

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE FOR PROFESSIONAL CAREER IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the importance of native (specialty) and foreign language competence in today's multicultural and multilingual society and discusses the significance of professional language skills for linguistic competence as one of professional career factors in the context of globalization. One of the tasks of higher education institutions (HEIs) is improving students' linguistic competence. Acquisition of communication skills requires developing students' thinking, activity, creativity, and resourcefulness. The paper presents how students of several HEIs of Kaunas city view the importance of native (specialty) and foreign language skills for their professional career in the global world.

The study showed that in view of the internationalization and globalization of the labor market, multilingual competence is important for professional career and development. According to the respondents, English language skills and the ability to express one's thoughts in Lithuanian were highly important for professional success, whereas Russian and Polish language skills were least important.

Key words: communication, linguistic competence, native (specialty) language, foreign languages, professional language, professional career

1. INTRODUCTION

When preparing youth for life, the development of communicative competence is especially important. Communication is an exchange of created or processed information between two or more people in order to achieve common understanding. This is a continuous, endless, and integrated process. A person's communicative competence is determined by, among other factors, high-quality language skills as well as the ability to transmit and receive information (Naginevičienė 2010).

Lithuanian higher education institutions (HEIs) educate and train specialists that seek to demonstrate their best possible competences in professional activity. Professional language (native (specialty) and foreign) skills form the communicative competence, which ensures the students' future professional career and personal development. Due to globalization, the role and importance of international communication is continuously increasing. Information exchange is carried out on the level of states or international organizations, but it may also be personal – among people living in different countries (Vilniaus pedagoginis universitetas 2005). Acquisition of professional language skills as the aim and the result of high-quality studies provide the possibility of student mobility, international studies, the development of project activity as well as the preparation of more comprehensive and more significant graduation theses.

The competences of the native (specialty) and foreign languages are among the eight general competences providing the possibilities for life-long learning and required for a member of the global knowledge society of the 21st century, communicating and cooperating in the international socio-cultural, professional, and academic space within the paradigm of life-long learning (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning 2006). The development of linguistic competence is an integral part of university education (Alaunienė 1996).

The selected topic is relevant because the objective of every HEI is to search for ways to develop an intellectual personality capable of working in the global society. The development of science, technology, various branches of art, etc. creates the necessity of improving the native (specialty)

language and broadening the knowledge of foreign languages. In order to reveal students' opinion about the significance of the native (specialty) and foreign languages for professional success, we conducted a quantitative and qualitative study.

The aim of the study was to reveal the opinion of the students of Kaunas HEIs about the significance of the native (specialty) language and foreign language skills as preconditions for the international communicative competence in the context of modern professional competences.

The objectives of the study were the following:

1. To analyze the concept of communicative competence.
2. To reveal the opinion of the students of higher education institutions in Kaunas city about the need for and the effect of the native (specialty) and foreign language skills on professional activity.
3. To determine which native (specialty) language and foreign language skills are most important for successful professional activity.
4. To evaluate the possibilities for the development of language skills as part of communicative competence at a higher education institution, and to present the conclusions of the study.

The object of the study was the opinion of the students of Kaunas HEIs about the importance of the native (specialty) and foreign language skills for professional career in the conditions of globalization.

Methods of the study:

1. Analysis of scientific literature.
2. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data obtained during a written questionnaire-based survey.

During the study, we conducted a questionnaire-based survey. The questions in the questionnaire were of the closed type, where the respondents had to choose one of several responses. Thus we could avoid alternatives that were not included into the closed questions of the questionnaire.

The following types of closed questions were included in the questionnaire:

- a) dichotomous – the respondents were asked to choose one of two responses;
- b) multichotomous – the respondents were asked to choose from more than two responses;
- c) questions with graded responses – the respondents were asked to arrange the responses so that their tension could be revealed (Kupstienė & Peleckienė 2009, p. 132).

