

## Mastering several foreign languages: a real competitive advantage for the newly-graduates

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**Abstract.** Based on a 25-item omnibus questionnaire, the authors have tried to verify the place foreign languages hold in our respondents’ personal and professional life, as well as their feelings towards the implication of the educational system into the promotion of foreign languages. The research has highlighted the fact that HE institutions should strengthen their relations with the business environment and should start reshaping their language policies to be able to answer, in a more punctual manner, to their students’ latest demands as well as to those of the Labour Market.

**Keywords:** multilingualism, Global Labour Market, Human Resources.

### 1. Introduction:

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has started under the auspices of globalization and internationalization, of professional mobility, but, unfortunately, also under the ill-fated ones of the Global Economic Crisis. This would translate, on the one hand, in an intensification of the bilateral contacts between the European countries and cultures and, on the other hand, in increased competition when it comes to employability. The enhancement of the communication abilities in foreign languages has become particularly important within the framework of an increasingly competitive and global labour market, multilingualism being the latest challenge a European graduate should answer to. Nevertheless, as it also results from the Eurostat surveys, there are still huge discrepancies between the figures and percentages resulting from the country data, and the graduates’ self-perceived proficiency, which might explain their considerably diminished employability chances. Thus, in 2008, according to the Eurostat survey (Mejer, L. et al.; 49/2010, p.4), English is the most widely studied foreign language (being studied by 96% pupils at upper secondary level), followed closely by French (83% at upper secondary level), while German, Spanish and Russian are only studied in certain countries. However, when it comes to self-perceived knowledge of foreign languages, the Adult Education Survey (Mejer, L. et al.; 49/2010, p.5) reveals the fact almost 70% of the Romanians declare they do not speak any foreign languages, ranging next to Hungary, Portugal, Spain, Bulgaria and Greece, approximately 20% say they can speak one foreign language and only 10% of the interviewees state they can speak two foreign languages, 23 % of the people who declare being able to speak two foreign languages having completed graduate and post-graduate Higher education study programmes (Mejer, L. et al.; 49/2010, p.5)

### 2. Multilingualism: a contemporary socio-cultural reality

Multilingualism, understood as a contemporary phenomenon assumes the alternative use of several languages, of several linguistic systems as a consequence of current human networking. The importance of the phenomenon is given by the existence of an unprecedented volume of cultural, technical and scientific values, of a human and socio-professional literature, whose content must be known and turned to good value within the process of individual development.

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The need to know a foreign language is a must of the contemporary existence, since in the IT and the knowledge post-industrial society, the market offer is ever increasing, and the opportunity to fit into a socio-professional activity belongs to those who master an internationally spoken language or, the language of the country that makes the market offer; it creates genuine possibilities for individual mobility and for the creation of new work places; it promotes competitiveness, lifelong learning and intercultural dialogue. Multilingualism is not a whim, it has turned into a European value (and not only), a reality of the modern world, so that each individual may speak and be understood in his/her mother or foreign tongue. The knowledge of foreign languages has a direct impact on the system of inter-human relationships, on the adaptation to the new environment, on overcoming the anxiety towards newness, towards new forms of culture and civilization or towards the learning effort. At the same time, being able to speak several foreign languages satisfies both people's communication needs and the need of showing respect towards the identity of each human being involved in this process. What matters is that one knows what to make of themselves when one attempts at new realities they would like to fit into.

## **2.1. Work sample, hypothesis, and method**

Our research on the place held by multilingualism in terms of employability chances - has been conducted on a sample made up of 465 respondents, most of them graduates from "Petre Andrei" University of Iași but also from other Higher Education institutions. It highlights the ever increasing need to know a foreign language and to develop multilingual inter-human communication abilities. The objectives of our investigation have been outlined on the grounds of the imperative need of inter-human communication under the circumstances of the globalization, of the human activities, of the development of the post-industrial society and of the sustained development of the international labour market, as well as of the means by which the demands of foreign language learning are being satisfied in our country, under the current circumstances.

