

DEVELOPING BUSINESS STUDENTS' COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE COMPETENCES FOR THEIR SUCCESSFUL PROFESSIONAL CAREER

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The importance of professional communicative language competences for business students' successful professional career is highlighted. The results of the research carried out at both National Mining University and Wroclaw School of Banking into Bachelor's degree students' and graduates' professional skills are presented and analysed.

Introduction

The need for knowledge of foreign languages was articulated after the common European market was created in 1992 and then as the European Union expanded gradually accepting new members (2004-2007) a demand for mobile labour force speaking a foreign language grew. The increasing need for knowing a foreign language for fostering the mobility of students was expressed in the Lisbon Strategy formulated in 2000 [7].

The analysis of curricula relating to the European standards of language education as well as the comparative analysis of the language policy in different European countries indicate that the direction of changes in foreign language education is in line with dynamics and trends in this field in Europe [4]. These trends respond to labour market needs – a growing demand for the personnel speaking foreign languages.

Recent changes to curricula in foreign language education come closer to the model defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). It can be seen in the fact that a stronger emphasis is put on the development of language skills rather than the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary.

Language curricula develop communication language competences at all stages of education, including higher education, for example, knowledge of language resources, understanding statements, making statements, reacting to statements, processing statements etc. [6]

The creation of the European Higher Education Area by 2010 [1] sets challenging tasks in terms of greater mobility for students, more effective international communication, better access to information and deeper mutual understanding. In order to be competitive in the job market, meet its requirements and gain further professional success, universities should provide their students with an appropriate training to help them develop the competences and strategies needed to participate effectively during their studies and in the professional situations they encounter as well as communicative language competences in English [3].

By competences we mean the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions [2]. In our situation, business students need to obtain knowledge and skills to allow them to be effective in their working environments. Communicative language competences are those which empower a person to act using specifically linguistic means.

According to Education and Qualification Standard (EQS) which reflects the educational and professional aims of training for Bachelor's degrees and identifies the occupational status of the graduates, business students need, for example, to be able to communicate effectively in business environment, namely, make public speeches/give presentations, respond to main ideas and identify relevant information in discussions on study- or specialism-related topics, respond appropriately to speaker's attitude/point of view, produce business correspondence, understand authentic texts and writer's attitudes and viewpoints as well as develop their study skills.

The exit level of proficiency for Bachelors is B2 (Independent User) to be assessed at the end of the course according to B2 level descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) [2]. The English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Curriculum was

designed to achieve the B2 language proficiency level as the standard of achievement for Bachelor's degree.

The Business English syllabus is based of the ESP Core Curriculum content which is focused on professional communicative competences regarded as language behavior specific for academic and professional environment. The language behavior requires acquisition of linguistic competence (language skills and language knowledge), socio-linguistic and pragmatic competences needed for performing study and job-related tasks [3].

The purpose of the research is to find out which of the professional language skills business and economics students have possessed best while studying for their Bachelor's degree, which ones they are applying in their work (if they are working and using English), in order to give a sharper focus on developing the necessary skills while teaching Business English courses. 42 bachelors (13 finance students and 29 management students) of the National Mining University (Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine) and 28 bachelors (13 finance students and 15 management students) of Wroclaw School of Banking who took degree in finance and management have been surveyed.

1. Research Analysis

Bachelor's degree students from the National Mining University and Wroclaw School of Banking specialising in finance and management were given the self-assessment checklist of professional language skills they can do in their target language and were asked to tick the appropriate boxes.

The professional language skills that business students need to acquire while studying for their Bachelor's degree are developed in Business English syllabi designed by the teachers of the Department of Foreign Languages of the National Mining University and Wroclaw School of Banking in conformity with the descriptors of professional language proficiency (levels B1+, B2 and C1) on the basis of:

- Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF, 2001);
- requirements of educational and qualification characteristics of graduates adopted by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine: Education and Qualification Standard (EQS) and Educational Professional Program (EPP);
- job descriptors developed and validated by businesses;
- the results of a survey carried out among professionals, teachers and students in higher educational institutions.

