

DEVELOPING COMPETENCES FOR COOPERATION WITH FOREIGN PARTNERS AT THE LATVIA UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE

Anete Mezote

Latvia University of Agriculture
anetemezote@inbox.lv

Abstract. Due to the increasing role of international partnership among organizations besides specific profession-related competences the prospective specialists in all fields need to develop foreign language, communication and cooperation competences to be able to cooperate successfully with foreign partners. It is important to note that foreign language skills alone cannot guarantee successful cooperation with foreign partners especially in cases when cooperation on an international level occurs frequently. Surveys among the graduates of the Latvia University of Agriculture prove the need for foreign language and cross-cultural communication skills, as well as other cooperation skills to successfully accomplish the work duties of specialists of different fields. Due to this reason, competences needed for successful communication with foreign partners should be developed in students of different faculties of the Latvia University of Agriculture according to the Latvian current labour market needs of each particular field. As the market needs and requirements for the working specialists differ, the task of educators within engineering education, as well as education of external relations specialists and other prospective specialists is to continuously determine the competences and the level of the competences needed for each specialty and find solutions for developing the particular competences within foreign language courses or other (on many occasions more cooperation-related) courses, afterwards ensuring the integration of such solutions in the curriculum and thus solving the problem regarding the lack of cooperation competence among the graduates.

Keywords: competences, cooperation, foreign partners.

Introduction

Due to the increase in cooperation among companies and institutions all around the world as a result of the globalisation of business processes, employees working in these companies and institutions need to possess not only appropriate language skills, but also communications skills, especially those related to cooperation with foreign partners. Such a need demands the employers hire only specialists capable of ensuring successful cooperation between a company or institution and their partners. As a result, the prospective employees within all sectors and almost all positions apart from their highly specific professional competences need to possess also foreign language, communication and cooperation skills both to ensure that they are able to get a job and are able to cope with the various tasks related to cooperation with foreign partners, as these tasks involve not only the need for the ability to speak a foreign language, but also the need to understand the cultural differences and possess certain cross-cultural communication skills.

For every specialist working in the business environment nowadays apart from foreign language skills (which ensure the ability to speak well) communication competence is of high importance. The needed communication competence could be defined as the ability to choose a communication behaviour that is both appropriate and effective for a given situation [1].

Obviously, each situation is different for each specialist and in each field, therefore different levels of communication skills must be developed in students.

Apart from the communicative competence and certain communication skills, cooperation skills must be possessed as well. These skills are the ones that are needed for cooperation organizers: the ability to resolve conflicts and the ability to understand the perspectives of others, as well as knowledge in the certain problem area [2]. Understanding the perspectives of others involves not only analysis of the partner's situation, but also the analysis of the differences between the two or more partners in order to better understand the other partner's viewpoint and behaviour and thus avoid misunderstandings and negative attitudes.

In cooperation, it is important to avoid conflicts that could negatively affect the existing or prospective cooperation. Therefore the main criterion for successful commercial cooperation is the ability to ensure a productive environment for successful interaction among partners [3].

The means of ensuring the mentioned preconditions for a successful cooperation and the extent to which such preconditions are of high importance again differ among fields of professions, as the level

of involvement of certain specialists in cooperation activities differs. However, all specialists need to be able to ensure an appropriate environment for cooperation and cooperate well to some extent. Cooperation among organisations is often affected by cultural differences [4]. Due to this reason, cultural differences should be noted, accepted and considered. The importance of understanding cultural differences is also stressed by W. Schramm, who in his communication model stresses the usually important communication elements, paying additional attention to the field of experience, which also is different for people from various national, organizational and other cultures due to the specific cultural differences and involves cultural background information (see Fig.1).

