standard of assessment.

The most important thing for us is to be able to communicate freely, and certificates are not always an indicator of verbal communication skills.

Certificates are often out-of-date, a long time has passed since it was issued and the person has had no contact with the language during this time. Similarly, students and graduates of philology, many times they lack the ability to speak, and this is the most important thing.

We test the language use in practice

What counts is up-to-date practical knowledge

Our language audit is tailored to the CEFR, so we require, among other things, industry-specific vocabulary.

We do not require a certificate because we do not communicate in this language with clients.

We believe that an interview alone is sufficient to see the level of a person's language proficiency.

We expect our staff to communicate in English and a certificate does not prove this

as long as the candidate is able to speak the language, no certificate is required

Confidence in communication is more important

Practical language skills matter

Figure 6: The reasons why recruiters do not require language certificates (original spelling and grammar)

Language Skills And Tasks

Our respondents indicated that speaking and writing are the most important language skills in the professional context while listening and reading turned out to be slightly less significant. We have asked our respondents to designate tasks they expect job candidates to be able to perform. The results are presented in the lists below in the order from the most to the least often selected and are expressed as percentages.

Speaking

conduct phone calls and video conferences	91
participate in business meetings and discussions	82
make small talk	68
participate in the work of an international team	64
react to feedback	50
take part in negotiations	45
conduct business meetings	45
present (products, company, statistical data, charts)	41
give feedback	41
react to conflict situations (during meetings, negotiations)	41
stand up for your beliefs and ideas	41
paraphrase, simplify statements (your own and other participants of the conversation)	32
manage the team	23

Figure 7: Speaking tasks employers expect job candidates to be able to perform.

Writing

write e-mails	95
write reports	73
write messages in messengers, chats	50
write business letters	45
write grammatically correct texts	45
take notes	41
translate texts	27
draw up minutes	27
write posts on social media	23
respond to complaints	18
create website content	18
write opinions (about the employee, about the offer, about the project)	14
write articles (trade magazines, newsletters, press releases)	9

Figure 8: Written tasks employers expect job candidates to be able to perform.

Reading

business correspondence	95
reports	73
press, website	68
legal documents (contracts, acts)	59
professional literature	55
manuals, user instructions	45

Figure 9: Reading tasks employers expect job candidates to be able to perform.

Listening

to people on the phone and at videoconferences	100
to people during business meetings	86
to presentations, lectures, webinars, training on professional topics	73
to information provided on information portals	45
to information on voicemail	23
to information shared on social media	23

Figure 10: Listening tasks employers expect job candidates to be able to perform.

Soft Skills

Apart from the language skills our research aimed to identify what other skills the employers look for in job candidates so that we could incorporate them into foreign language course curricula. The results are presented in the list below in the order from the most to the least often selected and are expressed as percentages.

interpersonal communication	91
analytical skills	91
teamwork	86
motivation and perseverance	82
willingness to learn and develop	82
good organization	82
troubleshooting	73
time management	64
work under pressure	59
critical thinking	59
digital skills	55
awareness of values and ethical behaviour	50

intercultural understanding	50
completed higher education studies	45
flexibility	45
ambition	41
commercial awareness	36
willingness to engage in hard work	36
negotiation and persuasion skills	23
a well-prepared job application	18
creativity in taking risks	14
International experience	14
leadership skills	9

Figure 11: Soft skills that employers expect from job candidates.

Conclusions

The survey results underscore the essential role of foreign language proficiency in boosting students' employability. With increasing global connectivity and cross-cultural interactions in the professional realm, foreign language skills have become indispensable in shaping a highly competitive and sought-after workforce. Students equipped with such skills are better prepared to meet the diverse demands of the modern job market and unlock a myriad of opportunities for career growth and success.

In conclusion, the employability of business students is significantly enhanced by focusing on the acquisition of English language skills. English remains the number one foreign language required by employers, with speaking and writing being identified as the most crucial skills for professional success. International corporations frequently evaluate candidates' English knowledge during the recruitment process, often through conversational assessments. In such companies, English is an integral part of daily communication. However, in Polish companies, its usage is relatively rare.

The study reveals that employers tend to prioritize practical language skills over formal certificates. Verbal communication and practical abilities, such as phone and video calls, meetings, collaboration in international teams, and written communication via emails, reports, and chats, are highly sought after. Additionally, understanding presentations, webinars, and lectures in English is vital for effective integration into the global business landscape. Besides language proficiency, employers highly value a range of other skills, including interpersonal communication, analytical capabilities, teamwork, motivation, adaptability, organizational proficiency, troubleshooting, time management, the ability to work under pressure, critical thinking, and digital skills.

To boost their employability, business students should strive to develop a well-rounded skill set that encompasses language proficiency alongside these practical

and interpersonal abilities, positioning themselves as dynamic and versatile professionals ready to excel in the competitive job market.

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