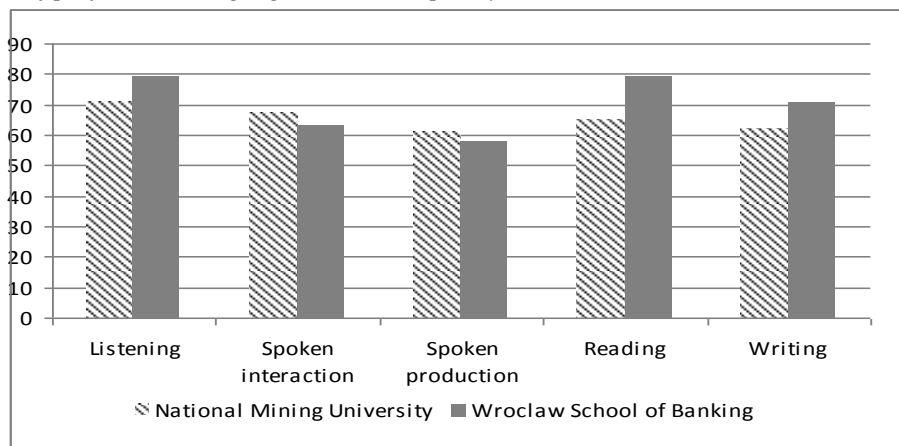
The data analysed indicate that Polish and Ukrainian students best possess listening and reading skills. However, writing, spoken interaction and spoken production skills need to have further practice.

This testifies to the fact that in their business courses students widely use textbooks by prominent publishing houses such as Oxford, Cambridge, Longman and others which are accompanied with a variety of authentic listening materials for both classroom work and self-study. BE teachers find it crucial to develop students' reading skills by making foreign-language reading interesting in itself, in particular using reading materials that reflect the authentic purposes for which people, in fact, read, and coaching students in making use of the knowledge they already have in order to understand new messages. Reading is an important methodological topic in the field of teaching English for both academic and specific purposes and is considered one of the essential skills in learning a language. Reading texts are the main sources of information and they provide a basis for developing writing, listening, and speaking skills.

Students should acquire spoken interaction and spoken production skills because in both academic and professional contexts they need to take an active part in conversations and discussions, understand detailed professional instructions well and respond adequately, behave and react appropriately in common social, academic and professional situations in everyday life, and know the rules of how people should interact in these situations (recognize appropriate gestures, eye contact, personal space, and body language in each situation) etc. Also, they should be able to write

business and professional letters, reports to a standard format, giving their opinion about accumulated factual information with confidence, notes and memos, take notes during lectures, seminars, workshops, conferences, meetings, etc.

Fig. 1 Comparison of professional language skills developed by Ukrainian and Polish students



The data below (Fig. 2 and 3) show that WSB finance students' professional language skills are better developed compared with NMU finance students. However, they both should pay special attention to improve their writing skills. Why management students of the NMU demonstrate a better performance can be explained by the fact that they actively participate in a variety of international projects launched by leading European Universities such as:

- Summer school of entrepreneurship in Poland (founded by the NMU and WSB)
- International School of Leadership "Argo" (Sharov Summer School)
- X-culture (International Business Student Collaboration Project of Northern Illinois University, USA with the NMU as the only Ukrainian University)
- Leader Project (joint project of the Institute of Economics of the NMU and Richard Ivy School of Business, University of Western Ontario)
 - Europe Fair, Promar, Dzialki (annual Polish 2-3-day economic mini-projects)
 - DIPMUN (Dnipropetrovsk International Program Model United Nations)
 - ONUMUN (Odessa National University Model United Nations)
 - Business Week (Poland, Latvia, Czech Republic, Belgium, Germany)

The main aim of these international projects is exchange of experience, development of entrepreneurship and negotiation skills as well as practical knowledge in marketing, finance, PR, teamworking, project management, and acquaintance with European culture. On the whole, students' participation in international projects increases their motivation in learning the English language.

Fig. 2 Comparison of professional language skills developed by finance students from WCB and NMU

