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Development of Supra-Professional Skills of Future Translators at University Curriculum

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Abstract

The study considers the formation and development of supra-professional skills of translators and specialists in international relations while studying at a university. Special attention is paid to the description of the formation and development of future translators' supra-professional skills at the university in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors conduct a review of the sources to eliminate terminological discord, offer their own definition of supra-professional skills, and list competencies included in the group of skills under study. A detailed analysis of the scientific literature proves the importance and necessity of developing supra-professional skills among language faculty graduates during their university studies, thereby confirming the relevance and novelty of the research. The analysis of current translation vacancies and a survey of employers of translation companies, LSPs and companies' international departments allow the authors to identify a relevant list of necessary supra-professional skills of modern graduates of language faculties who plan to develop their career in the field of translation and/or international relations. Based on the information obtained from the analysis of vacancies and employers' survey, supra-professional skills are arranged into the groups of personal, interpersonal, and digital skills. Besides, some recommendations are provided to form and develop the identified supra-professional skills in teaching language and translation disciplines both at the bachelor's and master's levels. The authors rely on their practical educational experience at the School of International Relations of MGIMO University and the Faculty of Foreign Languages of the Samara State University of Social Sciences and Education.

Keywords: soft skills, supra-professional skills, methodology of teaching, translation, interpretation, international relations.

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Introduction

The study analyses the formation and development of supra-professional skills of future translators and specialists in the field of international relations in the process of teaching language and translation disciplines at the university at two levels of study: bachelor's and master's degrees in the era of extreme events of the coronavirus pandemic. In the current Russian higher education system, the problem of training a specialist in the field of translation in the digital communication environment is considered particularly relevant. According to the President of the Russian Academy of Education, Zinchenko, one of the reasons for this was "widespread digitalisation, forced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictive measures introduced" (Translation Didactics in the Digital Age, 2020). It is known that the organisation of the educational process in the digital environment already has both positive and negative results. It is crucial for a modern educator engaged in translation and foreign language teaching as it implies students' intensive involvement in the in-class activities to balance modern online tools and practical translation didactics (Stoikovich & Klyushina, 2018). The latter aspect was significantly influenced by modern digital technologies, as such a group of skills can be attributed to the supra-professional skills of a specialist in the field of translation and those of international relations. The changes affected various aspects:

- information search and processing (electronic encyclopedias and dictionaries, text corpora, and search services are being developed and improved);
- use of special application programs (Cat, Projetex, CAT tools, etc.);
- comprehensive case managers (byu.edu, Corpus of Contemporary American English, National Corpus of Russian), etc.;
- use of spellchecker programs for post-editing texts (Grammarly, Language Tool, Yandex Speller, etc.).

Nowadays, translators and specialists in international relations must be able to use the above-mentioned technical tools, which have recently come to the top of requirements for LSP employees. Besides, graduates should also demonstrate a high level of proficiency in other supra-professional skills formed regardless of computer technology and are necessary for successful interpersonal communication offline.

The period of university studying is a crucial stage in the formation of the individual as a whole. It is undoubtedly the basis for the formation of the individual's professional component.

In general, students are successful in their academic activities since they have already chosen their future profession and are more responsible in their approach to learning. However, considering the current situation in higher education in Russia and taking into account the requirements of the modern labour market, both students and the teaching community need to admit the importance and necessity of forming and developing not only professional (hard) but also supra-professional (soft) skills of a modern graduate since it is the latter that helps them to become competitive specialists in an oversaturated labour market. This issue adds value and relevance to our study and stresses its novelty.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The study aims to substantiate the need to form and develop supra-professional skills of translators and specialists in international relations while studying at university. This goal can be achieved if a number of the following tasks are performed:

- to conduct a review of the scientific literature to eliminate terminological discord;
- to analyse current vacancies of a specialist in the field of translation and interview employers of translation companies and LSPs to identify the list of necessary supra-professional skills of the current graduates of language faculties;
- arrange the identified supra-professional skills of future specialists in translation while teaching students language and translation disciplines both at the bachelor's and master's levels.

