

# RE-ROUTING IN EUROPE: THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION AS A TRUCK DRIVER WITH LIMITED LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

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**Abstract:** Although there are a number of professions that include communication among participants whose native languages are not shared, so far no research has been carried out exploring how Hungarian truck drivers get along in their daily routine with a limited language competence. This paper is based on a qualitative investigation carried out to investigate what kind of language competence Hungarian truck drivers possess, what situations they participate in, what language-based challenges they face, whether they consider their language competence adequate to carry out their daily work and, finally, what other skills and competences they draw on should their language competence prove to be insufficient. The results the interview study show that Hungarian truck drivers measure their foreign languages skills against the tasks they can carry out with their help and that they are able to perform efficiently partly due to the fact that most of the problems they might face are highly predictable and they can prepare for them. The study also reveals that although they consider their language proficiency to be sufficient, should previously avoided problems occur, they draw on a number of communication strategies and tools.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication, language competence, communication strategies, drivers, experience

## 1 Introduction

Today's world, in which many industries depend on the import and export of certain products, consists of numerous professions that require communication among speakers whose native languages are not shared. The employees in such areas as, for instance, tourism, catering or shipping always have to be prepared to communicate in a foreign language. Not only should they speak the most common *lingua franca* languages (e.g. English, Spanish, etc.), but sometimes they have to face foreigners and solve problems in languages in which they have a relatively low level of, or non-existent, proficiency. This paper describes how foreign language is used by Hungarian truck drivers in situations where the mother tongue of the participants differs. This research aims to fill a hiatus in an area that has not been investigated in Hungary until now: The objective is to see how Hungarian truck drivers get along with – very likely – limited language competence. In order to answer this main question, a number of sub-questions also need to be explored, namely what kind of language competence the Hungarian truck drivers participating in the study have, what situations they come across and what difficulties they encounter in their work, whether they consider this language proficiency adequate to perform effectively in these situations and finally what other tools they might apply to achieve communication in cases when their language competence does not suffice. This paper aims to explore these questions without generalizing its findings to the entire population of Hungarian truck drivers in Hungary; however, it has to be noted that all the participants of the research (interviewees) voiced very similar opinions in answer to the interview questions.

## 2 Review of the literature

### 2.1 Communicative competence

The term *communicative competence* is associated with Hymes (1971), who claimed that it is this complex, language related competence that makes humans able to communicate with each other. Hymes argued that in order to speak a language competently, it is not only important to be aware of the linguistic constraints of the specific language, but the speaker has to adjust what s/he says in various situations, for instance, by taking into account who s/he talks to, for what purpose and in what circumstances. It is the different components of communicative competence that make all these adjustments possible. Several researchers felt the need to identify these components. One of the most widely applied models was created by Canale and Swain (1980). Their model identified four different components of communicative competence:

- (1) Linguistic competence
- (2) Sociolinguistic competence
- (3) Discourse competence
- (4) Strategic competence

In practical terms communicative competence is usually understood as general language competence. In fact, it is a complex interplay of the elements listed above. For the purposes of this paper it might be useful to briefly summarize what the components refer to. Thus linguistic competence incorporates the ability to use proper grammar and vocabulary, and combine them correctly to form structures. Sociolinguistic competence means proficiency in using the appropriate register of language in different situations. Thus, for instance, it takes into account the receiver, as speech is modified to make it understandable and inoffensive to the listener and it also includes the relationship between the speaker and listener (e.g. the question of politeness). Discourse competence is the ability to organize sentences into a coherent and cohesive text, while strategic competence offers a solution in overcoming language problems like not understanding something or not being able express oneself. One of the shortcomings of this model is that “it is difficult to include language functions (e.g. suggesting, apologizing) in it, even though these have an important role in communicative language teaching” (Kormos & Csölle, 2004, p.38).

The relevance of examining communicative competence in this paper is that linguistic competence is claimed to be present only in a limited way in the foreign language communicative competence of the truck drivers participating in this investigation. In van Ek's model (1986) this component is described as “the ability to produce and interpret meaningful utterances which are formed in accordance with the rules of the language concerned and bear their conventional meaning... that meaning which native speakers would normally attach to an utterance when used in isolation” (p.39). This means that there is a basic level for communication where all words, structures and forms retain their lexical meaning and where meaning is not derived from the context or the situation where it is uttered. Van Ek's model also claims that in communication, linguistic competence could be separated from all the other components. Byram (1997) further simplifies the definition of this competence by claiming that linguistic competence is the ability to apply the rules of the standard language in order to create sentences. This, in some ways, agrees with the Chomskyan idea of perfect grammatical sentences and ideal speakers.