Our **hypothesis** starts from the premise that the richer the international labour market offer is, the more necessary is to master foreign languages; if the contemporary world is dominated by knowledge and communication in all the realms of the human existence- science, culture, technology, etc. – the organizational management of one's career must set policies, programmes and specific means for the achievement of an outstanding, dynamic individual career, which may be adjusted to the new conditions created on the labour market, targeting that kind of information which is accessible only through good knowledge of internationally spoken languages.

From a methodological perspective, the objectives and the hypotheses of the research have led to the drawing up of the main working tool- the 25-item impersonal and anonymous omnibus questionnaire-, structured on two dimensions: the first part aims at collecting enough data on the respondents that constitute the sample of our research, while the second is oriented towards the identification of the need to know foreign languages, as the main condition to be fulfilled for the integration and the socialization of the potential employees on the international labour market, for the acquisition of a new culture, or of the abilities and of the knowledge required by the job that is aimed at.

## **2.2. Data analysis and interpretation**

Consequently, the research was performed on a sample (465 respondents) which has been structured according to variables that were meant to provide enough information in conformity with the objectives and the hypotheses that have been set. With reference to the first dimension of the research- *the main data on the interviewees* – the research offers factual information that covers the specific requirements of the investigation. According to gender, 185 of the respondents (39.8%) are male, while in terms of age, we notice the fact that 75.9% are 30 years old or younger. Taking this variable into account, the sample is reconfigured as follows: 45.2% of the respondents belong to the age group 21-25 years; 30.7% to the age group 26-30 years; 13.8% belong to the age group 31-35 years, while 10.3% belong to the group 36 years old and older.

In terms of education, mention should be made that 56.3% (262) are graduates from "Petre Andrei" University of Iași, the rest of the respondents coming from other Higher Education Institutions in Iași, the

lawyers and the economists being predominant within the sample, covering 50.3% of the whole sample: 25.3% are economists, 25% are lawyers, 1.7% are sociologists, 10.3% are psychologists, 6.2% are social workers, 8.8% are engineers, 9.7% are doctors, 11% are philologists and 1.9% have other professions.

The fact that during the period of the research (January 2010- December 2010) of the total number of respondents only 46.6% were permanently employed, while 22.1% were unemployed is highly revealing. According to their contract type the structure is the following: 45.6% have a permanent labour contract, 11.0% - part-time labour contract, 10.1% work occasionally, 11.2% are freelancers, and 22.1% are unemployed. From this point of view, we appreciate the fact that the sample covers a wide range of professions, but also that 50% of the respondents do not have a permanent work place, being currently in search of the job that matches their education and acquired culture, a phenomenon which is also relevant on the national level, too (Catană, V. et al.; 2009, p. 4).

After having organized the data so that we may highlight the quality of the sample we were able to detect the essential aspects related to multilingualism, aspects which are structured on several dimensions. As far as the *need of knowing foreign languages* is concerned, we had in view the fact that multilingualism is a resource in the shaping and development of an individual's career, helping him/her build new cultural competences, increased and more efficient mobility, a resource that must be turned to good value by the knowledge society. One should not forget that Europe is the home for all its citizens and the workers' mobility, be they intellectual, or people working in the manufacturing or services industries, leads to the promotion of multilingualism, feature of a dynamic business world. From this point of view, learning foreign languages becomes a necessity of our existence, in a multicultural reality. The research highlights the fact that 39.8% of the sample declare that they have abilities for foreign languages, 23.9% believe that they do not have such abilities while in the case of 36.3% of the respondents the answer was "more or less"/ to a certain degree.

