EMPIRICAL RESEARCH OF COLLOCATIONS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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This scientific paper presents a corpus-based investigative research of German collocations; in text comprehension, a new method for identification of collocations is presented, as well as a scientific discussion of the types of collocations for which this new analysis method is suitable. The article further explores the consequences of using collocations and their translation into other languages on communication in foreign language teaching. It was examined how the students of foreign languages in Slovak universities (non-philological courses of studies) can deal with the collocations in their future profession (as translators or experts in a professional language) after their linguistic studies and whether they are able to actually implement this foreign language competence in the future. Although vocabulary work is developed as a primary competence among foreign language learners, some areas of studies lack current, creative and innovative teaching materials, especially in the didactic field of comparative collocation research. The results of our research projects promote the acquisition of foreign language skills and help teachers develop and use new methods in their work.

Keywords: collocations; German language; linguistics; corpus linguistics; foreign language learning; idioms.

Introduction

Fixed word combinations − idioms, collocations, familiar quotations (*geflügelte Wörter* in German) and others are omnipresent in the vocabulary of contemporary German in all areas of society. They contribute to a fundamental societal and linguistic change that becomes the subject of numerous scientific works of linguists.

Scientists and linguists have dealt with the question of idioms and collocations, which are an inseparable part of phraseology, for years (Burger, 2015; Handwerker, 2010; Targońska, 2019; Nesselhauf, 2005; Webb, Newton & Chang, 2013; Duden, 2017). Collocations were previously neglected in phraseology, but have become increasingly important in recent years. This is largely due to corpus linguistics, which makes it possible to research the stability of word combinations on an immense amount of linguistic data. This area of phraseology is much larger and probably more important for language use, especially for foreign language learning than one would have assumed (Burger, 2015, p. 38).

The term collocations is mostly used in two ways in modern German linguistics:

a) as the abstract meaning for word combinations that are semantically "compatible";

b) as concrete meaning for fixed word combinations that form a lexical-grammatical category located in the lexical system of language between free word combinations and idioms, e.g. *summende Biene, einen Wettkampf veranstalten, eine Tagung abhalten, eine Reise unternehmen, ein Abkommen schließen/ treffen* etc.

On top of that, there are two competing terms of collocation: on the one hand, the basic collocation term, which is indispensable for foreign language learning (and lexicology) and on the other hand, the computational linguistic term of collocation (Ďurčo & Vajíčková, 2016, p.26). For a better understanding and deeper study of the collocations, we recommend studying the following authors that deal with this modern linguistic phenomenon from a didactic point of view: Varga Kiss (2018); Collentine (2010); Pellicer-Sánchez (2015, 2017); Lewis (2000); Harm (2015).

The main aim of our empirical research is expanding, consolidating and supporting the language skills of learners. We also focus on the description and the research into the perception, appropriation and application of collocations by Slovak German language students at the Faculty of Applied Languages at the University of Economics in Bratislava as part of their linguistics studies.

The term collocation in corpus linguistics

Based on Ďurčo & Vajíčková (2016), there are relationships between the individual words in a collocation in the system of language that can be described as vertical or linear. In vertical relationships, there are words that form grammatical or lexical paradigms. As far as the words in linear relation to each other are concerned, they form in the syntagm (Ďurčo & Vajíčková, 2016, p.12). The authors emphasise that words used to form syntagms must not only be grammatically compatible, but also semantically. Some words stand side-by-side more often in syntagms than others. There are words that occur often in phrases that in the vocabulary they are perceived as structurally and semantically related made up (prefabricated)

units. They are lexicalised and are perceived as complete lexical units and are part of the lexicon. There are also word combinations that stand between free and lexicalised (idiomatic or non-idiomatic) word combinations. They consist of lexical components, the occurrence of which is tied to a specific word, which means that their combinability is restricted. In the latest studies, they are referred to as collocations (Ďurčo & Vajíčková 2016, p.12).