In practice, it might also mean that since linguistic competence is only a component of communicative competence, in order for truck drivers to be able to communicate efficiently, they might compensate for their lack of linguistic competence by drawing on the skills pertaining to the other competences of the construct. Thus, it would be possible for them to communicate efficiently, even though their linguistic competence is limited. Apart from the language related components of communicative competence though, other competences and skills, e.g. intercultural competence and general communication skills can also help make communication more effective.

## 2.2 Intercultural communicative competence

Communicative competence allows people to engage in more or less efficient communication with other speakers. It focuses mostly on the speakers' proficiency in the language they use and quite a few language-related skills. In the case of Hungarian truck drivers who regularly work abroad, it can be predicted that the drivers will find themselves in situations in which they might not be proficient in the given language or might not speak it at all. Therefore, they might need to draw on another skill while working abroad, namely intercultural competence.

Intercultural communicative competence (abbreviated and referred to hereafter as ICC), is in Fantini's view "... the complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (2005, p.1). With the help of ICC the speaker is able to successfully negotiate and interact in another culture, too. This requires other types of knowledge than purely language related ones, such as language skills and cultural knowledge about the other speaker's country in order to facilitate understanding and not to hinder it, for instance by crossing boundaries, breaking taboos or by misusing pragmatic knowledge. According to Byram (1997), for efficient interaction between the parties the right attitudes (e.g. openness, respect, ability to relativize and "decentre" oneself), certain knowledge (of self and other, and of the interaction itself) and diverse skills, such as skills of interpreting and relating or skills of discovery and interaction, are needed.

ICC, based on the above, can mean both knowledge that enables truck drivers to communicate more efficiently with foreigners, i.e. knowledge about cultural do's and don'ts, and a certain set of skills which, even though the drivers do not speak the foreign language and know little about the culture, allows them to communicate by overcoming difficulties in language. Thus, ICC can either be envisioned as a layer above communicative competence or as a form of knowledge that is activated when truck drivers communicate with foreign people. The relevance of ICC is that it complements communicative competence in situations where truck drivers encounter foreigners and thus it might be another reason why truck drivers would be able to get along with limited linguistic competence as their limitations are balanced by many other skills and communication strategies (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997), including ICC.

According to Dörnyei and Scott (1997), these communication strategies can be numerous and – just as in the component of communicative competence which Canale and Swain (1980) called strategic competence – they include time-gaining strategies, message adjustment strategies and achievement strategies. These often operate as unconscious mechanisms and thus, just like ICC, they might behave as a set of skills. Time-gaining

strategies include, for instance, the use of fillers and hesitation devices, while message adjustment can consist in abandonment or reduction of the message or in its replacement. Finally, achievement strategies can be, e.g. paraphrasing, word coinage or approximation. What is important regarding the purpose of this work is that while some of these strategies demand a certain level of proficiency in the target language, e.g. paraphrasing or the use of fillers, other strategies are independent of the target and/or source language and can be applied by speakers with limited linguistic competence in intercultural situations. These non-linguistic and/or non-verbal means include miming, gesturing or imitating.

### 2.3 Expectations in communication

It has been detailed in the previous sections what tools (e.g. different competences and communication strategies) are available for the speaker in order to achieve the desired outcome. On the other hand, it has not been observed yet what kind of information the listener needs to contribute to the speaker's success. Grice (1975) has identified four criteria (maxims) that contribute to successful communication:

- (1) the maxim of quantity
- (2) the maxim of quality
- (3) the maxim of relevance
- (4) the maxim of manner

If both participants adhere to the constraints of these four maxims, then a conversation, in theory, is likely to be efficient. Each participant's contribution to the discussion will be relevant to achieving the desired outcome, they will be truthful to one another, they will try to solve the problems as quickly as possible and finally, the conveyed messages will be devoid of possible misunderstanding and thus the conversation will be the result of a successful cooperation. It is important to highlight that both participants have to abide by these unwritten rules since flouting any of these maxims will result in possible failure. What follows logically from this statement is that both partners strive for mutual understanding. Török (2000) illustrates the success of communication between speakers in a Venn-diagram. One of the circles includes the knowledge and comprehensible signs of Speaker A, and another includes those of Speaker B. Communication is only possible in sections where the two circles intersect, thus the need for finding 'a common ground' is constant. This is true for language, too. If one of the speakers is at a different linguistic/cultural level than the other one, both speakers have to approximate a common level where understanding is possible for both communicating partners.