During their language classes, students at HEIs perform various exercises and work with various texts - both coherent and non-coherent. One should not forget the fact that each student's linguistic abilities are revealed in independently created texts – either spoken or written. It is especially important to ensure that students can coherently speak on their specialty topics both in Lithuanian and in a foreign language. Coherent texts used during native (specialty) and foreign language classes may be various and used for a variety of tasks, but they also pose a number of issues concerning the methodology and the psychology of language teaching. Therefore, these issues should be tackled (Alaunienė 1996; Grebliauskienė & Večkienė 2004).

A comparative analysis of languages shows that contacts between languages mostly result in interference phenomena. During the teaching process, the phenomena of the native (Lithuanian) language are analyzed and compared with the respective phenomena of foreign languages.

2. THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Life in a multicultural and multilingual Europe and successful integration into the world of activity requires a certain competence of the native (specialty) and foreign languages. The improvement of the linguistic competence has been recognized as a life-long process, and thus it is important to analyze the conditions for language learning and the preservation and improvement of linguistic competence in HEIs (Mačianskienė 2010, p. 89).

Our age is the age of active and dynamic people. Intensive changes require quick and accurate decisions. New technologies create instantaneous images and virtual reality, and a person capable of operating in such reality may develop an illusion that he or she may be as successful in real life and work, and thus learning to communicate is not necessary. However, the importance of communication skills is not decreasing because people with such skills feel confident in various situations of subject-based, professional, or daily communication (Grebliauskienė & Večkienė 2004). Language is seen as the universal means of communication because it helps us transmit the content of information. According to the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning, communication in the native and foreign languages are seen as key competences of lifelong learning (Naginevičienė 2010). Thus, the development of communication skills is an important task in the process of personality development.

The concept of *communication* is difficult to define precisely because it is a multifaceted process that involves a number of fields of activity. However, all the definitions proposed by various researchers have one statement in common – i.e. that communication is a process of information exchange (Naginevičienė 2010). Verbal communication is a process of information exchange where the information is coded in a certain system of linguistic signs (Baršauskienė & Janulevičiūtė – Ivaškevičienė 2005). The ability to use languages (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) is seen as communicative competence. According to Hutmacher (1996), communicative competence includes knowledge, skills, and the ability to understand and speak in more than one language as well as the ability to hear the collocutor and to take his/her opinion into consideration (Bankauskienė 2014).

According to van Ek (Baltrušaitienė 2007), communicative competence consists of linguistic competence (the vocabulary, the rules, and the combinations of these elements), sociolinguistic competence (the ability to use and interpret language forms according to the communicative situation while understanding the intentions of communication), discourse competence (the ability to understand and speak coherently when communicating), strategic competence (the ability to use verbal and non-verbal language), socio-cultural competence (the ability to understand the socio-cultural context in which the language is used), and social competence (willingness to communicate with others, self-confidence, etc.). Thus, communication involves the whole essence of a person – thoughts, language, voice, and action, whereas language itself acts as means of the development of communication skills (Crystal 2005).

International communication may be defined as a complex that analyzes the transmission of values, attitudes, opinions, information, and data (“without borders” – i.e. between different states) by people, groups of people, institutions, governments, etc. A number of factors indicate an increasing importance of international communication – people have more contacts with different countries than ever before, and they also travel to distant places of the Earth and come into contact with different cultures. The level of the development of information technologies changes the concept of a community – personal and professional relationships may be maintained irrespectively of time and place. Today we all are members of international communication (Vilniaus pedagoginis universitetas 2005). The fact that linguistic skills are important for international communication is proven by the principles of this competence – the selection of understandable, effective, and concrete words, avoidance of old and/or unnatural words, formulation of clear and succinct sentences, and highlighting keywords. High-quality language skills are the precondition for these abilities.

3. RESULTS OF THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

This article is based on the study of students' opinion about the importance of linguistic competence – i.e. native (specialty) and foreign languages – for professional activity. The study was performed during the academic year of 2015-2016 and included first-, second-, and third-year students from Kauno Kolegija/University of Applied Sciences (subsequently, KK), the Lithuanian University of Health Sciences (subsequently, LSMU), Vytautas Magnus University (subsequently, VMU), and Kaunas University of Technology (subsequently, KTU). In total, 160 respondents participated in the study - 88 females and 72 males. The studied group was selected by applying non-probability (convenience) sampling.