Special attention is paid to the description of the trajectory of the formation and development of future translators' supra-professional skills at the university in the era of extreme pandemic events.

Literature review

In the modern doctrine, many different terms are used to refer to non-professional skills: 'supra-professional skills', 'soft skills', 'flexible skills', 'employability skills', 'people skills', 'non-professional skills', 'key skills', 'skills for social progress', 'life skills'. Such a wide variety often causes inevitable confusion when referring to this topic and confirms the need to clarify the terminology system. Raitskaya and Tikhonova (2019) state that the multiplicity and interdisciplinarity of approaches to soft skills as a phenomenon is the problem of defining and classifying the term. In this study, we will use the term 'supra-professional skills' to define all mentioned above terms. The analysis of Russian and foreign topical sources leads us to the conclusion that scientists understand supra-professional skills in different ways, offering different interpretations for this term:

- interpersonal communication skills (Blackmore, 1999; Robles, 2012);
- skills, qualities, and attributes of an individual (Cobb, Meixelsperger & Seitz, 2015);
- personal, social and methodological skills (Cinque, 2016);
- communication and managerial talents (the ability to convince people, lead and manage processes, make presentations, find the right approach to people, the ability to resolve conflict situations, use oratory techniques, and, in general, those qualities and skills that could be called universal, and not those that are inherent in people of a particular profession) (Sosnitskaya, 2009).

In this study, we are to adhere to the following definition: supra-professional skills should be considered as a set of knowledge, skills and abilities that combine personal skills and interpersonal communication skills that can be assigned to both a group of professionals in a specific field and for an individual, in addition to managerial and teamwork skills.

The options for defining supra-professional skills are shown in Figure 1:

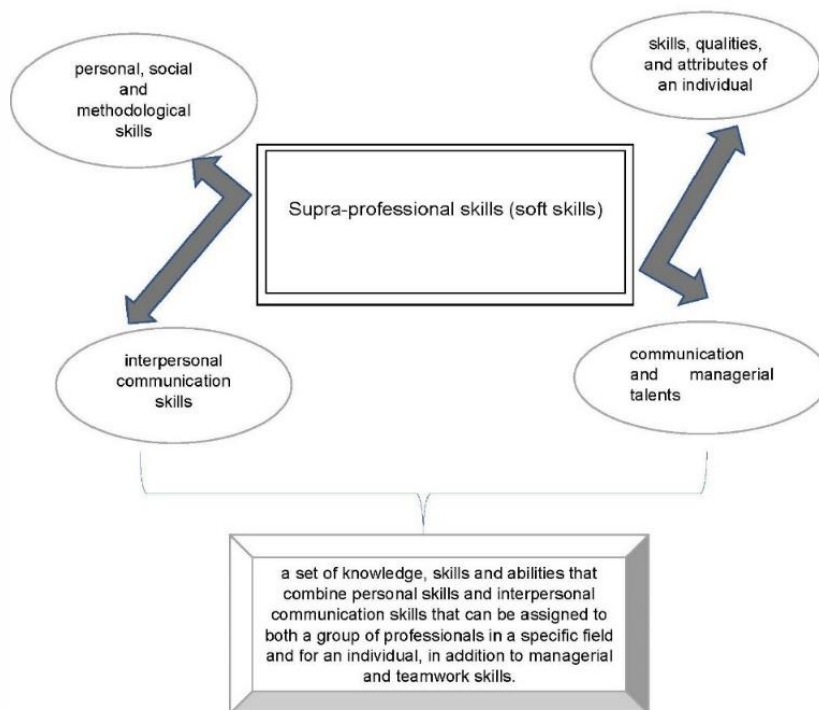


Figure 1. Variants of ‘supra-professional skills’ definition interpretations and the version adopted in the article