These maxims also have practical implications. As the aim of communication is to achieve the goals as quickly as possible, certain features of language in communication will not be taken 'seriously' or they will not be considered as mistakes. Although in many cases the mediating language of truck drivers is German rather than English, very similar processes to English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) occur in all languages. Graddol (1997) and Jenkins (2006) claim that certain 'superficial' features of English are ignored in communication due to the fact that these do not play a deciding role in comprehension, such as the third person singular *-s*. As the loss of these features does not result in a loss of meaning in communication, the listener still understands the message and might even ignore the fact that the speaker has a very limited linguistic proficiency. Although Graddol and Jenkins made

these statements specifically about English, similar modifications/omissions are possible in other languages as well; thus these features are not ELF-specific.

The importance of the listener in this paper is justified by the fact that two of the competences of communicative competence are sociolinguistic and strategic competence, both of which involve the receiver of the truck driver's message. Truck drivers take into account what they are capable of saying (linguistic competence) and then, if necessary, will compensate by drawing on their sociolinguistic competence (i.e. assuming that the receiver will do everything s/he can to help) and strategic competence (i.e. a number of tools they apply to accompany the message to avoid misunderstanding, e.g. body language). By drawing on the listener, truck drivers can compensate for the lack of linguistic competence and thus they might get along in their daily routine with limited linguistic proficiency. In addition, discourse competence might also relate to the listener in a way, as both participants are in the same place and time, which allows for gaining further advantages from the situation.

## **2.4 Research questions**

The research questions are based on the literature reviewed above and on the researcher's own assumptions – based on experience – of truck drivers' foreign language proficiency. The following research questions were formulated to explore how Hungarian truck drivers get along with limited language proficiency in their daily work routine:

- (1) What features characterise the linguistic competence of the Hungarian truck drivers interviewed?
- (2) What situations do the Hungarian truck drivers interviewed come across and what difficulties do they encounter in their work regarding language use?
- (3) Do the Hungarian truck drivers interviewed consider their linguistic competence adequate to perform effectively in linguistically difficult situations?
- (4) What tools do the Hungarian truck drivers interviewed apply to enhance communication in cases when their linguistic proficiency does not suffice?

## **3 Research methods**

In order to answer the research questions, an interview study was conducted with twelve Hungarian truck drivers. The interview schedule focused on their work and intercultural communication experience.

### **3.1 Participants**

For the purposes of this small case study, twelve Hungarian truck drivers of a particular logistics company were interviewed. They were all males with an average age of approximately 55 (averaging 54.83, ranging from 39 to 68). They have all completed the 8 years of primary education in Hungary and most of them have received some kind of secondary education, but not all of them have taken the school leaving exam. On average they have spent 18.49 years as a truck driver, although values vary from 1 month to 34 years, thus in future research this value might be asked using months as units instead of years. The sampling was convenience-based and the only criterion for belonging to the sample was that

they all belong to the very same truck company, thus no data were excluded from the sample. Some interviews were conducted at the company's headquarters, while some of them were done while travelling along with the truck drivers in their own trucks as they were less nervous in their own habitual environment.

Figure 1 shows the age of the truck drivers and the amount of time they have spent as truck drivers, both using years as a unit. During the interview process, for the purposes of anonymity, truck drivers were coded with different Hungarian male names and the alphabetical order of the names shows the order of the interviews, too (András was interviewed first, Béla was second, etc.).

