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Abstract

The main objective of the present paper is to explore **the way higher education discourses reflect the realities of university learning and teaching**. Are the values adopted in the mission statement of most universities that consider internationalization as an option followed in the everyday actions of their teaching and administrative staff? The author will look at **the way language use influences access to a certain type of education and later how this affects the availability of jobs**. **Linguistic barriers** need to be evaluated in order to discuss the important political and social issues as well as natural phenomena that affect the world today. This is important when correlated to the huge and constantly growing **costs of the translation and interpretation services in the European Union** and beyond. The paper will try to raise some issues related to students' expectations and institutional offers in the field of languages education and research considered from the perspective of Europe 2020.

Key words: language education, higher education values, linguistic barriers, internationalization

Introduction

Higher education has been under constant and accelerated change everywhere in the world in the second part of the 20th century and the beginning of the new millenium. What traditionally used to be perceived as a field of contemplation, research and, why not, convenience has changed into an extremely competitive and, mainly in the last two decades, increasingly dynamic environment both at institutional and personal levels. Massification or democratization of higher education, MOOCS (massive open online courses), educational markets, competitive advantages of universities, entrepreneurial universities, quality assurance, ranking of universities, teaching and research/advanced research higher education institutions – are only a few of the concepts that are widely used in the public sphere nowadays. While they are mostly positive and motivating concepts conjuring up visions of an enlightened knowledge society in which research, innovation and creativity are key elements of social life, they also carry with them darker connotations about the battle for expansion of university influence that is materialized not only in the increasing number of students, but also in the social prestige of their teaching staff, prestige that is materialized in income, affluence and influence.

The pressures of the “bottom-line economy” (Callahan, 2004, p. 24) with an almost exclusive focus on money, in which only materially documented success counts and quality standards are quantified, have transformed higher education in a battlefield in which there are winners and losers and universities tend to become businesses. Nevertheless, higher education is a field in which, more than in sports, what should count is the process, that is participation translated into the synergy of minds that working together could contribute to the pushing forward of the frontiers of knowledge or, less dramatically and more realistically,

pushing backwards the ignorance of some of our students while attracting those students or industry specialists who have fresher and more diverse views than academics.

The present article looks at the way higher education discourses reflect the realities of university learning and teaching: are we truly honest, fair and transparent in our discourse to our students, to ourselves and to the rest of our stakeholders? Then I will look at how language use influences access to education and jobs and briefly at some issues connected to language barriers in today's globalized world.

Discourse and reality issues

It has been the nature of intellectuals in general and of academics in particular to be haunted by doubts and internal debates on theoretical issues as well as on practical decisions they have been called to take. Nevertheless, in the field of applied modern languages some of those doubts rarely surface in professional seminars or workshops which are usually crowded with content and methodological issues and even in staff room small talk or department meetings they are often avoided as uncomfortable.

Some of the strong points that are constantly reinforced in institutional discourse and have become stereotypes in the way we address our students are connected to the efforts that have to be made in order to become a good, successful professional. By a successful professional most people understand a good and secure position in a strong company, preferably multinational, with clear and motivating promotion opportunities, a large income and a good package of benefits. A successful professional has easily noticeable outward signs of success materialized in property, international travel, and expensive training opportunities. In order to become successful professionals, students need to study hard and, consequently, get the highest grades, be able to transfer knowledge across disciplines and into real life, be on the alert to detect opportunities, take opportunities and move on in their careers and, always be transparent and ethical in their behaviour. They have to study hard, but also manage somehow to get experience which is better acquired not in the internship system which is yet too formal and superficial, but mainly by getting a job and being noticed in what one does there. These are the constant points that are reinforced by most instructors when addressing a new class or by university management on official occasions such as the opening of a new university year.

However, what is the reality in many of today's Romanian universities? Quite often the insistence on hard work, on library research and meaningful project work are met with silence and the "we know better look" when we address our students. In a system in which evaluation is made most often through multiple choice tests, not out of pedagogical reasoning, but simply because of personal convenience and administrative costs, the results, excluding cheating, which is fairly common, do not always favour those students who study hard. The role of project work – which today is a compulsory component of most grading systems - is important as it helps the assessment of the qualitative components of learning. Those components cannot be evaluated through multiple choice tests because they refer to the ability to express oneself in a clear, coherent and logical way, to the extent and choice of one's vocabulary, to the ability to research one's subject, to the degree of independence from mainstream attitudes, etc., in a word to the capacity of thinking critically. However, still a lot of projects are downloads from the internet, without even an attempt at adaptation, localization of content and, most important, without quoting the source. The reasons for such situations are complex, are not even typical only of the Romanian system of higher education, but it is not the purpose of the present paper to deal with them.

