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LANGUAGES AND THE LABOR MARKET – A LOVE STORY?

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Abstract

The paper attempts a review of the relationship between language education and the labor market, trying to see whether the language education in today's universities (with a focus on Romanian business universities) truly meets the more and more exacting demands of the labor market. The paper will try to provide answers to the following questions:

- is the curriculum of the universities adapted to the language realities current students /future employees will be facing in today's globalized society?*
- is there a need for multicultural education today, and are universities meeting those needs?*
- is there life after graduation for language education – i.e., who takes over after students leave universities, is there a form of continuation of their language education and who are the suppliers/beneficiaries?*

Key-words: labor market, language education, multiculturalism, globalization, lifelong learning

1. Introduction

The paper will ask some challenging questions, which are extremely important both for today's language education providers (universities, as well as private providers) and for the

beneficiaries – students and their future employers. We shall seek answers to those questions by resorting both to previous research undertaken by the author and colleagues, and to new research. The goal will not be just to review the figures available and draw our own conclusions, but also to outline the disparities between the objectives set by universities (virtually all of which emphasize the poignant need for multilingualism, and multilingual education) and the actual situation, as reflected in the curriculum of the respective universities.

2. The need for multilingualism and the answers to that need

To begin with, we would like to point out that the need for multilingualism is seen as imperative by most beneficiaries of language education.

As a recent article¹ shows:

*‘Virtually all of the most ambitious students in the world, at all levels – elementary, secondary, and tertiary – have one thing in common in 2013: the desire to become proficient in a language other than their native tongue, and possibly several languages. For some of these A-type students, “desire” is not strong enough a word – “requirement” is more apt.’*²

But even in the quoted article, the disparity we spoke of is highlighted:

*‘A Forbes article recently reported that despite growing demand among Americans for foreign language courses, American “schools at every level are balancing their budgets and offsetting reductions in government allocations by cutting their offerings and/or eliminating foreign language requirements.” This, despite the fact that right now roughly 18% of Americans report speaking a language other than English versus 53% of Europeans.’*³

This worrying trend in the US is fortunately not matched by the situation in the UK:

¹ *Globalised economy continues to drive demand for foreign language proficiency*, 23 Jan 2013, <http://monitor.icef.com/2013/01/globalised-economy-continues-to-drive-demand-for-foreign-language-proficiency/>

² Idem 1

³ Idem 1

*'By contrast, reforms to British curriculum (due to take effect in 2014) include all children in Britain being taught a foreign language from the age of seven, and Scotland announced last year that within a decade all pupils will start learning other languages from the first year of primary school instead of the currently mandated P6.'*⁴

An extremely interesting report from the influential Economist Intelligence Unit: *Competing across borders: How cultural and communication barriers affect business*. The Economist report based on a 2012 survey targeted at 572 executives in Europe, Asia Pacific, North America and Latin America underlines the importance of foreign language proficiency for graduates:

*'Even when recruiting for jobs in their home market, almost one-half of all companies say that prospective candidates need to be fluent in a foreign language and a further 13% say that multilingual ability is a key selection criterion.'*⁵

Once the need for multilingualism has been established, there is one more question that seems to demand an answer: which languages are the ones most sought by employees, and is English still holding the privileged position we have been accustomed to?

The answer to the first question is, as the reader might have realized, dependent on the location of the person asking the question. The article already quoted⁶ gives at least three different answers:

'UK-based The Telegraph recently posted a list of the ten best languages to study based on their relation to employability. The Guardian narrows it down (for Brits) to French, Spanish, Swedish, German, and Russian. Key Skills for Enterprise to Trade Internationally, published by Forfás (Ireland's policy advisory board for enterprise and science) and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) emphasises a more

⁴ Idem 1

⁵ *Competing across borders: How cultural and communication barriers affect business*. The Economist report , 25 April 2012,

http://www.managementthinking.eiu.com/competing-across-borders.html?quicktabs_content=research, p.15

⁶ *Globalised economy continues to drive demand for foreign language proficiency*, 23 Jan 2013, <http://monitor.icef.com/2013/01/globalised-economy-continues-to-drive-demand-for-foreign-language-proficiency/>

*comprehensive list: German, French, Spanish and Italian as well as Mandarin Chinese, Russian and Arabic.*⁷

As for the predominant position of English, the answer is the one we would expect:

*'And despite the rise of non-Western nations in the global economy, English is still the language most commonly used as the first language of business in international commerce.'*⁸

However, the same article shows that in the US, the Council on Foreign Relations argues that “the promotion of foreign language instruction should be a national priority,” noting:

*“The global economy is shifting away from the English-speaking world. Since 1975, the English-speaking share of global GDP has fallen significantly and will continue to fall. The Chinese economy will surpass the US economy in size soon after 2030. Latin America (Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking) and South Asia (Hindi- and Urdu-speaking) are growing strongly as well. Exports have accounted for half of post-recession US economic growth, and future US growth will increasingly depend on selling US goods and services to foreign consumers who do not necessarily speak English.”*⁹

The conclusion seems obvious: despite of the fact that, for the time being, English still maintains its privileged position, the future is not necessarily bright for those who consider English to be enough for a well-paid job and for a safe journey on the troubled seas of intercultural working relations.

