

Languages key to success

Education

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A study showed 40 per cent of recruiters highlighted the importance of language skills.

Multilingualism is today considered one of the key elements of a modern Europe, given that learning foreign languages enables people to enrich their lives, grasp new ideas and benefit from Europe's cultural diversity.

“ The demand for foreign languages for specific purposes and communication skills is steadily rising

- Mario Pace

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In today's world, knowing how to use a language in specific circumstances gives r

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very strong bargaining power, especially in the world of work.

In the 2007 book *Languages for Specific Purposes. Searching for Common Solutions*, Dita Gálová says “globalisation of the world economy requires professionals and specialists in various areas to communicate effectively in foreign languages. The success is conditional on their language skills and competences with respect to their professional areas”.

In the global marketplace we now live in, languages have become crucial across all sectors.

From law to finance, tourism to technology, marketing to administration, most businesses today need linguists not just to enable them to communicate across the globe but also to understand different cultural realities and needs.

Language skills are becoming increasingly important in organisations and businesses which want to remain competitive on an international level.

As the European Commission declared in one of its documents on multilingualism, entitled, ‘Languages mean business’, one of the main reasons why thousands of European companies lose out on concluding deals and contracts is their lack of linguistic and intercultural competencies.

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Furthermore, the Business Forum for Multilingualism set up by the European Co

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in 2008 clearly pointed out that “a significant percentage of European SMEs lose business every year as a direct result of linguistic and intercultural weaknesses.

“Although it appears certain that English will keep its leading role as the world business language, it is other languages that will make the difference between mainstream and excellence and provide a competitive edge.”

The teaching of foreign languages for specific purposes implies addressing the immediate and very specific needs of the learners involved. The driving force, both in the preparation stage as well as in the development stage of such courses, should be an analysis of the learners’ requirements, who often need the language for their job.

For example, the needs of a learner studying a foreign language for scientific or technological purposes are totally different from those of another learner studying the same language for legal or financial purposes. Even the skills required vary considerably.

This implies that teaching a foreign language for specific purposes can be quite taxing and demanding. First of all, it must be acknowledged that the learner is the primary knower of the content of the material. The teacher’s role is to provide the tools for the learners to help them develop and acquire the skills they need.

In other words, the teacher needs to understand the context in which the language will be used as well as any specialist concepts and terminology, and this, in turn, implies the need for specific training, tailor-made courses and teaching the practical use of the target language.

The teacher is not only obliged to develop a learner-centered curriculum and find the best methods to pass on linguistic knowledge in accordance to the learners’ needs, but also to piece together the curricular materials needed to reach the learners’ objectives.

In an article entitled ‘Business needs language’, Language Magazine explores “what business wants: language needs in the 21st century” and concludes that, within the US business sector, there exists a real need for a more systematic discussion of the role and value of foreign language skills, especially in the face of strong perceptions that English is the lingua franca (common language) of international business.

A lingua franca can never be enough in today’s world to satisfy every communication need. Several research studies show that the most frequently cited barrier to intra-European mobility remains lack of foreign language skills.

A recent Eurobarometer study showed that 40 per cent of recruiters in the industry sector highlighted the importance of language skills for future higher education graduates.

Another study, about the internationalisation of European SMEs published by the European Commission in 2010, shows that when companies start exporting, language and cultural barriers start being perceived as important obstacles.

The demand for foreign languages for specific purposes and communication skills is steadily rising on the European labour market, and employers often demand diplomas or certificates as a proof of language competence. This means the testing and accreditation methods connected to language competences for professional purposes are becoming increasingly important and relevant.

It also means that the language skills acquired through such courses, usually outside the formal education system, should be formally acknowledged.

On this point, the Council of Europe's 'Common European Framework of Reference' provides both the structure for most of the assessment methods for language competences as well as transparent and authentic proof of appropriate skills acquired for various occupations.

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