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# Foreign language in the workplace: linguistic requirements in the Greek public administration sector

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## Abstract

Foreign language is an everyday necessity of every European citizen, since it is essential for the communication and adaptation to contemporary needs in education, workplace and everyday life. It is important that people, who have learned a foreign language, can put it into use in their daily communication. In this article, we intent to focus on the discussion pertaining to the foreign language use in the workplace and especially in the Greek Public Administration Sector. Our intention is to present and discuss the results of a study concerning the linguistic and intercultural skills needed in the working environment of concrete in the broader and narrower range of the Greek public sector. The research took place in the period from October to November 2010 in various areas of public services in the geographic area of Epirus (north-western Greece). It focuses on the language and intercultural skills that are required both for effective communication in a foreign language, as well as the execution of officer duties. Our main aim is to contribute to the academic discussion of defining the fields as well as the micro-skills that are necessary for the efficient execution of specific professional functions.

**Keywords:** Communicative competence, Foreign Language Use, Intercultural skills, Greek Public Administration Sector

## 1 Introduction

### *Foreign Language learning in the context of the European language policy*

The Council of Europe since its establishment pointed towards a new direction in the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Europe. The framework of this new direction was provided by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching and assessment* (CEFR). Although the CEFR describes in detail the various goals associated with the fields of learning, teaching and assessment, the most important goal for the Council of Europe seems to be a larger cultural understanding among the member states of the European Union (Council of Europe 2001:1). The concept of Europe language policy is based on three basic principles, which are outlined briefly in what follows (Council of Europe 2001: 2):

The linguistic diversity of Europe is to be transformed from a barrier of communication into a source of mutual enrichment and mutual understanding.

It is only through a better knowledge of European modern languages that it will be possible to facilitate communication and interaction among Europeans of different mother tongues in order to promote European mobility, mutual understanding and co-operation, and overcome prejudice and discrimination.

The development of educational policy principles in language learning. Member states can achieve greater convergence of policies at European level through agreements on continuous cooperation and coordination.

For the implementation of these principles the Committee of Ministers called member state governments to cooperation at national and international level; organizations of different constitutions in the field of languages and learning would promote and provide an effective European system of mutual exchange of information in all aspects of language teaching what was planned to be a necessary component in language learning research (Council of Europe 2001:2). The language policy must contain and take into consideration the totality of social action of groups and individuals. Kremnitz at this point differentiated between explicit and implicit language policy. He stressed that while first languages and their use have an effect, the implicit language policy concentrates on other fields that are the object of their actions, and have yet both linguistic and cultural impacts (Kremnitz 1994:80).

The action-oriented approach of the CEFR (*Common European Framework of Reference*) suggests that in future due to the growing mobility within Europe various forms of employment and corresponding definitions will arise. The reasons for which one is dealing with a language can be quite different. A motive for language learning could be the study content, the language certificate for professional qualification, or the attractiveness of education in a foreign language speaking environment. In this context, according to the rationale of the Council of Europe thinking, it is important, that the communicative and learning activities are related to the drives, motivations and interests of learners (Council of Europe 2001:51).

Central to the *Common European Framework of Reference* are the different types of skills that can enable a learner to act communicatively. The tools for the activation of partial, complete or even individual language competence that can proceed receptive, productive, interactive or spoken, consisting of general skills, communication skills, as well as different strategies all together (Council of Europe 2001:9). This approach can be regarded as descriptive, as it represents what is needed to think about set aims, content and the required methods, as well as about their realization (Glaboniat/Müller 2006:15). The set tasks range from a variety of individual linguistic sub-skills up to a "complete" language proficiency. Certain contexts and circumstances often require only partial competences, which are activated by means of communicative language activities.

In the action-oriented approach of the *Common European Framework of Reference*, the learner is viewed as a social actor, who has to deal with communicative tasks (not only language tasks) as a part of the society (Council of Europe 2001:9).