The questions included in the questionnaire were intended to clarify the respondents' opinion about which languages were important for professional success. Currently, employment ads with increasing frequency emphasize not only the knowledge of English or some other foreign language, but also flawless skills of the Lithuanian language. The respondents' opinion about the importance of languages for professional success is presented in Fig. 3.1. The ability to write correctly in Lithuanian as an important factor for professional success was most frequently mentioned by VMU students (36%), and least frequently – by KK students (15%). Such results may be explained by the fact that VMU provides university-level education, the students are more motivated, and the majority of them will enter Master study programs. Besides, it is noteworthy that VMU has more study programs in the field of humanities. KK students acquire higher non-university level education and in most cases start working after graduation instead of continuing their studies. When evaluating the significance of the correct use of spoken native (specialty) language for professional success, VMU students also attributed the highest significance to this skill (39%), whereas the percentage of the respondents who positively evaluated this factor of professional success among KK students was the smallest (13%). This could be because the evaluation of the significance of native (specialty) language for the professional career was influenced by the fact that KK respondents' professions were related more to the labor market than with the world of science. The English language skills were seen as significant mostly by VMU students (41%), somewhat less so – by the LSMU students (33%), even less so – by KTU students (21%), and the least – by KK students (6%). Such responses confirm the fact that the English language is *lingua franca*, the most popular language of international communication. The distribution of the evaluation of the significance of neighboring foreign languages (Polish and Russian) was the following: the most favorable evaluations were presented by VMU respondents (36%), then followed the LSMU respondents (29%), KTU respondents (18%), and KK respondents (17%). The evaluation of these languages as important for professional success by most students may be attributed to the fact that Russian and Polish ethnic minorities comprise approximately 13% of the population in Lithuania. Besides, the Russian language has a significant influence on economic relationships with Eastern European countries. The distributions of the respondents' opinions about the significance of other major European languages (German, French, Italian, and Spanish) was almost the same in all respondent groups. This may be attributed to the European Union population's possibilities of mobility.