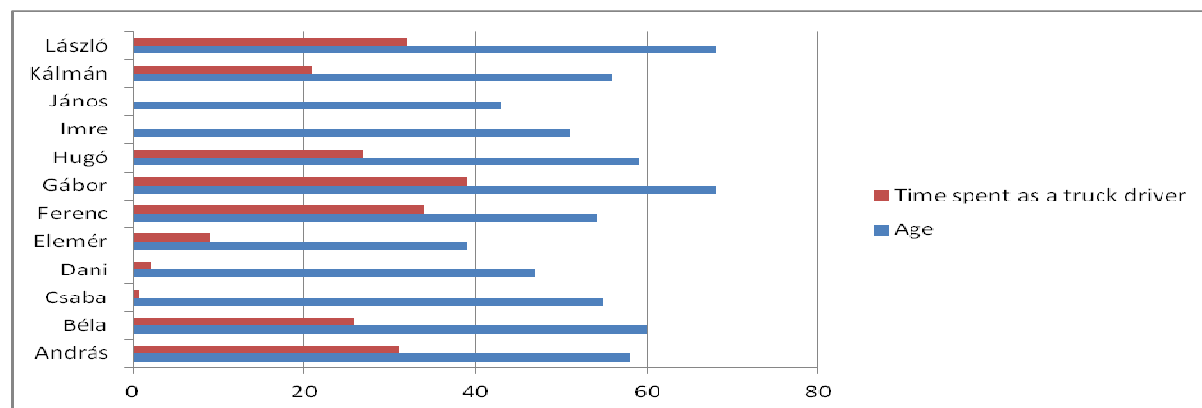


Figure 1: The time spent working as a truck driver and the age of the participants in the study

### 3.2 The Instrument

The instrument used for data gathering was a qualitative interview in Hungarian, containing 29 questions using the polite 'vous'-form in questioning, later modified to the casual 'tu'-form in order to accommodate to the usual greeting and questioning style of the drivers (for an English translation of the questions, see the Appendix). The instrument had been piloted before the interviews with both the HR department of the company and with a truck driver. After that the change of style was applied and as there were no female drivers at the company, the question about the sex of the participant was deleted. The interview questions were listed in the order of a natural conversation and they were based on the available literature in the topic and on the researcher's initial assumptions about the life of a truck driver.

### 3.3 Procedures

All the interviews were conducted in Hungarian on altogether four different occasions during the summer of 2012 at either the company's headquarters or while travelling with truck drivers in their daily work. All the participants were required to sign a research agreement which informed them about the aims of the study, the researcher, his aims with the research data and the results. Finally, they were asked to decide if they agreed to their interviews being recorded and if they would like to receive further feedback about the research. Only 2 participants agreed that their voice could be recorded; in the other cases detailed interview notes (including whole sentences) were taken by the researcher. An average interview lasted about 20-25 minutes and the detailed data were carefully noted down. As

mentioned above the drivers were then given letter codes with the alphabetical order matching the order of the interviews.

After the interviews had been conducted the data were entered into Microsoft Excel which allowed for classification and systematic comparison. This procedure also revealed the questions which might not be suitable and/or do not relate to the daily life of the truck drivers.

## 4 Results and discussion

In this section, data gained from the research are presented in order to answer the research questions. Firstly, the results of the inquiry into the linguistic competence of Hungarian truck drivers are described, then the problems Hungarian truck drivers face regularly are discussed. After that, the interviewed truck drivers' views on their linguistic competence to carry out their daily operations are detailed, and finally, their communication (verbal and non-verbal alike) tools to supplement communication are outlined. All these results are detailed in order to find an answer to how Hungarian truck drivers get along with limited linguistic competence.

### 4.1 The linguistic competence of Hungarian truck drivers

Rating the language skills of different language users/speakers is an important issue in the EFL profession. The CEFR is a framework that details each language level according to skills or tasks the given speaker can perform in the target language. Even though the truck drivers interviewed are not aware of this framework and the categories it details, they define their language skills very similarly, most of them described their language skills as sufficient for the tasks they want/need to achieve. Figure 2 details the answers of each truck driver in connection with the number of years spent as a truck driver.

| TRUCK DRIVER | YEARS of EXPERIENCE | LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE  |
|--------------|---------------------|---|
| András       | 31                  | Russian: intermediate, German and Italian: basic knowledge                                  |
| Béla         | 26                  | Can greet/thank in Slavic languages, English, Russian, French, Spanish, Italian and Swedish |
| Csaba        | 0.75                | a "little" German   |
| Dáni         | 2                   | "Only the necessary knowledge"  |
| Elemér       | 9                   | Understands English more than other languages   |
| Ferenc       | 34                  | "What is necessary for work"  |
| Gábor        | 39                  | Spent his childhood in Austrian area  |
| Hugó         | 27                  | German and Italian: everything necessary for shipping                                       |
| Imre         | 0.08                | Russian (passive), German: "with arms and legs"   |
| János        | 0.08                | "Just a little" in English, learnt Russian earlier  |
| Kálmán       | 21                  | "Can make himself understood in German" and "can read some words" in English                |
| László       | 32                  | German-Italian: intermediate, studied Russian for 7 years                                   |

Figure 2: The language knowledge and truck driving experience of each participant

As the results show, their description of their language skills is based on their intuitions and whether they consider the amount of knowledge they currently possess sufficient to carry out their daily routines. As no language test was applied to define what, for instance, the categories “intermediate” and “understand” mean, it is assumed that these categories indeed suffice for their daily activities.