In addition to the existing terminological diversity, which creates confusion in the perception and interpretation of the term, the list of those skills considered to be above-professional can also cause a problem. The resources analysis shows the study involving both a whole complex of supra-professional skills of future specialists (Stepanova & Seer, 2019) and individual skills included in the list of supra-professional ones. Al Muzzamil (2018) explores the employment skills of graduates, which, according to the scientist, can be developed through the English for Special Purposes (ESP) course, taking into account the needs of a particular profession. Employment skills are also explored by (Beheshti, 2020). Symanyuk and Pecherkina (2016) describe communication skills and the essence of psychological predictors of pedagogical communication inhibition. Chevtaeva, Nikitina and Vishnevskaya (2020) believe the supra-professional skills of graduates to be formed and developed through the teachers-students interaction as this form of interaction serves as a matrix of future employer-employee relations.

A study conducted by Harvard University and Stanford Research Institute shows that the impact of professional skills on an employee’s career success equals only 15%. In comparison, supra-professional skills determine the remaining 85% (National Soft Skills Association, 2015).

These data confirm our statement about the importance and necessity of forming and developing supra-professional skills of language faculties’ students. In contrast, analysis of the sources confirms the relevance of the study and its novelty.

Methodology

In the study, theoretical methods were used, including the analysis of the study’s subject based on pedagogical, psychological, and didactic sources and reflexive and systematic analysis of the justified organisation of the authors’ pedagogical activity of the article. As empirical methods, quantitative research methods were used, current vacancies in the field of translation were analysed, a survey of employers of translation companies and LSPs was conducted, and more than 80 current translation vacancies on such the leading Russian websites as hh.ru; en.jobble.org; rabota.ru; superjob.ru; vakvak.ru were studied.

The online survey, conducted on the Google Forms platform, was attended by 47 employees of translation agencies, LSPs and companies’ international departments from different regions of Russia.

All respondents participated in the survey voluntarily after they had acquainted with a detailed plan, procedure, and objectives of the study provided by the authors of the paper. The respondents expressed their desire and hope to receive a notification about the work's results, as they consider the topic to be significant and relevant in the modern professional world of translation studies. All the survey participants had to list the professional and supra-professional skills that, in their opinion, are necessary for the work of an interpreter. All data was provided electronically in the Google Forms platform. The survey results were carefully analyzed, structured in a table, and presented in the next section.

At the next stage of our work, we analyzed the available/current vacancies of translators on such huge Russian websites and job marketplaces as hh.ru; en.jobble.org; rabota.ru; superjob.ru; vakvak.ru The purpose of this review of current translation vacancies was to determine the requested professional and supra-professional skills of translators in the modern labor market.

Then, the review of current translation vacancies and the survey engaged the employers of translation companies, LSPs, and international departments of different companies were conducted to identify the list of necessary supra-professional skills of modern graduates to be formed and developed in the process of university studying in the extreme conditions of online training in the pandemic era. The survey responses and the vacancies' survey results determined the structure and content of the study and confirmed its need and relevance.

Results

Table 1 shows the results of the survey focused on the current translation vacancies and a survey held within the employers of translation companies, LSPs, and different companies' international departments:

Table 1. The list of required hard and supra-professional skills of a translator (results of the survey of employers and the analysis of vacancies)