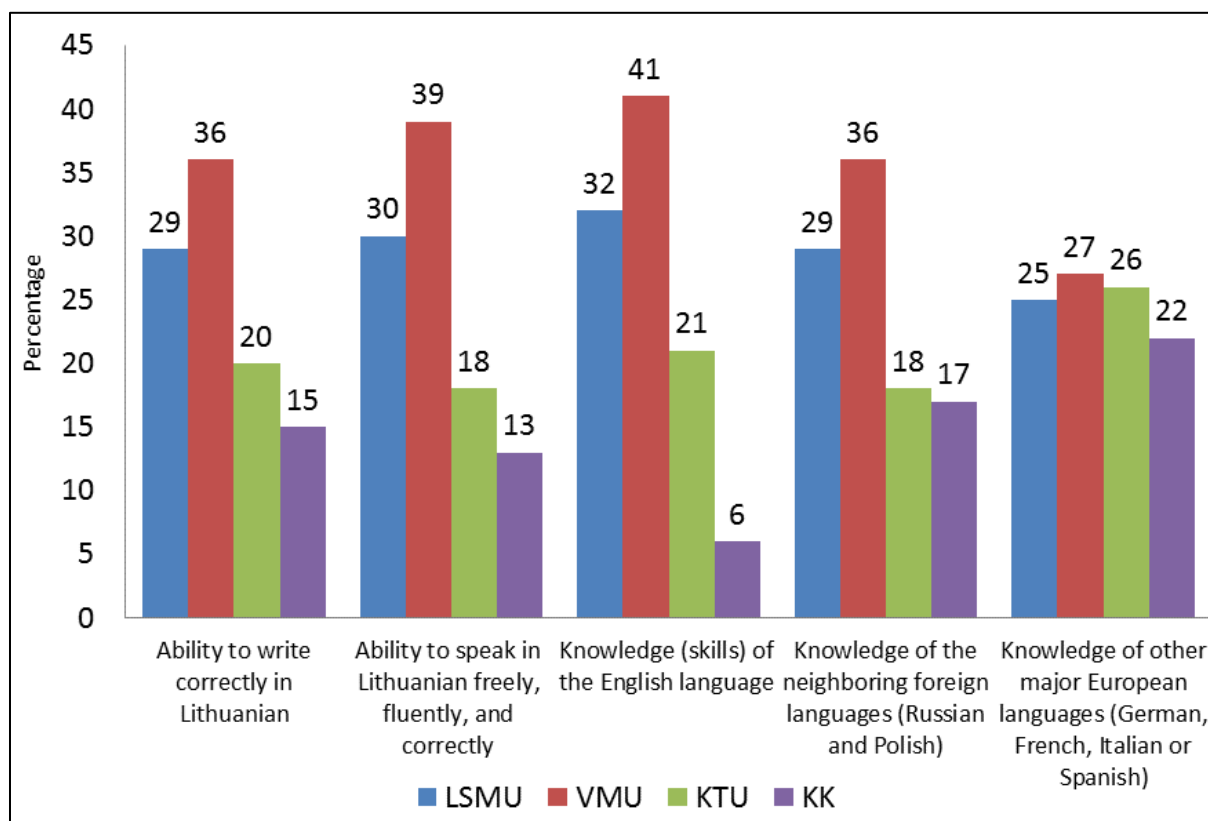


Fig. 3.1. The importance of languages for professional success

Another question aimed at clarifying which level of native (specialty) language knowledge is most important in professional activity (speaking and writing correctly; freely and fluently (although not always correctly) expressing one's thoughts; and speaking and writing in a vivid and rich language). The majority of the respondents indicated that being capable of freely and fluently (although not always correctly) expressing one's thoughts in the native (specialty) language was sufficient for professional success. Out of 29.5% LSMU students who stated that native (specialty) language was important for the professional career, 13% thought that correctness of the language was not very important – speaking freely and fluently was sufficient. The respective percentages in other groups of respondents were the following: VMU: out of 37.5% - 16%; KTU: out of 19% – 9%; and KK: out of 14% – 7%. A small part of the students of all the investigated HEIs thought that being capable of speaking and writing correctly was necessary (Fig. 3.2). The results of the survey showed that the respondents did not think that speaking and writing in a vivid and rich language was relevant.