Collocations generally have a binary, hierarchically organised structure. For this purpose, Hausmann (1984) introduced the terms "base" and "collocator" (base-collocator principle). Accordingly, the two words that form a collocation do not stand side by side as equal words. Rather, a word is always the basis to which the collocator (in German "Kollokator") is assigned. According to Hausmann (1984) the most important basic part of speech is the noun, because it is the noun that names the things and phenomena of this world about which there is something to be said. It should be mentioned that adjectives and verbs can only be used as basic words insofar as they can be further determined by adverbs. In the dichotomous distinction, the basis is regarded as the hierarchically higher and semantically autonomous element of the collocation, the collocator as the hierarchically subordinate and semantically relational element. The basis is always a referential quantity that refers to something non-linguistic and serves to name it linguistically or to make it the subject of the statement (Ďurčo & Vajíčková, 2016, p. 16, 27). A special cohesion relationship arises between the base and the collocator, which is also referred to in the literature as "Affinität". It is stronger in some collocations, but weaker in others. Hausmann (1984) differentiates between fixed and non-fixed word combinations. He counts the idioms among the fixed verbal combinations. He calls the non-fixed combination of any two linguistic characters. He divides these elements into three groups:

a) Co-creations – free combinations;

b) Collocations or affine combinations: This group is a combination whose components "tend" to each other and therefore cannot be freely combined by the language user. He calls these "collocations" and calls them "semi-finished products" of the language;

c) Counter-Creations: combinations, the components of which are semantically exclusive, "counter-creations".

In the structural sense, collocations are classified according to their morphological and syntactic properties. The morphological analysis examines which part of speech the basis of a collocation belongs to. In this way, substantive, adjective, verbal and adverbial collocations can be distinguished. If syntactic properties of collocations are examined, collocations can be analysed similarly to idiomatic expressions. Subclasses are determined internally - based on the morpho-syntactic relationships between the base and the collocator. Outside of the phrase, it is examined whether a collocation in the sentence fulfils the role of a clause, two clauses or part of a clause. Verbal collocations can consist of a single or multiple words, with an addition being a collocator. Collocations also have morphological categories. Substantive and adjective collocations distinguish categories such as gender, number and case; Verbal collocations, in turn, include categories such as person, number, tense, gender of the verb and mode (Ďurčo & Vajíčková 2016, p.39).

Classification of collocations in German linguistics according to Ďurčo & Vajíčková (2016, p. 40):

(1) Noun collocations

The noun collocations are divided into the following groups according to the part of speech of the collocator, which is always an attribute:
- noun + noun in Genitive: *das Glück des Tüchtigen*
- noun + noun without case: *eine Flasche Wein, eine Packung Zigaretten*
- noun + adjective: *hohes Alter, bittere Armut, feste Überzeugung*
- noun + present participle: *tragende Rolle, hochfliegende Pläne*
- noun + past participle: *entspannte Atmosphäre, verzerrtes Gesicht*

(2) Adjective collocations

In adjective collocations, the division into subgroups is determined according to the part of speech of the collocator:
- adjective + adjective: *peinlich genau*
- adjective + adverb: *ganz ruhig*
- adjective + past participle: *schneidend kalt, dringen erforderlich*
- past participle + adjective: *tödlich verwundet, scharf betont*
- adjective + noun: *des Lebens müde*

(3) Verb collocations

Verbal collocations are based on the collocator's word class. If the collocator is a noun, its complementary role resulting from the valence of the verbal basis serves as an additional criterion for differentiation:

- verb + noun as a nominative supplement: *der Motor stirbt, das Herz klopft*
- verb + noun as an accusative supplement: *den Film entwickeln, die Zähne fletschen*
- verb + noun as a dative supplement: *den Anforderungen genügen, der Kritik aussetzen*
- verb + noun as a genitive supplement: *des Todestages gedenken, sich seines Ruhmes erfreuen*
- verb + noun as prepositional supplement: *unter Beweis stellen, in Bewegung setzen*
- verb + adjective: *trocken erwidern, sich frisch fühlen*

(4) Adverbial collocations

There is only one subgroup in adverbial collocation:

- Adverb + Adverb: *ganz anders, erst kürzlich*.