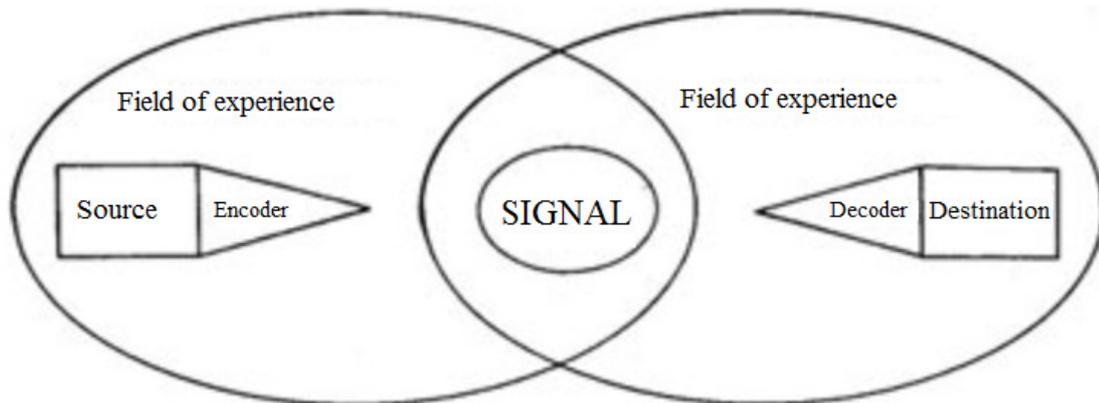


Fig. 1. Schramm's model of communication [5]

Cultural background, as well as working environment and experience gained is a part of the field experience that affects the way how the partner decodes the communication signal or message. In different situations the field of experience for a certain partner can be comprehensive, typical of a certain work or other experiences, as well as there can also be a lack of such field experience. Due to that, students should develop communication (including cross-cultural competence and cooperation competences) competences and practice communication that would ensure their successful understanding and behaviour in different kinds of communication and cooperation situations.

Recent surveys [6; 7] of the graduates of the Latvia University of Agriculture have found that the specialists need to possess high level of foreign language, communication (functional communication, cross-cultural communication) and other cooperation skills, but as the fields the graduates are working in differ, the levels of competences they need to possess tend to differ as well.

In Latvia, the cooperation possibilities for companies and institutions have increased obviously as well. At the same time, the need to cooperate with foreign partners has increased even more and is continuously increasing every year, and there is hardly a company or institution today capable of developing or even surviving without cooperating in the today's market. According to the aforementioned, any specialist to be hired in any kind of a company or institution (with some exceptions of employees work activities of which do not involve communication at all), as well as to be able to successfully work in any kind of a company/institution should be able to manage successful cooperation of the company/institution with other organizations by means of ensuring appropriate communication and guaranteeing a good impression of themselves and the company/institution.

Regardless of the need for every employee to possess appropriate language and communication skills, there are some professions involving the necessity to communicate internationally more and some requiring international activity more rarely or in a form that does not require such a contribution from the employee as regards the need to ensure successful activity in communication issues.

In the Latvian labour market and at the same time also business market (just like in most other markets of countries of Central Europe and often also others), public relations specialists, external relations specialists, managers and specialists of different other professions are those who are hired for communication and cooperation purposes, therefore they are the ones that need to possess communication and cooperation skills most, if compared to others. There are many sectors and companies/institutions employees of which are supposed to ensure international cooperation and partnership for the companies/institutions along with their primary job duties – they are the ones that also need to possess language, communication and cooperation skills, but it is not their main duty and

therefore they are usually not hired on the basis of assessing the level of such skills (instead their primary professional skills and abilities are assessed).

Engineering specialists, for example, represent a sector in which employees are almost never hired on the basis of assessing language and communication skills, but these skills are a privilege as regards the chances to get a job, especially a good job. Engineering as such is not related to communication, but engineers need language, communication and cooperation skills, because the enterprises they work for also cooperate internationally and therefore require specialists capable of ensuring that. Besides, engineers often read in English and/or cooperate with other engineers in different exchanges between companies, visits, as well as seminars, conferences and electronically, therefore the mentioned skills are needed, as without communication internationally it would not be possible for an engineer to develop or remain competitive in such a small country as Latvia [7].

It is so, obviously, because the engineering sector is one of those which experience updates every day (which, obviously, are not of Latvian origin), and therefore engineers without exchange of experiences would seriously lag behind, if compared to the developments in the world and competences of other engineers.

In general, engineers are usually mainly taught only professional foreign language skills which alone cannot guarantee successful cooperation and communication. Therefore engineering students should be taught not only specific engineering terminology and cover only activities related to engineering, but they need to acquire content that along with the specific information to be acquired boosts also functional communication, cross-cultural communication and cooperation competences, as engineering students of the Latvia University of Agriculture state that they consider cooperation skills to be useful and would like to acquire them within the professional foreign language course, as on many occasions they to a large extent tend to lack such skills [7].