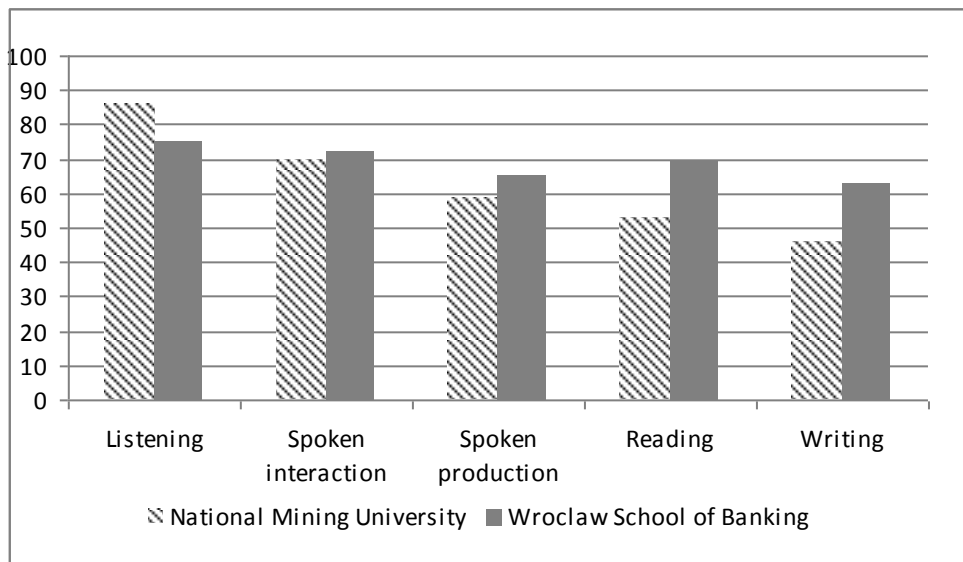
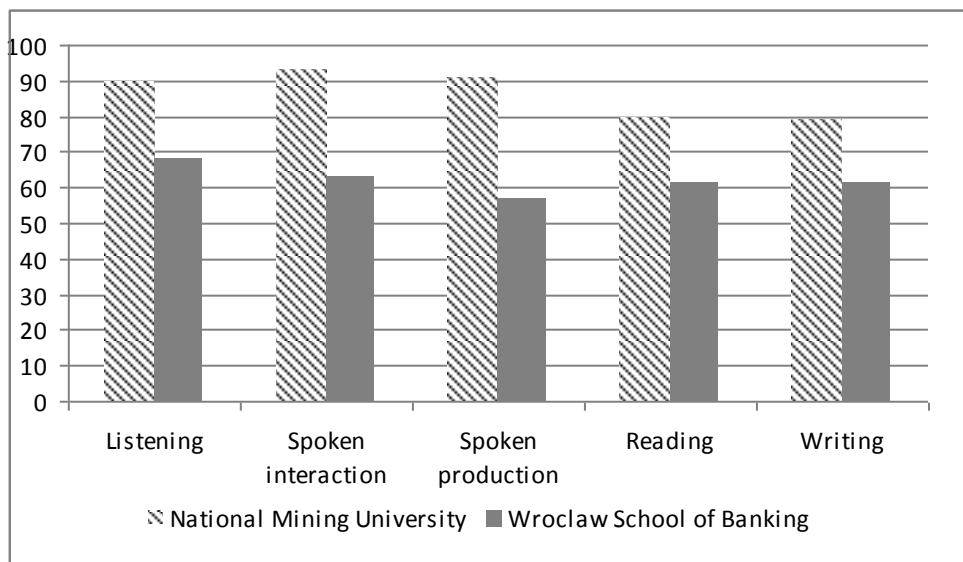
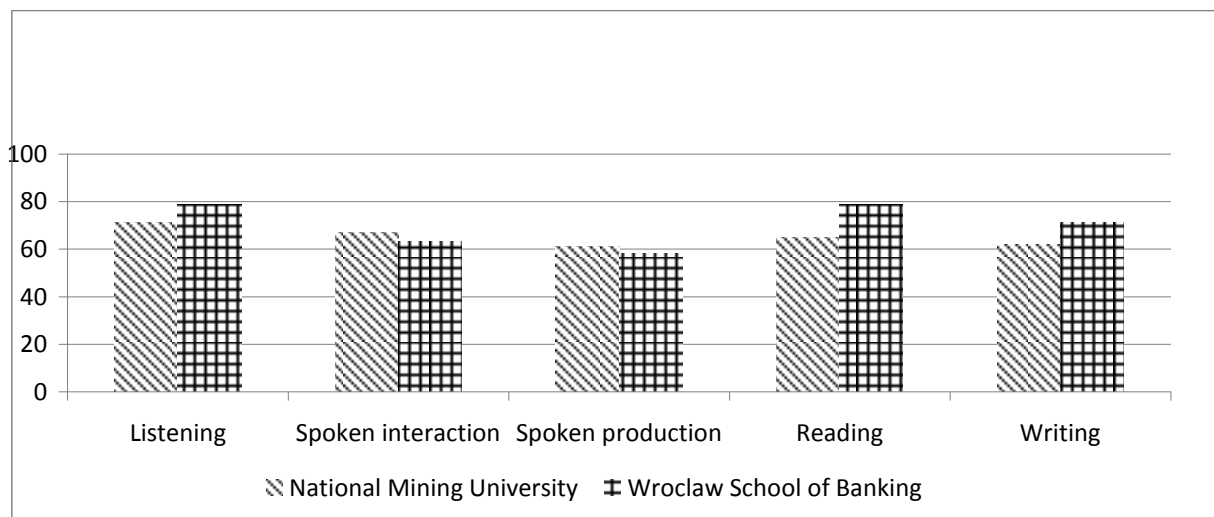


