

TEACHING SPANISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE FOR STUDENTS OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS

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Abstract The intercultural dimension in teaching students of economics and business is strongly supported by promoting foreign languages learning. Mastering a foreign language enables users to communicate and to better understand the culture of business partners or customers on the increasingly globalised markets. In this paper, we therefore focus on the needs of the students at the University of Economics in Bratislava – the largest university in Slovakia providing education in economics and business – with respect to teaching Spanish as a foreign language. Based on a questionnaire survey among students, we assessed the relevance of mastering Spanish for the overall study as well as with regard to their expected careers after completing their studies, the relevance of specific topics in the syllabus, the desired learning outcomes and competencies as well as the evaluation of the acquired knowledge and competencies with the aim to improve the teaching process in Spanish lessons. We conclude that teaching Spanish should focus more on oral communication and intercultural competencies.

Keywords:
teaching,
spanish,
syllabus,
competencies,
survey.

Introduction

The University of Economics in Bratislava (UE) is the only state university of Economics and Management in Slovakia and foreign languages are an important part of the study programme from its start. The study of foreign languages is a significant part in university education for economists. The importance of foreign language teaching is pointed out in work by a number of authors, e.g. by Stein-Smith (2016), Mercier (1942) or Li (2011). According to the European Commission (2005), language skills are “important in achieving European policy goals, particularly against a background of increasing global competition” (p. 14). While foreign language skills can be a considerable career asset in a broad spectrum of careers, they are notably important for careers in the export sector and in foreign-owned companies (Stein-Smith, 2016). The importance of foreign languages in international business has long been recognized and accepted. Marschan, Welch and Welch (1997, p. 591) argue that language needs to be considered as an important element in managing multinationals because it “permeates virtually every aspect of their business activities”. Language is an important component of a psychic distance that influences companies' internationalization patterns (Wiedersheim-Paul, 1972).

The study of foreign languages not only provides students of UE with the irreplaceable professional preparedness, but also improves the intellectual and, in broader terms, cultural dimension of their personality. The importance of intercultural factors in the process of teaching a foreign language was pointed out by Morar (2009, p. 81) who states that “intercultural competence has become a key competence for the majority of people”. At the time when UE was established, the emphasis was laid on foreign language teaching. This is evidenced by the fact that as early as in the academic year 1940/41, up to 7 foreign languages (German, Russian, English, French, Spanish, Italian, Hungarian) were taught at the High School of Trade (UE's forerunner) and in the period 1947-1952, there were up to 11 languages taught, including Romanian, Polish, Serbo-Croatian and Swedish (Sivák et al., 2013). Currently, seven languages are taught, i.e. English, German, Spanish, French, Italian, Russian and Slovak as a foreign language for foreign students. Language teaching is provided by the Faculty of Applied Languages (FAL), which was established in 2010 from the Institute of Foreign Languages at the UE in Bratislava.

FAL offers the subject Foreign Languages and Intercultural Communication in combination with English, German, Spanish or French. The aim of FAL is to offer a high-level education that includes an advanced level of communication and intercultural competence in two foreign languages as well as the basic knowledge of economics, law and social sciences. In addition, FAL provides all 7 languages at other faculties of UE (i.e. the Faculty of Commerce, the Faculty of National Economy, the Faculty of Business Management, the Faculty of Economic Informatics and the Faculty of International Relations). In 2005, a credit education system was introduced and its core is the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) that divides language knowledge into three levels: A (A1, A2), B (B1, B2) and C (C1, C2). FAL has introduced compulsory studies of at least two foreign languages and three foreign languages at the Faculty of International Relations (FIR), the principle behind the foreign language choice and the sequence of teaching. Foreign language teaching according to this system is divided into (Sivák et al., 2010):

1. *A common basis with the condition of completing the first stage of study in which languages are taught at six levels:*

- A1, A2 – foreign language for beginners;
- B1 – general language for pre-intermediate students;
- B2 – general language for intermediate students and professional foreign language for pre-intermediate students;
- C1 – advanced foreign language;
- C2 – professional foreign language for advanced topics (national economy; economic informatics; business economy; business; corporate management; culture, civilization and intercultural communication; negotiations); and

2. *Optional and compulsory elective courses throughout the study:*

- language courses A1 - C2.