Other questions in the interview (nos. 12, 14–17, 23, 27) aimed at finding out if the drivers are satisfied with the language knowledge they have and what kind of people they encounter during their daily operations. Three of them answered that they do not really talk to anyone during their journeys apart from collecting/delivering the goods, two of them answered that they only communicate if the other person is also Hungarian and another three answered that they only talk to people they could understand. The answers show that given that the other person is Hungarian or they can understand each other ‘well’, truck drivers do not face the possibility of encountering disappointments or dissatisfaction in connection with their language level.

#### **4.2 Problems Hungarian truck drivers face and situations they come across regularly**

The situations in which truck drivers are required to use a foreign language or any language at all are very limited. Three of the drivers claimed that they regularly encountered the police or customs officers although they also suggested that these occasions were not frequent since these “routine checks” were mostly performed at random. They also added that they did not expect or prepare for such situations since the task of a truck driver was to carry the goods according to the rules (e.g. the Highway Code) and if they did so, there was no reason why they should be stopped. The most frequent occasions when they are required to speak a foreign language are: being stopped by a police/customs officer, loading goods and asking for directions. None of the interviewees could give an example of when they had failed to perform these tasks due to linguistic difficulties and/or intercultural barriers.

The drivers were unable to point out difficulties they had encountered, although two of them mentioned that as they had not been stopped by the police before, they were expecting it to happen soon “according to the rule of large numbers”. On the other hand, when asked about their preparation for journeys abroad (questions no. 26 and 27), four of them mentioned that they bought the required amount of food, three claimed that they checked the customs and routes of the country and only two of them claimed that they also packed a dictionary for the journey. In comparison to common belief, truck drivers normally neither know nor are interested in the goods they carry as long as they appear on the CMR (travel warrant), which they can hand over to the official asking for it. All the situations mentioned by the truck drivers are collected and grouped in Figure 3. In each case some sample sentences that are used regularly by the truck drivers in the given situations are shown, too. These situations are not ranked or grouped according to the frequency with which they are encountered.



| MAIN AREA                           | SITUATIONS   | SAMPLE SENTENCES  |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| Directions                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asking for / checking directions</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where is the gas station?</li> <li>• Where can I buy a highway pass?</li> <li>• Where is the ‘ring’?</li> </ul>  |
| Loading                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Checking the goods</li> <li>• Loading</li> <li>• Overweight</li> <li>• Packing</li> <li>• Introduction</li> </ul>                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the goods?</li> <li>• Where can I load?</li> <li>• How much does it weigh?</li> <li>• Is it fragile?</li> <li>• I am a truck driver from... [company].</li> </ul> |
| Life on the road                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Necessary goods</li> <li>• Actions to do</li> <li>• Problems to be solved</li> <li>• Meeting ‘colleagues from other companies’</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where can I buy food?</li> <li>• Where can I take a shower?</li> <li>• Where can I rest?</li> <li>• I have a flat tire, can you help me?</li> </ul>                        |
| Optional areas: stopped by officers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The police</li> <li>• Customs</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can I check the tachograph?</li> <li>• Where is the CMR?</li> </ul>  |

Figure 3: Most frequent situations in the life of a truck driver grouped according to the main areas they relate to

### 4.3 Adequate linguistic competence

Questions 14–22 aimed to explore whether there are situations in which the truck drivers’ current language knowledge is insufficient and in connection with this, how they solve and/or prepare for these situations in the future. According to the drivers, they mostly stop and might get out of the truck for the break they are required to make every 4.5 hours. During this stop they sometimes shop by pointing to the required goods (six drivers). According to them they are not required to perform ‘difficult’ language tasks (nine drivers), only two of them had some misunderstanding, both with the French (one when dealing with a flat tire and the other one at the shipment site). When asked about disappointments or failures due to communication/language breakdown none of them could give an example; nor could any of them detail a scene in which they failed to communicate with another person or failed to achieve a desired outcome. Thus, based on the interviews, it can be claimed that the interviewed truck drivers believe that their language proficiency is adequate to their needs.