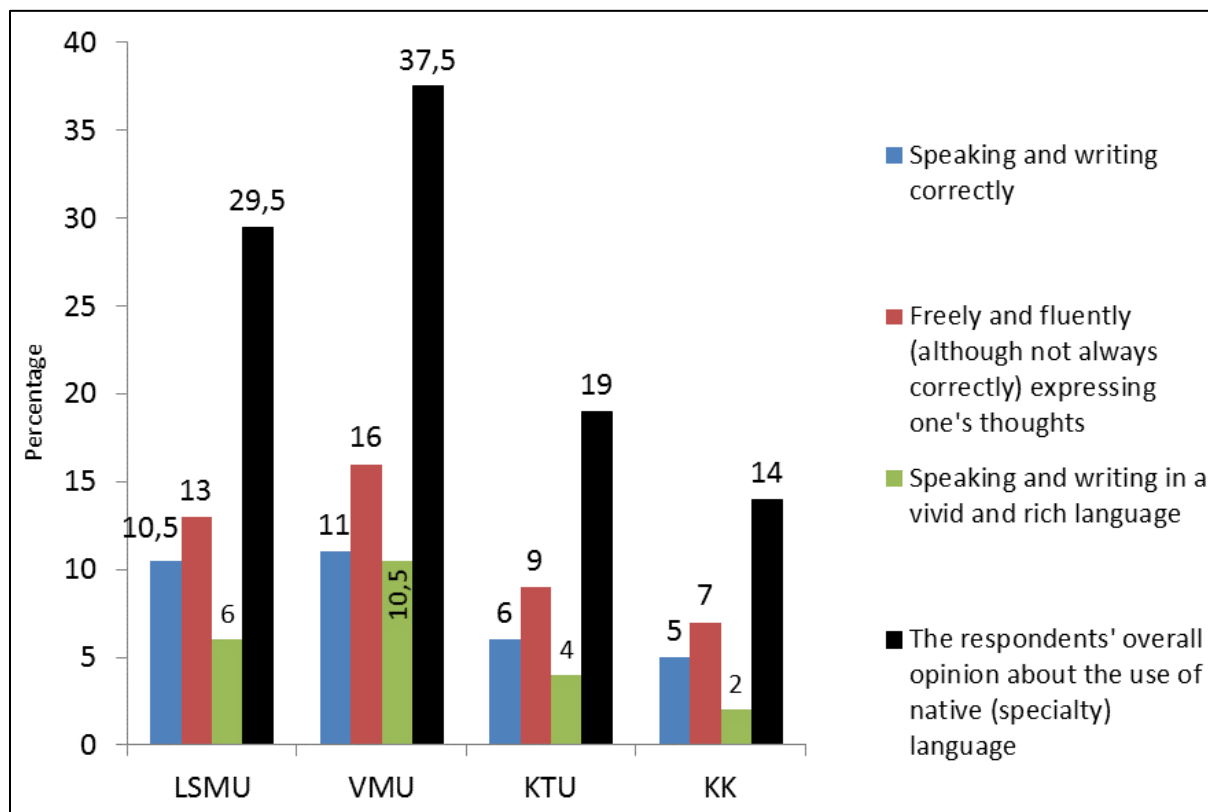


Fig. 3.2. The need for native language knowledge (%) in professional activity

According to Mačianskienė (2010, p. 98), linguistic competence provides possibilities for career development and employment as well as ensures competitive superiority, and thus the importance of the development of foreign language competences is increasing. The respondents were further asked which level of foreign language knowledge was most important in professional activity (speaking and writing correctly; freely and fluently (although not always correctly) expressing one's thoughts; and speaking and writing in a vivid and rich language). The majority of the respondents indicated that being capable of freely and fluently (although not always correctly) expressing one's thoughts in a foreign language was sufficient for professional success. Out of 29% LSMU students who stated that a foreign language was significant for the professional career, 15% thought that correctness of the language was not very important – speaking freely and fluently was sufficient. The respective percentages in other groups of respondents were the following: VMU: out of 35% - 18%; KTU: out of 22% – 10%; and KK: out of 15% – 8%. A smaller part of the students of all the investigated HEIs thought that being capable of speaking and writing correctly was necessary (Fig. 3.3). The results of the survey showed that the respondents did not think that speaking and writing in a vivid and rich language was relevant because vividness and richness of the language was not a characteristic feature of the scientific style.