In the first year of study, students of all faculties enrol into the 1st foreign language course starting at B2-C1 level and ending in two or three semesters (depending on the faculty) at C2 level. In their second year, they enrol in a second foreign language course lasting two or three semesters (depending on the faculty) starting at B1 level (continuation of the foreign language study they had at their secondary school) and ending at level B2-C1. FIR students have an extended language course that lasts longer. The first foreign language course lasts 6 semesters and the second foreign language course lasts 8 semesters. In addition to the language, they also study the culture, the intercultural topics and the area studies. Both languages (the first and the second language) end at C2 level with a final state exam.

In addition, students at FIR have a third foreign language starting at level 0 and reaching B2-C1 in the first year of the second level of study. In addition to the study of professional economics-related language and area studies, UE in Bratislava places an emphasis on intercultural communication and negotiations (especially at FAL and FIR). These subjects prepare graduates not only from a linguistic point of view but also from the point of view of getting to learn both general and profession/business-related culture, customs and traditions of other cultures.

Teaching is provided by the teaching staff, lecturers and associate professors specializing in philology, culture, history and area studies of the relevant language. English, German, French and Spanish subjects also are provided by native speakers as teachers as well. Intercultural communication is becoming increasingly important in business negotiations and in dealing with foreign partners. Therefore, intercultural communication is part of FAL's study of Foreign Languages and Intercultural Communication subject; at FIR, it is taught in foreign language subjects and culture and foreign language communication. FAL is the only faculty in Slovakia offering the subject Intercultural Communication and Business Negotiations in Foreign Language.

Spanish is the mother tongue of almost 500 million people; it is the second most used language in the world (after English) and the third most used language on the Internet (Spišiaková, 2016). Two thirds of the American continent population communicates in Spanish – precisely the countries with emerging economies where a huge market and many business partners are opening up to the European Union. Not only the EU experts but also students are aware of this fact as the interest in

studying Spanish is growing rapidly and it is the second most requested language at the University of Economics after English. Currently, almost 500 students are studying Spanish at the University of Economics. Teaching Spanish is provided by the Department of Romance and Slavic Languages. The Department employs one associate professor, five assistant professors and two lecturers who are native speakers (from Colombia and Nicaragua). The Department also offers subjects such as Spanish, Business Spanish, Culture and Civilization, Spanish Culture, Communication and Communication in the International Context, Intercultural Communication, etc.

In this paper, we pay close attention to the needs of the students at the University of Economics in Bratislava with respect to teaching Spanish as a foreign language. Based on a questionnaire survey among students, we assessed the relevance of mastering Spanish for the overall study as well as with regard to expected careers after completing studies, the relevance of specific topics included in the syllabus, the desired learning outcomes and competencies as well as the evaluation of the acquired knowledge and competencies. The questionnaire survey was conducted in order to determine our students' views on the contents as well as the way of teaching Spanish.

Characteristics and structure of the survey sample

Our survey was conducted from September 2018 to December 2018. The core research group consisted of students of the University of Economics in Bratislava enrolled in the academic year 2018/2019 in their first, second or third year of study. Together, 112 students participated in the research. The sample consisted of 74% women and 26% men. Students of three faculties were represented in the survey, namely the Faculty of International Relations (FIR), the Faculty of National Economy (FNE) and the Faculty of Applied Languages (FAL).