### 4.4 Tools to supplement communication

As the following extracts show, the drivers interviewed seem to have a very analytical approach to language knowledge, i.e., they look at the “outcome” of certain utterances as the sum of all the parts of the utterances. They can only combine previously known items to create new utterances. According to Mey (1993), this rules out the possibility of pragmatic knowledge, as the analytical analysis of words and linguistic structures does not take into consideration the socially accepted language forms and functions. The following situation exemplifies this approach (as told by András):

Some time ago... approximately 10 years ago, a very rich man decided that the funeral of his brother should take place in Germany and not in Hungary as the family was originally

from Germany. Thus, he arranged for all the flowers and equipment and the coffin, too to be delivered by one of the company's trucks. The driver of this truck was a very young truck driver, just having finished the 'four-handed wheel training' (the initial induction period supervised by a mentor) and although he had the CMR ready he had forgotten to look up the word 'coffin', so when a German police officer stopped him he did not know how to respond to the question "What are the goods?". He only spoke little German but knew the word 'container' and also assumed that if there is somebody dead in the 'container', then the good he is delivering can be nothing else but a \*'"Tot (German for dead) container". Of course, the police officer opened up the trunk of the truck and nearly arrested the driver for killing the man.

This also exemplifies the phenomenon that the given truck driver looks at language as the sum of building blocks where any combination is acceptable and understandable by his conversation partners. However, the next example shows this in even greater depth. In this conversation Driver Dani is answering question no. 24/a in German as he claimed this is his 'stronger' language, a language in which he is capable of performing the necessary actions (see Figure 3).

Interviewer: How would you say very politely that after you paid the bill at the gas station, the teller forgot to give you a bill? How would you signal the problem and ask for a bill very politely?

Dani: ... Mmm... (approximately 2 minutes thinking)... Ticket problem, bitte [please].

Interviewer: Okay, thank you. Can you try to be a bit more polite?

Dani: Of course... (1 minute passing)... Ticket problem, bitte... bitte... [please... please...]

The building block-effect or this analytical approach prevails in this situation, as not only does the truck driver use 'bitte' as a word for asking for something, he is aware of the fact that 'bitte' also means 'please' in German, thus he assumes that if he asks for something politely, then the required utterance is 'bitte, bitte'. This shows that he is using a content word to perform a pragmatic action, as well as other what do you mean by normal? actions in the target language, too.

So far, two examples have been given of simplification/strategic competence to convey the desired message: in the former extract it was an analytical lexical approach while in the latter one a pragmatic solution that were applied. The next example by Driver Béla shows a syntactic solution:

Interviewer: How would you say in English "I do not speak English"?

Béla: \*No speak English.

This shows that the driver is aware of the meanings of the separate words, where 'no' means a negation, 'speak' means 'talk' and English is the language. However, despite all this knowledge, he does not use the correct negative form (i.e. do not).

The final type of simplifying the message exemplified here is the phonological simplification (although it has been present in all the other examples, as well). For this type, two examples are shown as illustrations, one in German and the other one in English, both for situation 24/e:

Béla: \*Schuldi'bitte...

Dani: Mo-ment, please.

In the former example, Béla does not pronounce the whole word for "Entschuldigung" [Excuse me] but omits the first part of the word and 'swallows' the ending in order to be able

to clip it with the following word ‘bitte’. This not only shows the incorrect pronunciation on the driver’s part but supposes that he regularly hears these two words joined together in fast speech, thus he assumes that due to their contraction and constant appearance together they are one word. Dani exhibits Hungarian intonation and pronunciation, too, which suggests that the pronunciation of individual words or expressions does not matter as long as the intent of the speaker is clear.

When truck drivers were asked where and how they acquired foreign languages there seemed to be an agreement that language skills simply “stick to somebody” (Béla and Ferenc), and they are acquired through “living through the situation” (Gábor and Hugó), thus the situation provides a hands-on approach to learning new phrases or new building blocks. This type of learning is called tactile learning (Lightbown & Spada, 1993), similar to task-based learning, and as the drivers all agreed that learning happens the most easily, the fastest and the most efficiently in this way, it seems to be their preferred mode of learning or “learning style” (Dörnyei & Cohen, 2002, p.9). Although Littlewood (1984) suggests that language learners develop differently, it seems that the necessary linguistic items and the profession of the individuals play important roles in the process.

When drivers face a communication breakdown or feel that “something is not working well”, they apply different strategies to overcome these difficulties and strive for mutual understanding. Most of them (six drivers) try conveying the message once again and, if this fails, they try to use different words. The following step is intense gesturing and the final solution is normally drawing (see Figure 4). The other six drivers did not respond to the question, claiming that they are unable to recall any situations where communication broke down.

| <b>TRUCK DRIVER</b> | <b>IF I AM NOT UNDERSTOOD, I...</b>                            |
|---------------------|--|
| András              | “use gestures and try to describe [it].”                       |
| Béla                | “try [to say it] again with gestures.”                         |
| Dani                | “show it and use my arms and legs [as gesturing devices].”     |
| Elemér              | “repeat it, make gestures and “dance [intense body language].” |
| Ferenc              | “show it, mime it, dance it.”                                  |
| Hugó                | “make gestures.”   |

Figure 4: Communication strategies used to complement messages in cases where they are not understood at first

## **5 Main findings, limitations and recommendations for future research**

### **5.1 Summary of the main findings**

This small-scale qualitative research aimed to explore how Hungarian truck drivers get along with limited linguistic competence when driving abroad. In order to find an answer to this question, it was investigated what kind of linguistic competence they have in foreign languages, in what situations they are required to communicate, whether they consider their linguistic competence adequate for their daily needs and finally, and what strategies and tools they draw on should their linguistic competence prove to be insufficient. The findings indicate that truck drivers measure their foreign language skills against the tasks they are required to perform and many of them believe their foreign language proficiency to be sufficient for

carrying out their daily work. That their linguistic competence is sufficient to their needs, despite its relatively low level as described by the CEFR, might be due to the fact that they encounter the same situations regularly, thus they only rarely encounter linguistically new situations, where their situation-based linguistic competence might prove to be inadequate. In the light of these pieces of information, they do believe that their linguistic competence is adequate to their job. Last but not least, in previously avoided or in known situations where their linguistic competence fails for some reason, they apply a number of communication strategies, ranging from circumscribing through body language to drawing (see Figure 4), in order to compensate for their linguistic competence.

As the results of this study indicate, it is possible for Hungarian truck drivers to get along with limited linguistic competence, as other competences and communication strategies compensate for their linguistic competence, or rather, supplement it in situations in which it does not suffice. It also needs to be highlighted that when the expression “sufficient” is used for the language proficiency of truck drivers, it means that they are able to carry out their tasks with its help, i.e. the tasks are used as benchmarks for proficiency. On the other hand, when it is suggested that their proficiency is “limited”, it refers to the comparison with using a proficient/native speaker as a criterion. Also, as shown above, their language knowledge seems to be built up of certain blocks or linguistic structures acquired in different situations, and thus experience plays a role in their communicative competence: the more situations drivers take part in the more linguistic competence they gain, as they can prepare for these predictable situations. It might also mean that the more experienced drivers actually require a smaller set of tools to compensate for linguistic competence, as their linguistic competence is more advanced due to their being more experienced in various situations. Although these suggestions are simplified and restricted to the number of participants, further research should be carried out in order to find answers to these questions.

This paper also raises the issue of how powerfully communication strategies and skills can compensate for the lack of linguistic competence and of whether they are part of language proficiency or not. The reason why this question is important is that although ICC and communicative competence both help the speaker to communicate efficiently, they are reasonably difficult to teach and even more difficult to measure. Also, most of these skills are part of the individual differences present among speakers. According to Byram (1997), ICC is made up of various attitudes (e.g. openness, flexibility, readiness to adjust, etc.), knowledge and diverse skills. All the examples in this study, for instance creative linguistic solutions or the intense use of body language, are part of not only ICC, but are also deeply embedded in personality. This indicates that language, communication and intercultural training as well as personality development are inextricably related and should therefore be given space in foreign language education.