The Council of Europe also aims at ensuring that the Member States are equipped with the necessary communication skills to interact with each other. This could lead to an increased mobility in the professional field within Europe, which "involves the tendency in itself to bring the social function distributions in motion and thus in the longer term the collective linguistic competence" (Kremnitz 1994:74). In this context Funk defined the vocational foreign language teaching as "a pragmatic, learner-and needs-orienting language teaching". A distinction is made between pre-vocational, concomitant and professional qualification oriented language teaching. The goals of these different subcategories vary, ranging from "the general preparation for the language requirements of occupations," about "the (better) deal with the current linguistic requirements of the profession" to the creation of "legal requirements for a professional degree"(Funk 2007:175).

In addition Kremnitz places particular emphasis on the fact that "the best and most symmetrical official and institutional language policy is worthless without its social realization that they can only be taken seriously if it is accepted and practiced by the respective companies " (Kremnitz 1994:82).

## **2 Foreign language in the workplace**

English as an international language is almost essential for every European citizen, as it is the language of international communication with almost all countries. However, knowledge of English alone is not considered adequate (European Commission, 2011; Leckey, 2010). German, French, Russian and other languages are in many domains important and therefore, we understand that many European citizens need to have language skills in more than one language in order to be competitive in the international professional environment.

As mentioned by Mouzakis, human social organization, the flow of knowledge and information, the modernized and increased productivity, the employment and labor mobility, services, culture and socio-economic development are in general associated with education and human resources cultivation. At the same time, the various developments in the public sector, and the creation of a multicultural society signal the need for further training and spiritual development of human resources (Mouzakis 2006:6). Karalis contends that, the term "need" can be defined in two ways, each corresponding to a different approach. According to the first approach, need is defined as "the distance between an existing situation and a desired pattern, i.e. the deficit qualifications deemed necessary for performing a particular task or having equal participation in dimensions of social life. The second approach defines need as "the interest and motivation one has for his participation in an educational process - and that may be the result of subjective estimates." Therefore, the educational needs are associated with the realization on the part of men's lack of knowledge, abilities and skills. These needs are translated by adult learners into expected learning outcomes when they attend a training program and, in this case, a program for learning foreign languages (Karalis 2005:16).

The Council of Europe helps Member States to apply new language programs and motivates further innovation in language teaching and learning, a prerequisite for the promotion of cooperation between educational institutions in different European countries. In this direction we believe that it is important to consider the language needs in various fields, an analysis which could lead to the creation of new language programs. Therefore, in this paper we decided to investigate the linguistic needs in a domain with specific language and communication demands, that of the field of public administration.

## **3 The aim of the Research**

The main aim of this research is to determine the foreign language needs that are presented in the Greek public administration sector. In particular this research targets the following: the micro skills which are required in a foreign language in various public positions; the channels by which civil servants have contacts and communicate in the context of their work; the intercultural skills that are needed; the four main language skills; the necessity of certificates in foreign languages.

## **4 Data collection procedure and synthesis**

This research was conducted in the period October-November 2010 in several public services in the geographical region of Epirus, Greece. The area was chosen for reasons that have to do with time limitations. An expansion in parts in the rest of Greece would require much more time than what available. Totally 113 civil servants who were working in various public services (executive and low-level servants) completed the questionnaires of the present research. The sample was selected by the method of random sample and the number was deemed sufficient for an indicative medium-scale survey.

Data was collected by means of a questionnaire which includes parts of another questionnaire used in a similar research (Agorastos, Koiliari, Kontouli, Papageorgiou, Hatsitheodorou, 2009). The remaining part of the questionnaire was designed by the researchers for the purposes of the current experiment. The questionnaire consisted of five closed type and one open type questions. In one of the closed-ended questions (Question 5) were asked a justification too, which was given in free form. For the analysis of the data in this case as in the open-ended Question 6 the justifications/ reasons provided by the participants needed to be categorized. Then the answers were entered into a database and finally analysed by means of the Excel tool.