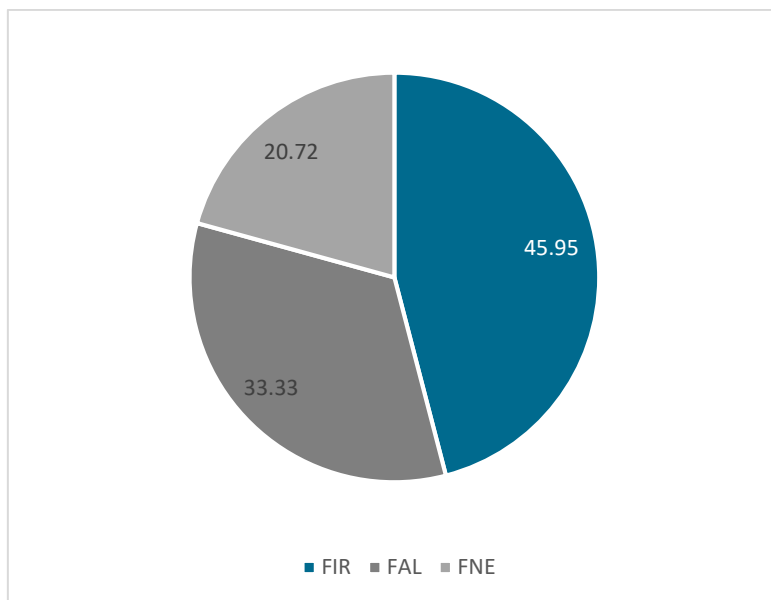


Figure 1: Structure of the sample

Survey results

The questionnaire focused on the content of the Spanish course. We examined the relevance of mastering Spanish in terms of the overall study as well as in terms of the expected career of graduates after completing their studies. The detection of the relevance rate of the topics for their inclusion in the content of Spanish course represented an important part of the survey. At the same time, respondents identified the desired learning outcomes, competencies and skills that should be improved in the teaching process. Finally, they evaluated their knowledge and competencies acquired during the course.

Relevance of mastering Spanish for the overall study as well as with regard to expected careers after completing studies

The relevance rate of mastering Spanish for the overall study as well as with regard to the expected careers after completing the studies was evaluated on a scale from 0

= ‘completely irrelevant’ to 5 = ‘very relevant’. The frequency and percentage of each evaluation are captured in Table 1.

Table 1: The evaluation frequency and its share on total

Evalua- -tion	0 = completel y irrelevant	1 = slightly relevant	2 = less relevant	3 = medium relevant	4 = more relevant	5 = very relevant
	Relevance of mastering Spanish with regard to the overall study					
Num- ber	0	4	6	26	41	31
Share	0 %	3.7 %	5.6 %	24.1 %	38 %	28.7 %
	Relevance of mastering Spanish with regard to expected career					
Num- ber	0	8	16	29	36	16
Share	0 %	7.6 %	15.2 %	27.6 %	34.3 %	15.2 %

Source: Authors' research.

The average rate of relevance regarding the overall study reached 3.82 (i.e. more relevant) and the average mark of relevance regarding the estimated professional career after graduation amounted to 3.34 (i.e. medium relevant). Due to the comparable results of average relevancy rate for men and women, it can be concluded that there is no difference in the perception of this indicator based on gender. However, there are differences in the perception of the degree of relevance depending on the field of study. Students of the Faculty of Applied Languages consider Spanish to be more relevant in terms of both the overall study and the estimated career after graduation than students of other faculties (average rates of relevance were 3.91 and 3.41).

Respondents had the possibility to specify at least four reasons to study Spanish. As indicated by Figure 2, the most frequently stated reason was the significance of Spanish as one of the most used global languages, followed by an interest in Spanish language and culture. More than 36% of respondents study Spanish because of the planned future career.



Figure 2: Reasons for studying Spanish

Further, respondents were asked to specify how they want to use Spanish after completing their studies. The results are shown in Figure 3. In total, 76% of respondents indicated their intention to use Spanish in their work after graduation. Moreover, 12% of respondents expressed their wish to work in Spanish-speaking countries. For 10% of respondents, the study of Spanish was needed as they wanted to work in international companies. 4% of respondents expected using Spanish in communication with customers or business partners. Respondents not foreseeing the use of Spanish in their work after graduation still wanted to use it for travelling or everyday communication.



Figure 3: Using Spanish after completing studies

Relevance of specific topics and competencies included in the syllabus

In order to determine which topics and competencies are the most and, respectively, the least relevant, respondents evaluated the relevance rate of the 9 topics and competencies on a scale from 0 (= ‘completely irrelevant’) to 5 (= ‘very relevant’). The survey results are shown in Table 2 where the topics and competencies are listed according to the average value of the relevance from the most relevant to the least relevant. The average relevance value of all topics amounted to 3.47 (i.e. medium relevant to more relevant).

Table 2: Relevance of the topics and competencies in terms of their inclusion in the Spanish course content

Rank	Topic or competence	Average value
1	Basic vocabulary	4.39
2	Oral communication	4.24
3	Written communication	3.66
4	Intercultural knowledge	3.37
5	Professional vocabulary (business, international relations, banking, administration, etc.)	3.37
6	History, culture, social and political process in Spain	3.32
7	Translating competencies	3.04
8	History, culture, social and political process in Latin America	2.91
9	Interpreting competencies	2.84

Source: Authors' research

Respondents were further asked to specify which knowledge and competencies they consider to be the most useful for their future career. Figure 4 shows that the most useful competence is the ability to speak and communicate in Spanish. Basic and professional vocabulary was considered useful by almost equal percentage of respondents.