3. Conclusions of previous research on the curricula of top universities

As we have stated in the introduction, the current paper benefits of the results of previous research undertaken by the author and colleagues in The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, and wishes to continue and develop these results.

⁷ Idem 1

⁸ Idem 1

⁹ Idem 1

In an article¹⁰ published in 2012, we have studied the curricula of leading world universities. The method we used in the study was the following: we selected from the Top 400 universities included in the World University Rankings 2011-2012, published by Times Higher Education, the best universities on each continent and we studied their curricula to see the approach leading world universities take to multilingualism. The top universities on each continent, according to the above-mentioned source, are as follows (the world rank is given in parentheses):

Table 1: Top universities on each continent¹¹

Continent	The first-ranking university	World rank
Europe	University of Oxford, UK	4 world
Asia	University of Tokyo, Japan	30 world
North America	California Institute of Technology, US	1 world
South America	University of São Paulo, Brazil	178 world
Oceania	University of Melbourne, Australia	37 world
Africa	University of Cape Town, South Africa	103 world
Source: http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2011-2012/top-400.html		

In the paper quoted, we have also mentioned the fact that the results of the study were limited by the amount of information available on the sites of the respective universities, as some of the information was restricted to current students of the universities.

¹⁰ Ionciă Diana-Eugenia, Dima Viorela-Valentina, *The role of educational services and of multilingualism in economic development. A case study on foreign language courses*, The 22nd edition of RESER International Conference, Services and economic development: Local and global challenges, 20-22 septembrie 2012, ASE, Bucuresti, ISBN: 978-606-505-565-0, ISI Proceedings

¹¹ Idem 10

We shall briefly outline here some of the results of the study and add our comments. We shall first quote the main conclusion of the research:

*'The study on the curricula of the business and economics sections of the above-mentioned universities largely revealed the fact that the study of foreign languages does not generally represent the focus of study in the respective universities. In most cases, foreign language classes are not part of the mandatory courses for business and economics students. The results might be seen as surprising, given the fact that all the universities mentioned include multilingualism as a key element in their language strategy, and have well-wrought policies regarding the admission of international students.'*¹²

Some of our explanations for this fact were the following:

*'However, there are aspects which might account for some of these results. To begin with, 4 of the 6 universities studied are in English-speaking countries, only two of the leading world universities being different in this respect (University of São Paulo, Brazil and University of Tokyo, Japan). This would account for the absence of the study of English as a foreign language in the curricula of the universities (for domestic students), for obvious reasons. It does not, though, account for the absence of mandatory courses in the case of languages other than English.'*¹³

Another important aspect we mentioned was that – ‘while generally not offered as part of the mandatory subjects business and economics students have to take, foreign language classes are included in the educational supply of the universities either as optional courses or as additional courses offered by language centers in the universities to students and teachers alike.’

¹⁴ Also, ‘in the case of international students, for the four universities located in English-speaking countries, since courses are in English, knowledge of the language at an advanced level

¹² Idem 10, p.8

¹³ Idem 12

¹⁴ Idem 12

is a prerequisite. Most universities require a level equivalent to a score in the IELTS examination of at least 7.5 (although requirements vary).¹⁵

To the conclusions quoted on the curricula of the leading world universities, we would like to add one more element included in previous research, perhaps the one which holds the most significance for a Romanian reader: our remarks on the situation in Romania, with a focus on the state of things in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies.

4. Concluding remarks for the case study in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies

In the same article quoted above, we presented the conclusions of research undertaken in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies.

*'The aim of the present case study has been to show the students' perceptions on the usefulness of such a service in an economic university meant to equip its graduates with the theoretical knowledge and practical competences that would enable them to perform outstandingly on the job. The Faculty of Marketing was chosen for the case study since its students attend foreign language classes throughout their undergraduate studies. Hence, we could observe the evolution of students' perceptions from the first to the third year of study. Moreover, we were able to interview students from in campus and distance learning programmes, to see whether there is any difference in the two categories of students.'*¹⁶

The main findings of the case study were:

'The level of attendance and class participation points to the students' interest in foreign languages classes. The students' answers on the use of foreign languages at work provide insight into this great interest: 37% of the respondents had a job, out of which 90% used English for various in-company and business to consumer activities, alongside other half a dozen languages (French, Spanish, Italian, German, Turkish and Portuguese). Since respondents actually use these languages at work they were able to form an informed