## 5 Data analysis

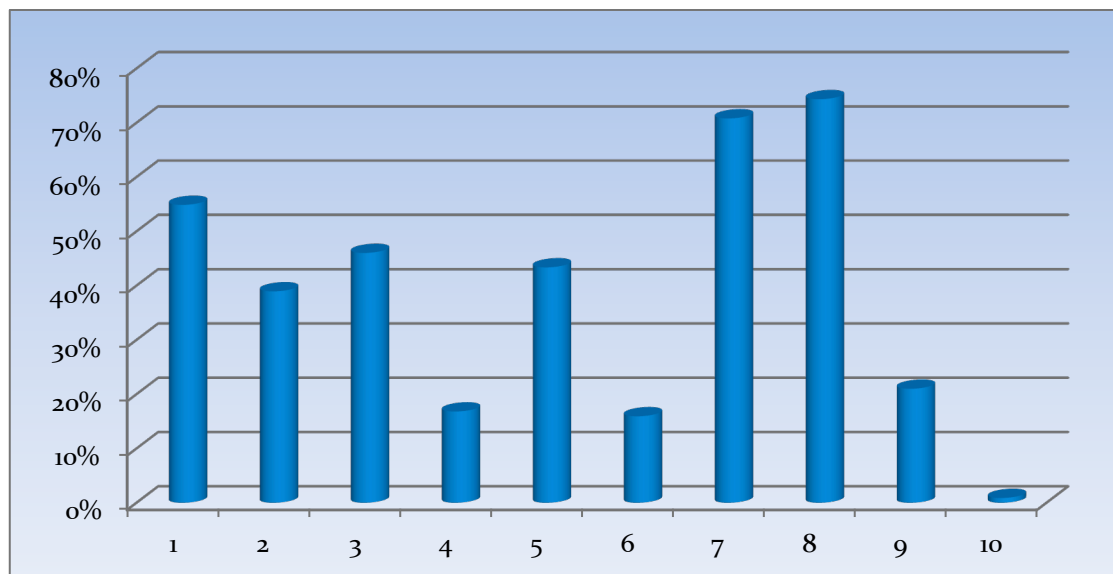
The seven tables that follow summarize the results which are obtained from the statistical analysis of the data. Particularly important for this investigation are the information which are recorded in the first three tables and are associated with the macro-mikroskills in a foreign language which a civil servant must have so that s/he is able to meet his/her job requirements effectively.

Table 1 and chart 1 present the results concerning oral communication (Question 1).

*Table 1: Oral Communication*

No	Micro skills	Answers	%
1	Presentation of different topics	62	54.87%
2	Realisations (trade and technical language)	44	38.94%
3	Telephone customer advisory service	52	46.02%
4	Translation	19	16.81%
5	Mediation of information from one language to another	49	43.36%
6	Job Applications	18	15.93%
7	Supply of Services / Understanding and Implementing orders	80	70.80%
8	Exchange of Information	84	74.34%
9	Distribution of Products	24	21%
10	Other	1	0.88%

*Chart 1: Oral Communication*



As we can see from the table and the chart above, as regards oral communication "Exchange of Information", "Supply of Services/Understanding and Implementing orders" and "Presentation of different topics" are the most frequent micro skills. Probably, this is based on various pragmatic factors of language use. It can be illustrated as follows (Storch 2008:217):

