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# Designing language courses for twenty-first century competences: a model of teaching toward learner autonomy implemented in a university context in the Czech Republic

<https://doi.org/10.1515/cercles-2021-2004>

Received September 13, 2020; accepted March 4, 2021

**Abstract:** The twenty-first century is a time of unprecedented social and technological development. Defining the period is an internationally interconnected world pregnant with information, dynamic events, and individual choice. These attributes create a highly complex, unpredictable, ambiguous and volatile environment that places new demands on every adult individual to continue in their efforts to educate, requalify and upskill during the course of their whole life. Based on both national and international educational strategies, a willingness to pursue life-long learning and an ability for it represent the main objectives for the curricula and educational programs. The current study presents a language teaching model that aims at student autonomy in language learning. The model, specifically focused on business English, was based on student needs analysis studies conducted and replicated in 2006, 2013 and 2016 at ŠKODA AUTO University, and as part of an international HEI cooperation research between 2017 and 2020. The Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach is adopted to combine course topics and outlines. In-class and self-study activities aim at language competences proportionally distributed between reading, writing, listening, and speaking tasks. Teaching methods cover both individual work and peer cooperation. Course requirements provide students with a high degree of freedom when making decisions about the content of their projects. As such, this concept helps students find the area of their self-realization, which boosts their motivation, willingness and ability both to continue and self-direct their further learning.

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**Keywords:** CLIL; curriculum; life-long learning; needs analysis; student autonomy; syllabus; twenty-first century competences

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Twenty-first century job market

Predicted job losses from the impending fourth industrial revolution (Industry 4.0), a gradual replacing of traditional manufacturing, industrial practices, as well as administration with smart technologies, have continually been pointed out and have raised concerns among national institutions, academia, business and media, and are reflected in their strategy planning. According to the OECD, the development of artificial intelligence (AI), digitalization, and automation might endanger 14% and substantially change 32% of jobs worldwide over the next 10–15 years (OECD 2019: 3). In the Czech Republic, these numbers might translate into as many as 408,000 potential job losses and 1.4 million substantially affected positions (NVF 2016: 4).

Though change brings loss, it also presents powerful opportunities. While some jobs might indeed disappear as a result of progress, many new ones will surely arise from a spirit of innovativeness. Professions identified by international organizations as least susceptible to replacement by AI are those requiring people skills (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014; OECD 2019: 14; Schwab 2018). The rising popularity of people-oriented professions and the new commensurate consumption patterns from durable goods towards services are indicative of this trend. In the Czech Republic, the most sought-after professional qualifications in 2018 were sports massage, au-pair, hotel and gastronomy services, beauty and personal care services, or engineering works (NÚV 2018: 4).

The shift to human-oriented jobs will require a renewed set of skills (NVF 2016: 6). Future workers will mainly need flexibility, adaptability, initiative, and motivation for life-long learning to cope more effectively with information, connect various specializations and skills and be able to make links beyond their narrow professionalization. Effective foreign language skills will be part of a student's "globalized toolkit" meeting the criteria and conditions of the current times.

The Czech Republic is among the nations responding constructively to the new educational demands. Both the White Paper for education (MŠMT ČR 2001), which formulates educational strategies on the macro-level (national), and the General and School Educational Programs (NÚV 2004), setting up standards for the mezzo (institutional) and micro-levels (individual), determine three categories of so-called twenty-first century skills. The strategies include STEM skills (science,

technology, engineering, and mathematics) as key to survival in a technology driven society, language skills being fundamental for international communication and cooperation, and the development of soft skills necessary to survive within the highly volatile job market during the course of a lifespan. Under the rubric of soft skills, learners develop communicative techniques, teamwork, critical thinking, problem solving, as well as a sense of personal responsibility and own judgement to act and make decisions in accordance with the AI related ethical and moral standards. All of which have a place in foreign language education.

## 1.2 Language competences

Foreign language skills have been an agreed strategic issue as well as a common interest across nations as they demonstrably enhance international dialog and understanding, strengthen an “economy’s competitiveness, people mobility and employability” (Council of the EU 2011: 2), and arguably contribute to “personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social cohesion, and employability in a knowledge society” (2011: 1). In order to enhance European multilingualism, the Barcelona European Council meeting from 15–16 March 2002 set up the strategic framework “1 + 2” to meet a common objective “to the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age” (Council of the EU 2014: 1) among its citizens.