One way to look at the above is to reflect upon the state and status of university teaching staff as compared with the rest of the occupations in Romania. While the pressures and constraints of everyday life add to the difficulties of a career based on constant and continuous study, in conditions of severe underpayment comparative to similar jobs in the industry, in a system that is changing in discretionary, unpredictable and controversial ways, it is clear why the appeal to take up a university career, which used to be the cherished dream of most of the top part of university graduates, is no longer that appealing. Therefore, when students are asked whether they intend to choose a teaching career in higher education the answers are most often negative. Even those who embark on teaching careers take up a second job as a plan B or later on leave the field of education for better paid jobs. The high turnover for junior staff in universities as well as the almost total lack of candidates for entry level jobs due to their absurd selection criteria are, in my opinion, clear indications that education is regarded as a temporary solution on a way to

a more prestigious and better paid career. International research shows that academic employment may start having a negative image due to lack of real career prospects not only in Romania, but in the rest of Europe as well (Huisman et al., 2002, p. 141). Recruitment and retention of academic staff is going down every year due also to demographic trends which strongly affect the ability of universities to attract the number of students they have been comfortable with. The sad conclusion is that in Romania higher education is perceived as a second or even third best option from the point of view of career desirability both in discourse and in reality.

Another way to look at the skepticism with which students meet the urge of teaching staff to put in hard work, research and self-study is the practice of universities facing the demographic decline. Giving up entrance examinations for less difficult admission procedures, lowering standards of passing exams for fear of not having too many drop-outs and affecting negatively university incomes from tuition fees are some of the issues that students are well aware of when given the hard-work discourse. They prioritize between the constraints of university study and the demands of the job market in which employers no longer need “knowledge”, but skills, competences and a good, flexible attitude necessary in a fluid work setting.

Cheap and well-trained labour force, good language skills, highly disciplined labour, flexible frame of mind have been only a few of the stereotypes in the pro-European discourse of the pre-accession period. This was and still is the way in which Romanian official brochures describe to potential investors the key elements of the Romanian market. And this is the way foreigners who have set up businesses in Romania explain why they chose this part of the world and why they had been successful in using the local advantages. On the other hand, however, with the growing needs of an economy from which a significant part of good professionals have left in search of better paid and more appreciative working environments, the realization of the gap between what is considered well-educated people and a disciplined attitude towards work and organizational lines of authority in Romania and the rest of the European Union seem to have deepened. At entry level jobs human resource managers want good language skills, computer proficiency and an open, committed attitude with a continuous availability to learn. In other words employers need soft skills. For middle and top management positions experience and former performance will be taken into account, but also and mainly leadership and strategic thinking. (Racareanu, 2012) Who teaches or rather trains students in universities to meet the needs of the employers or even better to become employable in such a dynamic work environment?

Many areas of soft skills development are covered during language activities organized by the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication which is one of the largest in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES). The Department has sixty full time teaching staff, nine support staff and another twenty-five collaborators. In such a large department, functioning in one of the largest universities in Romania, institutional communication can be difficult, and most of the times it is so, which accounts for a very slow decision making process and for informational bottlenecks. Although students are generally appreciative of the quality of the teaching and learning experience that is offered by the Department there are those who complain. Some of the reasons for students’ complaints are: lack of transparency in explaining course objectives and requirements, testing and evaluation criteria and lack of meaningful feedback whenever required. Most of the complaints are justified and although progress has been made (faculty curricula and course syllabi are available on the university website, some course materials are offered free by instructors on their personal websites, test design and test grading have been improved with debatable results however, student participation is encouraged in management activities, there are complaint procedures) the gap existing in comparison with international practices is still considerable. Romanian students’ mobility has increased and therefore their familiarity with western universities best practices puts a lot of pressure on their Romanian professors.

Business communication and language use

Let’s have a look at the **what** of the teaching of communication in the context of business higher education with a focus on the Faculty of International Business and Economics (FIBE) of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies.

