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10 April 2017

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/91405/>

MPRA Paper No. 91405, posted 17 Jan 2019 17:20 UTC

Mastering languages, the guarantee for a better job?

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Abstract: *Our globalized world asks more and more professionals and good specialists in different areas of communication on today's labor market. The success is often conditional on their ability to manage languages and cultural barriers. Usually, the most important are that language skills and competences which are related to their professional areas. Therefore, are languages an instrument or a guarantee for a better job? This study will analyze the value of foreign languages on the European and business space and the advantages of having language knowledge on today's labor market.*

Key words: *languages, master foreign languages, labor market, language dynamic, multilingualism*

Today's globalized society and the changes in last decade in Europe, determined the European Institutions to search more and more professionals and specialists in different aspects of the labor market. The European Council, in a meeting held in Lisbon in March 2000, agreed strategic goals for the Union in order to strengthen employment, economic reform and social cohesion as part of a knowledge-based economy (European Council, 2000: 1). The idea was that investing in people and developing a welfare state in Europe should be crucial for both citizens and society.

The aim of this article and research is to prove that, in this knowledge-based society, mastering at least a foreign language is an important asset for the young generation who is graduating a University or another type of studies after high school, in order to have a better job and a better insertion on the labor market. Therefore, the hypothesis of this paper work is the fact that mastering foreign languages can be a guarantee for a better job, a better business, a better life on the labor market. We will try to demonstrate this affirmation by relevant examples and by the experience of the others. The purpose of this article is to contribute to the mainstreaming of learning languages in relevant policies and politics of the European Union by encouraging the various actors interested in language policy to work in a more trans-sectorial way and by contributing to the development of multilingualism in Europe.

1. Multilingualism – a valuable resource on the European space

In 2000, in Lisbon, the European Council stresses the strategy of the European Union for the future. One of the main goals was to modernize the European social model by investing in people and by combating social exclusion and to sustain a healthy economic outlook and a favorable growth (European Council, 2000: 3). Multilingualism and language learning was one of the important points on the European agenda.

Today's European Union strategy documents (Europe 2020) still make reference to multilingualism and language promotion as an aim or objective to be reached in the future. When we refer to multilingualism, we speak about the capacity of one person to communicate or to understand different languages at a certain level. The languages promotion makes reference to the policies implemented or to be implemented by the European Union in order to create the appropriate space for the teaching and learning of foreign languages. The vision of Europe in 2020 is of a smart, inclusive and sustainable economy (European Commission, 2012:

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4). At European level, all over the time, different initiatives were taken in order to complete this vision for the future.

A first signal was sent by the 2002 Barcelona Council, held under the heading “A competitive economy based on knowledge”, when it was decided that it is very important for each European to study at least two foreign languages from a very young age (European Council, 2002: 19). This is a policy still actual and applied in the majority of the European Union member states. Three years later, in 2005, this policy was taken by the European Commission in its “Framework Strategy for Multilingualism”. Several goals were settled up for that time for multilingualism. The European Commission promised to ensure that all the departments will apply its multilingualism policy through an internal network, that will continue to foster multilingualism, that will launch a Language portal providing information about multilingualism, that will give a greater role to its translation field offices, that will organize high-level seminars on multilingualism in the Member States, that will continue to offer universities grants and teaching assistance in the field of conference interpreting, that will continue to develop cost-effective multilingual conferencing and communication tools, that will continue to promote language knowledge and the language professions (European Commission, 2005: 14). If we take a look on all these strategies, we can observe that the European Commission kept the promises and accomplished all these goals. They are all visible in all the Member States. In the wake of this Strategy, the European Commission prepared a study on the impact on the European economy of shortages of languages skills. The study, called the ELAN study, was published in 2006, and it gives practical information and analysis of the use of language skills by SMEs and the impact on business performance. The results of this study are significant for all the European countries, because one of the conclusions is that a significant amount of business is being lost in European enterprises as a result of lack of language skills (Hagen, 2006: 17).

The next step for the European Commission was the creation, in 2008, of a Business Forum for Multilingualism. The final report, titled “Languages mean business – Companies work better with languages”, represents a recommendation for the European institutions, and can be seen as a favor for the European companies. The recommendations included the following – “the European institutions should create a permanent platform for exchange of best practices for companies, gathering relevant information from the business community, trade organizations, Chambers of commerce, trade promotion organizations, schools, and education authorities” (European Commission, 2008: 14). In other words, on one hand, the Forum proposes the creation of an online platform at European level for exchanging practices on multilingualism, and on the other hand the Commission regarded this platform as a means for policy implementation.

In 2011, as a contribution to the Business Platform for Multilingualism, established by the European Commission in 2009, a Network for the promotion of language strategies for competitiveness and employability (with the acronym CELAN) was created. The aim of this network was to make a contribution to the activities of its parent organization, the Business Platform for Multilingualism, by raising awareness among the target groups of the relevance of multilingualism, by enabling the business users to identify their own specific needs and to take appropriate action (CELAN, 2013: 4).

All this policy statements presented above, as well as various studies and researches in the field of multilingualism, have drawn the attention to the importance of languages skills. The CELAN project is only an example of the development of transversal solutions to multilingual problems across the business community in Europe, because the project provides the language content and knowledge, but particularly highlights the know-how and skills with which this knowledge can be applied (European Commission, 2011: 15). The current European Commission strategy documents for Europe 2020 make reference to multilingualism, but only in a limited way and as a vision plan for the future. On the other hand, we consider that languages and multilingualism should continue to be present on the European agenda and other projects as those who were already made could be done for the business community, for the European people and,

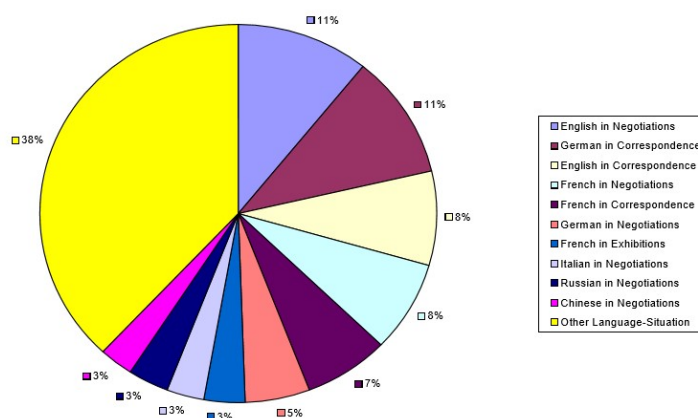
finally, for the common good. The importance of languages has to become aware for everybody, at any time, from European Institutions to local authorities, and from high functionaries to normal people.

2. Languages mean Business

The European Commission policy statements from Lisbon and Barcelona, as well as all the projects that have been implemented, show the importance of language skills. They demonstrate as well that the multilingualism should be promoted and recognized as a fundamental and essential element of corporate quality. The challenge is to integrate multilingualism in all strategies aiming at developing human capital for the future. The context in which we live requires the necessity of mastering of the largest possible number of foreign languages so that we could integrate on a very harmonious way on the international labor market and interact with other specialists from different European countries, and not only in the field in which each of us activates.

The ELAN Report about the Effects on the European Economy of Shortage of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise, one of the biggest and important studies at the European level, shows clearly the importance of languages in a growing economy and analysis the use of language skills by SMEs and the impact on business performance. The survey made for this study comprises 2000 exporting SMEs from 29 European states and 30 multinational companies with over 500 employees. Analyzing the language skills and the intercultural competences in these firms, the survey found that a significant amount of business is being lost as a result of lack of language skills: “Across the sample of nearly 2000 businesses, 11% of respondents (195 SMEs) had lost a contract as a result of lack of language skills. Many were unable or unwilling to indicate the size of the contract lost, but 37 businesses had lost actual contracts which together were valued at between € 8 million and € 13.5 million. A further 54 businesses had lost potential contracts worth in total between €16.5 million and €25.3 million. At least 10 businesses had lost contracts worth over €1 million.” (Hagen, 2006: 4-5). Another problem that experiences the SMEs is the intercultural communication. More than 10% of the responds of the same study were aware of having encountered intercultural difficulties. So, in order to succeed, the language skills and intercultural skills must be improved. The Figure no. 1 shows the languages and the situations which firms mentioned as a cause of missing contracts. The lack of English for negotiations is the most common situation, followed by German in correspondence with the same percentage. The second situation is English in correspondence, followed by French in negotiation, with the same percentage.