The situation is similar as regards specialists in other fields, therefore success of international cooperation is important in other sectors as well. Due to this reason the acquisition of the mentioned competences (functional and cross-cultural communication competences, as well as cooperation competences) partly is already and should be more integrated in the curriculum in order to solve the problem in engineering education, as well as education of other prospective specialists that is described by the fact that specialists working in Latvia lack cooperation competences that are vital for successful cooperation with foreign partners.

Materials and methods

In the research, the data obtained from surveys of the graduates of the Latvia University of Agriculture (in 2010 and 2011) were used and compared. Two different fields of specialities (engineering sector and external relations sector) were analysed to determine the level and scope of the cooperation competences needed.

For proving the need to carry out a research regarding the development of cooperation competence of students of the Latvia University of Agriculture and in order to determine methods for integrating the acquisition of cooperation competences in the curriculum, the methods of theoretical description and analysis have been used. To obtain data, the methods of quantitative research have been used, by assessing the data of the surveys carried out after the graduation of students of the Latvia University of Agriculture. The opinions of the surveyed graduates revealed the necessity to develop cooperation competences, but the levels of the competences needed for specialists in different fields differ, therefore different methods, levels and areas of acquisition of cooperation competences should be applied in education of different prospective specialists. The methods of practical analysis have been used to assess the survey results, indicating to the importance and use of cooperation competences of students of the Latvia University of Agriculture, and provide conclusions regarding how to develop cooperation competences within the curriculum.

Results and discussion

The surveys of the graduates of the Latvia University of Agriculture reveal that even though students of different faculties at the Latvia University of Agriculture are already for several years being assisted in developing communication skills and cross-cultural skills besides the professional

foreign language courses and other similar courses (by means of integrating appropriate methods in the curricula), the competences needed for successful cooperation with foreign partners are not yet sufficient enough for fulfilment of their work duties and especially the mentioned skills are not sufficient for a large proportion of the graduates (see Fig. 2 and Fig. 3.).

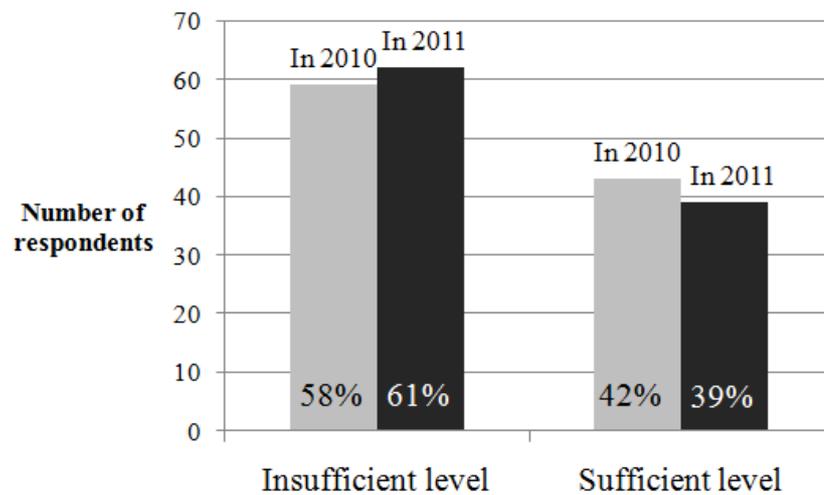


Fig. 2. Skills needed for cooperation with foreign partners of engineering specialists

As shown in Figure 2, the skills needed for cooperation with foreign partners of engineers are not sufficient to most of the respondents (58 % and 61 % in 2010 and 2011 respectively), as well as in 2011, the skills are not sufficient to even a larger part of the respondents, if compared to 2010, meaning that the number of graduates with sufficient level of skills needed for successful cooperation with foreign partners is not satisfactory (if to presume that after graduation all of the graduates with some probable exceptions need to possess successful cooperation and communication skills for work on an international level).

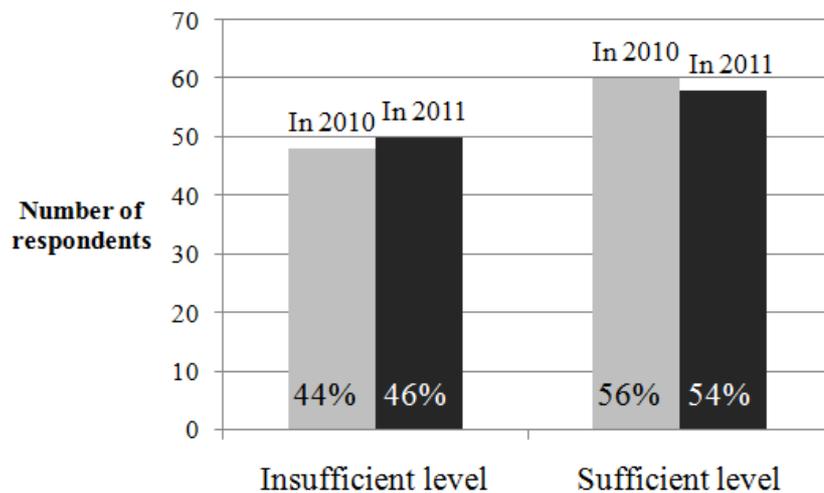


Fig. 3. Skills needed for cooperation with foreign partners of external relations specialists

The situation is problematic also with graduates representing specialties in which cooperation skills with foreign partners are of a more vital importance, e.g., graduates in the field of external relations specialists the main job duty of which is cooperation with foreign partners. Analyzing the results of the skills of the surveyed external relations specialists, it becomes clear, that the largest part of the graduates possess the necessary skills to cooperate successfully with foreign partners, although too many graduates still tend to lack the mentioned vital skills. To be more precise, almost a half of the respondents lack the needed skills (need of which they have already experienced in their work) both in 2010 and 2011, revealing then in 2011 the number of graduates in need of development of cooperation skills is increasing just like it is observed also with the engineers analyzed above.

It should be noted that the respondents were asked to state, if they are in need of certain skills (to evaluate the overall competences they are in need of) or not instead of comparing and analyzing the

extent to what they personally need those certain skills or, vice versa, do not need those skills, as well as they were not asked to state if they more are in need of or possess those certain skills, therefore the results do not reveal the proportion of skills that are possessed or lacked, but they rather reveal the number of graduates that lack some of the necessary skills (one, two or several).

As external relations is a field where international communication is an everyday duty of the employees working in Latvian organizations, the number of students lacking such skills should be decreased without hesitation similarly as it should be planned in relation to engineering students, but in a manner of integrating a lot of more specific activities related to cooperation with foreign partners, cross-cultural issues and boosting other kinds of culture-specific experiences far more than for those studying engineering and other specialities that are less related to international cooperation.

For each specialty (e.g., engineering, external relations), a model should be developed and integrated into the curriculum to develop competences for communication with foreign partners, therefore in the survey the work duties and skills needed most in each specialty were found out.

In the survey, engineers mentioned lots of work duties related to engineering, but 58 % of them also mentioned that they need skills for communication with foreign partners, meaning that in their work they occasionally need to communicate and cooperate with foreign partners. As this percentage is larger than the percentage of those engineers that possess sufficient skills, it means that lots of engineers have to cooperate internationally with no appropriate skills.

As the main duties in relation to cooperation with foreign partners the following actions were mentioned by the questioned engineers: telephone communication, business lunch, meetings (with prospective or existing partners) – all of them in relation to discussion of possible partnerships.

The most frequently mentioned competences, by engineers, that fall into competence of communicating with foreign partners are as follows: foreign language skills, business communication skills, business etiquette. Other competences were mentioned only by a few respondents.

External relations specialists mentioned the following work duties: telephone communication, legal correspondence, business lunch, meetings (with prospective or existing partners), campaigns, conferences (participation or translation), events – all of them in relation to discussion of possible partnerships or with the aim of establishing contacts.

Among external relations specialists such competences were mentioned as most necessary in relation to communication with foreign partners: cross-cultural communication, verbal communication, translation, legal correspondence and bookkeeping. Other competences were mentioned only by 5 respondents. External relations specialists do not mention foreign language skills – that might be explained by the fact that these skills are sufficient for them and they no longer experience the need to develop such skills.