Table 1. The structure of common collocations in the German language

root	+	collocator
Zähne		*putzen*
Telefonnummer		*wählen*
Tisch		*decken*
collocator	+	**root**
blinder		*Passagier*
kalter		*Krieg*
collocations	←	**common phrases**
das Bett machen		*das Bett reparieren*
eine Frage stellen		*eine Frage vergessen*
ein Gespräch führen		*ein Gespräch aufzeichnen*
Sport treiben		*Sport lieben*

According to Lemnitzer (1997), the computer linguistic term of collocation is described as the systematic analysis of very large amounts of text that open up the access to lexical and grammatical structures to which other methods are closed to. An important, if not indispensable tool in this analysis is a statistical procedure. The combination of large amounts of data and their frequency and distribution using statistical methods with the aid of the computer leads to new insights into recurrent educational patterns of a lexical and grammatical kind. The focus of the investigation is not the unusual, but the typical in the lexical and syntactic construction of statements (Lemnitzer, 1997, p.118).

Proper collocation use indicates a very high level of language proficiency. This applies both to collocations in the general language and to collocations in technical languages, e.g. legal language or in a language of a youth group. If used the right combinations of words together, i.e. those that are conventionally always used together or mostly together, the speaker is perceived to be well versed in the law or that they have been a member of this youth group for a long time.

What is particularly difficult when learning collocations in German language is the fact that they are not fully defined. Admittedly, the adjective *blond* is often used in conjunction with *blond hair*. However, it is also possible to combine blonde with *girl, woman, man* or *beard*. A combination like a *blonde hairdresser* (*blonder Friseur*) would be quite uncommon, while a *blonde blouse* (*blonde Bluse*) would be a stylistic error. However, the jokingly meant combination of a *blond beer* (*ein blondes Bier*) for a *light beer* (*ein helles Bier*) in everyday German has gradually become common.

The rules for the correct use of collocations are therefore not fixed, but rather fluid. While different expressions are used mostly or very often, some expressions are less common, but still within the

convention; other expressions, in turn, consciously (due to linguistic creativity, literature, advertising, media language) or unconsciously (language errors) violate the conventional rules. Using words together, i.e. as collocations, is like moving in chains. On the one hand, you have to stick to the convention (the chains), on the other hand, you have the freedom to vary a bit (to move). In recent years, databases have been able to evaluate huge amounts of text and thus find more common and less common collocations (Strank, 2010, p. 90).

In the recent years, discussions are being held by teachers and linguists about teaching collocations in foreign language learning. Although several scientific papers (as well as textbooks and articles) have been written on the subject, the discussion is still not closed. From the latest publications, we want to draw attention to those related to our issue and those that served as an inspiration for our research.

Nizonkiza (2017) explores in their study the effect of teaching collocations on building an academic vocabulary. The study suggests that exposing students to this phenomena contributes towards building their productive use of collocations in both cued recall and essay writing and therefore improves higher education of these students. Another study paper by Pellicer-Sánchez (2015) focuses on incidental approaches for the acquisition of collocations while reading. Results showed that collocational knowledge is learnt at a similar rate to other lexical components of individual words. In 2018 a study of J. M. Rogers was published about teaching collocations as part of teaching foreign language vocabulary. Here the author says that collocational knowledge plays a central role in helping learners achieve native-like fluency in a foreign language. Similarly, Altuwairesh (2017) writes that teaching collocations in EFL leads learners to attain native-like proficiency in a foreign language. Szudarski (2018) points out in his research that more attention needs to be paid in foreign language learning to collocations as well as multiword units, such as idioms, phrasal verbs or lexical bundles.

On the topic of translating collocations, there are few interesting studies that have been published recently. Smadja and McKeown (1994) found out that collocations are notoriously difficult for non-native speakers to translate, since they cannot be translated word by word. Antle (2018) mentions that language acquisition involves the storage of collocations in a mental lexicon, and producing fluent speech (f.e. during translation) requires a quick retrieval of collocations from the mental lexicon. Collocations as a key issue in translation among professionals in the medical field is the main focus of Badziński´s paper published in 2019. This study suggests that erroneous use of collocations discredits any paper or researcher and leads to dissemination of a professional knowledge. Garcia, García Salido and Alonso-Ramos (2019) wrote a paper that presents a method to automatically identify bilingual equivalents of collocations using monolingual corpora in two languages and thus proving that the translation of collocations is still an issue in foreign language learning.

Hypotheses:

Many Slovak language learners are not aware of the existence of collocations and their relevance for language learning when learning vocabulary. Our **first hypothesis** examines how the lexical units in the German language can be identified and how the specific collocations can be recognised.