Communication Partner

Communication situation

Theme Framework

Communication form

Linguistic means

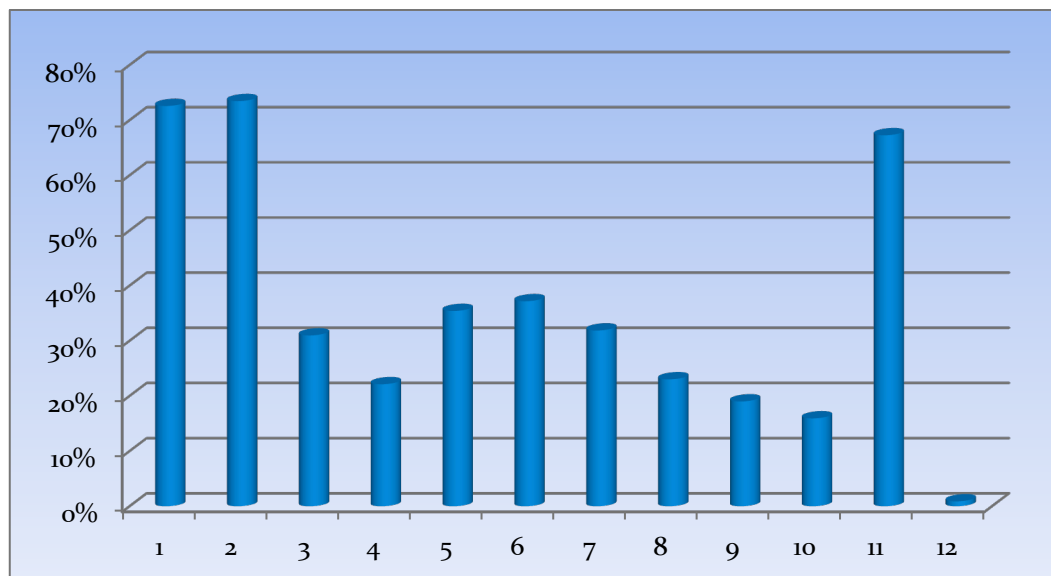
The oral communication or concrete linguistic action is, therefore, a particular constellation of these pragmatic but also paralinguistic and non-verbal factors.

The following table (Table 2) and chart (chart 2) present the results of the answers related to written communication.

*Table 2: Written Communication*

Number	Micro skills	Answers	%
1	Writing and handling of correspondence	82	72.57%
2	Writing and handling of E-Mails	83	73.45%
3	Language revision concerning the language	35	30.97%
4	Translation and subtitling	25	22.12%
5	Summary of i.e. technical documents	40	35.40%
6	Writing of essays, presentations and others	42	37.17%
7	Writing of notes	36	31.86%
8	Labels/Notes/Data	26	23.01%
9	Web page construction	22	19%
10	Web page editing	18	15.93%
11	Managing and Using Databases	76	67.26%
12	Others	1	0.88%

*Chart 2: Written communication*



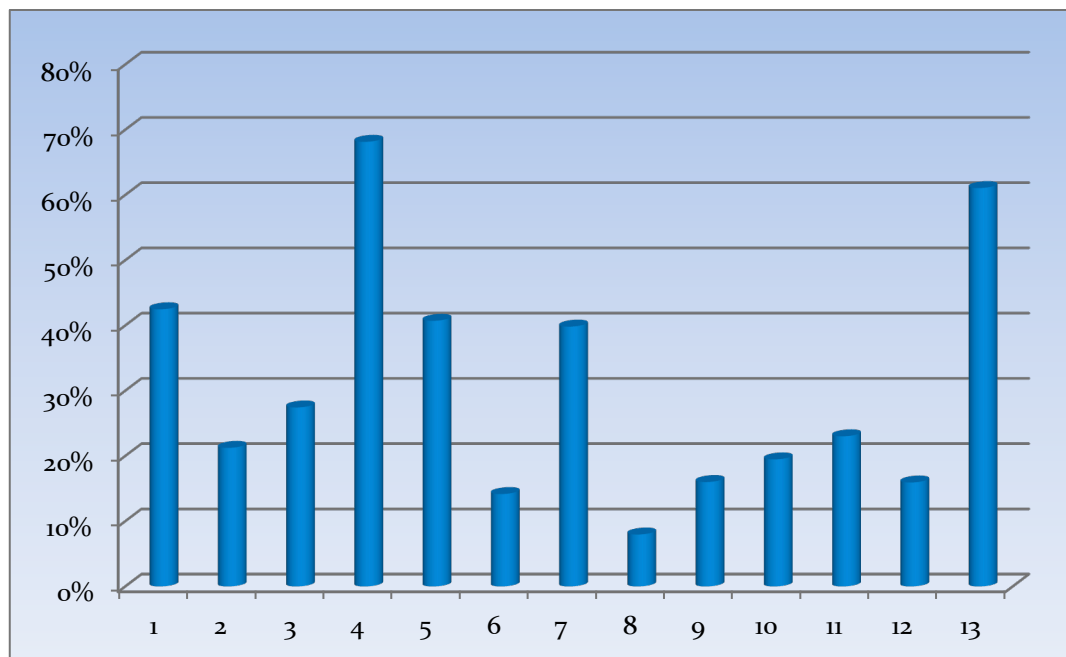
These findings indicate that that the micro-skills "*Writing and handling of E-Mails*", "*Writing and handling of correspondence*" and "*Managing and Using Databases*" play a prominent role. Only further below appear in the list, the writing productive activities "*Writing of essays, presentations and others*", "*Summary of i.e. Technical documents*" and "*Writing of notes*". All these micro skills describe the individual components that should lead to process-oriented writing. Successful written communication can only occur only if situations, themes, and specific addressee as well as text-functional aspects are taken into account (Storch 2008:248).