Figure no. 1: Situations in which languages are a cause of missing contracts

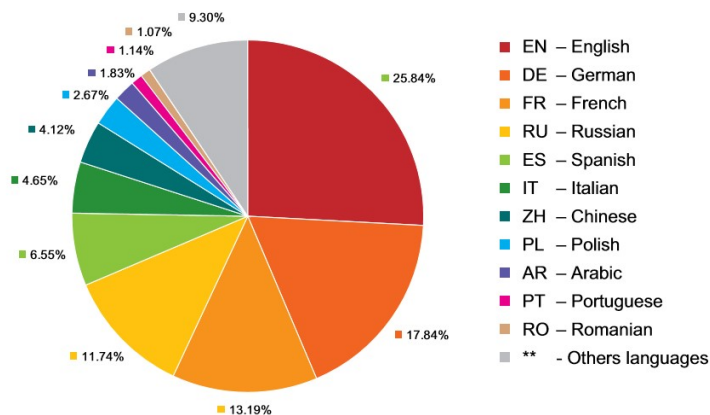


Source: Hagen, Stephen. 2006. *ELAN: Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise*, p.18

The same study shows that the main reason given by the firms about the causes of experiencing a loss of contract is the lack of staff speaking languages, followed by the lack of follow-up and lack of confidence of employees in the communication with the others. These are the specific causes for the lack of intercultural awareness and cultural affinity.

When it comes to speak about what languages would be more important to be learnt, we are tempted to declare that English is the lingua franca in business. It is true, the English language is very important in the European business environment and can be a strategic ally, but not all the markets are comfortable with this one and not all businesses function with knowing only English. For example, English is used for the businesses made with the Anglophone countries, UK, USA, Canada and Ireland, but as the same time German is used in the relations with Germany and Austria, Russian is used in the business relations with the Baltic States, French is used in the relations with France, Belgium and Luxembourg. English is not more widely spread and actually the study demonstrates that English should be seen more as a basic skill that a foreign language (Hagen, 2006: 11). Or, on the other hand, the English language can be viewed as a key language for gaining access to the business markets and then it would be important to use the language of the zone, as Russian, German and Polish in the Eastern Europe, French in the relations with Africa or Spanish in the relations with Latin America. The long-term business partnerships depend upon the relationship management and to achieve this, the knowledge of language of the target country is essential. Figure no. 2 shows the languages in which the firms have registered a need, according to the ELAN study.

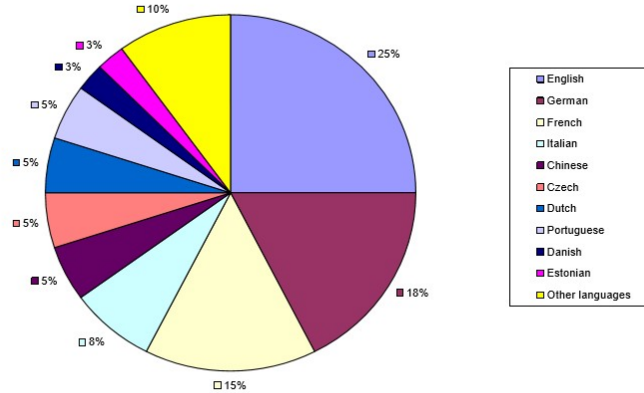
Figure no. 2: Languages that SMEs would need to acquire or improve



Source: Hagen, Stephen. 2006. *ELAN: Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise*, p.36

It is interesting to notice that English, German and French remain between the most important languages to acquire for a successful business. On the other hand, other languages as Russian, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Polish, Arabic, Portuguese and even Romanian seem to acquire more and more importance in the business world. Maybe, this is the reason why the firms have already trained their staff in the majority of these ones. Figure no. 3 shows, according to the ELAN study, the languages in which the firms have decided to train their staff. In the top position is English, followed by the German language and then French. Other languages in which the firms have trained their staff are Italian, Chinese, Czech, Dutch, Portuguese, Danish and Estonian. It is obvious, in this case, that the languages that the SMEs feel that would need to improve are approximately the same with the languages in which the firms have already trained the staff.

