

# On the Issue of Students' Multilingual Competence (Evidence from Higher Educational Institutions of the City of Vladimir)

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**Abstract.** *The article analyzes the state of multilingual competence of students of higher educational institutions in the city of Vladimir. The main research method was an online survey of students. The results revealed a rather low level of multilingualism. Students lack linguistic competence in different life situations: from using a computer to communicating with citizens of other states.*

**Keyword** – *multilingualism, foreign language, sociological survey, vocabulary, students*.\*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the functionality of foreign languages has increased significantly. Professionals who speak several or at least one foreign language are currently more competitive in the regional and global labour market. Fluent speaking provides additional opportunities for getting involved in academic and student exchanges as well as traineeships. The objective of the research is to assess the level of the multilingual competence of students of higher educational institutions in the city of Vladimir. Based on the results obtained, it will be possible to provide insight to the employment opportunities of graduates in large international companies, to determine the potential of their territorial social and labor mobility.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A large number of works in the field of linguistics, sociolinguistics, psychology, pedagogy and sociology are devoted to the problem of multilingualism. In our research we have the greatest interest in publications on the analysis of the level of linguistic competence among students and determining the factors affecting the students motivation in learning foreign languages. The articles by Yu.E Leshchenko [2], T.S. Ostapenko [4], A.A. Prokhorova [5] reveal the features of educational multilingualism. The authors focus on the specifics of training specialists who speak two or three foreign languages. According to A.A. Prokhorova [5], the transition to multilingual education is connected with a

number of problems. This is especially deeply felt in non-linguistic specialties, for example, in training in engineering areas. In the vast majority of cases, the only language learnt is English, sometimes students can also choose between German and French. The problem of teaching Asian languages in non-linguistic universities remains practically unresolved, despite the fact that the bulk of international technical projects are carried out precisely with these partner countries. The role of a foreign language as social guidelines in education was considered by G.F. Trubina [6]. G.N. Hamedova [1] conducted a research on formation of the motivation in learning a foreign language among students of non-linguistic professions. The author suggests using social networks as a virtual space for learning a foreign language. The continuous interaction of all participants contributes to the motivation to learn the language. As an experiment, G.N. Khamedova suggested that the students should switch to English when communicating on the Facebook network, both with Russian and foreign users. Currently, the general theory of multilingualism is at the nascent stage, which means developing its own theory and methodologies, setting the main goals and objectives of research, as well as experience-based data accumulation. General theoretical and specific issues, directly or indirectly related to the problems of multilingualism, are not only closely intertwined, but are also the subject of research of various scientific fields and entire sciences. That is why multilingualism is a complex phenomenon that needs to be studied through the lens of an interdisciplinary approach [3].

The use of the concept of “multilingualism” does not yet have clear boundaries because there are several terms for bilingualism and multilingualism: bilingualism, multilingualism, polyglotism, plurilingualism, trilingualism, as well as numerous interpretations of these concepts. There are various theoretical approaches to the study of bilingualism not only in the world science, but also within individual countries. The following approaches are most clearly traced in foreign publications: 1) a generativist approach based on N. Khomsky's ideas, which admits that every person has inherent Universal Grammar; 2) a cognitive approach; 3) a connectionist approach [7].

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The authors of this article understand multilingualism as knowledge (mastery) of two or more foreign languages. The vast majority of schoolchildren and students in Vladimir study exclusively English. It is quite rare that any of them learn a second foreign language, and the authors consider this case to be an example of multilingualism.

### III. METHOD

The main research method was a sociological survey based on online questioning of students studying at higher educational institutions of the city of Vladimir; 215 respondents took part in the survey. The data obtained during the study were processed using the SPSS Statistic software. The selection is sufficiently representative by the sex, age and educational fields in which the survey participants are trained. The whole range of careers available in the region – technical, humanitarian, natural science, legal and economic – was included in the list.

Before entering higher education institutions one third of the respondents finished schools in the regional center, whereas 40% of them came from other regional cities to enter the university, and 11% graduated from village schools.

The remaining part of those who chose to study in the city of Vladimir, came from other regions of Russia or countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). A similar territorial distribution is characteristic for applicants entering higher educational institutions of the city annually. The survey was carried out in educational institutions of the regional center only due to the concentration of the higher educational institutions in the region in the city of Vladimir.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our study revealed that 55.3% of respondents do not have any practice of language communication. One third of the students (32.1%) get into a communicative situation when they leave the Russian Federation for holiday. Every tenth person is of necessity to communicate with foreign relatives or friends, which leads to improving their language skills. Less often, students get into the language environment, going to a camp with international participation or leaving to work in the United States for summer (Table 1).

TABLE 1. WHEN DO YOU PRACTICE SPEAKING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE?

Options	% of respondents
While on holiday abroad	32,1
When meeting foreign guests	5,6
When visiting my friends or relatives abroad	5,1
I do not usually have any practice in foreign language speaking	55,3
When visiting a camp with international training programs	0,9
When I go to the USA for work	0,9
Total	100,0

The possibility of communication with native speakers and immersion into the language environment is not always

determined by the desire of the student, but often depends on the starting level of language proficiency and his or her economic opportunities. Due to the fact that most of the students do not leave the Russian Federation for financial reasons, the chance of being in the language environment is practically minimal for them. Communication in a foreign language with friends rather than with relatives is of higher prevalence.

Young people seriously lack skills in language communication. About 70% of respondents feel uncomfortable in different life situations. For some of them the current level of proficiency in English is not sufficient when communicating with friends and relatives or while on holiday abroad, someone is concerned about the limited employment opportunities, others have language difficulties even when using a computer. The remaining third does not suffer from lack of proficiency in a foreign language not because of a confident command of it, but since they do not have an internal need to communicate with native speakers (Table 2).

TABLE 2. WHEN DO YOU FEEL THAT YOU LACK LANGUAGE SKILLS?

Options	% of respondents
While on holiday abroad	30,2
When you went to work in the USA in the summer	1,4
When I speak to my friends or relatives abroad	17,2
When using a computer	15,8
When getting a job	4,2
I do not lack language skills, because I do not speak a foreign language. I have no such need	28,8
I do not lack language skills, as far as I have a good command of the language	0,9
Total	100,0

English is considered by the students the most perspective language to study, 79.5% of respondents maintain this position, Chinese takes the second place in their rating list (12.6%); the Arabic and Japanese languages were ranked third with a significant backlog (each of them chosen by 1.4% of respondents) (Table 3).

TABLE 3. THE BEST PROSPECTIVE FOREIGN LANGUAGE FOR FUTURE LEARNING: STUDENTS' OPINION

Options	% of respondents
English	79,5
Equally prospective are English, Arabic, Chinese	0,5
Arabic	1,4
The language that one considers necessary for learning	0,5
All	0,9
Greek	0,5
Spanish	0,5
Italian	0,5
Chinese	12,6
No idea	0,9
German	0,5
Russian	0,5
Japanese	1,4
Total	100,0

Thus, as the young people assume, the priority is still for the English language. At the same time, the popularity of Chinese is growing, and there is an extremely low demand in learning German. This seems quite surprising, since the Vladimir region traditionally has quite close foreign economic ties with Germany. French was not chosen by any of the respondents as a language reasonable for learning. The students underlined the dependence of their choice of a foreign language on a particular life situation. Considering this, in isolated cases, preference may be given to Greek, Italian or Spanish.

The language desirable for learning does not always coincide with the one they learn in reality. In practice, the situation is as follows: 92.1% studies English, 3.7% - German, 1.4% both English and German. Finnish and French are being learned by only one student. None of the students has yet begun to study the basics of Chinese. Greek, Italian, Spanish and Arabic languages still also remain only a dream for the respondents.

Despite the fact that more than half of the students mention the desire to learn a second foreign language, one cannot say that they massively put extra effort into this. The overwhelming majority of students (87%) study a foreign language only within the university studies, 3.3% do it additionally with a tutor, 1.4% attend language courses, 8.4% use special online programmes.

It is necessary to mention that the students are quite realistic about their level of proficiency in a foreign language – the overwhelming majority of the young people consider their knowledge in this area to be rated as “satisfactory” or even “unsatisfactory”. Only every sixth respondent is ready to mark his or her knowledge as “good,” and “excellent” is generally extremely rare. In oral communication, the students first of all deal with insufficient vocabulary; they often do not understand the questions, therefore they cannot formulate an answer. Every fifth respondent does not show the necessary speed in answering questions.

It should be noted that the younger generation rarely mention fear of making mistakes or being unsatisfied with their own pronunciation (Table 4). Thus, we can say that in the process of communication they are fairly relaxed. Their inability to keep a conversation does not deal with the presence of internal complexes, but with a rather low level of proficiency in a foreign language.

TABLE 4. IF YOU HAVE DIFFICULTIES IN ORAL COMMUNICATION IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE, WHAT IS THE REASON?

Options	% of respondents
I am afraid of making mistakes	7,4
I lack vocabulary	49,3
I do not understand the question, that is why I do not know how to answer	15,8
I feel upset because of my pronunciation	3,3
It is hard to give a quick response to the questions	20,0
I do not have any difficulties in communicating in a foreign language	4,2
Total	100,0

The very significance of the ability to speak a foreign language is not disputed by young people: 65.1% sticks to the position that a good command of a foreign language is necessary for everyone, other 29.3% consider it desirable, but not necessary. Only 3.3% do not think of the importance of mastering a foreign language (Table 5).

TABLE 5. HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO HAVE A GOOD COMMAND OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE FOR A MODERN PERSON?

Options	% of respondents
Hard to say	1,9
A good command of a foreign language is not necessary	3,3
A good command of a foreign language is essential for every person	65,1
It is preferable but not essential	29,3

Among the deliberate motives for learning a foreign language, the following ones are mentioned by the students: personal interest in learning a foreign language and other cultures, a desire to continue their education and build a career abroad (7.9%), a desire to work in a foreign company in the Russian Federation (2.8%) . It should be noted that these motives are not dominant in the study of a foreign language, more than half of the students (54.9%) do this because of the need to master the university programme of study.

Most students speak only one foreign language to some extent, every fifth respondent is able to communicate in two foreign languages. A good command of a foreign language, according to most students (53.5%), makes a person more competitive in the labor market and helps to get a better-paid job (22.8%). The importance of a foreign language for everyday life and for improving the ability to communicate with foreigners is not very significant for students. Thus, the students pay attention to the economic benefit of foreign language proficiency in the first line, which allows them realize their social and labour mobility more successfully (Table 6).

TABLE 6. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF A GOOD COMMAND OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE?

Options	% of respondents
Knowledge of a foreign language makes a person more competitive in the labor market	53,5
Knowledge of a foreign language helps you in everyday life	7,9
Knowledge of a foreign language can help get a better paid job	22,8
Knowledge of a foreign language can help in communicating with foreigners	15,3
It does not have any benefits	0,5
Total	100,0

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Acknowledging the importance of multilingual training, the students of higher educational institutions of the city of Vladimir still have quite inconsiderable results in learning foreign languages. The strongest incentive to study a foreign

language is the need to pass this subject as part of the curriculum but not the deliberate choice. Therefore, the opportunities for territorial, social-labour and academic mobility of students are at a fairly low level.

In future studies, it is necessary to focus on identifying the influence of the level of education of parents, place of residence and the profession which the student is studying, on the level of knowledge of foreign languages. In order to identify the factors affecting the motivation to take part in multilingual communication, it is desirable to conduct in-depth interviews with different groups of students. In this regard, foreign students studying in universities of the city of Vladimir are of considerable interest. They are prominent representatives of multilingual communication. First of all, they are quite fluent in Eastern languages (Arabic, Turkish, Persian), which are quite difficult to learn while living in Central Russia. In this case, focus groups with this target audience can provide a lot of interesting information.

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