In what follows (table 3, chart 3) we will proceed to the results from the question concerning the communication channels that the employments need in their field of work.

Table 3: Channels

Number	Channels	Answers	%
1	Books	48	42.48%
2	Magazines	24	21.24%
3	Newspapers	31	27.43%
4	Instructions	77	68.14%
5	Information and description sheets	46	40.71%
6	Advertisement material	16	14.16%
7	Public emblems and announcements	45	39.82%
8	Shields in supermarkets, shops and other markets	9	7.96%
9	Product packages and labels	18	16%
10	Tickets/ cards	22	19.47%
11	Forms and questionnaires	26	23.01%
12	Dictionaries (monolingual and bilingual) and terminology dictionaries	18	15.93%
13	Databases (News, general information etc.).	69	61.06%

Chart 3: Channels



The channels include texts. The Common European Framework of Reference uses the term “text” to refer to all language items that language learners receive, produce or replace "(Council of Europe 2001:95). In this context, observing the scores in Table 3 and chart 3, we can emphasize that the channels from which most of the texts in the field of work are coming from are *instructions, databases, books, information-description sheets and public emblems and announcements*. All other channels follow by quite a difference with rates that not exceed 30%.

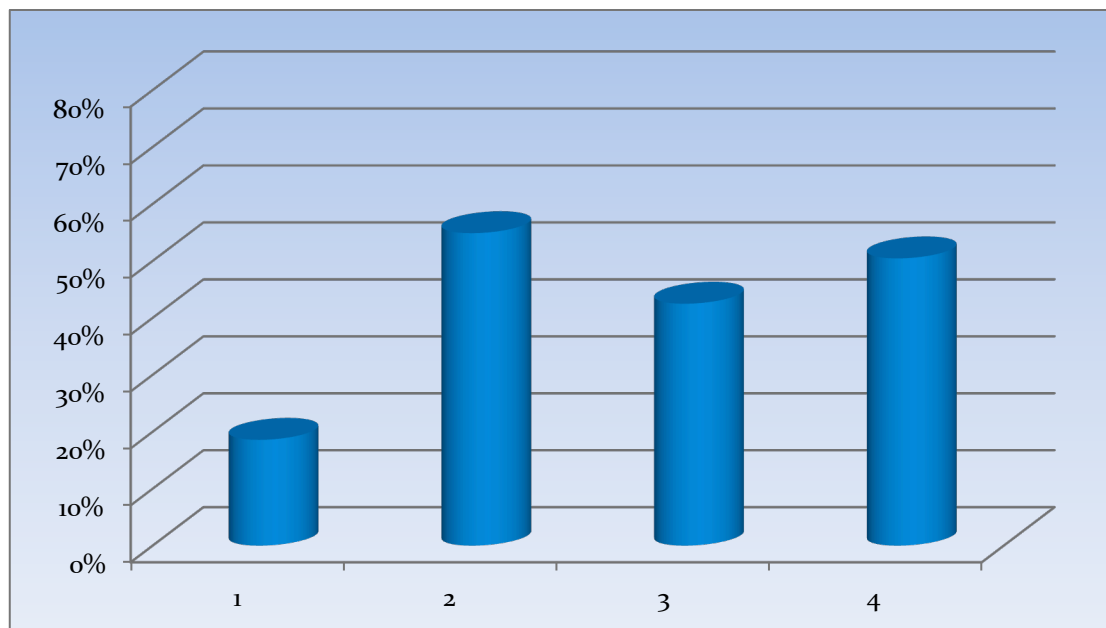
Table 4 and chart 4, below, correspond to the answers for the third question of the questionnaire, which focuses on intercultural competence. This aspect receives special importance by the Council of Europe Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. The options, which were offered as possible answers to the *civil servants in this question*, were described under the chapter 5.1.2.2 (Council of Europe 2001:104).