Extremely interesting is the fact that, under the circumstances set by the post- industrial, knowledge society, 63% are preoccupied to learn foreign languages while approximately 37% are not concerned about this matter, which is quite an important percentage in our opinion. As far as the positive answers are concerned, the respondents' feed-back regarding the motivation for learning foreign languages is the following: 41.3% - need it to adapt, integrate and socialize efficiently in new environments, 22.3% - declared that learning foreign languages is a necessity for someone who aims at acting in the post-industrial world, 18.1% say it is the basic condition in generating impact within the system of inter-personal relationships, bringing added value to the partners' character, 13.8% say foreign languages facilitate the migration on the labour market and 4.5% believe it is a condition of lifelong learning and the development of one's career.

Correlating these opinions with the frequency of using the known foreign languages and of the advantages one can get from mastering foreign languages rounds up the first part of the background research. As far as the frequency of using the known foreign languages is concerned, the research shows that 42.4% of the respondents said that they use it occasionally, only when abroad, 30.5%- never use it, 26.0% use it very rarely – because their work environment does not require it and only 1.1% use it on a day-to-day basis- being employed in multinational structures.

When it comes to perceiving the advantages of knowing foreign languages, rounded up with the opinions regarding the reasons for learning a foreign language, the research shows that 46% of the respondents believe it is a real competitive advantage when applying for a job, 34.3% show that the advantage resides in increased mobility, 12.0% - sustain the idea of the professional competitiveness while 7.7% - that of networking facilitation.

The second dimension of the background research refers to the *structure of the foreign languages that have to be known, and their levels of knowledge*. The opinions are founded on the realities of the contemporary world, where a restricted number of languages (English, French and Spanish) are acknowledged as "lingua franca", being spoken on a global level. The research shows that, as a whole, the respondents declare to be speakers of at least one foreign language (English mainly), while 38% are able to integrate in a new environment, mastering a second foreign language. The discrepancy between the general self-perceived knowledge of foreign language at national level, as it results from the Eurostat survey (Mejer

et al.; 49/2010, p.5), and our respondents' self-perceived knowledge results from their educational attainment. Thus, people who seem to perceive themselves as speakers of one or two languages are those with Higher Education studies. The opinions diversify when it comes to languages that should be used for a successful career. 58% have mentioned English, 27% French, 12% German and 3% for other languages (Italian, and Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Arabic). That "English is no longer the only show in town" had already been highlighted by David Graddol (Graddol, 2007, p.62). The languages that, in his opinion, already challenge the dominance of English in some regions are Spanish and Mandarin (Graddol, 2007, pp. 63, 64). If we correlate these opinions with the item "what language do you speak" – we should say that English is perceived as being known by almost 63% of the respondents, out of which 28% at pre-intermediate level, 31% at an intermediate level, 14.7 at upper-intermediate level and 16.3% at advanced level and only 10 % at proficiency level. French is known by 52% of the whole sample, out of which 34% at pre- intermediate level, 51.1% - at intermediate level while 14.9% - at upper-intermediate level. German is known by 18.1% of the respondents, out of which 32% know it at an intermediate level, 44.3% at upper-intermediate level, 16.7% at advanced level, and only 7% at proficiency level. If we relate these opinions with the education structures where they acquired this knowledge, it results, according to our research, that more than 72% of the respondents acquired the foreign language at intermediate level, 21% at advanced level, 7% at elementary level during high school; during university years more than 58% have received intermediate level linguistic training, 25% at upper intermediate level, while 17% at pre- intermediate level. As it results from our research, 72.9% of the respondents declare that they have built their foreign language skills within formal education structures, while 27.1% outside the formal education system. The importance of knowing foreign languages is also revealed by the opinions with reference to the introduction of the foreign language test within the human resources recruitment and selection process: 37.4% of the respondents are for its introduction during the recruitment and selection procedure of the prospective employees; 32.7% only if it is mentioned in the job description, 20% believe it is not needed, and 9.9% do not have an opinion on the topic.

*When we got to the best way of studying foreign languages at competitive level*, the research highlights the whole range of the process: 33.2% have chosen learning with native speakers, 26.2% for training in the country of target language, while 40.5% have ticked the answer "Romanian teachers". When it comes to the recognition method of their foreign language skills, 63.8% of the respondents would choose an international certification, which would give them more chances on the international labour market, 31.7% would choose a certification issued by a national testing center, while 4.5% do not express any opinion.