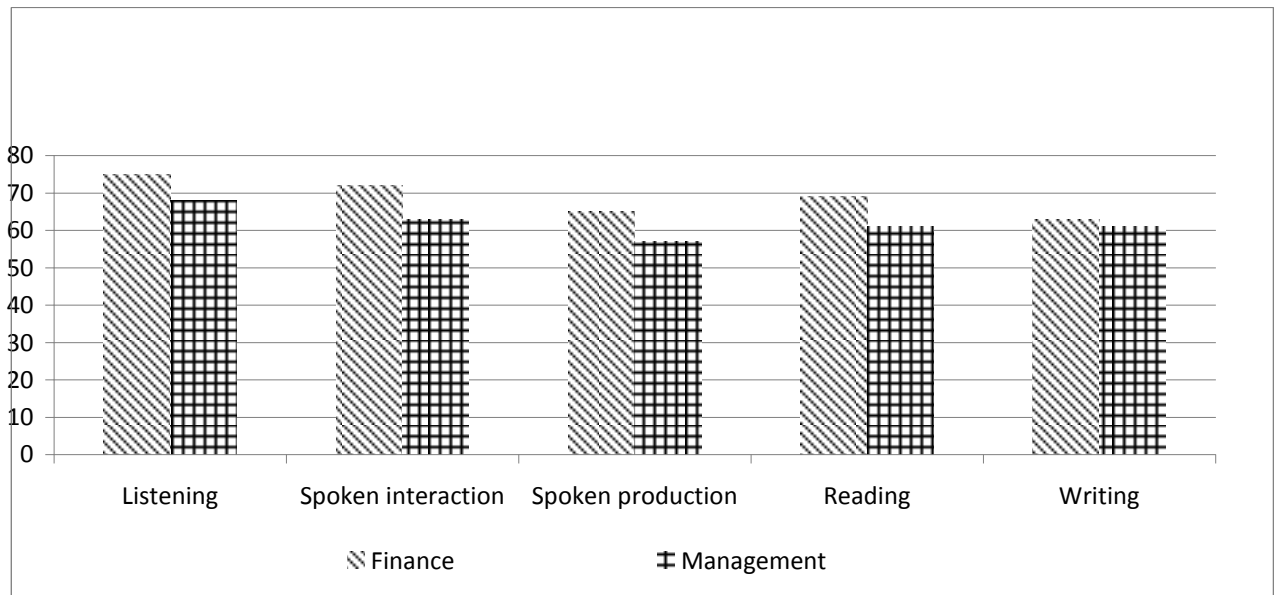
Fig. 3 Comparison of professional language skills developed by management students from WCB and NMU



Comparison of professional language skills developed by Ukrainian and Polish students

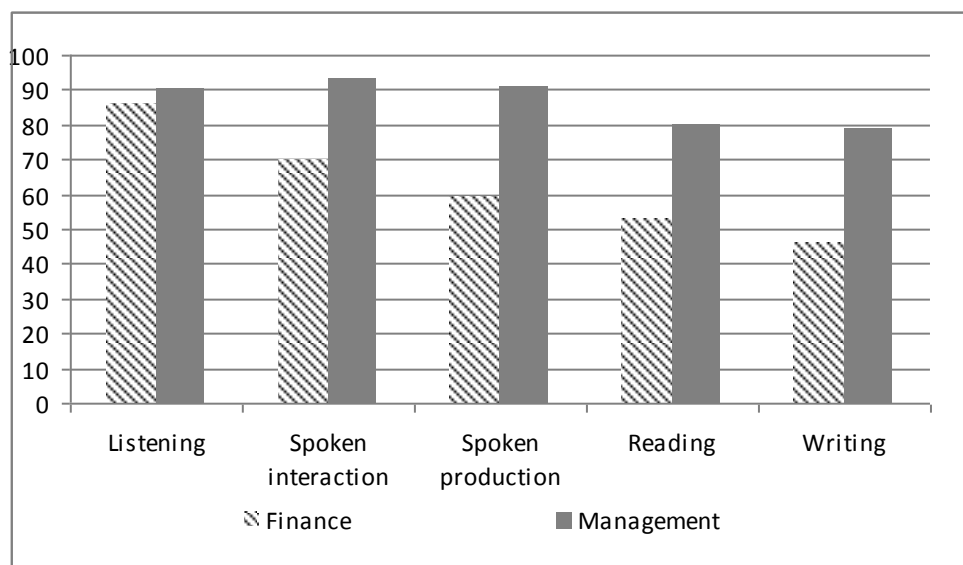


Comparison of professional language skills developed by finance and management students of the NMU