From the characteristics of the collocations mentioned above, it can be deducted that, like other idioms, these are to be stored as a whole, i.e. as a vocabulary-learning unit. Many studies (Targońska, 2014; Siyanova-Chanturia & Schmitt, 2008; Boers & Webb, 2018) conclude that foreign language learners pay little attention to collocations, the meaning of which they can easily misunderstand. They do not focus their attention on the form of the collocations, which is why they do not explicitly perceive the collocator, which can vary from one language to another (Hausmann, 1984, p. 397).

Following this idea our **second hypothesis** or question is: How can collocations be taught and how can the acquisition of collocation skills be promoted? Collocations are a common occurrence and Handwerker (2010, p. 249) points out that collocations are not noticeable to the native speaker. They are not aware of the collocations; only by contrasting the native language with a foreign language can the native speaker become aware of the existence of collocations. The reason for this inconspicuousness could also lie in the neglectful treatment of phraseology – including collocations – in native language lessons (Targońska, 2014, p. 130).

Collocations represent a major learning problem when acquiring foreign language vocabulary, as pointed out by authors of many scientific papers (e.g. Durrant & Schmitt, 2010; Spišiaková, 2016; Mocková, 2019). Because of their reception by foreign language learners, they seem to be perceived as a conventional combination of words. In this context, the question arises as to what interference errors can cause the non-recognition of German collocations for Slovak German language learners. The **third hypothesis** is therefore – German collocations are subject to interference and are therefore incorrectly translated or used in the target language.

Given that collocations vary from one language to another and can manifest differently, they often represent a source of error, especially in language production (although they are usually not problematic in reception). The foreign language learner cannot build a collocation independently or transfer it from one (foreign) language to the other, because these cannot be produced independently − only as multi-word units in context. The identification and use of these specific word combinations play a particularly important role in the process of language learning.

Methods

I. Participants:

150 students from two study years of the master's programme in the German language in combination with the English language took part in our collocation research. The research was carried out at the Faculty of Applied Languages (Department of Linguistics and Translatatology) at the University of Economics in Bratislava in the academic year 2018/2019. The research had one main goal and several sub-goals. The **main goal** of the research was the subject´s detection of German collocations when reading an unknown text. With this goal, we pursued better appropriation of the foreign language knowledge of our students. One of the sub-goals was to determine whether the students were able to correctly translate German collocations into Slovak. Using different types of text, we also observed whether the identified collocations were used sensibly in different types of text. This definition and the outcomes that result from it are particularly relevant for professional communication.

II. Apparatus and Materials:

Several linguistic methods were suitable for our research project, from which we selected three: the **comparative**, the **analytical** and the method of a **questionnaire survey**.

In order to promote knowledge of foreign languages, the comparative method is used in linguodidactics to point out important new knowledge based on the native language and to plausibly compare this knowledge in both languages. Especially in transfer and interference research, reference is made to the serious interference errors in the target language with the help of comparison. In our case, this method helped us to draw the students' attention to the foreseeable mistakes in the area of using the German collocations. It has helped us to prevent numerous mistakes in the German language. As expected, Slovak learners of German misunderstood and translated some collocations, e.g.

Table 2. Collocations in German that are prone to interference

original collocation in the Slovak language	correct translation to the German language	common (interference) mistake
umyť zuby	Zähne *putzen*	Zähne *waschen*
loď *ide*	das Schiff *fährt*	das Schiff *geht*
byť za *vodou*	über den *Berg* sein	über dem *Wasser* sein
uviesť do života	ins Leben *rufen*	ins Leben *führen*
dostať na kolená	in die Knie *zwingen*	in die Knie *bekommen*

In our research, we chose a specific questionnaire that contained seven questions (Appendix 1). We wanted to use the questionnaire to determine whether the students could recognise collocations in unknown German texts and translate them into the target language. The students had unlimited time and space for the answers. The questionnaire was anonymous, the students were able to respond openly to the questions. Since the participants of our research are students in the Master programme, they were able to judge more consistently how advanced their linguistic courses are and whether they are lacking linguistics training in Semantics, cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics and other language disciplines.

With the help of this analytical method, we analysed the answers collected in the questionnaire together with the students, in which not only lexical and phraseological, but also grammatical and stylistic errors were examined. The research showed that most German collocations are not literally translatable. This fact has been pointed out by the analytical method, which in addition to quantitative research of possible errors, also showed important didactic-methodical approaches to the acquisition of collocations (especially cognitive and cognitive-psychological aspects).