Figure no. 3: Languages in which firms have trained their staff



Source: Hagen, Stephen. 2006. *ELAN: Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise*, p.35

In other words, we could resume that languages are very important for the success of a business. There are different and various situations when the languages are indispensable. On the other hand, it would be an error to consider that there is a lingua franca in business. In function of the location and country, various languages can be useful for a business. So, it's demonstrated that languages mean business.

3. Languages mean a good job

It was been demonstrated that languages mean business and more languages one knows, more benefits can this bring to a company. If we look the situation from the point of view of the individual, we can state that languages mean a good job for a person, maybe a better one on the labor market. This is the reason why, the European Parliament and the European Council in its Recommendation from 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning set out eight important competences for each individual:

- 1) Communication in the mother tongue;
- 2) Communication in foreign languages;
- 3) Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology;
- 4) Digital competence;
- 5) Learning to learn;
- 6) Social and civic competences;
- 7) Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and
- 8) Cultural awareness and expression. (European Parliament, 2006: 4).

The European Parliament defines these competences as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for all the individuals for personal fulfillment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment (European Parliament, 2006: 4) and should be acquired during one's learning life. Languages, included mother tongue, are between the first two as importance. The communication in foreign languages is essential for the working life.

One could argue that speaking in the same sentence about a language and the value of a language can be a blasphemy, because languages are, first of all, vehicles of the literary creation and of culture, the reflection of the identity of a community and the expression of the individuality. But, there are various studies that demonstrate the relation between languages and their value on the labor market. François Grin from the University of Genève, in a study, demonstrates the direct relation between languages and a good job, and to be more exact, the relation between the linguistic competences and different incomes. He argues that an

employee who masters several languages will be able to better manage all kinds of tasks, whether it would be sales to a customer or contacts with suppliers who speak foreign languages. That means that he will create more value for his company, justifying a higher remuneration. So, we can speak about a different labor income in favor of the people who have these skills (Grin, 2016: 6). In his research, Grin based his results on official data given by public authorities. He mentions as well that the data he analyses can be combined with different phenomena, because, usually, the people who know several languages are also likely to be better trained and it is very possible that their income be held by the level of training more than by their language skills. At the same time, even if it is surprising, the language skills could play no role in the income of an employee (Grin, 2016: 7). As a conclusion to his research, Grin mentions that it's worth, for both individuals and companies to teach and learn foreign languages, because it's economically wise to not limit itself to a single one, as dominant as it could be a language.

Another interesting study, conducted by Sean Mulkerne and Anne Marie Graham in 2011 shows the direct relation between the employability and the graduates who have developed linguistic and intercultural skills. The authors show that on the labor market there is a continued demand for the foreign languages most commonly studied in universities. At the same time, businesses, in a wide variety of sectors, seek recruits with language abilities. The most common sectors in which companies need persons speaking languages are Sales and Trading, IT and Technology, Administrative, Finance, Project Management (Mulkerne and Graham, 2011: 3). It's important to mention as well that language learning encourages international mobility. The authors of the study mentioned above say that international mobility is highly valued by employers, as it suggests both a strong command of a language and an increased flexibility (Mulkerne and Graham, 2011: 4). When we speak about languages on the labor market, the variety of languages is very important. This is another aspect underlined by the research of Mulkerne and Graham: "The present research demonstrates that there is still a high demand for language and intercultural skills. This is an important message for any institution delivering language learning in higher education, at whatever level. Employers are looking for individuals with active language skills, able to work on an international stage at home or abroad. They are looking for a wide range of languages, across a variety of sectors" (Mulkerne and Graham, 2011: 6). In other words, the authors suggest the fact that language competences together with the intercultural skills represent an opportunity for the young generation, and at the same time an asset for a better job.

