

# Language skills in vocational education and training – Views of policies and practice

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## Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that language and communication skills are crucial for acquiring vocational proficiency, completing successfully vocational training and maintaining employability, as well as for communication and interaction in everyday work. However, how do vocational education and training (VET) policies, trainers and trainees address the issue of language and communication skills? We assume that policies, trainers and trainees would attribute different value and relevance to language and communication at and for work. The results presented here are based on the findings of the research project „Language and communication requirements in vocational education and training“.

## Policy documents

### European framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning

**Definition**  
From eight key competences two focus on communication:  
Communication in the **mother tongue**: the ability to express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in oral and written form, and to interact linguistically in an appropriate and creative way in a full range of contexts.  
Communication in **foreign languages** includes the items mentioned above and also intercultural understanding.

### Operationalisation

Definitions of competences include

- knowledge, e.g. to know main types of verbal interactions,
- skills, e.g. to use different types of texts and
- attitudes, e.g. a disposition to constructive dialogue.

They refer to writing, reading, speaking, and listening.

### European Qualification Framework/ German Qualification Framework

**Definition**  
EQF: There is no explicit reference to linguistic and communicative competences.  
GQF: Communication is defined as the exchange of information aiming at conveying understanding between persons, in groups and organisations.

### Operationalisation

Linguistic competences are divided into eight levels. 3- and 3 1/2- year VET are assigned to level 4 and 2-year VET- to level 3.

### Curricula of vocational education and training

**Definition**  
Communicative competences refer to the willingness and ability to understand and shape communicative situations. This includes understanding and expressing own intentions and needs as well as those of the partners.

### Operationalisation

Communicative competences are described in terms of writing, reading, speaking, and listening. They can be referred to

- explicitly, e.g. read analogue and digital measuring and test data,
- implicitly, e.g. receive requests and information from customers

## Perceptions of trainers and trainees

**Data base:** Research project „Language and communication requirements in vocational education and training“, here: utterances concerning the relevance of language for work. 16 participant observations in training companies / 33 qualitative interviews with trainees and trainers / investigated training occupations: Management assistants for retail services (**RS**), Medical assistants (**MA**), Motor vehicle mechatronic technicians (**MV**)

	speaking	listening	writing	reading
<b>RS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• „most important“</li> <li>• seek customers' loyalty</li> <li>• organise work processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• „prerequisite for speaking“</li> <li>• realise customers' demands</li> <li>• understand work instructions and briefings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• „very little“</li> <li>• execute orders, complaints,..</li> <li>• fill in forms correctly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• „read permanently“, almost scanning texts</li> <li>• obtain internal and stock related information</li> </ul>
<b>MA</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• „mainly oral communication“</li> <li>• diverse communication partners (different registers)</li> <li>• stress (patients: pain, anxiety)</li> <li>• organise work processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understand patients and show empathy</li> <li>• obtain work instructions while doing other things</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• document medications, ... written by hand or on the PC</li> <li>• take notes in order to remember what has to be done later on</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• check patients' data</li> <li>• extract diagnoses from letters</li> <li>• monitor data</li> </ul>
<b>MV</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• find out information for performing a task</li> <li>• organise work processes</li> <li>• communicate with experts and customers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understand work assignments</li> <li>• process information for performing a task</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• describe briefly work carried out</li> <li>• indicate work still to be carried out</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• search for information for repairing and error diagnosis</li> <li>• organise work processes</li> </ul>

## Conclusions

In some policies language skills are mentioned explicitly (definitions and operationalisations), in others implicitly. Implicit mentions do not correspond to the importance of language and communication requested by VET.

The trainers and trainees interviewed are aware of the importance of language for work interactions. The value and relevance attributed to writing, reading, speaking and listening differ considerably within and between the three training occupations investigated. In the case of some operations, communication and interaction are directly part of work tasks e.g. selling goods and organising work processes. In the case of other operations, they underpin tasks, e.g. reading instruction manuals for repairing cars.

## References

Settlemeyer, Anke; Widera, Christina; Efung, Christian (2014): Linguistic and communicative requirements in vocation education and training. Poster presented at the ALAPP conference 2014 [https://www2.bibb.de/bibbtools/tools/dapro/data/documents/verweise/so\\_22304%20Poster.pdf](https://www2.bibb.de/bibbtools/tools/dapro/data/documents/verweise/so_22304%20Poster.pdf). For further references see appendix.

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