The data obtained also show that finance students demonstrate less satisfactory performance compared with management students of the NMU. The results are given in Fig.4.

Fig. 4 Comparison of professional language skills developed by finance and management students of the NMU



There are several reasons to explain these discrepancies. Firstly, according to the National secondary school standard (2004), the proficiency level for school leavers is B1+. The entry level of students specialising in economics ranges from A1 to B2: A1 - 35.5%, A2 - 43.3%, B1 - 18.7%, B2 - 2.5% [5].

Table 1. Results of the Placement Test carried out by finance and management students of the NMU

Entry level	A1 (%)	A2 (%)	B1 (%)	B2 (%)
Area of Specialism				

Economics Students	35.5	43.3	18.7	2.5
Finance Students	36	64	0	0
Management Students	4	85	11	0

In order to bridge the gap, extra language training should be provided for students whose language proficiency level is below B1+. More contact hours will need to be allotted in order to cover bigger learning/training gaps (see Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Estimate of Progress in Contact Hours (1 hour = 60 min)

Target level \ Entry level	A2	B1	B2	C1
A1	200 hours	400 hours	600 hours	850 hours
A2	•	200 hours	400 hours	650 hours
B1	•	•	200 hours	450 hours
B2	•	•	•	250 hours

Source: research conducted by Council of Europe presented in the English for Specific Purposes National Curriculum for Universities, 2005.

Secondly, the number of hours for finance students is much lower than for management students: one-year compulsory course for finance students and two years of compulsory studies and two years of optional courses.

These data also show that the skills students can do best are applied in their part-time jobs (about one-third of NMU students taking a Master's degree combine work and study). For example, students can understand articles and reports concerning contemporary issues within their academic and professional areas, identify the author's viewpoints and the most relevant abstracts, and they do that in their part-time jobs. Similarly, students are good enough at writing business and professional letters, notes and memos conveying information relevant to academic and professional addressees, taking notes on points which seem to be important during clear and well-structured lectures, seminars, workshops, conferences, meetings, etc. and summarizing a wide range of factual academic and specialism-related texts and, consequently, they apply these skills in their work.

The professional language skills Bachelor's degree NMU students can do 100% in the target language are:

- understanding standard spoken texts on study and specialism-related topics in standard spoken language at normal speed;
- doing information search in the Internet.

The professional language skills Bachelor's degree WSB students can do 100% in the target language:

- making ideas and opinions on academic and specialism-related topics clearly understood by providing relevant explanations, arguments and comments convincingly in both formal and informal discussion (finance students);
- taking notes on points which seem to be important during clear and well-structured lectures, seminars, workshops, conferences, meetings, etc. (finance students).

2. Study skills and Self-study as an Integral Part of the Study Process

The successful study process heavily relies on study skills that are aimed at developing students' abilities to make effective use of the learning opportunities created by teaching/learning situations. They encourage the development of independent learners in academic- and specialism-related areas. According to the objectives for B2 level, the study skills, which are developed throughout the Business English course, are grouped into the following categories:

- information location (e.g. locate specific study or subject-related information using library catalogue);
- academic speaking (e.g. make a presentation or give a talk on study-related topic);
- academic writing (e.g. summarize, paraphrase, synthesize ideas from different types of texts);
- organization and self-awareness (e.g. develop individual study plans);
- assessment (e.g. understand assessment requirements, including continuous assessment) [3].

The focus on developing students' study skills reflects the values of the Bologna Process with its emphasis on individual responsibility for learning [1].

High level of foreign language teaching is perceived by universities as an effective and individualized assistance in achieving the highest level of students' language skills. At times of emphasising learning rather than teaching as well as acquiring knowledge, skills and attitudes by the learner, a model is promoted by the European Qualifications Framework [8], and curricula pay attention to the necessity of preparing students for being ready to undertake *life-long learning*.