Table 4: Intercultural Communication

No	Intercultural competences	Answers	%
1	The ability to combine the source culture with the foreign culture	21	18.58%
2	Cultural sensibility and the ability to identify and use a number of different strategies in order to communicate with members of other cultures	62	54.87%
3	The ability to act as cultural mediator between the own and the foreign culture and handle critical incidents effectively	48	42.48%
4	The ability to overcome stereotypical relations	57	50.44%

Chart 4: Intercultural communication





The above analysis yielded that the two intercultural skills that stand out are “*Cultural sensibility and the ability to identify and use a number of different strategies in order to communicate with members of other cultures*” and “*The ability to overcome stereotypical relations*”. In the third place with a small difference is “*The ability to act as cultural mediator between the own and the foreign culture and handle critical incidents effectively*” while in the last place with enough distance from the others, follows “*The ability to combine the source culture with the foreign culture.*” skill.

A possible explanation for this result could be that the ability to communicate directly with people from other cultural backgrounds and identities is seen both in everyday life and at work as a desirable goal (it is therefore in the *public administration* sector communication the most important ability) in the sense of a real and tangible for the individual action.

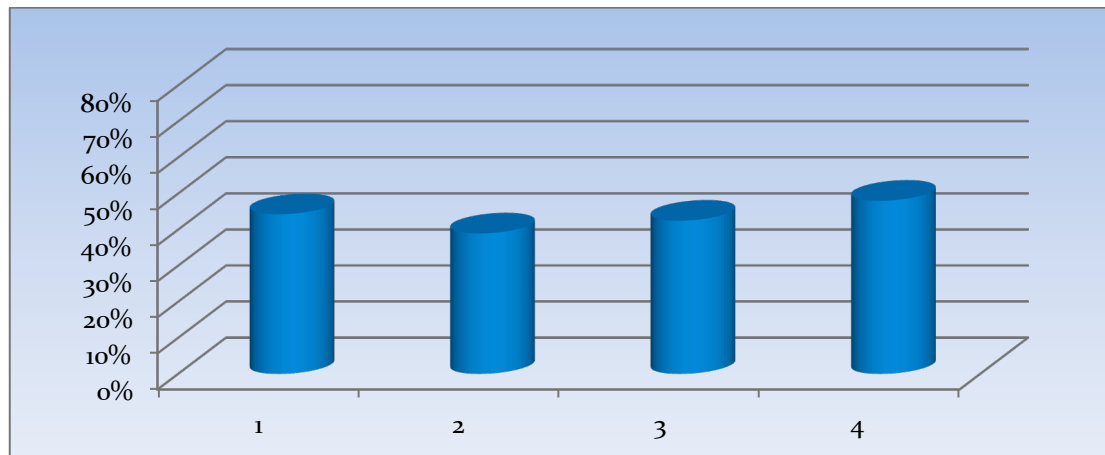
In the literature there are various terms for communication, starting with the sense of language, or in other words of language competences towards communicative competence. In any case, according to Edmonson & House (1993:267) the fundamental element knowledge is divided into implicit and explicit knowledge or declarative and procedural knowledge. While declarative knowledge represents a static, linguistic knowledge on the various linguistic levels of description, procedural knowledge implies various speech receptions, production and interaction processes, such as communication strategies (Edmonson & House 1993:270). The Council of Europe (Common European Framework 2001:105) defines procedural knowledge as the combination of practical and intercultural skills. According to the Framework two other factors complete the general competencies: the personality-related skills and the ability to learn. The conditions of communicative competence as defined and required in the communicative approach by the Framework are listed in the questionnaire in the form of the four language skills, as shown in the following table (Table 5). It should be noted that in the options mediation was not included, since it was believed that as a term it may complicate the participants of the survey.

Table 5: Language skills

Number	Language Competence	Answers	%
1	Oral communication	50	44.25%

2	Written communication	50	44.25%
3	Listening	44	38.94%
4	Reading	48	42.48%

Chart 5: Language skills



The Table 5 and Chart 5 above show that oral communication, written communication, listening comprehension, and reading comprehension seem to be equally necessary in the workplace, according to the *civil servants' responses*.

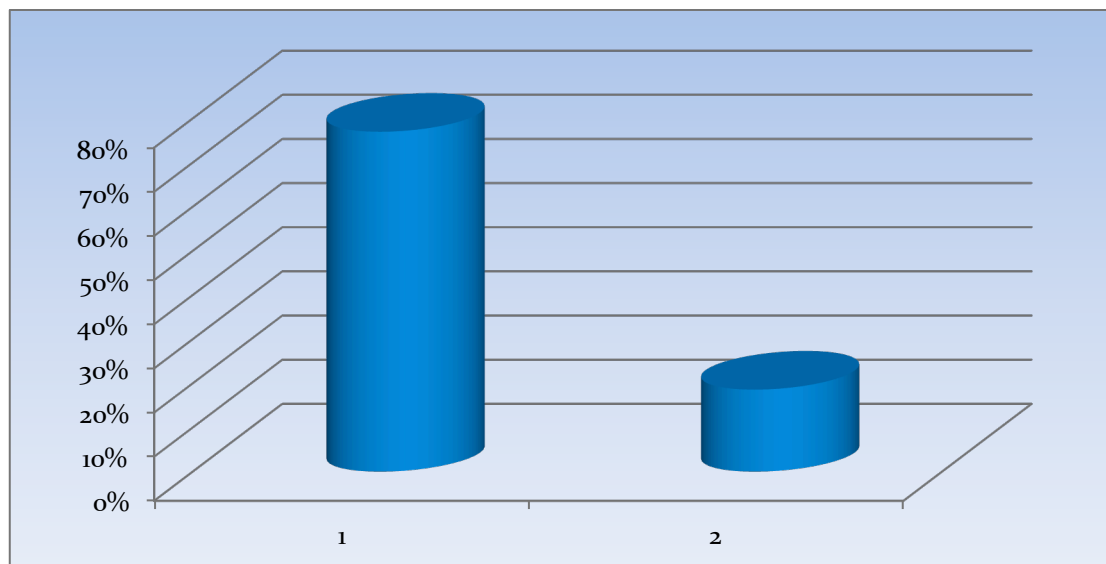
Of particular interest for this research are the last two tables (question 5-Table 6a, 6b) which focus on exploring the need for a foreign language certification on particular skills related to the workplace when working for a government institution. It should be noted that there is not currently such an opportunity in Greece since the National Certificate of Language Proficiency that is offered since 2003 regards refers to and tests general language skills and does not focus on language skills required in the workplace. Conversely, in countries such as Germany such certifications already exist.<sup>1</sup>

Table 6a: Certification

Number	Certification	Answers	%
1	Yes	87	76.99%
2	No	21	18.58%

Chart 6: Certification

<sup>1</sup> In Germany there is the certification : "Deutsch für den Beruf"



The main finding derived from table 6a and chart 6a is that the vast majority of the participants are positive towards the possibility of having a state certification of foreign languages for business purposes.