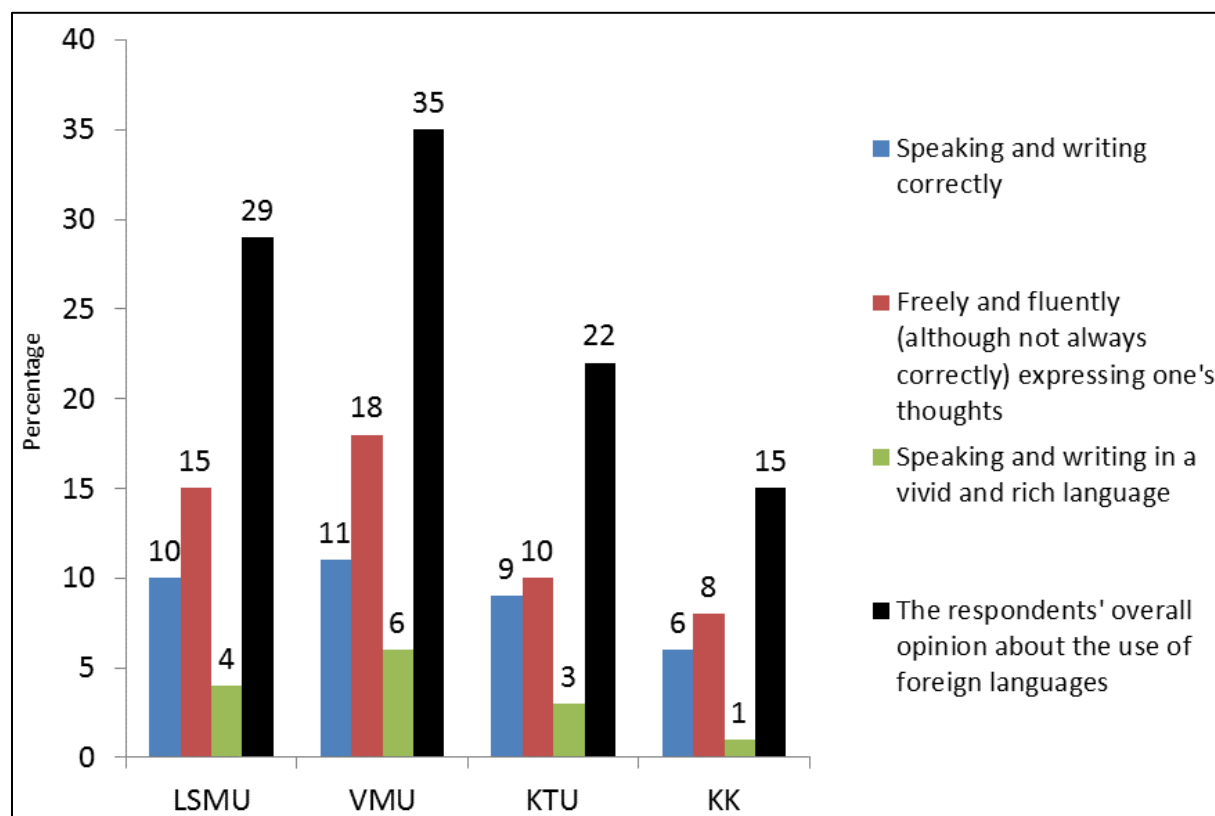


Fig. 3.3. The need for foreign language knowledge (%) in professional activity

Communication in foreign languages largely involves the main skills of communication in the native language: it is based on the ability to understand, express, and explain concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts, and opinions verbally and in written (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in the respective social and cultural environment (when learning, at work, at home, or during leisure time) according to one's wishes or needs. Communication in foreign languages also requires such skills as mediation and cross-cultural understanding. Each person's level of knowledge depends of four aspects (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and different languages, social and cultural education, the environment, and/or interests. To know foreign languages, one has to know their vocabulary and functional grammar as well as the main types of verbal communication and the functional styles of the language. In addition, knowledge about the predominant order in the society, cultural aspects, and changes of languages is important. The most important skills of communication in foreign languages include the ability to understand a verbally conveyed message, to initiate, maintain, and conclude a conversation, and to read, understand, and prepare a text according to one's personal needs. People should also be able to use properly the available aids and to learn languages unofficially via life-long learning. A positive approach means acceptance of cultural diversity, interest in languages and cross-cultural communication, and curiosity (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning 2006).

The analysis of the study programs of HEIs in Kaunas city (LSMU, VMU, KTU, and KK) showed that the greatest number of foreign languages was taught at VMU – 23 foreign languages (English, Arabian, Estonian, Greek, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Yiddish, Chinese, Latvian, Polish, the Lithuanian sign language, Lithuanian as a foreign language, Latin, Greek of the New Testament, Norwegian, French, Russian, Serbian, Finnish, Swedish, Turkish, and German). KTU offered 10 foreign languages (English, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Lithuanian as a foreign language, Latin, French, Russian, Swedish, and German), LSMU – 9 foreign languages (English, Danish, Italian, Lithuanian as a foreign language, Latin, French, Russian, Swedish, and German; plans are made for the introduction of Spanish, Japanese, and the Lithuanian sign language courses from September 1, 2016), and KK – 7

foreign languages (English, Italian, Lithuanian as a foreign language, Latin, French, Russian, and German) (Fig. 3.4). A survey of the introduced study programs showed that students have ample possibilities to learn the desired languages or to improve the already acquired foreign language skills.