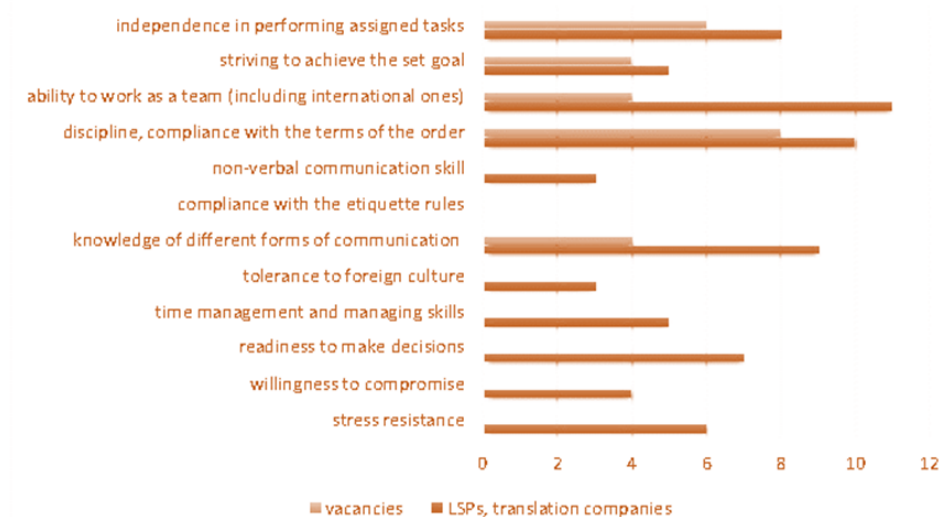
No.	Professional (hard) skills/ Supra-professional (soft) skills	Overview of current vacancies	Survey results
1	knowledge of modern requirements to a translator in the conditions of the "digital economy" and the ability to navigate the existing information technologies used in the field of translation	+	-
2	high level of foreign and native language proficiency for professional activities and working interpersonal contacts	+	+

3	ability to use the translator's information tools and choose the necessary information resources	+	+
4	stress resistance	-	+
5	the ability to clearly express their thoughts, argumentatively defend the point of view, influence the partner, and correctly interpret their behaviour	-	+
6	ability to search, analyse, collect, store, and systematise information and the ability to organise a professional information translation environment	+	-
8	knowledge of various information technologies for solving specific translation tasks and the ability to use certain algorithms	+	+
9	readiness to make a quick and appropriate decision and to take responsibility for it	-	+
10	knowledge of machine translation features and the ability to properly apply them, post-editing skills	-	+
11	management skills and the ability to plan and solve translation tasks, as well as organise one's workplace (time management and ergonomics in the workplace)	-	+
12	ability to express tolerance to foreign culture, customs, and traditions	-	+
13	knowledge of different forms of communication and their specifics and the ability to properly communicate online	+	-
14	compliance with the etiquette rules (including online etiquette)	-	+
15	nonverbal communication	-	+
17	knowledge of software and the ability to ensure information security online	+	-
18	independence in performing assigned tasks and confidence in decision-making	+	+
19	striving to achieve the set goal	-	+

20	ability to work as a team (including international ones)	+	-
21	discipline, compliance with the terms of the order	+	+
22	ability to use the necessary CAT-tools and translation memory files	+	+
23	compliance with the business dress code	+	+
24	ability to work with glossaries and create own glossaries	-	+
25	ability to work with language corpora and reference sources	-	+

The survey results presented in the table above show that respondents consider developing professional skills (hard skills) and supra-professional skills (soft skills) of future employees to be equally important. The distribution of the above-mentioned supra-professional skills mentioned by the survey respondents is shown in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2. The distribution of the supra-professional skills' value based on the results of a survey.



As part of the next stage of the study, we are to analyse the information received and systematise it, provide some recommendations for the formation and development of supra-professional skills when teaching students at the extreme conditions of COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion

Some supra-professional skills are indicated only in vacancies, and some are mentioned only by employers. This is because of some peculiarities of describing the vacancies, when the fundamental requirements for the applicant are indicated, and an attempt to attract an employee is made. At the same time, a survey of employers allows one to identify a list of such supra-professional skills that are rarely mentioned in ads.

The obtained data might be taken into account when organising students' educational process and extracurricular activities at universities of Russia (Klyushina & Shalifova, 2019).