BUES is one of the largest higher education institutions in Romania even after enrollments have dropped. The academic staff includes around 600 full-time, highly qualified members, out of whom 300 professors and readers which shows the ageing of the teaching staff and the system's incapacity to attract young people.

BUES enjoys a good reputation worldwide and this is reflected in the applications from overseas students for Bachelor's courses, master and doctoral studies. Most undergraduates, master and doctoral students are from Albania, Angola, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bulgaria, China, Columbia, Congo, Croatia, Egypt, Gabon, Germany, Greece, Iran, Lebanon, Macedonia, Great Britain, Morocco, Nigeria, the Moldavian Republic, Russia, the USA, Syria, Sweden, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Yemen. There is also an increasing number of Erasmus students. These figures point to the need of a well organised department for international students, with clearly communicated procedures and with staff that is well trained in intercultural communication and relevant foreign languages or at least English.

At the Faculty of International Business and Economics, education at the graduate diploma level is based on a curriculum that combines core subjects that are fundamental to the field of economics with specialty and elective disciplines. This, hopefully, ensures the development of soft skills so important for international business. FIBE offers full programs of studies in both English and Romanian as the primary language of instruction. Moreover, English is a mandatory subject for all attending students. The unique selling point of FIBE as compared to the rest of the BUES is the wide range of elective foreign languages and business communication courses that are offered (in French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish as well as in Arabic, Japanese, Chinese and Turkish).

Communication is taught in the university in both Romanian and in foreign languages at undergraduate level. In the Romanian language the subject is taught by people with a background in economics while in foreign languages it is taught by people with a background in philology who specialize in one or several of the foreign languages taught in our university and some of them have also a degree in economics. The general communication courses tend to be theoretical and mainly adaptation of international textbooks with no or very few local examples.

At Master level there are several programmes which look at communication from the perspective of the department which developed them (marketing communication, managerial communication, banking communication, etc.). At doctoral level there is no area devoted entirely to communication studies as, in the Romanian system of higher education, this area comes under the jurisdiction of the Faculty of Sociology, which is part of the University of Bucharest. Those who are interested in continuing their education and doing research in the field of business communication have to "disguise" their theme so that it fits the specializations that the doctoral school of the BUES offers. The university is accredited to organise doctoral studies in two branches of science and several fields, namely: *economics* in the fields of management, international business and economics, accounting, marketing, finance, economics, economic cybernetics and statistics, and *law*.

Teaching communication is essential to: the development of the whole person; the improvement of the educational enterprise; being a responsible citizen of the world, both socially and culturally; and, **succeeding in one's career** and in the business enterprise. In other words access to continuing one's education as well as to a better job is done through improved communication skills and mastering several languages (Morreale et al., 2000, p. 1).

Enhanced communication skills are needed for having success in the study of, or rather the demonstration of having studied, all disciplines and later on in increasing one's employability factor in one's future life time. The importance of communication skills for the workforce, particularly for what are called today knowledge workers, is evidenced by the relatively many research programmes to assess the competencies (skills) that students need when entering the world of work. Morreale (2000, p.29) points out the stringent need for a variety of communication skills, such as *interpersonal skills, working in teams, speaking and listening, writing*, that are considered essential to over 50% of the jobs in today's labour market.

The European Union (EU) has been well aware of the importance of communication for its success as a political endeavor. Almost a decade ago it produced a White Paper on Communication (White Paper, 2006) which acknowledges the 'communication gap' between the European Union and its citizens. The

existence of this gap made all the EU institutions give a new emphasis to communication work. But Europe also has to overcome its many linguistic barriers. This is an issue that will be explored in the next section.

In terms of communication Americans have an obsession with public speaking. Speaking in public is ranked the number one fear of the nation (Bruskin, 1993) and this might explain why the curricula of schools and universities include a large variety of courses in public speaking and debate. Comparatively in Europe there is a large diversity of traditions and of approaches to developing the same skills: from a very similar one in the UK to almost no formal interest at all in Romania.

The importance of communication in the curricula of higher education institutions in Europe can be inferred from the Dublin descriptors developed in 2003 and adopted in the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area. They offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with awards that represent the end of each of a (Bologna) cycle or level. The framework consists of three cycles (undergraduate, master and doctoral) and offers generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges in the first and second cycles. **Table 1** presents only the outcomes for communication competences on all the three cycles, undergraduate, master and doctoral respectively. On a range of five sets of competences that each cycle of education should develop, communication is placed on the fourth place in all three cycles. Outcomes are kept very general in their description as not to undermine their effectiveness in specific countries.