When it comes to foreign languages, practical language skills of students indicate the quality of education. A high quality of education will involve great efficiency in preparing students for achieving the highest possible level of communication in a foreign language.

The evaluation of foreign language learning relates both to the product of acquired language skills as well as to the process of teaching and learning.

Study skills are aimed to develop professional communicative competences of students, thus becoming an integral part in teaching and learning a language. Study skills are also professional transferable skills, which can be used by students in learning other subjects as well as in many other different contexts including their careers and personal lives.

In order to develop students' professional language competences, self-study should be paid much greater attention.

There are various forms of self-study organization, e.g. students read professionally-oriented texts and report on them, they make projects, presentations, etc. Practice shows that the most effective means of students' self-study activation is their participation in scientific conferences. Students are engaged in extensive purposeful reading with processing the information from various sources. They analyze and summarize the texts, make a written report and oral presentation, state and justify their opinions. Project work is of great importance. Students can access the source material in their own time, work through the material at their own pace, choosing topics to match their own interests. They can work on their own, in pairs or small groups or as a class to complete a project sharing resources, ideas, and expertise along the way.

Self-study should be developed in such a way as to develop students' creative approach to the tasks and encourage the development of skills of problem solving. The study process itself should motivate students' self-education.

The task of the teacher is to help students organize their self-study thoughtfully and carefully, find effective ways of working, so that they can continue working efficiently and usefully even when away from their teacher and the classroom. The teacher should provide an environment and create the atmosphere in the language classroom in which students can learn.

A special emphasis should be given to assessing students' self-study. It must be done regularly; students must be aware of assessment criteria. The purpose of assessment lies in receiving quality feedback, which encourages students to become self-motivated independent

learners. Therefore, teachers should give positive feedback to support students' beliefs that they can do well. Whatever feedback strategy is used, it should help students develop a clear sense of their own progress.

The Language Portfolio helps students to organize their self-study as it provides students with grids for self-assessment of language achievement and the setting of personal learning goals. It also promotes autonomous lifelong learning and helps to develop learning skills by providing suitable guidance and instruments students use. The Language Portfolio helps to make the language learning process more transparent to students, to help them develop their capacity for reflection and self-assessment, and thus to enable them gradually to assume more responsibility for their own learning. Regular goal setting and self-assessment are central to the Language Portfolio. A language passport requires learners to assess their own proficiency using the scales and descriptors derived from the Common European Framework; and a dossier, in which the owner collects evidence of his or her developing proficiency in second and foreign languages. This emphasis on self-assessment coincides with the Council of Europe's concern to promote autonomous lifelong learning. The introduction of self-assessment can lead to an open dialogue with students and give them a better understanding of students' problems.

Conclusion

As Ukraine has declared its intention to become an equal partner within the Bologna Process framework, Ukrainian universities are expected to confront the European standards in language proficiency. Following the recent National English Language Teaching reform at secondary level and taking into account the international practice of language education at tertiary level, the English for Specific Purposes Curriculum states that the minimal acceptable English language proficiency level to qualify for a Bachelor degree is B2 (Independent User).

Meeting the aims of the National ESP Curriculum, the overall aim of the syllabus for business and economics students is to develop professionally-oriented communication language competences that will allow them to communicate effectively in their professional environments. The syllabus covers the most important job-related skills that are used in specialism-related situations identified in EQS and EPP.

For business and economics students to be able to be successful in their professional career it is vital to develop all professional communicative language competences in Business English courses. The development of professional communicative competence, which relies on students' ability to learn, subject knowledge and prior experience, and is carried out within a study- and specialism-related situational context, is crucial for business students to be able to communicate effectively in the world of work and be competitive on demanding job market.

As Bachelor degree students are supposed to have B2 level, but not all of the respondents attain B1 entry level, they should be provided with more hours and continuous practical training.

Self-study is an integral part of the Business course and takes 30-60 per cent of overall students' load. It fosters their independent and autonomous learning, enhances job-related skills, and develops communicative language competences, cognitive skills and learning strategies, including self-organization.

As not all Ukrainian students have the necessary skills to organize their study without close teacher supervision, materials for students' self-study should require special attention on the part of teachers.

The use of project work in ESP stimulates students' self-study. Students are engaged in extensive purposeful reading with processing the information from various sources followed by a written report and oral presentation which is shared with other students, giving the project a real purpose.

What is more, the skills that business students are to develop are professional transferable skills as can be used by students in learning other subjects as well as in many other different contexts including their careers and personal lives.

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