Although the realities of the post-industrial world, of the knowledge society direct the development and evolution trends towards globalization, our research reveals the fact that approximately 36% of the respondents would welcome a lingua franca that would enable the migration of the workforce and the improvement of the functional communication at global level. However, approximately 64% of the respondents reject the idea of promoting a universal language that would lead to the loss of the national identity, the language remaining an important part of the national culture. Such a point of view does not cancel the need to learn a foreign language, which, as shown above, promotes the integration and the socialization within new socio-professional environments and socio-cultural paradigms.

The last dimension of our research through the information we have acquired, presents the *orientations with respect to the development of multilingualism*. Out of the total number of full-time, part-time and seasonal employees, that is 66.7% (310 respondents), approximately 78% declare that the organizations they work for are not willing to make investments in this direction and only 22% stated that companies do invest in their employees' multilingual training. The answers we received are also supported by the recruitment agency feed-back from employers. (Catană, D. et al.; 2009, p.3) These opinions reinforce the fact that the organizations – training and development framework for individual and corporate careers- must re-evaluate their management, in the sense of identifying the needs to know foreign languages, turning these necessities into a dimension of the personal and/or professional development of their staff, if they wish to activate in a world based on skills and change. These are key features of the knowledge society, where the linguistic training of the staff becomes part of a company's competitive development, preserving value within the field of the socio-professional activities, and of corporate culture development.

The last part of the questionnaire aimed at relating the previous answers with the demands of introducing additional foreign language learning modules both within the structures of formal education in the large sense and the lifelong learning training system: 16.0% of the respondents were for the introduction of the foreign language module at primary school level, based on the experience of other European countries; 21.0% believe that the right moment would be the lower-secondary level, 33.0% the upper-secondary level and approximately 30.0% within the context of lifelong professional development. Such suggestions are supported in spite of the obstacles that seem to hinder the promotion of multilingualism. Thus, 52.0% of the respondents feel multilingualism is hampered, while 39.4% of the respondents believe such obstacles do not really exist, while 8.6% are not familiar with their existence or absence. Those who argue for the existence of hindrances in promoting multilingualism state that they are due to: 48.4% - the lack of funds for investments in this directions, which means that funding opportunities for the development of foreign language skills are not sufficiently promoted, especially those that may be accessed via European Lifelong Learning Programmes or the programmes for the development of the Human Resources with European funding; 22.5% - people's anxiety in relation to the learning effort; 8.1% insufficient promotion of multilingualism within the existing organizational structures and a certain inertia in the field; 21.0% other thresholds- cultural, psychological or age-related, etc.

### **2.3. Conclusion**

The conclusion we can draw refers to the fact that multilingualism as a cultural reality, result of the changes our contemporary world is permanently going through, multicultural dimension that stands out as a necessity, seems to be both understood and accepted by the great majority of the investigated persons, respectively by 84.5% of the whole sample, while 11.0% stated they do not perceive multilingualism as a multicultural phenomenon and 4.5% do not know what the concept stands for.

Thus, in line with the recommendations of the Business Forum for Multilingualism (2008, p. 7), we understand the concept as an important, multicultural phenomenon, integrated within the knowledge that must be promoted by organizational structures through their staff, to make sure that both the individual and organizational aims and goals are being carried out at the highest standards. Moreover, our research has been conceived as an alarm signal with strong implications both for the academic and the business environment. HE Institutions should strengthen their relations with the business environment and should start reshaping their educational policies from a more pragmatic perspective, answering thus, in a more punctual manner, to the latest requirements of the labour market. HE Institutions should work with and for the business environment when designing their foreign language offer, making it more varied and flexible. The student should have the possibility of choosing among different foreign language courses (at least four in our opinion), the final goal being the possibility to compete on the global labour market for a better paid or simply more interesting job.

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