As engineering specialists most of all need to use engineering terminology, as well as because learning of such terminology is provided for in their study programmes, practice of such terminology still remains the main task within classes. Apart from that, and despite the already integrated development of communication and cooperation competences, special attention should be paid to acquiring the specific terminology by means of using it for telephone communication and in combination with language used in business meetings. At the same time, the prospective engineers should also be provided with the basic information about cultural differences in business etiquettes for them to be able to behave properly in business lunch and other situations when meeting foreigners from different national cultures.

For specialists work activities of which are much more related to communication with foreigners, as well as the main task of which is to establish good relationships with foreign partners and successful partnerships, in all communication courses special attention should be paid to acquiring telephone communication and legal correspondence, as well as language of special events (lunch, meetings, etc.) to a larger extent than it is done at the present moment. Year by year, the changes in need of specific competences should be observed and the study programmes should be accordingly adapted.

As the results show, communication with foreign partners is important to different kinds of specialists, therefore the cooperation competences of all students should be improved more. Such a situation in general emphasizes that cross-cultural content and acquisition of professional terminology

or other profession-related content by means of applying methods that develop cross-cultural competence and certain communication skills needs to be integrated into curricula even more. At the same time, the need for cross-cultural competence and skills for cooperation with foreign partners increases in all fields of business, therefore the proportion of acquiring such skills should be increased accordingly as well.

Conclusions

Cultural background, working environment and experience gained is a part of the field experience that affects the way how a communication or cooperation partner decodes the communication signal or message, therefore cooperation might not be successful, if there is a lack of such field experience.

Even though students at the Latvia University of Agriculture are already for several years being assisted in developing communication skills and cross-cultural skills besides or in the professional foreign language courses or other similar courses, the competences needed for successful cooperation with foreign partners are not yet sufficient enough for fulfilment of their work duties for a large proportion of the graduates

A comparison of the competences for cooperation with foreign partners of the graduates of the Latvia University of Agriculture in 2010 and 2011 reveal that within these two years the level of competences is decreasing.

For each specialty, a model should be developed and integrated into the curriculum with the purpose of developing competences for successful communication with foreign partners: as regards engineers – special attention should be paid to acquiring the specific terminology by means of using it for telephone communication and in combination with language used in business meetings and basic information about cultural differences in business etiquettes; as regards external relations specialists – in all communication courses special attention should be paid to acquiring telephone communication and legal correspondence, as well as language of special events (lunch, meetings, etc.) to a larger extent than it is done at the present moment.

Communication with foreign partners is important to different kinds of specialists, therefore the cooperation competences of all students should be improved more, year by year observing the changes in need of specific competences and adapting the study programmes accordingly.

Cross-cultural content and acquisition of professional terminology or other profession-related content by means of applying methods that develop cross-cultural competence and certain communication skills need to be integrated into curricula even more, and as the need for cross-cultural competence and skills for cooperation with foreign partners increases in all fields of business, the proportion of acquiring such skills should be increased accordingly as well.

References

1. Spitzberg, B. H., Cupach, W. R. In Griffin, E. A first look at communication theory. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000, pp. 143 – 137.
2. Foster-Fishman, et al. Building collaborative capacity in community coalitions: A review and integrative framework. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 29(2), 2001, pp. 241 – 261.
3. Juch, S., Rathje, S. *Cooperation Competence – A Problem-oriented Model for Successful Interaction in Commercial Alliances*, vol. 13 I, 2011, 22 p., [online] [27.01.2012]. Available at: http://www.interculture-journal.com/download/article/juch_rathje_2011_13.pdf.
4. Apfelthaler, G. *Interkulturelles Management*. Wien: Manz Fortis, 1999, pp. 140 – 157.
5. Schramm, W. How Communication Works. In: *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication*, (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1961, pp. 5–6.
6. Malinovska, L., Abele, J., Mezote, A. Competences Necessary for External Relations Specialists. In: *Материалы международной научно – практической конференции. Книга 2. В 3 книгах*. Барановичи: РИО БарГУ, 2008, pp. 427 – 431.
7. Mezote, A. Development of Cross-cultural Communication Skills of Engineering Students. 10th International Scientific Conference Engineering for Rural Development, Proceedings, vol. 10, 2011, pp. 528 – 508, [online] [22.09.2011]. Available at: <http://tf.lv/conference/proceedings2011/>.