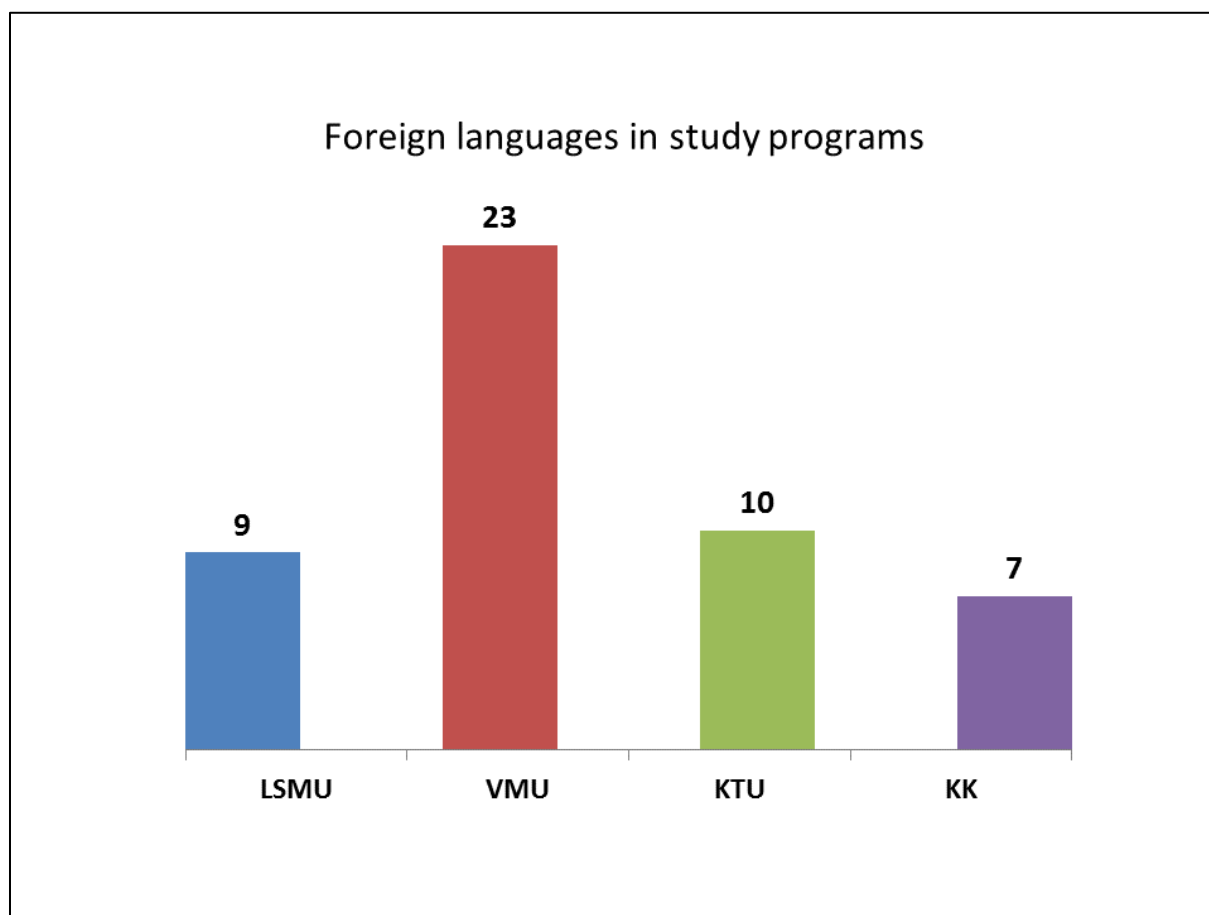


Fig. 3.4. Possibilities for the improvement of linguistic skills at higher education institutions (LSMU, VMU, KTU, and KK)

4. CONCLUSIONS

1. The analysis of scientific literature showed that international communicative competence is becoming highly important in the global world, and good knowledge of foreign languages is the precondition of this competence. Native (specialty) language is significant as one of the general skills of life-long learning.
2. The results of the empirical study showed that students who participated in the survey recognized the significance of the native (specialty) language and foreign languages (mostly, English) for professional success.
3. According to the students' opinion, correct written and spoken language was not necessary in professional activity – they thought that the ability to express one's thoughts freely and fluently was sufficient.
4. Higher education institutions create favorable conditions for learning new languages or improving the already acquired skills.

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