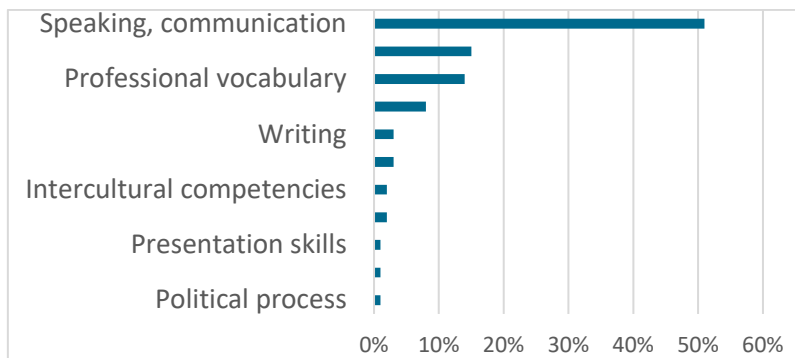


Figure 4: Knowledge and competencies the most useful for future career

Contrary to that, Figure 5 presents which knowledge or competencies were perceived as the least useful for future careers of respondents. Here, the knowledge of literature and history clearly prevails. According to 20% of respondents, each knowledge or competence acquired may be professionally useful. 13% of respondents (grouped under caption 'other' in Figure 5) represented various knowledge or competencies, where each of them was named just by one respondent. These included, for example, lexicology, interpreting, translating, reading, orthography, listening, and geography or Spanish songs.

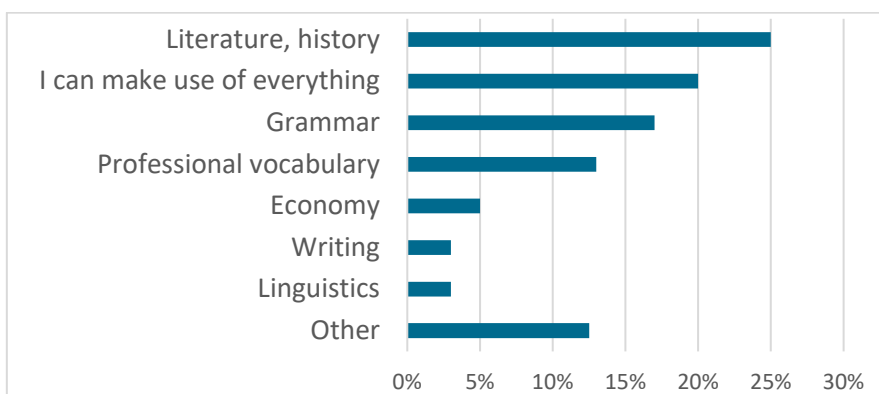


Figure 5. Knowledge and competence the least useful for future career

Evaluation of acquired knowledge and competencies

Respondents evaluated the level of difficulty to master the Spanish course on a scale from 0 (= ‘completely undemanding’) to 5 (= ‘very difficult’). The average value was 3.26 (= medium demanding). Respondents further evaluated (according to their personal views) the degree of how they managed to deal with the tasks received at Spanish lessons. Evaluation was carried out in scale from 1 (= ‘excellent’) to (5 = ‘insufficient’). The average mark was 3 (= ‘good’). This assessment is independent from the teachers’ grading of how students managed the task in the examination, as it was done before the examination. Table 3 summarizes the extent of improvement in specific knowledge and competencies on a scale from 0 (= ‘no improvement’) to 5 (= ‘very significant improvement’) as evaluated by respondents. The best improvement was achieved in basic vocabulary followed by understanding spoken language and the ability to translate. Contrary to that, the knowledge on Latin America improved the least.

