

Foreign Languages and Employability in the EU

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Abstract—This paper presents the phenomenon of multilingualism becoming the norm rather than the exception in the European Union. It also seeks to describe the correlation between the command of foreign languages and employability. It is evident that the challenges of today's societies when it comes to employability are more and more complex. Thus, it is one of the crucial tasks of higher education to prepare its students to face this kind of complexity, understand its nuances, and have the capacity to adapt effectively to situations that are common in corporations based in the countries belonging to the EU. From this point of view, the assessment of the impact that the command of foreign languages of European university students could have on the numerous business sectors becomes vital. It also involves raising awareness of future professionals to make them understand the importance of mastering communicative skills in foreign languages that will meet the requirements of students' prospective employers. The direct connection between higher education institutions and the world of business also allows companies to realize that they should rethink their recruitment and human resources procedures in order to take into account the importance of foreign languages. This article focuses on the objective of the multilingualism policy developed by the European Commission, which is to enable young people to master at least two foreign languages, which is crucial in their future careers. The article puts emphasis on the existence of a crucial connection between the research conducted in higher education institutions and the business sector in order to reduce current qualification gaps.

Keywords—Cross-cultural communication, employability, human resources, language attitudes, multilingualism.

I. INTRODUCTION

TO begin with, it is vital to connect the topic of learning foreign languages by university students with the European Union, since it is strongly believed that all those young people studying at universities in Europe are not only the citizens of their home countries, but they also belong to the community of the EU and their education can certainly contribute to its development.

It is also fundamental to describe the correlation between the command of foreign languages and employability. It should be noticed that different skills, such as language, communication, adaptability and critical thinking are regarded as the main attributes that graduates are obliged to have when they intend to enter labour market, especially when professionals are supposed to work with advanced technologies. It is evident that the challenges of today's societies, when it comes to employability and to the reality of the current labour market, are more and more diversified.

This paper reviews evidence concerning the foreign language competences of European citizens and presents new findings about the relationship between foreign language skills

and the likelihood of being in employment [1]. Thus, it is one of the main tasks of universities to prepare their students to face the current situation on the job market in the member states of the EU. Hence, it is noticeable that job recruiters' requirements focus on the mastery of foreign languages among university students since it ought to be remarked that it has an inevitable impact on business in the EU. Headhunters representing corporations with a strong position on the market are becoming more and more aware of this correlation. Nonetheless, universities tend to be often heavily criticized for not enabling graduates to obtain the so-called real contexts connected with their professional practice. For that reason, it is obvious that one of the crucial issues that constitute the mission of universities is prospective graduates' employability. Thus, higher education institutions and universities are supposed to make more effort to meet these characterised challenges. Effective strategies that should be adopted to facilitate graduates' employability are, for example, introducing more availability of vocational language courses, or in case of the universities where it has already been introduced, the number of hours of foreign languages in the curriculum ought to be increased.

II. DISCUSSION

It is significant to highlight the strong bond between higher education institutions and the world of business, not only in Europe, but in the whole world, especially in the sector of commerce that is dominated by foreign languages, such as English and Mandarin. Therefore, companies based in the EU, especially the future members of our community, which are the so-called developing countries, should rethink their recruitment and HR policy in order to take into account the importance of foreign languages.

Academic qualifications and adequate proficiency in foreign languages are vital taking into consideration various fields of career. It regards tourism, diplomatic services, international journalism, mass communication, public relations, entertainment, arts, publishing, interpretation and translation and federal organizations. It also offers the opportunity of working in multinationals corporations and specialized governmental agencies.

The focus should be on the goal of the multilingualism policy developed by the European Commission which is to make sure that young people master at least two foreign languages which is crucial in terms of their professional sphere of life. There seems to be a misconception that the command of foreign languages is beneficial only if university students are willing to work in a specific field, such as the education sector. Nonetheless, nowadays graduates need to be aware of the importance of their knowledge of foreign

languages. Language skills allow people to study or to work abroad and to live in a multicultural environment. It is observed that university graduates are presented with numerous opportunities in terms of their future professional career. Their language competences are considered a factor of competitiveness at a macroeconomic level and an essential element that is to increase the individuals' employability.

The Strategic Framework of the European Commission regarding Education and Training from 2020 highlights that both skills and qualifications requirements undergo the constant process of evolution of the job market. As it was claimed by the European Commission: 'Skills, competences, and qualifications that people need change over time. To deal with these changes people need to be equipped with a variety of basic skills, including literacy, numeracy, foreign languages, science and digital skills.' [2]

It was in 2013 when the British Chamber of Commerce recognized that the UK's export policy was adversely affected by the lack of FL skills of its business actors: the markets were going through a constant state of expansion and the language barriers were incessantly increasing. It was stated that 'only 5% of the inquired entrepreneurs claimed to be fluent in French and in the other most common business languages, namely Mandarin, Russian, German, Spanish and Italian.' [3]

It is striking that OECD states that: 'only 33% of young adults in Portugal have higher education qualification, a situation which is far below the OECD average (42%).' [4] Increasing these comparatively low levels of education will be crucial to improve employees' well-being and increase their monthly income. Better skills and qualifications will also reduce the increasing inequality in the distribution of income by providing higher income-earning opportunities for university graduates willing to master more foreign languages. It should be noticed that there is a direct relation between the research conducted in higher education institutions and the business sector in order to bridge the existing qualification gaps.