III. Procedure:

A German text was presented to the subjects about the reasons and motives for learning foreign languages. (Source: https://www.sprachreisen-ratgeber.de/warum-sprach-machen-.php). During the seminar, the students had enough time (90 minutes) to read the text (without a dictionary), to recognise (underline) all of the German collocations in the text, and to translate them accordingly into Slovak (or find equivalents). With the translation of the collocations in the text, we aimed to determine whether the students that are at the end of their university studies were able to grasp and use these word combinations after finishing linguistic and translation studies for several years. One of the main concerns of our students' linguistic work was text analysis. Working with foreign language texts is a crucial part of their future occupation. With the help of this research, we were able to determine whether our foreign language teaching at our Faculty of Applied Languages was actually relevant in practice.

Results

When analysing and evaluating the research we carried out, it was noticed that most students were unable to identify correctly the majority of collocations in the text. The number of correctly identified collocations has varied. In only a few cases (43 students of 150), a satisfactory number of collocations was identified (75% of all collocations in the text) and the students were able to recognise these collocations in the text (*Geschäftssprache, Bewerbungsmarathon, Arbeitsplatz, Sprache eines Landes* were the most recognised collocations). However, in the majority of cases (106 students), there were only four, three or two of all the collocations in the given text recognised and in one case no collocation was identified or marked. This can be attributed to the fact that the students had no clear idea of exactly what collocations are in a foreign language and how they can be distinguished from other free word combinations or compound words.

In the second part of the research, the students were asked in the questionnaire to formulate their own definition of the term collocation and they should write down their tips on how to learn frequently used collocations in the German language more easily. When evaluating the questionnaire, we had to fall back on the fact that the students did not complete a degree in philology and that their degree is not identical to the degree in the German language course of studies at philological faculties in Slovakia. For this reason, it is easy to understand that students often make errors in their translations that can interfere with communication. After all, students correctly and comprehensively characterised the term collocation, their tips showed that they had given great importance to the need for learning collocations in their German language classes. They complained that they did not have enough linguistic subjects offered during their studies. In addition, they lacked practical linguistic exercises (e.g. in the area of vocabulary work or phraseology), which ultimately leads to uncertainty in the correct use of foreign language. This result can be traced back to our first hypothesis.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the student answers in the questionnaire to the second hypothetical question: the security in dealing with collocations requires much more authentic text work in the classroom.

Regarding the third hypothesis, we concluded that it has been verified: some German collocations have often been mixed in student´s translation with free word combinations or compound words, which is clearly due to interference. The collocations in the given text that were mistaken (and translated incorrectly) most often were: *nach Gründen suchen, das Wissen verblasst, berufliche Situationen, den Zugang verwehren, Gruppen bilden, soziale Akzeptanz, zahlreiche Gründe, eine Sprache beherrschen, zum Verständnis beitragen, freiwillig und motiviert lernen, ernstes Interesse bekunden, an Ansehen gewinnen, Gehirn fit halten* etc.

Discussion

For some years now, there have been controversial discussions about how foreign language teachers can effectively teach their students, the awareness and use of collocations in the German language (e.g. Burger, 2015; Durčo & Vajíčková, 2017). But a clear answer to this seems difficult. In our study, the specific process of uncovering problems in recognising and identifying German collocations by Slovak students was described. The results provide important information for the design of German lessons for language teachers, especially in the areas of reading comprehension, text design, interpretation and translation.

It can be said that the acquisition process of German collocations is a very complex and dynamic process. The language teachers have to be made aware that certain forms and procedures are more suitable for the appropriation of German Idioms (collocations) than others. This was clear from the student answers in the questionnaire and has confirmed our hypotheses. Based on our research, we wanted to prove that active work with collocations has a motivating effect on students, it inspires them to reflect independently

and to understand more complicated linguistic structures (such as collocations). In this way, the rate of student error in the transfer of collocations from the source to the target language is reduced. And that was exactly the main goal of our contribution - to present teachers and learners with new ways and possibilities in collocation work.