This strategic requirement has been implemented into the Czech national curriculum (NÚV 2004). At primary level, the first foreign language is introduced no later than in the third grade and second foreign language by the ninth grade. Two foreign languages continue to be taught at secondary level, while reaching the B2 competence level, based on the international standards defined as Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2011), in at least one is guaranteed by the state graduation exam (MŠMT 2001). At tertiary level, Czech higher education institutions (HEI) follow a common European internationalization strategy aimed at improving teaching and learning languages through, among other programs, student and staff mobility and international cooperation in shared curricula and research activities (Chládek 2015: 14–15). Each student can choose to participate in the European Erasmus program within and beyond member states, which allows the participants to spend time working or studying abroad from 2 to 12 months during their bachelor’s, master’s or doctorate studies. The program can also be extended into a graduate internship one year after completing their studies. Consequently, students and teachers have opportunities to participate in study or work-related activities, such as shared or tandem teaching or various cooperation programs between academia and business.

### 1.3 Twenty-first century educational systems

As the current technological development yields fundamental social changes, these are reflected in expanded generation gaps. Today's students are notably unlike the generation of their parents and teachers. Growing up in a digital world, they work with and process information differently. Interconnectedness entails manifold opportunities to travel, study, or work abroad. These digital bonds further define today's students' educational needs and expectations different from those of the preceding generations. Foreign language curricula, while satisfying governmental strategies, would be remiss if they did not accommodate the attitudes and experiences of the new generation. Teaching must move away from frontal teaching (Johnson and Johnson 2014), and educational activities must engage in problem-solving, decision-making, planning and strategizing (Steel 2001). Content-Based Instruction (CBI) (Brinton et al. 1989), Task-Based Instruction (TBI) (Ellis 2003) or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Marsh 1994; Morgado et al. 2015) are three approaches that introduce language teaching into content subjects in many European tertiary-level programs.

One of the areas of necessary modernization is language teaching approaches and methodologies, so that they better reflect what has been observed in pertinent educational research pinpointing the benefits of activity-based language education. Studies into English as a lingua franca point out the “decreasing relevance of native speaker norms” (Cogo and Dewey 2006: 60) in everyday speaking practice with greater preference given to pragmatic use. According to Cogo and Dewey, students should be treated as “accomplished L2 users in their own right” rather than as “failed or incomplete native speakers” (2006: 63–64; Firth 2009), and instruction should aim at developing functional competences over formal precision. Language management theory (LMT) draws parallel conclusions, arguing that language inaccuracies tend to remain unnoticed or unresolved. In natural interaction, they hardly impede everyday discourse, since understanding is determined by shared goals rather than adherence to linguistic forms (Nekvapil and Sherman 2015). Studies of Business English as a lingua franca (BELF) reach the conclusion that learners must develop “global communicative competence” (Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2011; Pullin 2010, 2013, 2015), which means use in sociocultural contexts and business situations, rather than in linguistic tests.

The process of implementing language-oriented procedures and changes is part of language planning, a theory first introduced by Joshua Fishman in 1971. Based on this theory, language-oriented acts occur at two levels: a macro-level covering the international and national language related decisions of policy makers, such as the EU or global institutions, and a micro-level encompassing acts

processed by local decision makers representing institutions, such as municipal offices, schools, libraries, business or services. Language management theory (LMT), a modern concept of language planning first introduced by Jernudd and Neustupný in 1987 and further elaborated upon by other scholars (Kimura 2014; Nekvapil and Nekula 2006; Nekvapil and Sherman 2009, 2015; Neustupný and Nekvapil 2003), refers to these institutionally initiated processes as “organized language management”.

LMT, however, recognizes a third, individually driven dimension of acts “oriented toward change in the structure and use of language or languages” (Nekvapil and Sherman 2015: 1) that occurs from within. While redefining the above-mentioned two levels of institutional acts as macro (national and international) and mezzo (local and institutional) levels, LMT describes the micro-level as “simple language management”, which covers systematic and discourse-based, every day communication acts of single language users. The acts are driven by their perceptions, evaluations, plans, decisions or language learning and interactional strategies.