The European Union's vision for the next years is to become exquisitely clever, sustainable and inclusive economy which is only possible by improving the outcomes of university education and practice and investing both money and time in skills in general and language skills, in particular. These are essential conditions to achieve the EU goal of continuous growth, creating jobs, promoting employability and increasing competitiveness. One of the ambitions is to establish better functioning of EU labour markets, to provide adequate skills for the particular jobs and to improve the quality of work and working conditions on the European job market. In this context, mastering 'foreign languages and fluency are the main determinants of learning and professional mobility, as well as of domestic and international employability.' [5] Thus, insufficient language skills constitute a major obstacle to a free movement of workers and to the international competitiveness of EU enterprises. However, 'it is obvious that the benefits of improved language education definitely contribute to the immediate economic advantages, encompassing the whole range of cultural,

cognitive, social, civic, academic and security aspects as it was mentioned by the European Commission in 2018.' [6]

Advanced skills in FL, people's age group and their professional situation/activity and the chances of experiencing career progression are linked; this association is even more evident when people master two and more FL. In terms of employment opportunities, it has been found out that the need for employees with FL skills varies according to the European geographical area where the companies are based. This association is even more evident when graduates master two and preferably more foreign languages. In terms of the perspectives of employment, there are 'significant differences that exist between the wages paid by some companies and how they are connected with FL skills that their employees possess and use in their professional activity, in an attempt to move from a microeconomic domain to a macroeconomic level.' [7] Insufficient command of language skills has been considered as a barrier to accomplishing entry into employment and maintaining job position bearing in mind the scale of competitiveness. FL communication skills are a key prerequisite for a career at a national or international level. A good command of the English language is believed to assist graduates to have better communication as they are able to deal with various challenges.

The evidence proves that the mastery of such skills has resulted in higher wages. Therefore, universities based in Europe, especially in member states of the EU should put the emphasis on teaching their students foreign languages at a remarkably good level. It should not only be the focus on the subjects related to a particular field of studies, but also the education concentrated on the role of the command of foreign languages in professional career of graduates, not only general English, but also vocational languages, such as business or legal English, which is highly desirable in EU.

It is known that process of learning foreign languages not only develops the linguistic skills associated with this discipline, but it also offers the whole range of abilities that are appreciated by prospective employers, for example meticulousness and regularity. With a growing competition on the job market, it is crucial to have an outstanding knowledge of foreign languages. It is also perceived as the so-called 'must-have' taking into consideration the fact that most of teams in companies in EU are multicultural. Thus, it is so vital to communicate successfully with all the members of the team.

Multilingualism is a determinant factor to a successful cross-cultural communication as it allows to relate to various cultural groups in a personal manner. Using the language of the interlocutor contributes to getting rid of obstacles occurring during a conversation and enables another person to feel more comfortable, secure and confident, for instance during business negotiations between two companies based in different countries. It is worth mentioning that it is also the sign of respecting another person and their culture.

What is more, education is considered to be the vehicle of the creation and growth of new entrepreneurial and technological ideas which form the basis for innovation and

growth. Indeed, the universities play a significant role in enhancing the absorptive capacity of actors such as employees at firms and researchers at universities and research institution need to drive the economic growth.

It has been observed that among the professional qualifications and skills that prospective employees mainly include in their CV and resume is their proficiency in foreign languages. It is worth noticing that in various CV templates that can be found online [15], for example the EUROPASS CV, foreign language skills are one of the crucial components, along with educational background and training, previous work experience and other commonly mentioned skills, such as computer related ones. It is especially visible in the European Union, with its 24 official languages and its numerous regional and minority languages that the of the command of at least two foreign languages can play a crucial role in everyday life.

Moreover, it ought to be highlighted that it is also essential for international mobility and integration in a multicultural society to master at least two foreign languages. Furthermore, it also reflects cultural competences. As such, foreign languages can be depicted as a tool to bridge intercultural gaps and contribute to a mutual understanding when it comes to cross-cultural communication. It should be noticed that European policy-makers have already adopted a wide range of policies and projects in order to encourage foreign language acquisition among the European population, especially young citizens of the EU. Nonetheless, this procedure should be continued and more emphasis ought to be put on the role of foreign languages in the university education.