¹⁵ Idem 12

¹⁶ Idem 10, p. 17

*opinion on the usefulness of foreign language classes for their emerging career. Consequently, 83% said that foreign language classes are 'very useful' for professional development. Moreover, 77% of the respondents said they would like to study more than one foreign language during university. By doing this they hoped to increase their chances to work for a multinational company or to find a job abroad. The usefulness of foreign language classes goes beyond the actual use of foreign languages at work. To this extent, respondents have pointed to the fact that foreign language classes are a means to acquire and develop transferrable skills (such as: business correspondence, documentation, oral presentation, negotiation skills), which they also found beneficial on the job.'*¹⁷

We would like to add to the conclusions presented above, the conclusions of brief research on two more Romanian universities, a state university (The Bucharest University, The Faculty of Administration and Business) and a private one (The Romanian-American University).

5. A glance at the curricula of The Bucharest University, The Faculty of Administration and Business and of The Romanian-American University

A quick look on the websites of two other Romanian higher-education institutions providing degrees in business studies, namely The Bucharest University, The Faculty of Administration and Business and The Romanian-American University will reveal interesting facts.

For starters, we shall give a quotation from the site of The Bucharest University, The Faculty of Administration and Business, reflecting the university's view of the importance of foreign languages: 'The curriculum grants special attention to the competencies in informatics, law and foreign languages.'¹⁸

¹⁷ Idem 16

¹⁸ <http://www.faa.ro/index.php/studii-tip-licenta-2/administrarea-afacerilor>, my translation (The English version of the site does not contain this phrase)

We studied the curriculum of the respective faculty, the domain ‘Business Administration’¹⁹, which can be consulted at the link in the footnote, to see whether the interest expressed in the quotation above is matched by the actual supply of courses offered by the university, and here are our findings: foreign languages are studied in just two semesters, in the first and second year, the second semester of each, and only seminars are offered; the credits for the foreign languages seminars are about half of those offered for the other courses (2 credits, versus 4 credits for – a random example – Mathematics, or 6 for Microeconomics). The foreign languages offered are English or French.

A brief conclusion: the interest expressed in the ‘mission statement’ is far from being matched by the courses supply, and remains just an aspiration.

In the case of the private university, The Romanian-American University, the situation seems to be different, according to the university’s site.²⁰ The university has a Foreign Languages Department, which provides courses in various languages, including some ‘exotic’ languages like Chinese or Japanese. Furthermore, the university offers paid modules (intensive courses – 40 hours per module) in English, French, Spanish, German, Italian, all levels, at dumping prices. We have no information as to the quality of the courses, and whether they are in demand, but, at least at a declarative level, the private university seems to show more interest than the state university in ‘selling’ its foreign languages offer.

6. Instead of conclusions: the most popular foreign languages and the relation with the labor market

According to a recent article published in *Forbes*²¹:

‘Calculating the exact value of learning a second language has vexed economists. For example, it is difficult to separate the wage increases associated with learning a foreign language from other, closely co-related variables like education and motivation.’

¹⁹ <http://www.faa.ro/index.php/studii-tip-licenta-2/administrarea-afacerilor>

²⁰ <http://www.rau.ro/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=111>

²¹ *Most popular foreign languages*, http://www.forbes.com/2008/02/22/popular-foreign-languages-tech-language_sp08-cx_rr_0222foreign.html

We couldn't agree more. However, we think the attempt to see whether language education increases employability and the possibility of earning a higher wage is not futile. Let us see the results of some of the research undertaken to this end.

In 2005, Albert Saiz, an economist at the University of Pennsylvania, and Elena Zoido, an economist at the consulting group LECG, published a study comparing wage premiums for American college graduates who spoke Spanish, French, German, Italian, Russian and Chinese as a second language. In their findings, the law of supply and demand prevailed.

*'With its 1.7% wage premium, Spanish was the least valuable, followed by French (2.7%). Knowledge of German, Italian, Russian and Chinese was slightly more valuable, translating into an average 4% income boost.'*²²

A study by Aimee Chin, an associate professor in the Economics department at the University of Houston, has found that immigrants to the U.S. who go from speaking English "well" to "very well" see a wage rise of 30%. Chin's research, published in 2003, evaluated earnings of individuals who had emigrated to the U.S. as children and eventually entered the job market. Chin and her co-author found that compared to a person who speaks English poorly, those who have mastered it earn 67% more.

The results of the study above are not surprising, and are actually arguments for the consolidation of the position of English as the language for business and employment.

One last conclusion: while universities worldwide acknowledge the need for language education, and use it as a marketing tool in attracting their students, few universities keep their promise once students have opted for a university. A preliminary conclusion for Romanian universities – doubled by a warning – if these universities will not wake up to the language realities of the labor market, private language providers certainly will – and will reap the benefits when filling in the gaps created by the insufficient supply of the state universities.

²² Idem 21

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