Despite the view that supra-professional skills are universal, we believe that each field emphasises a specific skill or group of skills. The study results prove that future translation specialists and specialists in international relations are expected to have had a high level of proficiency in foreign and native languages for professional interpersonal contacts as long as the ability to clearly express their thoughts, defend a point of view, influence the partner, correctly interpret the partner's behaviour; as well as always be ready to compromise, to make a quick and adequate decision (and take responsibility for it), and to express tolerance to a foreign culture. That is why it is crucial to draw students' attention to other people's feelings and observe the rules of etiquette, according to which one cannot show apparent aggression, excessive emotionality or other excessive emotions as all this lead to confrontation. At the same time, for specialists in international relations, it is also essential to observe the norms of business and professional etiquette, knowledge and correct use of non-verbal communication, the ability to tactfully and unambiguously express their opinions, conduct negotiations and correspondence in compliance with the rules of cross-cultural communication and taking into account the mentality, traditions and specifics of the attitude to personal space characteristic of the country or region of the second party of communication. Moreover, our research has shown digital competencies to occupy an essential place in the list of future translators' supra-professional skills.

The obtained research results allow us to systematize the identified supra-professional skills into three large groups. It should be noted that in this case, supra-professional skills can be divided into personal, interpersonal and digital ones. By all means, it is mandatory to form and develop all these skills in student during their university studies considering the recent blended and online formats of education. Special attention will be paid to distant and online formats of university education.

Thus, we consider personal supra-professional skills include to be those reflecting emotional intelligence and the personal qualities necessary for career growth and practical work; self-control, stress tolerance, critical thinking, empathy, personal development, independence in the process of performing assigned tasks, and confidence in decision-making, time management skills, self-motivation, striving to achieve goals, flexibility, responsibility, optimism, willingness to compromise, and compliance with professional ethical standards.

Interpersonal supra-professional skills include skills and abilities that reflect a person's relationship with colleagues and professional partners. This category of skills includes communication skills, leadership skills, the ability to convince, the ability to defend one's point of view, the ability to work in an international team, cultural sensitivity, and much more.

"Digital economy" demands a lot to be competitive on the market with translators are no exception: future specialists in the field of translation should be able to navigate the existing information technologies used in translation; know how to apply translation information tools and be able to choose the necessary information resources; know the effective ways of searching, analysing, collecting, storing, and systematising information and be able to organise a professional information translation environment. What is more, translators are better to be aware of the knowledge of various information technologies for solving specific translation tasks and the ability to use certain algorithms; they should also know how to apply machine translation software; have proper time management skills and use some management techniques; plan and solve translation tasks, as well as organise their workplace; know the features of different forms of communication and be able to effectively communicate in an online format; use professional software and be able to ensure the online security of information on the Internet.

Conclusion

Summing up, we note that the formation and development of future specialists' supra-professional skills in the field of translation and those of international relations are vital, especially in the extreme era of the coronavirus pandemic.

As our research shows, employees of companies' international departments and LSPs note the importance of personal and interpersonal supra-professional skills when considering candidates for future employees and conducting job interviews, while the current vacancy announcements for translation specialists increasingly include the requirement to possess formed digital supra-professional skills.

At the present stage of the development of the higher education system in Russia, it is this knowledge, skills and abilities that are key for the successful employment of young professionals, advantageously complementing the well-formed base of hard skills obtained during their studies at the university and enabling graduates to be competitive in the international market.

In conclusion, we add that with some adverse effects of the digitalisation of training translators and international specialists' educational process, the positive results are significant and largely dominant. They are also a necessity in the context of a pandemic that requires providing distance learning and is likely to be relevant in the future. Simultaneously, a teacher of translation and language disciplines must possess both sets of supra-professional skills meant in the study. Digital competence is one of the critical components of a modern translator's professionalism that involves specific strategies and digital literacy needed to be taught and developed by future translators.

On the other hand, the necessary strategy for training translators in the digital environment is being developed and implemented in the universities mentioned above, which have already given descent positive results, and sets new tasks that meet the requirements of constantly developing digital technologies needed for their future professional activities.

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Competing interests

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