It is also evident that when the applicants for the same position have similar competencies, the mastery of foreign languages makes a difference. Some companies consider experiences abroad to be an added-value which only proves the significant role of the command of foreign languages on the job market. It is also stated that the requirements in terms of foreign languages increase with the level of qualifications. Written and oral foreign languages competences are strongly demanded by prospective employers. Their employees' language skills can help employers infer other competences, such as their adjustment capacity, empathy and the ability to develop the business image. Therefore, it is crucial to underline the major role that languages and multilingualism play in the European economy, so as to find ways to develop this further and encourage university students to learn and speak more languages which is to enable them to improve mutual understanding and communication.

It is definitely important to ensure that citizens of the European Union have access to the EU legislation, procedures and information in their own languages, however, they should be also aware of the essentiality of mastering foreign languages. Finding a correspondence between foreign language knowledge and employment prospects, the EU Commission stated that 'linguistic and intercultural skills increase the chances of obtaining a better job. In particular, command of several foreign languages gives a competitive advantage: companies are increasingly looking for skills in a

number of languages to conduct business in the EU and abroad' [8]. It has also been highlighted that the mobility schemes that promote and support foreign language learning among the EU citizens should be more widely accessible.

According to the European Commission report from 2020, three key target actions to promote foreign language skills in different areas of education have been identified, namely [9]

1. Life-long language learning: This strategy is aimed at promoting learning of at least two foreign languages from a very early age and also among adults, to continue with the provision of foreign language learning in secondary and tertiary education, to increase the range of languages taught and to develop learning programs for those with special education needs.
2. Improving language learning and teaching: It is to implement language learning objectives in schools' policies as well as increasing the provision of language teachers, providing them with suitable training programs and monitoring the language skills of students.
3. Creating language-friendly environments: This activity is necessary to establish language friendly communities, promoting linguistic diversity and making language learning more accessible.

Therefore, the following conclusions should be drawn:

1. Languages play a fundamental role in European businesses for their development in a globalised world. Multilingualism is no longer a choice or an option; it has already become a must for business growth
2. European Business relies on the labour market for the supply of Human Resources with the required language skills
3. Lack of language skills could become an impediment for employability, notably for careers leading to management positions
4. European business understands that apart from economical aspect there are also other important reasons for developing multilingual skills

There are multiple reasons for these specific language skills demands. In a globalised economy, there is little place for monolinguals. For instance, in sales and marketing sectors multilingualism is crucial for successful negotiations. Similarly, in trading sectors professionals that are proficient in foreign languages are sought after because their business activities may take place in border regions or different continents. There is a direct connection between foreign languages and economy. Foreign language knowledge is described in the economics literature as a form of human capital that increases economic productivity.

Frank and Bernanke define human capital as 'an amalgam of factors such as education, experience, training, intelligence, energy, work habits, trustworthiness, and initiative that affect the value of a worker's marginal product' [10]. According to O'Sullivan et al., human capital is 'the stock of skills and knowledge embodied in the ability to perform labour so as to produce economic value' [11]. In particular, as Chiswick states, 'Language skills are an important form of human capital. They satisfy the three basic requirements for human

capital: they are embodied in the person; they are productive in the labour market and or in consumption; and they are created at a sacrifice of time and out-of-pocket resources' [12].

III. SUMMARY

To conclude, it could be implied that knowing foreign languages is associated with higher rates of employment in most EU Member States and that commanding them proficiently is increasingly more important. It could be also assumed that social, cultural and economic diversity in EU Member States may shape the association between language knowledge and employment status. It is evident that there is a parallel between language diversity advantages for the employment status of the general working-age population in most Member States and similar advantages for sector specific employment. 'It can be also implied that if individuals aim at remaining employable and graduates are to meet job market demands, they should be aware of the necessity of multilingualism.' [13] Despite the fact that English is the most commonly studied language in the world, in many European and global companies, other foreign languages are used on a daily basis. Hence, the contribution of language and communicative skills to employability, competitiveness and achievement should not be doubted. Furthermore, English proficiency is increasingly recognized as an important factor that is related to the mental health of immigrants and ethnic minorities [14].

Finally, the results of this article can contribute to informing language policy decisions in educational systems. As language skills are acquired mainly through education, establishing a stable relationship between this form of human capital and employment status stresses the vitality of language education in Europe. It should be noticed that in order to enhance the employability of graduates both European institutions and universities ought to focus on foreign languages which are vital for human resources department in European companies. It cannot be ignored that university students should have the access to language courses and a special attention should be paid to the quality of teaching both general languages and vocational ones which are so sought after on the European job market. Even though particular cultures and languages ought to be appreciated, it should be widely known that citizens of the European Union are to acquire more than two foreign languages in order to be successful when their professional life is taken into consideration. It is crucial to bear in mind that university students are a part of a great society which is multicultural.

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