The relevance of the findings of this paper does not only lie in language teaching. The language and communication training of truck drivers can be just as successful and rewarding as the training of people in other jobs and professions. However, their training is also important from the point of view of business. The job of a Hungarian truck driver is among the highest ranked jobs in terms of labour turnover. Although there are numerous reasons for this, with further training, their jobs could be made easier and by providing customized language workshops, the drivers could engage in more situations in the future where they could rely on their communicative competence and ICC, such as networking and socializing with other truck drivers. Thus, the number of situations in which they engage actively and use language might increase, giving them more confidence and higher job satisfaction.

## 5.2 Limitations of the study and recommendations for further work

The current study is based on the results of a small-scale project. Consequently, because of its small-scale nature, it is not representative of Hungarian truck drivers. Furthermore, the sampling was based on convenience and no other criteria were employed in participant selection apart from being an employee of the same company. Therefore, further empirical research is needed either involving a larger sample size or by taking into account the individual differences of the truck drivers. Another limitation of this study is that it is based only on the interviews conducted and no research has been carried out to objectively measure the foreign language skills of the truck drivers. It should also be noted that as the participants included truck drivers with varied experience, the results cannot be generalized either for experienced or inexperienced truck drivers. Longitudinal studies are necessary to observe how foreign language skills are acquired and in what order to find out how experience results in linguistic competence in particular, and/or communicative competence in general. Finally, it would be of particular interest to investigate whether the situations Hungarian truck drivers encounter are specific to this company only, or if they occur in the work of all truck drivers in Europe.

*Proofread for the use of English: Christopher Ryan, ELTE BTK, Budapest.*

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## APPENDIX

### The English translation of the interview schedule

- (1) How old are you?
- (2) What is the highest level of education you have finished/attended?
- (3) How long have you been a truck driver? How long have you worked for this company?
- (4) Which European countries have you not visited before?
- (5) Do you speak any other language than Hungarian (if yes, how would you define your language skills?), or would you like to learn any?
- (6) Why did you become a truck driver?
- (7) What do people think about your job? How do they react when they learn that you are a truck driver?
- (8) If you were to introduce Hungary to another person (a tourist, another truck driver or foreign partner), what would you say about us, Hungarians?
- (9) Which countries do you usually go through? How would you describe these countries and the inhabitants?
- (10) Where are you required to stop and where else do you usually stop?
- (11) Which languages do you encounter most often in your daily work?
- (12) When you are abroad, who do you talk to? Who do you have to communicate with? Who do/would you talk in your free time or to kill time while you have to wait?
- (13) What kinds of needs/action make you stop?
- (14) I assume at customs or gas stations, etc. it is necessary to communicate. What needs did you have, what did you want to achieve besides the basic needs (e.g. filling up the tank)? Can you recall any situation where you had 'complex' or 'difficult' needs?
- (15) Could you achieve this goal? Did you get the desired item/product?
- (16) Have you experienced a situation in which your efforts failed?
- (17) Did you give up or did you try again? (How did you try again?)
- (18) Later on when you faced a similar situation, could you anticipate and prepare for that situation?
- (19) When you go into a place asking for something or trying to converse, how do you address people?

- (20) In which situation are you addressed by others? How are you addressed?
- (21) If you were to talk to a foreign person, how would you address them for instance at a gas station? Or beside the road asking for help? How would you initiate conversation? How do you talk to your foreign 'colleagues'?
- (22) Starting with collecting the cargo and ending when you deliver it, what kind of people do you talk to/encounter?
- (23) Has there been a situation or person in your career who you have greatly misunderstood or had difficulties talking with?
- (24) What would you say in the next five situations?
- (a) You were not given a receipt for the fuel, ask for one politely.
  - (b) You would like to ask for coffee.
  - (c) You have delivered the goods to your partner.
  - (d) A foreigner asks you what your job is and what your company deals with.
  - (e) The police ask for your documents, but you need some time to find them in the back of the truck.
- (25) If someone does not understand what you say, what do you do? (E.g. do you raise your voice, do you use gestures?)
- (26) If you know in advance where you will go next, do you prepare somehow? E.g. GPS, detours, resting places, gas stations or some sentences in a foreign language
- (27) How does your company help you prepare for these journeys? Do you get all the help you need? Is there anything in this area you are dissatisfied with?
- (28) Can you recall a situation in which you were proud of communicating very efficiently with a foreigner/you were able to solve some 'more difficult' tasks using a foreign language?
- (29) How are Hungarians different from other people (for instance, volume, body language, being friendly, etc.)?

Thank you for your help!