*Table 6b: Job orientated language certification*

Answers	Description	Number
1	Necessary for a better work result	14
2	Higher qualification	7
3	State obligation/ no financial burden for the citizens	10
4	Motivation for language acquisition	2
5	Other (pro)	5
6	Not necessary	4
7	Sonstiges (contra)	

In question 5 was a justification requested too. However, it is notable that only a small number of *civil servants* have justified the positive or negative answer (45 out of 113 servants). In the above Table 6b, the first five justifications refer to "Yes" and the last two to "No". Those who argue for a career-oriented language certification from a state institution are convinced that the staff would be thereby more productive. In second place follows the rationale that the language certification is among the duties of the state, and there must not be a financial burden for the citizens. As a third justification follows the fact that a certification is an additional qualification while in the last place appears the statement that the certification provides motivation for language acquisition. Finally 5 people gave an answer that does not belong to any of the above categories. Conversely, those who oppose to the certification and justify their position, consider that this is not necessary in the Greek public services sector since there are only few foreign documents which must be deal with.

## 7 Conclusions

While there are already many studies on language needs in business, there are only few studies on the need for foreign languages in the public sector. Indicatively Vandermeeren (2003) described the need for German as a foreign language in diplomacy. On the example of foreign embassies in Germany and Hunstiger (2010) he reported on the connection of career-related German as foreign language teaching and objective and subjective needs of EU servants and senior ministry officials from the EU Member States and other countries.

Concluding this paper we will provide a summary of the findings. The present needs assessment indicates that concrete in the Greek public sector there are specific language needs in foreign languages: specific micro-skills that are necessary for both the oral and written communication, as well as specific intercultural skills. The main skills to be pointed out are in written communication "*Writing and handling of E-Mails*", "*Writing and handling of correspondence*" as far as in oral communication "*Exchange of Information*", "*Supply of Services/Understanding and Implementing orders*" and "*Presentation of different topics*". According to the outstanding findings of intercultural skills as "*Cultural sensibility and the ability to identify and use a number of different strategies in order to communicate with members of other cultures*" and "*The ability to overcome stereotypical relations*" should be part of every study or foreign language program in order to train the employees appropriate.

Equally necessary in the workplace seem to be all the skills, like oral communication, written communication, listening comprehension, and reading comprehension. This leads to the conclusion that a language learning process should include and focus on all of them. In this sense of particular interest for this research are the last two tables (question 5-Table 6a, 6b) which focus on exploring the need for a foreign language certification on particular skills related to the workplace when working for a government institution. It should be noted that there is not currently such an opportunity in Greece since the National Certificate of Language Proficiency that is offered since 2003 regards refers to and tests general language skills and does not focus on language skills required in the workplace. Conversely, in countries such as Germany such certifications already exist

Moreover, it is clear that a public service employee or officer must be able to process foreign language material of different channels and in different quantity. Finally, it depends on the communicative ability in the four language skills of one or more foreign languages, since they all seem to be equally necessary. These data should be considered in any kind of textbook preparation, language proficiency tests or language program development, when it comes to people who are active in a particular working field.

This research shows there is a real need for certification of language skills indicated in the aforementioned skills. Certainly a prerequisite thorough analysis must take place, focusing on micro skills, specific language skills and on the kinds of texts-channels on each professional field separately. All these findings which small-scale studies like the present provide must be considered within the framework of a larger-scale study. The question of the correlation between linguistic and intercultural competence and the effects of both these factors on the expression of the foreign language competence were not measured in this case study, but turn out to be a challenging new venue of investigation.

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