At the end of the first cycle graduates will be required to be able to “communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences”. However, the way they communicate those ideas is as important as what they communicate. The author has the experience of working with international students from very diverse cultures (Thai, Chinese, Danish, Middle East, etc.); with different communication patterns and styles which made it difficult to discriminate between how much information was distorted by the difference in communication styles and practices or by lack of adequate study. This is a situation that has to be addressed by giving special attention to intercultural communication.

Table 1. The Dublin descriptors for communication outcomes and competences at the end of the three EHEA cycles

	Outcomes	ECTS Credits
First cycle qualification	Qualifications that signify completion of the first cycle are awarded to students who: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences; 	Typically include 180-240 ECTS credits
Second cycle qualification	Qualifications that signify completion of the second cycle are awarded to students who: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and nonspecialist audiences clearly and unambiguously; 	Typically include 90-120 ECTS credits, with a minimum of 60 credits at the level of the 2nd cycle
Third cycle qualification	Qualifications that signify completion of the third cycle are awarded to students who: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise; 	Not specified

The difference in communication styles is also evident in the way master dissertations or doctoral theses are written in various cultures, particularly those that are more distant from the Anglo-Saxon pattern prevailing in today's official institutional communication.

The curriculum in the higher education institutions in Romania has undergone complex changes and it continues to be updated to the standards of European and American models. The teaching of communication is part of this overall change. But the politics of change triggered mainly by the Bologna process made the current situation in BUES to be characterized mostly by the teaching of theory.

There are not enough opportunities for meaningful communication, such as writing and speaking for students. There are very few oral exams and the written exams are in their great majority multiple choice tests. Even in the students' research session, a once a year popular event, in which undergraduate students present the research they did under the supervision of a member of the academic staff, they are not given the opportunity to speak for more than three to five minutes. So much for public speaking for Romanian students of business who will need to compete in a tough business environment to "sell and buy" contracts! Besides general courses on communication and negotiation there is no course on public speaking and debate. As there is no "writing centre", either. The lack of a "writing centre" makes it difficult for students and tutors to go through the process of dissertations and theses writing. The lack of formal style of Romanian end-of-cycle assignments is notorious, even if some steps have started to be made especially by individual tutors and/or faculties.

Linguistic barriers

There is an increasing recognition of the linguistic barriers that affect integration and convergence processes in spite of the creation of the single economic market in Europe. The EU funded research done by META-NET (the Multilingual Europe Technology Alliance), a network of excellence dedicated to fostering the technological foundations of a multilingual European information society concluded that Europe is facing a severe communication crisis. META-NET (Europe 2020) underlines that the linguistic diversity and richness of Europe is a defining part of the continent's cultural heritage, but the same conditions also represent a barrier to commerce, trade, and continuing European integration. The research points out well known issues such as the lack of European-wide debates concerning various problems or the fact that large amounts of information is not available in all European languages in spite of the efforts done in this respect.

META-NET has developed a Strategic Research Agenda (SRA) that shows how focused investment in language technologies can generate considerable economic benefits that by far outweigh the costs. "The SRA shows how Europe can turn its linguistic and cultural diversity into a competitive advantage. The European language technology community, in both academia and industry, has strong competence in multilingual technologies and is in a pole position to play a leading role in the next IT revolution involving human language, knowledge, and emotion in meaningful ways." (META-NET, 2013). Language technology supports human activity in everyday tasks even at present in activities such as writing e-mails or reserving flights. It enables software that can process spoken or written human language. It helps searching for and translating web pages, operating car's entertainment system or mobile phone with spoken commands. The vision of the strategy proposed by META-NET is that, irrespective of location, when people need information or help, they will simply ask for it. Lifting the communication barrier between people and technology will change the world. Language technology will allow people to collaborate, learn, do business, and share knowledge across language borders and independently of their computer skills. Universities are invited to join in this collaborative process.

Conclusions

Communication may affect international processes particularly through the credibility of the institutions and organisations involved, as well as through the high costs of translation services that are required in the various environments, including higher education. It can also affect individual's education and employment access.

One of the main roles of universities is to invest in communication research and education as a means to foster increased cooperation for the benefit of their stakeholders.

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