In her study "Stratégies et identités plurilingues des entreprises et des individus dans les entreprises", Eva Lavric shows that languages can be viewed as an economic resource on the labor market and there are enough cases when the success of a business is due to the language skills and experiences of the manager or of the employees. In her research, she explains different strategies of business and different behaviors of individuals in businesses, accordingly to the languages approaches adopted. Two of her conclusions are important for our study and retained our attention. The first one is the fact that the language needs are always subject of calculations of costs and profits, with all the compromises that this concerns and the second one is that the linguistic skills create their own markets (Lavric, 2009: 9-10). In order to be more precise, Lavric explains that linguistic competences certainly have positive effects on the success of a business, but it's somehow difficult to measure it. On the other hand, the benefit generated by foreign languages isn't really quantifiable, but the costs of multilingualism are perfectly. It's also important to add the fact that a good linguistic policy it will always carry its fruits on medium and long term periods, never on short ones (Lavric, 2009: 9), but for sure the benefits will appear. Regarding the fact that the linguistic skills create their own markets, Lavric mentions that usually an entrepreneur who has some linguistic competences has tendency to turn in his professional life towards corresponding markets (Lavric, 2009: 10). That means that usually a person who speaks a certain foreign language has tendency to create a business on the market whose language knows. Of course, usually we speak about a small business, a family company. But, a foreign language can create a business opportunity and, furthermore, a good job.

There are a variety of other studies that demonstrates the fact that languages are a good instrument on the labour market, and so they can be considered a way to obtain a better job. Economists have been interested in language issues for a long time and there are examples of economic discourse on the evolution of languages dated even from the last century (Grin, 2014: 2). Even this relation between Economy and Languages demonstrates the strong connection between language competences and the labour market.

4. Languages in the era of Globalization. Conclusions

In a globalized world like ours, being different by having language competences can represent a great asset. The globalization changes the conditions under which the languages are seen. Even if in the business world English keeps its leading role as the business language, the other languages will make the difference between the mainstream and excellence and will provide a competitive advantage.

Nowadays, labor markets are global and the integration of multicultural and multilingual workers is very important. All the languages should be used more resourcefully in order to reach all the linguistic groups and to build strategic relationships. Languages are not used only in some sectors of the market, like sales or marketing, but also in the sectors of training, international services, export and even human resources. On the other hand, border regional initiatives should be encouraged, because they can enhance language skills and mobility, but also cross-border exchanges that can be transformed into successful cooperation and businesses (European Commission, 2008: 5).

According to the European Commission, multilingualism is one of the key elements of integration of immigrants and it opens up the intercultural dialogue. Multilingualism could improve the situation for them and could contribute to their involvement on the labor markets. The immigrants could be a great value both as cultural mediators and as sales resources. This is the reason why the language skills of a migrant can be considered a good in a company and could be used more proactively (European Commission, 2008: 10).

The PIMLICO Project on language management strategies and best practices in European companies regarding the languages, financed by the European Commission, underlines the fact that, in today's globalized societies, many companies have adopted various internationalization processes in their language management strategies in order to grow the international development of the employees. These strategies are based on recording the employees' linguistic and cultural skills such as language ability, cultural competence, language affinity and attaching people to work in the most appropriate market for their language skills. The companies have changed as well their recruiting policies, exploiting sometimes all the resources: "Many have adopted secondment or 'buddying' programmes to introduce employees to the foreign language/culture and immerse employees in the 'ways' of the foreign market. In this regard, they are notable recruiters of *native speakers*. Native speakers often have other professional or management roles in the company, such as sales, or general management, or are accountants, but they are seen as a very useful resource to the company, which is exploited by the 'good' company. They sometimes offer language/cultural advice, make contacts in the local market and can often offer linguistic and cultural training to their colleagues on the staff. The presence of native speakers is seen as enhancing the international culture in the company and a way of gaining the trust of their local clients." (PIMLICO, 2011: 57-58).

On the other hand, the globalization process should not have to change the conditions under which language training is taking place and the role of the languages either. Languages should not be treated only as language commodities and the language trainings should not be transformed into services which are providing only additional skills on the professional area. As much as important a language is for a company, it should be seen as a complex process and not being reduced to some words. According to Noémia Bárbara, "while the language loses its human environment, its social experience, it becomes more and more instrumental, devoid of educational values, and embedded with training features to win out in the marketplace." (Bárbara, 2007:19).

Employers should value not only the language skills, but the inherent skills and attributes – in particular the international and cultural awareness – that speaking a foreign language brings. Languages are very important on today's labor market, but should not be reduced only at its instrumental value. Languages are an important asset, an instrument for a good job as long as they maintain their position of cultural communication.

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