Developing language policies must occur in coordination with macro-, mezzo- and micro-levels in the form of national, institutional as well as individual strategies and measures. Being part of the mezzo level, HEIs must therefore mold their programs with respect to both the criteria of national and international standards as well as the individual needs of their learners. This, according to Richards (2017), happens through two separate but closely interconnected processes. First, universities develop curricula in order to provide a comprehensive view in a particular program reflecting the learner needs, the program’s aims and objectives addressing the needs. Then, they design syllabi to specify course content, including what kinds of skills will be taught, practiced and tested, what kind of topics will be included, what type of outcomes will be required, and which methods and approaches will be used during lessons. HEIs, however, cannot omit the perspective of their recipients. Students preparing for their future professional practice are an active part of the process and shape curriculum and course design from within.

This paper presents a model of language learning that reflects student needs within the socio-technological context of the twenty-first century. Developed and implemented in the ŠKODA AUTO University (ŠAVŠ) master’s degree language program, it combines results from institutional and individual student needs analysis studies blending the mezzo and micro perspectives into a viable teaching model reflecting the macro dimension of common national and international strategies and endeavors at the same time. As such, the model yields a complex competence- and content-based language teaching approach fully adapted to the current job market requirements, namely more enhanced communicative and critical-thinking skills.

## 2 ŠAVŠ language programs

ŠAVŠ is a university founded in 2000 by ŠKODA AUTO, part of the VW Group. The university offers business administration study programs that are nationally and internationally accredited (ACBSP). Its programs are established in line with industrial needs, include a technical core, and combine practical experience in either a local or international environment. Internships undertaken at ŠKODA AUTO and other companies, locally or abroad (compulsory in the Bachelor's program, optional for Master's students), are a crucial step in fusing theoretical understanding to practical know-how.

Complementing the individual school degree programs, departments and specializations, students can choose from a wide range of mobility programs implementing the internationalization plan. First, both students and their teachers participate in international and inter-institutional cooperation programs offered through Erasmus+ since 2005. Students may also aspire to complete a double-degree program in order to obtain their diploma from two internationally cooperating universities. Locally, cooperation for visiting students with their host peers is provided through a buddy system aimed at providing help, developing social contacts and creating language and interaction opportunities for all. ŠAVŠ also organizes international summer school programs and international weeks aimed at sharing know-how and expertise on a regular basis. Finally, international conferences take place covering topics such as modern language education or the automobile industry.

English is the primary compulsory foreign language at ŠAVŠ. Courses are run by the Department of Languages and Intercultural Competences (KJPIK). During their bachelor's program, students attend five modules with 240 teaching hours in total targeting the B2 level; three modules in the Master's modules with 144 overall teaching units targeting the C1 level are a mandatory part of the Master's program. English is complemented by another language option: Czech for foreigners, German, Spanish, Russian, or Chinese. Students are also required to complete at least one subject taught in English, choosing subjects from a fully accredited Business Administration program at both the Bachelor's and Master's levels. The department contributes to the portfolio with further subjects such as Business Communication Competences, Academic Writing in English, Doing Business in China, Strategic Management with Asian Focus and Media Literacy.

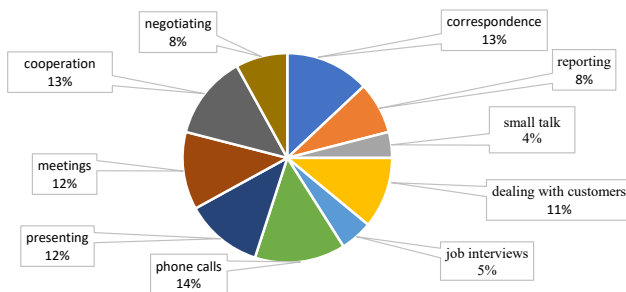
To develop the school curriculum together with the individual course syllabi which adhere to the international and national education and employment strategies, the department used two types of resources to design the language teaching model at ŠAVŠ: student needs analyses conducted at the ŠAVŠ language

department and a joint research project conducted in current partnership cooperation between ŠAVŠ and international partner universities in China and Vietnam aimed at identifying educational gaps.

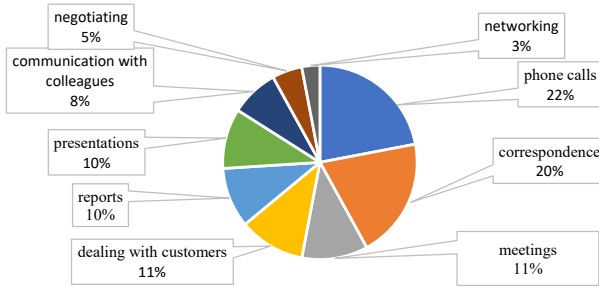
## 3 Research

### 3.1 Students' needs analyses

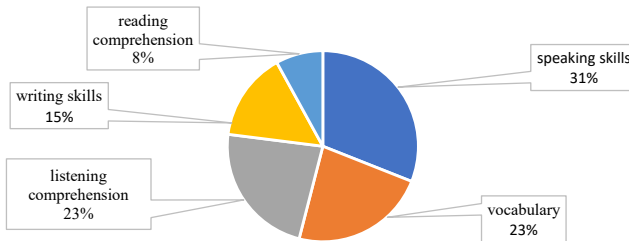
Students and employers are active participants and inherent stakeholders within education and the prospective job market. With this in mind, ŠAVŠ conducts repeated student program assessments and needs analysis research. This paper refers to its 2006, 2013 and 2016 iterations. The first 2006 student needs analysis focused on identifying student language needs with respect to their professional training. Viková's (2006) conclusion points to a need for productive speaking and writing business communication skills which the students reported as insufficient during their professional training. The 2013 study provided more detailed data addressing students as well as their supervisors after the completed mandatory internships. While focusing on the assessment of student activity and participation in communication situations with respect to their language competences and needs, the study came to a similar conclusion. Most of the necessary or desired competences from the perspective of both the students and their supervisors, seen as needed (see Figures 1 and 2) or weak (see Figure 3) during the student practical training, were practical verbal or written communication skills.



**Figure 1:** Language needs for future employment: student perspective.



**Figure 2:** Language needs for future employment: supervisor perspective.

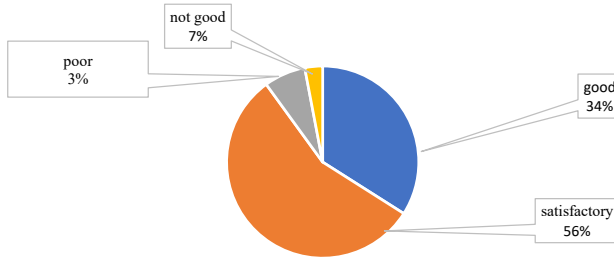


**Figure 3:** Weaknesses in student language skills during practical training: supervisor perspective.

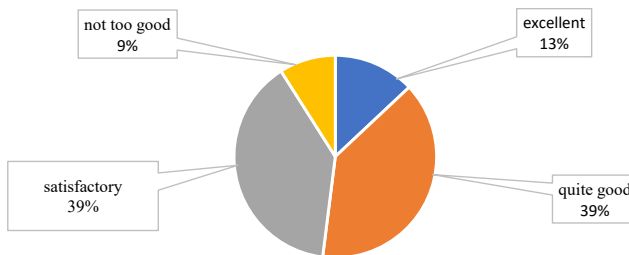
Interestingly, a noteworthy difference between the students' and the employers' perceptions was found. The students tended to be more critical of their own skills (see Figures 4 and 5). None of them assessed their competences as excellent and some even insufficient, while their supervisors evaluated more than half of the students' communication skills as excellent or quite good (13% and 39% respectively). But this still meant that practical communication skills were seen as weak or inadequate in almost half of the students. The process of adjustments to curricula and course design, as well as teaching approaches developing students' communicative competences and confidence started accordingly.

A more detailed iteration of the needs analysis which finally lead to the proposed teaching model was conducted in 2016 (Sieglöva et al. 2017). While examining the student perceptions about their language needs and respective course adjustment expectations as they were undertaking their mandatory training, this study added a qualitative approach to the statistical data. Seventy-two master's degree students from the business administration and operations, human





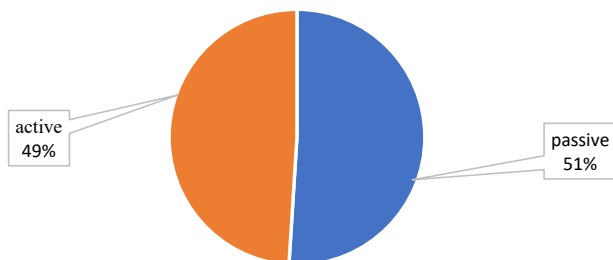
**Figure 4:** Language skill assessment during practical training: student perspective.



**Figure 5:** Language skill assessment during practical training: supervisor perspective.

resources, marketing and management programs who participated in Business English courses designed to reach B2–C1 level of the CEFR standards, assessed their language skills, their approach to speaking as well as their language expectations and training needs for their future professional practice in a printed questionnaire and informal in-class focus groups using a set of open and closed questions.

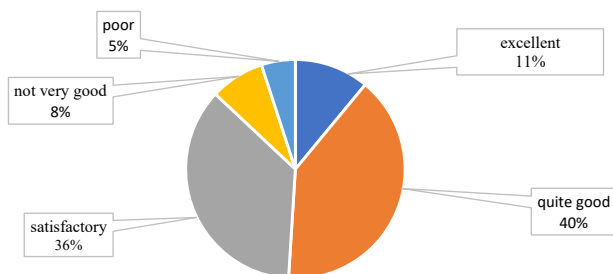
In this study, the students first assessed their competence level and approach to speaking (see Figure 6) as either active or passive, and included a written explanation of their self-assessment. While 49% saw themselves as active participants in social discourse, mainly in order to meet their study needs and ambitions better, self-improve in pronunciation, fluency, grammar, listening comprehension or pragmatics, or satisfy their attraction to intercultural issues through socializing with friends, peers or colleagues on a global level, 51% reported a tendency to avoid communication in English, mainly due to a lack of self-confidence, fear of making mistakes or personality traits. Weaknesses in language described in the textual testimonies included negative evaluation of fluency, grammar, or vocabulary.



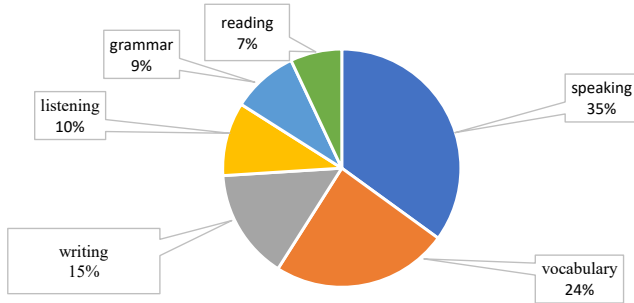
**Figure 6:** Student attitude toward communication in foreign language: self-assessment.

When self-evaluating their individual language competences, about the same proportion of students evaluated their English competences as excellent or good opposed to not very good or poor (see Figure 7). Furthermore, while assessing their language skills on a scale between best and worst, the students again report seeing the most language deficiencies in their speaking skills and vocabulary. These impressions again mirror the students' subsequent definition of classroom needs highlighting speaking and vocabulary related activities as the most sought-after for their language lessons (see Figure 8).

The written narratives in which the students were describing their ideas about an ideal lesson emphasized a more active role in classroom activities replacing the traditional frontal teaching style with its teacher-centered approach. Furthermore, the students prefer smaller groups and a closed classroom setup with closer contact with their teachers as well as peers. They also appreciate interaction and collaborative work which yields natural interaction and communication situations. They prefer to use authentic materials rather than textbooks which address



**Figure 7:** Student language abilities during practical training: self-assessment.



**Figure 8:** Student priorities for language classroom.

real-life topics, practical problems, current issues or case studies. Finally, the students report that they enjoy and welcome more opportunities to debate in pairs or groups or give presentations to a larger audience.

### 3.2 Institutional needs analyses

Similar conclusions were drawn from the international Joint Enterprise and University Learning (JEUL) project conducted in 2017–2020 by ŠAVŠ, the University of Economics of Ho Chi Minh City, the Banking University in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam and the College of Economics and Management at the Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics in China. In this project, partner universities worked on a long-lasting cooperation between the HEIs and the private sector, in order to implement pertinent changes into their modules so that their curricula and teaching practices would better respond to the current market needs. Each partner university collected feedback on student placements in companies through a survey defining the set of skills and knowledge required by enterprises. Results were made into case studies identifying competence gaps. The case studies served to upgrade school curricula by implementing competence-based training into their programs.

The project activities were grouped in 7 working packages, out of which working package three (WP3) directly focused on diagnosing inadequate skills and knowledge of the partner university graduates with respect to the global market needs. Each participating university conducted research targeted at business companies, various industries, recruiting channels and hiring strategies used by the companies. 201 printed and online questionnaires from 20 enterprises in China and 200 face-to-face interviews and online surveys in Vietnam covered topics

concerning curriculum gaps and resulted in country specific reports (Bui et al. 2019; Duong et al. 2018; NUMC 2018) with the following recommendations. While Vietnam, unlike China, revealed significant shortcomings in the technical knowledge of students and alumni, such as computer literacy or internet security, both countries identified significant gaps in soft skills that need to be implemented into their school curricula including a set of soft-skills, such as communication, problem solving, critical thinking, teamwork, or leadership skills. Practical vocational education complementing theoretical knowledge and corporate experience through internships were also viewed as inadequate, and more needed to be done to foster motivation, entrepreneurial spirit, international cooperation, social responsibility, and business ethics. To address these gaps, relevant skill-oriented objectives were embedded in the curricula of the Chinese and Vietnamese partner universities under the supervision of ŠAVŠ.

## 4 Curriculum, syllabi, and course design

In sum, the JEUL project as well as the earlier student needs analyses confirm that in order to keep pace with the national and international development and related job market requirements, schools need to react more flexibly to the fast-evolving social changes. To better satisfy the fast-changing needs of the micro and mezzo levels, that is the students' competence profile and adequate school educational program, schools need to offer relevant transformation in every aspect: their aims, objectives, and learning outcomes, contents and topics, as well as the methodologies and teaching approaches.

Using the findings from the JEUL project, which helped to set up the aims and objectives for the school curriculum from the perspective of integrated macro and mezzo levels of the language policy and planning process, and the earlier needs analyses results, which served to design individual modules with respect to content, methods, competences, and required learning outcomes corresponding to the needs of the recipients, the ŠAVŠ language department reached this content- and competence-based language teaching model in its master's level Business English program (see Figure 9). The model consists of 3 modules aimed at reaching the C1 CEFR level. Each module follows a concept based on the following aspects: course structure and load divided into in-class and home self-study tasks; topics and subtopics spread into blocks throughout the semester; balanced competence-based tasks and course requirements focused on language in use through reading, listening, writing, and speaking; teaching methods accentuating the student-centered approach; learning outcomes aimed at skill acquisition; and assessment methods evaluating the quality of performance and learning outcomes achieved.

Module 1: MANAGEMENT	COURSE REQUIREMENTS	READING	LISTENING	WRITING	SPEAKING	Assessment
<b>TOPICS:</b>  <b>Managers and motivation</b> (5 units)  <b>HR management</b> (3 units)  <b>Diversity management</b> (4 units)	<b>PROGRESSIVE ASSESSMENT</b>	<b>In-class:</b> free-resource texts analyses, <b>final test</b>	<b>In-class:</b> free-source audio/videos, <b>final test</b>	<b>In-class:</b> argumentation essay, <b>final test</b>	<b>In-class:</b> argumentation, impromptu talks, presentations, group debates, simulations <b>activity and cooperation</b>	40%
		<b>Self-study:</b> follow-up self-study, textbook exercises	<b>Self-study:</b> follow-up self-study, textbook exercises, <b>movie analysis</b>	<b>Self-study:</b> argumentation essay, <b>critical incident analyses</b>	<b>Self-study:</b> speaking exercises, autonomous learning strategies	
	<b>INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION</b>	<b>In-class:</b>		<b>In-class:</b> summary, teacher feedback	<b>In-class:</b> <b>individual presentation</b> , teacher feedback	10%
		<b>Self-study:</b> own-choice free-resource text		<b>Self-study:</b> <b>summary</b>	<b>Self-study:</b> presentation rehearsal	
	<b>JOB APPLICATION PACKAGE</b>	<b>In-class:</b>	<b>In-class:</b> sample pitch analyses	<b>In-class:</b> motivation letter, email	<b>In-class:</b>	20%
		sample CV and motivation letter analyses			impromptu pitch presentations	
		<b>Self-study:</b> textbook exercises, online resources	<b>Self-study:</b> textbook exercises, online resources	<b>Self-study:</b> <b>individual PPT, CV, motivation letter</b>	<b>Self-study:</b> <b>elevator pitch</b>	
	<b>BOOK REVIEW AND ROUND TABLE DEFENSE</b>	<b>In-class:</b> reading workshops		<b>In-class:</b> summary	<b>In-class:</b> <b>round table defense</b>	30%
		<b>Self-study:</b> own-choice book		<b>Self-study:</b> <b>book review</b>	<b>Self-study:</b> questions-answers	
	<b>Teaching methods</b>		content analyses, peer reading, assembled studies	individual and peer listening	individual and peer writing, peer editing and feedback, team work	individual communication skills (verbal, oral), pair work, team work, experiential learning

Figure 9: Content- and competence-based approach matrix: language teaching model for Module 1.

In particular, each language module is implemented into a 12-week long semester with 4 teaching units of 45 min per week. The study load includes 48 in-class contact hours, assumes 120 home self-study hours, and 12 hours of individual optional consultations with the teacher. Each module covers one main topic in Business English. These are management, marketing, and economy. Each topic then includes 12 subtopics which determine a general outline of the course set, but allow adjustments to accommodate emerging events or current social developments within field, individual student interests and preferences, as well as immediate adjustment needs of the school, teachers or students. The selection of teaching materials for lessons and self-study ranges from professional language teaching and learning materials to expert journals of publications and other free-resource materials chosen at the discretion of the teachers as well as the students. Both in-class activities and home assignments are balanced to develop the full set of language competences including not only the basic reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills, but also more advanced competencies, including critical thinking, communication and other soft-skills. Individual achievements are assessed proportionally according to the quality of performance and learning outcomes reached rather than by the number of mistakes made. A student-centered approach is implemented through a set of modern methods ensuring high student motivation, active involvement, and efficient cooperation. These include cooperative, motivational, activating, cognitive, communicative, or experiential learning methods, to name a few.

## 5 Conclusion

The aim of the language teaching model presented was to show how a desired change can be achieved through coordinated efforts integrating the needs, aims, and objectives set by the policy makers, institutions, and individual participants. The model represents a modern content- and competence-based approach to language teaching at tertiary level. This approach yields the expected learning outcomes for modern times demanded by the social changes and respective restructured job market. It shifts the focus from the teacher to the students, making them active and autonomous participants (Little 2008) in the educational processes motivated for life-long learning. They take over the responsibility and self-direction of their own learning and become prepared to handle the challenges of a rapidly changing and volatile world. Through active involvement that allows them to make individual decisions when choosing topics for practical tasks and communicative situations in cooperation with others, they achieve the learning objectives by developing the key competences and soft-skills necessary in people-oriented future jobs. Being assessed

by their actual performance, quality of completed tasks, efficiency of individual language competences and personal achievements rather than mistakes, they pluck up the necessary courage to face challenging tasks and complex problems. They enhance their cooperation, communication, and intercultural competences in the context of professional specializations and subjects. Exposed to tasks simulating real-life situations and reflecting actual social contexts, they learn flexibility, critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, or cultivated debate, and develop aptitudes to react to new or unexpected stimuli. Needless to say, such an approach fills in the gaps and expectations identified in the above-mentioned needs analysis conducted with both the students and potential employees within and outside a nation state.

Changes in educational content, aim, and style increase the demands on the teaching profession. The job of an educator, in fact, represents the type of jobs of the future based on strong soft and people-oriented skills. Educators must maintain their authority through efficient leadership based on experience from cooperation and management. They provide knowledge and expertise based on their own life experience and multi-disciplinary erudition. They stand as role models though personal and psychological maturity, stability, and wisdom, and they stay trustful based on their personal value system and integrity. Their job is not only to organize the activities, transmit knowledge and experience, or provide feedback and support, but also to continue their own life-long learning. They are active participants of social affairs, follow social development, self-study, think critically, problem-solve and adapt.

While the data presented in this paper generally confirm the same results over a decade of research, student needs demand further examination. Assuming the dynamics of industry 4.0 development, including the speed of progress in information and communication technologies, schools must be prepared to react to the continuing transformation of the job marked and provide their students with competitive knowledge, skills, and competences.

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