Table 3: Improvement in specific knowledge and competencies

Competence	Average mark
Basic vocabulary	3.24
Understanding oral communication	2.99
Translating competencies	2.92
Understanding written communication	2.84
Written communication	2.82
Oral communication	2.65
History, culture, social and political process in Spain	2.65
Intercultural competencies	2.56
Professional vocabulary	2.45
History, culture, social and political process in Latin America	2.30

Source: Authors’ research

Students were asked to evaluate which competencies they feel most and least confident in. The leading of three competencies in both aspects are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: The leading three competencies with the most positive or negative evaluation

The most confident – competencies	Share of responses	The least confident – competencies	Share of responses
Writing	28%	Grammar	35%
Understanding	25%	Speaking	33%
Speaking	25%	Understanding	7%

Source: Authors' research

Desired learning outcomes, competencies and recommendations

The rate of satisfaction with Spanish lessons was evaluated by respondents on the scale from 0 (= 'totally unsatisfied') to 5 (= 'very satisfied'). The average value amounted to 3.48 (= 'medium to more satisfied'). This shows that there is enough space for improving Spanish lessons. Respondents were asked to make suggestions in order to improve the classes of Spanish. The most frequent suggestion was to include more conversation in Spanish. Students would also welcome more discussion and creative tasks, permanent teaching staff, more listening and translating as well as current topics to be included into Spanish lessons. Some more recommendations are listed in Figure 6.

**Figure 6: Recommendations made by respondents to improve Spanish lessons**

Respondents were asked to specify topics that should be, according to their opinion, more dealt with during Spanish lessons. Approximately 25% of respondents would like to learn about culture, 21% about everyday topics and about 18% of respondents would prefer to deal more with topics related to the economy. Respondents further suggested the areas of professional language they would like to pay more attention to during Spanish lessons. The results are presented in Figure 7.



Figure 7: Suggested areas of professional language

Again, the most preferred area of professional language is economy followed by politics and international relations. Apart from the areas of professional language listed in Figure 7, some more areas were mentioned, i.e. marketing, environmental studies, geography, medicine, sociology, business negotiations, banking or psychology. Each of these areas have, however, reached less than 2% share of all answers. Preferences on professional vocabulary depend strongly on the field of study. For example, the students of the Faculty of International Relations prefer vocabulary concerning politics or international relations whereas the students of the Faculty of Applied Languages would expect to learn vocabulary from diverse areas of professional language.

Conclusion

Due to geographical, historical as well as economic reasons, Spanish does not belong to the most widespread foreign languages in Slovakia, in comparison to English, German or Russian (Grafton Slovakia, 2017). Therefore, we studied the relevance of mastering of Spanish for the students of economics and business in Slovakia. We

found that Spanish is more than average relevant primarily on the grounds of being one of the most used global languages. More than 75% of the students taking part in the survey intend to use Spanish in their future job. They either want to work in a Spanish-speaking country or for a multinational corporation where communication in Spanish is expected. Good examples of such corporations are Shared Service & Business Process Outsourcing Centres. They offer international support services for their parent companies and other subsidiaries. They also execute specific outsourced business processes for third-parties from abroad. With more than 30,000 people, they are important employers in Slovakia (Slovak Investment and Trade Development Agency, 2018). Spanish may be useful also in communication with foreign customers and business partners. Multinational corporations in Slovakia such as Henkel, Lenovo, Johnson Controls, Dell, Accenture, AT&T or Amazon employ Spanish and Latin Americans employees because they are not able to find as many Slovaks as they need who master both English and Spanish at a good or even a professional level. English is required mostly as a language of internal communication while Spanish is important for communication with clients in the Spanish-speaking countries.

For all purposes mentioned above, the most useful competence in Spanish is the knowledge of basic vocabulary, the ability to speak and write as well as intercultural competence. Opposite to that, the knowledge on Spanish or Latin American literature and history is perceived as not relevant by students of economics and business.

If looked at the evaluation of improvement in specific competencies, the results of our survey show that the best improvement was achieved in basic vocabulary and in understanding spoken language. On the other hand, oral communication and the intercultural competencies were among those competencies that improved the least.

The conclusion of our survey is that teaching Spanish should reasonably reflect students' preferences and their practical hints in preparing the syllabus and practical exercises. More attention should be paid to competencies that are the most useful for the students of economics and business. At the same time, intercultural competencies and oral communication were assessed as the competencies where the lowest improvement was achieved. This is in line with suggestions made by respondents concerning the improvement of Spanish classes. By far, the most

frequent suggestion was to include more conversation and discussion into Spanish lessons. As far as professional language and related vocabulary are concerned, lessons should be adjusted to the needs of the specific field of study.

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