Individual factors play an important role for students in language learning. Their language skills and communicative skills will decide whether they can identify the reason for errors when translating collocations. The motivation to learn is also an important factor that strongly influences the length of the work processes. Another factor is self-confidence, which decides whether the learners can perceive and translate German professional texts with collocations.

With regard to the collocation work in the classroom, the question remains whether Slovak language teachers have enough time for this kind of text work in their courses. A suggestion would be a redesign of linguistics (phraseology lessons) in combination with native speakers, who are more sensitive to the collocations and could be supported by prospective foreign language teachers.

Based on our investigation, further empirical research is therefore desirable and indispensable in order to gain a deeper understanding of the processing of collocation problems. Our research was limited by the small number of students; our linguistic faculty is the smallest of the entire university. In addition, our students lack the relevant linguistic competence because they do not study philology - the number of linguistic disciplines in our course is limited. It would certainly be advisable to initiate a broader research in the future, which would also deal with other word combinations from a contrasting perspective.

One of the reasons that the subjects of the study programme "Foreign languages and intercultural communication" attended by these students (research subjects) may be that at the University of Economics in Bratislava does not offer enough of linguistically oriented subjects such as lexicology, phraseology and word formation. These linguistic fields are only parts of the courses syllabus "Introduction to the study of the German language". Although all students in our research are part of the master's programme and have attended the same courses, their individual language level and competences are quite different. When assessing the answers of our questionnaire and giving feedback, language teachers should take into account the level of learning and the different skills of the students.

As already indicated above, collocations were often mixed (and mistaken) with free word combinations or compound words. After a few years of studying foreign languages, there are clear difficulties in recognising and correctly identifying idioms or collocations when reading texts by students. The goals and results of our empirical project can be supported by further research by well-known linguists, e.g. Boers, Demecheleer, Coxhead & Webb (2014); Laufer & Cobb (2019); Laufer & Waldman (2011).

Conclusions - Outlook and current trends

Based on our research and its scientific description in the field of German collocations, we have reached the following conclusions:

− mastery of such typical word combinations means that Slovak students make fewer mistakes in speaking, writing, word selecting, text work and the use of idioms;

− the study of collocations and their mastery help speakers use language more consciously and fluently;

− because of the literal translation of foreign words from the native language, it is a common problem in language learning, the exercises with collocations are of great help in this regard;

− from a methodological point of view, students are more motivated to work on collocations and other idiomatic word combinations;

− if the collocations are implemented frequently in the classroom, they can be more easily recognised by the learners while reading and inserting them into a new text;

− finally, students subconsciously comprehend collocations once these word expressions are acquired. They remember and use them in practice and that is the main goal for our university studies is to make this habit a second nature for the students: to enable students to use academic vocabulary and its modifications (e.g. to be able to use collocations scientifically) in their future practice. It would be desirable if further investigations in this area could confirm and expand our projects in the future.

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Appendix 1

<u>**Fragebogen zur Kollokationsforschung**</u> (anonym)

Wirtschaftsuniversität in Bratislava, Fakultät für angewandte Sprachen, Masterstudium 2019/2020, Sprachkombination Deutsch/Englisch

Instruktionen: Lesen Sie die Fragen im Fragebogen gründlich durch und formulieren Sie ihre eigenen Antworten und Ideen selbständig zu den gestellten Fragen.

Frage 1: Was sind Kollokationen? Charakterisieren Sie diesen Begriff!

Frage 2: Warum ist es wichtig, sich die Kollokationen in einer Fremdsprache richtig anzueignen?

Frage 3: Wenn Sie einen neuen fremdsprachlichen Text behandeln, achten Sie auf die typischen Kollokationen, die in dem Text vorkommen? Und wie gehen Sie mit ihnen um?

Frage 4: Sollte man den Kollokationen und der Phraseologie im Allgemeinen mehr Aufmerksamkeit im Unterricht widmen?

Frage 5: Gibt es Vorteile bei der Verwendung von Kollokationen bei der wirkungsvollen Textgestaltung?

Frage 6: Wie kann man sich die deutschen Kollokationen leichter aneignen? Schrieben Sie Ihre Tipps aus linguodidaktischer Sicht.

Frage 7: Welche schriftlichen Kompetenzen halten Sie in einer Fremdsprache für Ihren zukünftigen Beruf für wichtig?

Hier können Sie sich ausführlicher zum Thema äußern: